

2019 Issue 1 | Free

SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.

*"I was still baffled
by the notion of a
permanent address."*

ALSO INSIDE:

The sociology of Marie Kondo

*When public schools were
considered vital to democracy*

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SPARK is a publication of nonprofit Humanities Washington, our state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. At community venues across Washington, we hold hundreds of free events each year where scholars, authors, artists, and activists discuss everything from Washington State history to current social issues.

Published in the spring and fall each year, *SPARK* is a free magazine based on those conversations. It's available at cultural organizations throughout the state, or you can have it delivered for free to your door by signing up at humanities.org/subscribe.

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*W*e're now living in what's been called the "attention economy." The devices we carry in our pockets have launched a gold rush as companies devise new ways to keep our eyes glued to our screens so they can collect marketable data.

An important, and deeply damaging, strategy often used to capture our attention? Posts and stories that inspire outrage, fear, and revulsion, often with exaggerated or false claims. Studies (and about five minutes on Twitter) reveal that anger is among the most effective ways to keep our attention on social media. Companies have monetized our rage, and the consequences are all around us: deepening divides; demonization of people we don't know; and online trolls who live to provoke.

Now imagine sitting across from someone who made you angry online. You might hear a quiver of emotion in their voice as they explain their position, or see a flash of excitement in their eyes, or feel their fatigue. Even if you disagree philosophically, you'll see a more complete picture—and person—in front of you. Assuming good intentions is exponentially easier when you see someone's full humanity, instead of a single issue or stance you disagree with.

Humanities Washington provides these moments across the state, offering an alternative to the attention economy—a kind of connection economy. The stories in this magazine emerge from real conversations happening across Washington at libraries, museums, and cultural centers. Our events offer places away from the outrage industry—a space for neighbors to listen to each other and learn, and to more deeply explore ideas. We have no interest in capitalizing on your clicks and almost all of our events are free. Your attention is a profoundly scarce resource—our goal is to use it to make society a little better, not to boost a bottom line.



With sincere appreciation,

Julie Ziegler, Chief Executive Officer
Humanities Washington

DEEP STUFF

A Sociologist Sorts Through the Marie Kondo Phenomenon

By Michelle Janning



▲ Marie Kondo | Photo courtesy of Denise Crew/Netflix.

This winter, millions of viewers in nearly 200 countries watched the Netflix series “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo.” Kondo, a Japanese organizing expert, guides people in home makeover projects that require families to declutter and remove objects that do not, in her words, “spark joy.” As Kondo’s website states, the method is not just about doing the work of tidying up—it is about mindfulness and introspection. In other words, tidying up is not just a home project; it is a project of the self.

Kondo is on to something: the objects in our home each tell a personal story, one with a unique set of characters, plot twists, and emotional undertones. They might be saved love letters or childhood baseball gloves. They might be threadbare linens from a grandparent who immigrated with only one suitcase. They might be antique silverware that has been saved for a son or daughter, but involve a fear that the child may not want them. These objects feed into our sense of self, which can in turn tell us important things about society as a whole.

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In the past century, we've swung from “buying brings happiness” to “curating and purging certain bought items brings happiness.”

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As a sociologist, I gather these stories and notice larger patterns, collecting and curating what are called *home object stories* in order to tell the story of our larger society. People are more united than they might think in their seemingly lonely quests for figuring out what to do with home possessions, and “Tidying Up” provides a surprisingly detailed window into our shared concerns about clutter.

So what do the possessions of ten American families say about contemporary families and society?

First, we are witnessing a large shift in what is considered a healthy lifestyle, particularly when it comes to consumption and self-control. In the middle of the twentieth century, material goods were seen as a crucial part of fulfilling the American Dream for those families who could afford it, from TV trays to new cars parked in the driveways of new suburbs. But later decades brought recessions, recognition of environmental degradation, and a fear that we were all buying too much stuff and ending up miserable anyway. Now, to deal with all our stuff, we are encouraged to boost our self-control (or perhaps the illusion of it). If, by changing how we manage our personal struggles, we can become healthier, it's no accident that the improvement of self includes managing our home objects. The recurring theme is that our individual happiness is intimately tied to our acquisition and management of possessions. In the past century, we've swung from “buying brings happiness” to “curating and purging certain bought items brings happiness.”

Throughout “Tidying Up,” viewers are guided through households with voiceovers and confessional moments that



▲ Not sparking joy. | Photo by Ashim Silver.

highlight the very thin line between what happens to objects and what happens to people. People thank their T-shirts before tossing them in the donation pile; they thank their family members for their willingness to work on their own stuff. People confess that they want to change their stuff because they want to change themselves. Not unusual were references to “taking control of one’s things” as an integral part of the project of “taking control of one’s life.” If a pair of shoes “sparks joy,” keep them and maybe joy will be sparked in your intimate family relationships, too.

