

ARTICLES

THEME: IMMIGRANT & ETHNIC



OKLAHOMA
HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas

It's easy to find and read articles from our previous issues! Simply click the issue titles below or visit okhumanities.org/programs/magazine.

FABRIC

Fall/Winter 2024

African Wax Prints

Based on an exhibition curated by Dr. Gifty Afua Benson

“In February 2024, Oklahomans had the opportunity to experience a unique and beautiful exhibition when *Wandering Spirit: African Wax Prints* opened at the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities in Tulsa. It traced the history of African wax prints along colonial trade routes, across three continents, and through globalization in the post-colonial era, affirming that although not originally African, wax prints are ingrained in African culture where people love and identify them as their own.”

A Crazy Quilt

Rilla Askew

“Following the turbulent 1930s, Oklahoman Woody Guthrie penned his famous lyrics *This land is your land, this land is my land*, and the song is still widely sung in schools, at rallies, and community celebrations. Often, though, it seems that only the second half of the chorus is really meant—this land is *my* land. This land is *our* land. Meaning people who look like me, speak like me, have the same histories as me. How do we stand united as Americans when there seems to be so much that divides us? Books can be a great starting place. They foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience by introducing readers to works that recognize the myriad ways *we* are *they*, and *they* are *us*.”

Look for the Union Label: Self-Fashioning a Working-Class Identity

Tracy Floreani and MC Floreani

“What’s in your closet that you don’t wear, but can’t bear to let go of?...Whether they are uniforms worn day in and day out on the shop floor, sashes and costumes for public demonstrations, or a vintage dress made by a skilled grandmother’s hands, garments carry symbolism of personal history and identity. Clothing items hold a particular intimacy, too, as “ghost forms” of the loved ones who wore them, their second skin in the workplace or on the streets. They can be folded down and stored away, available at any time to be pulled from the closet to serve as sentimental reminders and proof of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Clothing carries particular weight in the history of the working class, both as an industry that employed immigrants and as emblems of social movements and union membership.”

Paj Ntaub: A Hmong Tradition of Sewing and Survival

Pamela Chew

“In August, 1981, I answered an employment advertisement that changed my life. Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma was hiring instructors to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to the incoming refugees of Southeast Asia, including the Laotian Hmong. Although I’d never been paid to teach ESL, I was a language learner and a graduate in French and Italian. I understood what it was like to learn a new language and was extremely excited to meet and help my students. For the next eight years, we taught each other as I learned the rich history of this ethnic minority. Historically an oral culture, they shared and sustained knowledge, beliefs, customs, and identity not only through stories, but the stitches of their textile tradition: *paj ntaub*.”

GO

Spring/Summer 2024

Searching for the Cyclops’ Cheese

Alexis Marie Adams

We leave the shop just as the tourists step up to the counter, asking to taste the *touloumotiri*. As we walk through the village, I feel a part of this place. And I feel anticipation: about slicing into the hunk of cheese that’s in the bag I am carrying home—a bag that contains meadows and forests, fog and rain, soil, slope, and sunlight, culture, resilience, and story.

STORIES

Fall/Winter 2023

Storied Traditions of Day of the Dead

Robert Con Davis-Undiano

Every culture in the world has some version of a yearly observance honoring the dead, often in summer or fall in connection with seasonal planting. In the Americas, this practice is imbued with the idea that at least once a year the dead may journey back to the living for a brief stay to commune with family and friends.

Shaping Cultural Memory

Sarah Milligan

If we have learned nothing else from the long history of collecting objects to reflect our past, it might be that everyone has a role. Representation matters in these history-saving spaces. When we empower everyone to shape their own story, when we gather these narratives and objects with a conscious eye for who and what is missing, the result is more than a collection to be visited. It is a living cultural trust through which we remember and better understand the stories of *us*.

A Republic of the Imagination: In Conversation with Azar Nafisi

An interview by Daniel Simon

With her latest book of essays, *Read Dangerously: The Subversive Power of Literature in Trouble Times*, Iranian American writer Azar Nafisi offers a “resistance reading list” that the *Washington Post* hails as offering “a new canon for the tyrannies of the present and the dystopian possibilities of the future.” Over Zoom, we discussed the power of storytelling embodied by Scheherazade and Alice in Wonderland; the intergenerational threads that connect readers; and the role of writers and readers in preserving memory and defending truth.