Second, the social group you identify with impacts the likelihood you’ll participate in the decluttering movement. Our home spaces and stuff, and televised renditions of decluttering practices, are not just about dividing those whose personalities lead them to minimalism and those whose personalities lead them to hoarding. Projects surrounding home stuff are also about group differences and inequalities. For example, there are real and troubling racial and socioeconomic inequalities between those who can afford to own a home in a desirable neighborhood (and maybe a storage unit to house extra stuff) and those who cannot. Within homes, we still see a division of household labor such that women disproportionately bear the burden of household tidiness and management of the entire tidying project. We know that what objects matter in a family depend on that family’s geographic location, racial-ethnic identity, immigration status, and social class.

In the show, Kondo assists a family that moves to Los Angeles and downsizes into a small apartment. The mother in the family

experiences the emotional toll of being held responsible for the organization and tidying of all family members' objects. By the end of the episode, not only have family members taken a larger role in their own tidying, but the narrative explicitly notes the likelihood of this burden falling too much on women, who perform a "second shift" of unpaid domestic labor even if they still work outside the home. In my research on love letters and photo albums, I found that women were more likely than men to feel responsible for organizing, storing, and saving kinship mementos. And they were more likely than men to curate these items in decorated boxes and in places where they would be kept safe. In other words, the project of "tidying up" is still a gendered project, whether it's about laundry or love letters.

Finally, family life is changing in the U.S., both in terms of what families look like and in terms of what families do. The definition of "family" is increasingly diverse: gay marriage is legal, couples are having children later, aging populations are staying healthier longer, and the proportion of American families headed by a married couple has declined to less than 50%. In other words, it is safe to say there is no longer a "typical" American family. As all of these shifts happen, the role of home objects necessarily shifts, too.

While the show was criticized for showing relatively affluent families from a similar geographic area, and for espousing ideals of minimalism that are more likely to be held by those who can afford to get rid of stuff, "Tidying Up" does portray a more diverse set of family forms than television from even a decade ago did. One cohabiting couple, for example, seeks the help of Kondo to tidy up in order to show one partner's parents that they have more concretely moved into an "adult" stage. The pair aligns the "adultification" of their home décor and organization with their goal of displaying their relationship as

more permanent and committed. This matters in particular for this couple because, as gay men, they feel the need to demonstrate relationship seriousness in the absence of marriage, and in a social context where the legitimacy of gay relationships may still be questioned. Having a tidy linen closet, then, not only contains a blending of the partners' mismatched towel collection as a symbol of their commitment to each other, it also signifies to parents that they are no longer children.

If you've ever felt like you're the only person who's had a hard time figuring out what to do with your stuff, and that if you were only able to get rid of more things you'd feel so much happier, you are not alone. We have come to culturally define home curation as an individual project. But the project does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs amidst a set of cultural shifts that include: changing family diversity (who counts as "family" when we decide who gets Grandma's table?), geographic mobility (how do we transport Grandma's table across five states?), family roles (who is in charge of the labor of figuring out what to do with the table?), changing ideals about the role of consumption in our lives (Grandma's table does not fit with my minimalist aesthetic), and even a reinforcement of the value that we are supposed to tackle this stuff on our own (I need to figure out what to do with Grandma's table on my own).

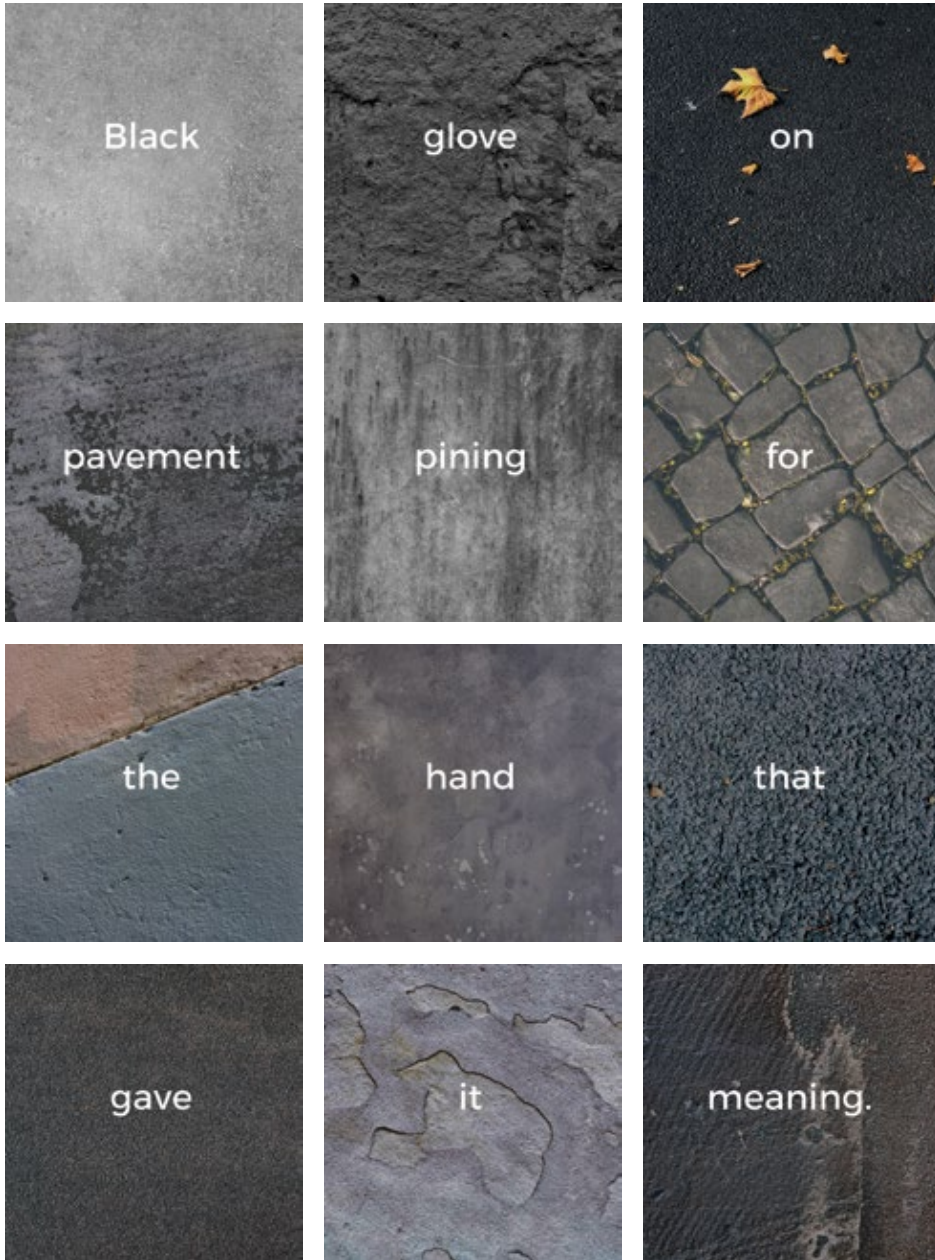
Our individual stories matter, but we are richer for understanding how these personal stories are part of a larger story. So, the next time you winnow a shoe collection or sift through a deceased relative's power tools, remember that shoes and tools bear the stories of their individual possessors, but they also bear the stories of the social world in which they were bought, worn, used, stored, lost, held dear, and thrown away. It is that social world, in fact, that shapes how we come to view shoes and tools as desirable, cherishable, or disposable in the first place. 



Michelle Janning is a professor of sociology at Whitman College and author of *The Stuff of Family Life: How Our Homes Reflect Our Lives*. She is currently presenting her free Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau talk, "What Your Home Says About the World," around the state. Find an event at humanities.org.

SODO

By Claudia Castro Luna, Washington State Poet Laureate.



▲ Design by David Haldeman.

WHEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE CONSIDERED VITAL FOR DEMOCRACY

Americans used to think free public education was a cornerstone of democracy. What happened?

By Johann N. Neem

“A republic, if you can keep it.” Those were the words Benjamin Franklin supposedly used when he emerged from the Constitutional Convention and was asked what kind of government the Framers were proposing.

For America’s founders, public education was essential to keeping the republic. Thomas Jefferson famously proclaimed that of all the arguments for education, “none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people the safe, as they are the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty.” He proposed an ambitious public education program for Virginia, but his plans never reached fruition during his lifetime.

Other states were more successful, however. By the 1820s and 1830s, a growing number of Americans were arguing that schools must be free, supported by taxes, and made available to all children. By the Civil War, most white children in the North attended public tax-supported schools, and the numbers were rising in the South as well. But those ideals had limits: racial

segregation in the North meant that fewer African Americans had the same access and, it goes without saying, enslaved people were denied access altogether.