FOOD

Spring/Summer 2023

Gỏi cuốn: A Family Tradition

Julianne Tran

A daughter and sister discusses her connection with a dish best served shared. “When I moved into my first college apartment, I came armed with a list of my favorite meals that I was determined to cook on my own. Gỏi cuốn—Vietnamese spring rolls filled with vermicelli noodles, some kind of protein, fresh vegetables, and herbs wrapped in bánh tráng, or rice paper—sat at the very top of this list.”

Corn and Cacao: Twins of Sun and Shadow

Bruce Dean Willis

Willis explores the importance of corn and cacao in Mesoamerican mythology and how it provides “insight into the ways the Maya thought, and still think, about the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.” It sustained them physically as well as spiritually and figured prominently in their creation stories and culinary concoctions.

Gardens in Camp

Anna Tamura

“Gardening, both ornamental and agricultural, was a common activity for Japanese American inmates in the temporary “assembly centers,” incarceration camps, and Justice Department camps. Camp gardens were continuations of prewar garden-building traditions, human and cultural responses to imprisonment and camp landscapes, and restorative activities that fostered communal healing and cultural cohesion. Vegetable gardens, also known as victory gardens during wartime, provided familiar edibles and contributed to sustainability efforts promoted by the federal government. While some of the gardens exhibited levels of resistance against confinement and the War Relocation Authority (WRA), others represented political symbols of loyalty and patriotism.”

Ukraine’s Farmed Forces

Zenia Kish

“The visibility of farmers and tractors across social media and pop culture offers a distinctly Ukrainian frame for expressing public resistance, symbolizing the mobilization of the whole society in defense of the country while affirming the inextricable ties between Ukrainian identity and the nation’s cultivators. Beyond this symbolic function as national protectors in the popular imagination, the idea of farmers and tractors on the frontlines expands the boundaries of the so-called theater of war.”

ETC

Fall/Winter 2022

I. Miller: Shoemaker to the Stars

Michelle Tolini Finamore

“As any *Sex and the City* fan knows, Carrie Bradshaw is fixated on beautiful shoes. She has a particular affinity for Manolo Blahniks and the show is widely credited with making the designer a household name. If the series had been made in the 1920s, Carrie’s signature shoes would undoubtedly have been designed by the New York City-based shoe firm I. Miller. Although not well known outside of fashion history circles, I. Miller’s presence loomed large in New York’s flourishing theater world, celebrated by luminaries of stage and film as Miller-Made shoes became synonymous with status and style.”

Rudolfo Anaya

Robert Con Davis-Undiano

“For many people in the U.S. and abroad, Rudolfo Anaya (1937-2020) defined the era he lived in. He published 50 volumes that range over novels, plays, poetry, essays, and children’s books. In a key moment in the civil rights era, these works gave the Latino community a face and a voice. They also helped the Latino community to see what was good and powerful in their own lives.”

The Essays—An Excerpt

Rudolfo Anaya

An excerpt from a moving and revealing story written by Anaya.

CODE

Spring/Summer 2022

Vampires, Aliens, and Zombies—Oh My!

Leeda Copley

“From Marvel Comics to sci-fi films, from video games to the latest pulp fiction, all manner of monsters populate modern pop culture, fascinating us with tales most fiendish and foul. And there is method to the madness. Monsters are good stand-ins for underlying political issues and social fears that are seemingly too difficult to confront.”

Color Coded—The Language of Tattoos

Eric Singleton

The first stories ever inked were symbols of maturity, spirituality, and artistic identity. “Tattoos date from ancient times and are shared around the world—among men, women, and sometimes children. Across cultures and throughout history, these body adornments have been associated with health, medicine, religious practices, maturity rites, and personal aesthetic.”

Graffiti

Pamela Chew

A daughter reflects on her father’s art and other “midnight artists.”

CITIZEN 2020

Fall/Winter 2020

On Civility

Pamela Chew

“Only now do I understand why my Chinese father wanted me to answer our phone or open the front door when the doorbell rang at our house in small-town Missouri. Even a professor who held an endowed chair still worried and dreaded a knock at the door. He constantly needed reassurance that his life in the Midwest in 1950—unlike the life he knew growing up in Chinatown in San Francisco during the ’20s and ’30s—would not be questioned, taken away, or jeopardized because of race, status, or documents.”