Americans at the time considered public schools vital for preparing new citizens for participation in a democracy. Moreover, at a time of rising immigration, they were seen as necessary to bring together an increasingly diverse society. “Our public schools are the most democratic institutions that this peculiarly democratic country affords,” proclaimed E. Hodges, superintendent of schools in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, in 1854. Schools should treat all children equally, educating them not just in the “rudiments,” but instilling them with the knowledge necessary for citizenship. In a society divided by religion, ethnicity, party, and wealth, public schools would “harmonize the various discordant elements that are found in society,” because students would “sympathize with and for the other.” In public schools, diverse people would come to think of each other as fellow Americans.

It was not just immigration but growing economic inequality that concerned advocates of public schools. John Pierce, the new state of Michigan's superintendent of public instruction, celebrated public schools where "all classes are blended together; the rich mingle with the poor, and are educated in company . . . and mutual attachments are formed."

Horace Mann, secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education and the so-called "founding father" of American public education, considered bringing together rich and poor to be one of the most important functions of public schools. If rich parents "turn away from the Common Schools" and choose to send their kids to "the private school or the academy" (the charter schools of their era), then the poor would end up with a second-class education. To ensure that students—and their parents—intermingle, "there should be a free school, sufficiently safe, and sufficiently good, for all the children within its territory."

But in the past several decades, Americans have begun to question these ideals. Confidence in public education has dropped off a cliff since the 1970s, with only one-third of Americans saying they have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the nation's public schools, compared with two-thirds during the 1970s. At the same time, support for alternatives like charter schools and private school vouchers has risen.

To their advocates, public schools served public functions. They would prepare citizens and, by bringing together all kinds of Americans, they would help forge a national community. Today, however, we seem less certain of that project. For many American leaders, schools serve economic rather than civic purposes. In the words of the Common Core State Standards, graduates of public schools must exhibit "college and career readiness," a less lofty ambition than the prior stated hopes for public schools. In contrast, during an earlier effort to create national standards during the first Bush administration, the National Education Goals Panel argued that higher academic achievement would prepare students for "citizenship, further learning, and productive employment." It argued that readiness for the job market was only one outcome of a good education, and it came after education's impact on citizenship and human beings.



▲ Two students at school in Southington, Connecticut, 1942. Photo by Fenno Jacobs, courtesy Library of Congress.

“

To their advocates, public schools served public functions. They would prepare citizens and, by bringing together all kinds of Americans, they would help forge a national community.

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▲ Students at a one-room schoolhouse in Ojo Sarco, New Mexico, 1943. | Photo by John Collier, Jr., courtesy Library of Congress.

If our leaders today emphasize economics, other Americans question the public schools' historic role of forging a common nation out of a diverse population.

On the left, some advocates of multiculturalism worry about efforts to foster a common culture. They instead urge schools to offer culturally-specific programs to minorities. On the right, many evangelicals and members of other religions have argued that secular public schools threaten their children's faith, so they advocate using public funds for private and religious schools. Supporting these families, our current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has devoted much of her public career to enabling parents to choose schools that reflect their own values instead of bringing all Americans together into public schools.

But what about common American values? Can we, as citizens, even agree on what those values are? Should schools bring diverse people together to foster a shared civic culture and to promote American ideals? And do we want to move beyond the language of college and career readiness to emphasize once again the ideals of citizenship? If so, how do we do so in a diverse society?

None of these questions are new. They were the kinds of questions that Americans confronted after the Revolution when they built our first public schools. But these questions have, if anything, become even more pressing for us today. 



Johann N. Neem is a professor of history at Western Washington University and author of *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America*. This essay is adapted from a 2017 talk at the University of Oklahoma. He is currently presenting his free Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau talk, "What Happened to America's Public Schools," around the state. Find an event at humanities.org.



MAN IN THE MOON

humanities
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bedtime stories | FUNDRAISER

This fall, join us for an evening of food, wine, and words at one of our Bedtime Stories Fundraisers.

SEATTLE, OCTOBER 11, FAIRMONT OLYMPIC HOTEL

Featuring Charles Johnson, Claudia Castro Luna, and Sonora Jha

SPOKANE, OCTOBER 25, THE SPOKANE CLUB

Featuring Sharma Shields and Ben Goldfarb

Registration begins late summer 2019.



The Privilege Button

By Maya Jewell Zeller

▲ Illustration by Christine Larsen.

A young poet with low elite-culture literacy walks into a wine bar and scans the menu, not sure what to order. She's trying to come off as sophisticated—after all, she holds an advanced degree—but wine bars make her nervous, because she has never heard most of the menu items pronounced *out loud*. She finds something that sounds simple and familiar enough—she knows well what wild things a hungry person can eat. Rose hips are high in vitamin C, and they make a bittersweet, earthy tea. The poet says loudly, confidently, “I’ll have the RÔSE,” pronouncing it like the flower, one syllable, with a long O.

“What’s that?” asks the bartender, assuming he misheard.

Her friend leans in, interjecting. “*She’ll have the rosé.*”

“Right,” the poet says, blushing. “That’s what I meant.”

When the wine comes, it does not taste like roses. This is because it is *drawn from the skin of fermenting red grapes*. Named for its color, it has nothing to do with flowers.

*

When I was a child, I dreamed of a literary life. I could feel it when I read poetry—the *dark spirit of the earth coming up*, as Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca would say, *through the soles of the feet*.

Wrote Lorca: “One must awaken the duende in the remotest mansions of the blood.”

My blood is sort of more like a trailer park.

But this is the story of how I came to live in an HOA, an acronym which you may know, but in case you, too, were ever flustered at a dessert menu, and had to look up how to pronounce “ganache,” HOA stands for “homeowners’ association,” which comes with a set of rules for neighborhood living.

*

Fairwood Park Protective Covenants, 2.04—Temporary Structures: No trailer, basement, tent, shack, garage, barn, camper or other outbuilding or any structure of temporary character erected or placed on the property shall at any time be used as a residence.

When we first moved to town, my husband and I lived in a 1912 house near West Central Spokane. We pulled weeds, planted lilacs, phlox, and fruit trees. We put plastic on our old windows to keep out the cold, and when, that first January, the temperature dropped into the negatives for over a week, we used a hair dryer to thaw the un-insulated pipes too close to the foundation wall. We tried wrapping them, too, but it seemed their freezing was inevitable. There were things about the house that we couldn’t fix, and we loved it.

“

Wrote Lorca:

“One must awaken the duende in
the remotest mansions of the blood.”

My blood is sort of more
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”

I always felt rich there, and I thought our \$100,000 loan was a fortune. We were *homeowners*! Or, at least, could be if we made our payments. I was still baffled by the notion of permanent address. My parents had been renters, even squatters; sometimes, we lived in a garage. Sometimes, we lived in a van. When I repeated this to my husband, years into marriage, he shook his head and said, with a realization I hadn’t reached, “Maya, you were homeless.”

I had never thought of myself as homeless. *Itinerant*, maybe, *gypsy*, sure—I didn’t yet know the term’s problematic usage. Not *homeless*. More like a mouse after a flood, finding a new place for its nest.

We made those nests in rural areas, where we ate salmon my brother caught from the river, blackberries we picked in the fields. We always had some kind of roof, a basin, a wood stove. We usually went to school, and we visited the library.



▲ Illustration by Christine Larsen.

My mother sang Cher’s “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves” while she darned our socks, and my father hummed “King of the Road” when, two beers into the night, he still felt jolly. Sometimes, my father drove a tow truck, and filled the bushes around our homes with junked cars, treasure troves where we discovered free cassette tapes (!) and cool T-shirts (!). The cars were playhouses, magic passageways to other lives, fuel to dreams of a future in which I would be sophisticated enough to attend fancy fundraiser desserts in ornate buildings. I dreamed these things the way a child dreams them, without any real awareness of my family’s economic status, without any shame of it.

Section 2.05—Minimum Dwelling Cost: No single family dwelling shall be permitted on any lot at a cost of less than \$100,000 exclusive of land.

When I began college in the late 90s, the socioeconomic privilege of my peer cohort was often taken for granted by my instructors, who said things like, “Well, *we* can’t really understand, being middle class.” They used words like *cul-de-sac* and IRA, and sometimes made cultural references

from TV shows like *Seinfeld* and stations like CNN. They said *The Dow is down two points*; I kept my eyes low. I didn’t really know what middle class meant, though I’d been passing so far. When I took a course in the culture of poverty as it related to education and language register, I finally understood: I grew up “in poverty,” “in a family of addiction.” But I knew how to move between formal and informal language register, so no one picked up on my past. Still, I was what we were studying: how to move from a culture of *poverty* into a culture of *education*. How to serve an “at risk” population, students who had family lives like mine: cycles of addiction, impermanent addresses, free and reduced-price lunches. In discussion, my classmates often said things like “I had no idea so many people *in America* lived like this,” or “I never realized poverty could be so beyond your control.”

I kept quiet; I was not interested in being a lab rat. I was not interested in changing, in their view, from a competent, assertive person I’d worked so hard to become, into an anomaly of class transcendence. How many questions would follow? They were questions I did not feel comfortable answering.

“ I pick up a subtext:
do not, under any circumstances,
tell us you grew up in poverty. ”

*

Section 2.06—Minimum Dwelling Specifications:

... All dwellings shall have enclosed garages of at least 20 feet by 22 feet, with completely sealed interior, walls and ceilings, and with fully paved driveways to the street.