HOME

Spring/Summer 2020

How Food Connects Us to Home

Ayelet Tsabari

“The aroma of Yemeni soup lingers in my kitchen for days after I cook it. I grew up trying to shake this smell off me. Now it lives in my house, a permanent stamp on my walls, a pungent greeting that welcomes my guests. When the hawayij my mother had given me in Los Angeles was finished I started making my own: grinding cardamom, cumin, turmeric, chilies and coriander in a mortar and pestle, the way my grandmother and great-grandmother had done before me. When I stand by my electric stove and pour hawayij into the pot, I’m a Jewish Yemeni woman making soup. I forget I live in a cold and strange city, ten timezones away from my family. I’m home.”

What Home is Not

Seungho Lee

“What does it mean to be ‘at home?’ Is home the place where you grew up, the space that contains your memories and possessions? Is the language you speak “the house of being,” as philosopher Martin Heidegger put it? Is it the people you love—your family and friends? The elasticity of what it means to be at home baffles me. My experience in Tulsa as a foreign student from Korea is filled with moments when I don’t feel at home. Maybe thinking about what home is not can help me more clearly define—and feel—what home can be.”

TIME

Fall/Winter 2019

Time is a Tiger

Pedro Blas Gonzalez

“Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) created a literary genre that left readers guessing whether his stories were fantasy fiction stories or encyclopedic non-fiction essays. As master of the metaphysical literary tale, Borges defied convention, insisting on the freedom to create worlds and characters that explore the vortex where appearance and reality meet. He persuades readers to follow him into literary labyrinths with works that are speculative and replete with paradoxes.”

CURIOSITY

Fall/Winter 2018

Tasting the World

Pamela Chew

“There were few people of Chinese descent living in Missouri in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Finding a Cantonese restaurant serving homemade tofu required an extensive search by car. I loved venturing out on Sundays with my dad, happy to be included in the daylong hunt. Only now, reminiscing about two-hour weekend drives sitting shotgun next to my professor father, do I truly understand the significance of genuine cuisine at that time to a first-generation Asian.”

A Fisherman's Tale

Diane Boze

“One of my favorite memories of Spain evokes a cool, windy beach in Galicia where I struggled to understand an old fisherman's tale in a language I had hardly heard spoken. The wizened storyteller and idyllic setting kindled my fascination and curiosity and coincided with explorations that essentially set my direction in life.”

VIETNAM

Fall/Winter 2017

On True War Stories

Viet Thanh Nguyen

War is hell. Like many Americans and people the world over, I enjoy war stories that depend on what seems to be a disturbing idea. I have a personal stake in such stories, having been born in Vietnam but raised, or made, as it were, in America. A war brought me from over there to over here, an experience I share with millions of my fellow Americans. Sometimes I wonder whether my circumstances, or what my parents endured, can be called a war story, and how that story can be told.”

INTERNATIONALISM

Fall 2015

Being ME (Middle Eastern)

Ibtisam Barakat

“Francis Foster, the legendary children's book editor for Random House and later for Farrar, Straus and Giroux/ Macmillan, passed away last summer. She will always be part of my creative journey. When Francis and I talked about *Tasting the Sky*, my memoir about childhood and war in Palestine, she said, “The Middle East is always in the news, but that does not mean Americans know much about Middle Eastern people.” She recalled the Native American proverb that one cannot empathize with the journey of another without walking in their moccasins. “Can the two sides of a notebook stand for a pair of moccasins?” I mused. She took a book that was on her desk, opened it, and put it on the floor like a pair of shoes. We both laughed. From this empathy-encompassed

proverb, and the expansive light of Frances' smiling blue eyes, I shall proceed by offering you my pair of moccasins. They are size ten medium, European size forty. They are sewn from memories and language and threaded with the string of a rababah instrument playing a Middle Eastern tune. I was often teased for the size of my feet, and I replied that I have big feet because I have a big journey. I invite you to become me for the duration of this essay—take a walk in my moccasins as a person from the Middle East.”

WORLD WAR I

Fall 2014

Chicago, 1919: “We are and will always remain HUNS”

Christiane Brandt Faris

“The late nineteenth century saw a rise of xenophobia, particularly against Irish and German immigrants. Americans feared the loss of traditions and business to these newcomers. With entry into WWI looming, anti-German sentiments increased across the country and in Washington politics. Theodore Roosevelt denounced German-Americans as “hyphenated” citizens whose dual loyalties could not be tolerated.”