A few years ago, after careful deliberation, frugal living, and in accordance with the standard social mobility of the educated middle class, my husband, children, and I moved from our “starter home” into a 4 bedroom, 3 bath house in a 1970s neighborhood, north of town, with a half acre yard and HOA bylaws. I was nervous about acclimating to these new, strange rules, but I had also grown weary of nightly car break-ins, anxious from regular sirens, and I looked forward to the quiet of stars.

At our first HOA meeting, people were welcoming, but some felt furious about the Smiths, who converted their one-family home into a shared living space for their parents and elderly friends (“Three families in one house? Who heard of such a thing? There’ll be cars coming and going all hours of the day!”). And they also ranted about the apartments just beyond our HOA boundary, transitioning to low-income, government housing. It’s the beginning of this conversation, and I pick up a subtext: do not, under any circumstances, tell us you grew up in poverty. This breaks *Section 2.08, Exterior Maintenance*, which stipulates, among other things, you must always keep a clean curb.

*

For several years, I taught writing at a private liberal arts institution, a school known for its basketball teams, its Jesuit

tradition, and its students’ relative privilege. (There *are* students on full scholarship, from Washington apple country, urban areas, or small Montana towns, who navigate a sense of culture shock and socioeconomic gap even wider than the one I charted at a state school.) In my first year of adjunct work at this private college, where at the time my salary was less than my students’ tuition, I approached the topic by teaching Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*, in which she works as a Merry Maid. When students expressed surprise at the maids’ working conditions, of the meager American Dream offered to someone employed full-time, or when they made statements about how a person could “pull themselves out of it” if they “get a degree,” I asked how many of their families employed maids; half the class raised their hands. After their awkward glances and equivocations, I shared that, to put myself through college, *I* worked as a custodian, changing sheets and cleaning dorm showers of high school football campers who, mostly oblivious to who replaced their towels, would sometimes prank us by shitting in the shower or behind the beds.

My students went back to their dorms and cleaned their own toilets; they ventured into Spokane on city buses, many of them using public transportation for the first time. In reflective research essays, they referenced these experiences, a range of statistics, Ehrenreich and other authors, and the university’s social justice mission. But it was still difficult to help those sweet young people—many of whom, since the age of sixteen, had driven their own cars (cars in which they did *not* also live)—understand how hard work does not necessarily equal a fair shot.

As is the case with many of us raised in (and out of) economic poverty, as an adult, I often feel guilt over my privilege. At the private university, I rarely admitted this to my students. I also didn’t tell them that Barbara Ehrenreich’s anthropological experiment made me personally angry, that her immersion in

poverty for the sake of narrative journalism felt like exploitation, that I always feared the essays I assigned might skirt appropriation. The entire time Ehrenreich worked undercover as a journalist, she had a bank account on which she could fall back, health insurance she could access. She did not have to make any hard choices; for her, there was a clear end to poverty. I understand what she was doing, though: passing. Playing a role.

*

My navigation of this world is still tenuous. I don't always pronounce words correctly, and I don't fully understand middle class social cues. I sometimes make generalizations, like "Many people who grow up with money don't understand they have money." (My children will be these people, no matter how much I ask them to reflect; they cannot fathom that the amount we spend each month for piano lessons is the equivalent of what my family once paid monthly in rent.)

I am deeply grateful for my life, but the irony of my socioeconomic extravagance, and the existence of systems that privilege my particular literacy level and race, does not escape me. When I drive home from work in my functional car, past the "No Soliciting" signs at the neighborhood entrance, the deer grazing in yards, where pre-programmed sprinkler systems water the plants, when I pull into my "fully paved driveway," I reach up to my sun visor and press the button on my automatic garage door opener. Like magic, the door glides up. I call the garage door opener "the privilege button," and every time I push it, I shake my head, giggle to myself.

I laugh, but I also tell the story to my students, where I now teach, at a state school. I tell them I want to believe if we

communicate thoughtfully across our intersectional ad- and disadvantages, we might bridge some boundaries. I tell them I still need to work on my daily actions, my hypocrisies—we all do.

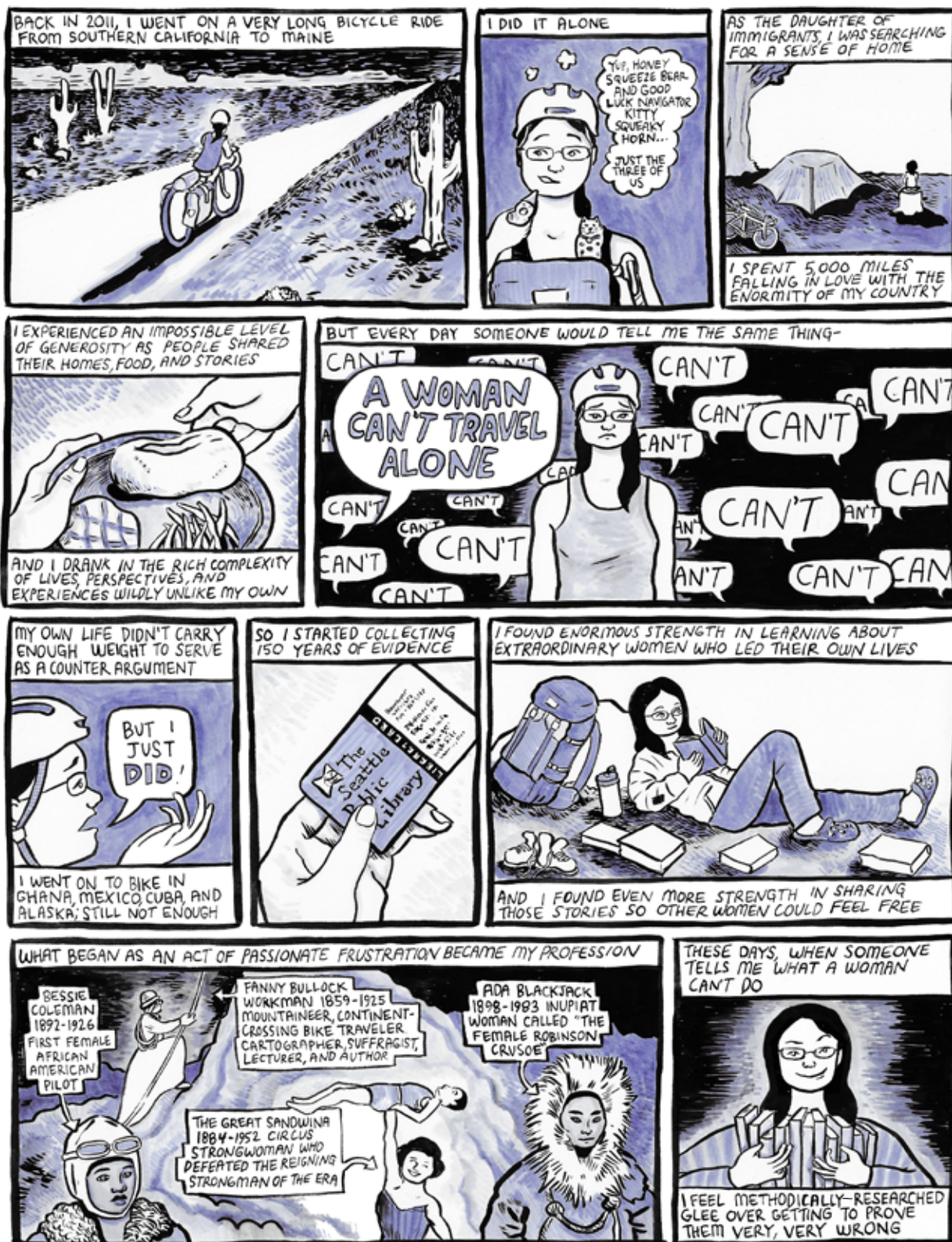
I tell them that when I push the privilege button, my garage door glides up to reveal a very human, middle class mess: kayaks stacked on cement blocks, bicycles and scooters piled on a lawn mower, old tires still in their bags, an unplugged refrigerator, a workbench covered with tools and manila folders, crates of books, a box of childhood treasures, old cassette tapes. They're safe and warm here in this "completely sealed interior."

The door that conveniently leads directly from garage to house opens, and out spill two giddy children, their faces sticky with melon juice. They've been practicing piano, building worlds that lead to Narnia. They're learning to say words in more than one language, and they're learning what code switching means, and they're learning they must practice empathy, be mindful when they push their privilege buttons. They have big dreams and finely tuned senses of humor. And on the off chance we find ourselves in an expensive restaurant, they'll probably laugh kindheartedly at their mom, who still won't be sure if she got it right: "ganache." "Guanache?" Whatever. 



Maya Jewell Zeller is the author, with visual artist Carrie DeBacker, of *Alchemy for Cells & Other Beasts*; the chapbook *Yesterday, the Bees*; and the poetry collection *Rust Fish*. Zeller teaches at Central Washington University.

This essay was originally written and read for Bedtime Stories Spokane, a literary fundraiser where authors write and read original work.