THE COMMON GOOD

Summer 2013

One's Self I Sing: Writing the American Spirit

Lori Lindsey

“Much like the people of America, the American character is an amalgam of heritages that spans time and place. The American character did not simply or suddenly appear; it formed over the course of decades. The open frontier and a spirit of independence and optimism took part in its formation. One of the greatest and most visible aspects of this American character is the philosophy of self-reliance and individualism.”

POP CULTURE

January 2013

New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music

Hugh Foley

“Along with drama, architecture, foodways, literature, and visual arts, music is a key way that humans express our joys, sorrows, spiritual pursuits, and collective memories. By delving into a region's music, we learn more about the people who live and have lived in that place. By extension, we learn about the commonalities we share as people, as well as understand more about our individual cultural identities.”

Popular Culture: America's Mirror

Peter C. Rollins

“One of the best ways for America to understand itself is by looking into the mirror of popular culture. Popular culture includes the songs we play, the commercials we absorb, the news we encounter on our computers and television screens and in our cars. We retain these images and messages—whether we want to or not.”

JANUARY 2012

Bridging Cultures through Humor

An interview with Firoozeh Dumas by Dr. Scott LaMascus and Editor Carla Walker

“The following interview is distilled from a three-hour conversation with Firoozeh Dumas when she visited Oklahoma City last July. We were dizzy from Oklahoma’s hottest summer on record—it was a balmy 105 degrees, down from a record-setting 110 just two days prior. Dizzy or no, we had great fun. It’s too bad the printed page isn’t equipped with a laugh track (we haven’t quite perfected the app for that). Firoozeh is the consummate humorist and relates her journey from Iranian immigrant to American citizen with both cheek and nostalgia. Add to the mix that she married a Frenchman and you’ll understand she has plenty of experience in embracing “the other.”

FALL 2011

Key Ingredients: Discovering Oklahoma—And America—By Food

Julia Abramson

“Food is so universally necessary that our daily need for it can seem banal. But food does not merely fuel the body. The food we eat expresses and defines identity. Foodways—our habits, customs, and choices—reveal much about the structure and texture of our communities, our position in the world, our beliefs and aspirations. If we reflect on these food cultures, we begin to understand the fascinating journeys that have brought us to where we are today.”

Last Suppers: A Meditation on Family Foods

Thomas Fox Averill

“Every cook has a signature dish. My mother had many. The tastes of her childhood, Lebanon bologna and Pennsylvania scrapple, were special treats. Her brown rice, made in a large crock with beef broth and mushrooms, graced our table whenever company came. She made Waldorf Astoria cakes with Hellman’s mayonnaise, and her macaroni and cheese tasted like butter. Her Thanksgiving turkeys, slow-cooked from four in the morning until four in the afternoon, and turkey gravy with its salty tang, will never be matched.”

Unforeseen Beauty and Possibility: A Decade of Discovering Islam

Krista Tippett

“In a perfect world, or at least a perfectly informed one, most Americans would have known something about Islam as the 21st century opened. They would have been aware that over one billion of the world’s people belong to this faith that emerged from the monotheistic soil of Christianity and Judaism. They might also have known that Muslims would soon be the second largest religious group in the U.S., after Christians. And that statistic might have come alive in American imaginations in the form of the doctors and teachers, parents and citizens it represents. But we don’t live in a perfect world. September 11, 2001, was many Americans’ catastrophic introduction to Islam.”

FALL 2010

Immigration Law—How Did We Get Here?

Adam McKeown

“How have we come to believe that immigration control is a fundamental duty of national governments? Why do we even think that human travel can and should be controlled at national borders? How does this belief coexist with the equally common Western ideal that restricting departure from and movement within a nation are basic infringements on human freedom? In a society that prides itself on opportunity and equal treatment under law, why does our government impose quotas and restrict who can and cannot enter our country based on wealth, education, skills, family connections, or country of origin? A look at the history of immigration law can provide insight on these issue.”

Can Poetry Still Matter? The Ideas and Influence of Dana Gioia

John Struloeff

“When preparing for a recent conference discussion on the work and influence of Dana Gioia, I had occasion to re-read many of his poems and essays—an extensive body of work. I was reminded of the noteworthy anthologies and books he has edited or co-edited, including the best-selling college textbook *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, which I used as a student and assign as a professor in my literature courses. I read many of his reviews (he’s written on dozens of authors) and his translations of Latin, Italian, German, and Romanian poets. I examined his work on the two national literary conferences he founded and his service as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), a position he held for six years. As a critic, few contemporaries have been read as widely as Dana Gioia.”

Outside the Frame

An interview with poet Natasha Trethewey by Dr. Regina Bennett, Dr. Harbour Winn, and Zoe Miles

“Natasha Trethewey was the featured poet at Oklahoma City University’s annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Distinguished Writer Series, supported in part by a grant from OHC. Trethewey’s poems explore cultural memory and ethnic identity, which reflect her own experience as the child of a black mother and white father and her fascination with lost histories. She won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Native Guard* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2nd edition; 2006), a collection of poems about the Louisiana Native Guard, the Union army’s first all-black regiment in the Civil War. Trethewey’s other poetry collections include *Domestic Work* (Graywolf Press, 2000) and *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (Graywolf Press, 2002) based on E.J. Bellocq’s twentieth-century photographs of prostitutes in the Storyville District of New Orleans.”

SUMMER 2010

To India and Beyond: Two Views

Gene Rainbolt and Sunita Sitara

“The two have been friends for decades, so when Rainbolt began considering a trip to India and the need for a knowledgeable guide, Sitara was the logical choice. “I wanted someone that could speak Hindi,” Rainbolt said, “someone who is Hindu that could interpret for me as well as debate with me.” As you will see in the travel entries featured here, their conversations were indeed spirited. Following are excerpts from their travel journals, in which they amassed more than 23,000 words collectively during a 30-day exploration of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The contrast in their perspectives is striking: two people, two genders, two different ethnic backgrounds. For them, “bridging cultures” begins with curiosity and an open mind.”

WINTER 2009

Kitchen Metaphysics

An interview with Charles Simic by Dr. Elaine Smokewood, Dr. Harbour Winn, & Kelly Kinser

“Charles Simic was the featured poet at Oklahoma City University’s annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Distinguished Writer Series, supported in part by a grant from OHC. Simic was born in Belgrade in former Yugoslavia, where his early childhood coincided with World War II. He immigrated to the U.S. during his teens and earned his bachelor’s degree at New York University. He is currently Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, where he has taught since 1973. Simic has authored more than 60 books, including *The World Doesn’t End: Prose Poems* (1990), winner of the Pulitzer Prize. He served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2007 through 2008.”

House of Windows

An interview with Author and Photographer Yousef Khanfar by Carla Walker

“I have lived in two zones, in the Middle East and in America, so I have two families and there’s that big ocean between them. It was sad for me to see September 11, because I saw my people attacking my people. Somehow we have to build bridges of understanding between people, between cultures, between religions. We have to have more tolerance.”

Toward a Better Understanding of Islam

Dr. Charles Kimball

“Despite intense media attention since September 11, 2001, most Americans still know very little about Islam. Much of what people think they know is both incorrect and highly distorted. The dominant images of Islam in the U.S. are distinctly negative. This is a dangerous dynamic in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is important that people seek to overcome the ignorance, bias, and fear that have too often characterized relationships between the U.S.—frequently perceived as a Christian nation—and the Middle East, which is assumed to be largely Muslim.”

SUMMER 2009

Caught in a Wewoka Sandwich

Ann Thompson

The different journeys people took to Oklahoma.

What American Means to Me

Amanda Kouri

Amanda is the daughter of Trey and Annette Kouri of Oklahoma City. She is a straight-A student who participates in sports, Honor Chorus, and a student leadership and service organization. Amanda read her award-winning essay in the House Chambers during Colonial Day activities and received a standing ovation.

FALL/WINTER 2008

Island of Voice

An interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca by Dr. Elaine Smokewood, Dr. Harbour Winn, Ted Stoller

“Jimmy Santiago Baca was the featured poet at Oklahoma City University’s annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Distinguished Writer Series in April 2008, supported in part by a grant from OHC. Born in New Mexico of Chicano and Apache descent, Baca became a runaway at age 13. It was after he was sentenced to five years in a maximum-security prison at the age of 21 that Baca began to turn his life around. There he learned to read and write and found his passion for poetry. He is the winner of the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award, the National Poetry Award, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, and, for his memoir *A Place To Stand*, the prestigious International Award.”

What America Means to Me

Manuel Hogan

Manuel Hogan was one of two winners of the 2008 Colonial Day at the Capitol Literature Contest sponsored earlier this year by the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. Colonial Day at the Capitol is an annual event for fifth-graders and is funded in part by a grant from OHC.