▲ Comic by artist and outdoorswoman Tessa Hulls. She is currently presenting her free Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau talk, "She Traveled Solo: Strong Women of the Early 20th Century," around the state. Find an event at humanities.org.

THE MUSIC AND THE MEANING

Charles Johnson wants to remind you that the way you write is just as important as what you write about.

By Jefferson Robbins



▲ Charles Johnson | Photo by Zorn B. Taylor.

A prolific writer for nearly 50 years, Charles Johnson has some advice for those pursuing the same path. The Seattle author and teacher's 2016 nonfiction book *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* packages his thoughts on writing alongside elements of memoir, criticism, and philosophy.

One could do worse than take pointers from the author of the National Book Award-winning novel *Middle Passage*, who also happens to be a founding father of Humanities Washington's Bedtime Stories literary events. Johnson proposed the idea of a yearly theme for the fundraiser that would prompt participating writers to create new work.

“

In great stories, the music and meaning,
the sound and sense are one—a whole or unified.

”

A political cartoonist and illustrator from a young age, Johnson’s explorations of fiction led to his first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, in 1974, and then to an outpouring of work that’s earned him MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships and numerous other honors. His newer cartooning work is on display in the children’s book series *The Adventures of Emery Jones*, *Boy Science Wonder*, named for his grandson and written with his daughter Elisheba Johnson. His latest story collection, just published in spring, is *Night Harwks*.

“You want to give your best technique, your best thought, and your best feeling,” Johnson said in commenting on *The Way of the Writer*. “. . . Where else in life do you have an opportunity to achieve perfection?”

Humanities Washington: Do you craft a story differently knowing it’s going to be read aloud?

Charles Johnson: No, my process is always the same. With early drafts, though I’m not tone deaf, I’m really just working on making the story entertaining, my focus being on voice, plotting, pacing, details for characterization and various props, and creating as completely as possible an imaginative world for the reader to inhabit. In later drafts, and especially the last one, I work on musicality in the prose. Then when the story is done, I test-read it, as an actor would, for the stand-up performance I have to deliver [at Bedtime Stories], my focus then being on tempo, where the story speeds up and slows down, lines that have to be delivered softly or almost *sotto voce* and others that raise the volume in the story. When reading, I ideally want every syllable to be sounded by me for its full experiential value.

Should every story be written to be heard? Do some stories remain great even though they resist being read aloud?

Even when we’re reading quietly to ourselves, we are in fact hearing the music and poetry in a prose passage in our minds. For that reason, the telling of a tale is as important as the content of the tale. Rhythm, meter, the performance of language—all that is the medium or vehicle for the story’s delivery. It’s very hard for me to think of a great story that is tone deaf or clumsy in its delivery. In great stories, the music and meaning, the sound and sense are one—a whole or unified.

Your grandson and your dogs are on the cover of *The Way of the Writer* with you, which sort of implies they’re important to your writing process.

I love dogs and, of course, I dearly love my six-year-old grandson Emery. He inspires me. That book cover, showing the study/home office where I’m writing at this very moment, is filled to overflowing—some would say “cluttered”—with objects that stimulate my intellect and imagination.

You’ve used visual presentations with some of your Bedtime Stories readings. Has your experience as a cartoon artist made your fiction more visual?

Yes, I think so. My imagination has always been primarily visual. I first see things in my head in wordless imagery. Then, as I write a story, the challenge is always to find a way to express what I see in my mind’s eye in language as vivid as the pictures that rise up in my consciousness. 

NEWS

from Humanities Washington

Poet Laureate launches online poetry map of Washington State

For Claudia Castro Luna, the Washington State Poet Laureate, the twisting lines of a map feel like the twisting lines of a poem, so she's taken Washington State's highways and roads and overlaid them with poetry. The result is the new Washington Poetic Routes, an online poetry map of our state. Visitors click dots on the map to see a poem from a Washington State poet written about that location.

"As a writer and poet I am constantly interested in the relationship people have to place," said Castro Luna. "Geography is inescapable. We are bound to the locations we inhabit: we dream in space, work in space, love in space. When we write about the place we live in, we tap into memory, into history, into our desires and frustrations. This is fertile territory for poetry."

The map is intended to be a living document of Washington State. The map currently has 25 poems from both established and younger poets, but Castro Luna hopes that a broad swath of Washington's residents will be included, so anyone can submit a poem for consideration via the website. View the full project at WAPoeticRoutes.org.



▲ Washington Poetic Routes map.

Hometown Teams, a Smithsonian exhibit, is traveling across the state

Humanities Washington is proud to present the Smithsonian Institute's *Hometown Teams: How Sports Shape America*, an exhibit that will be hosted by nine Washington communities in 2019 and 2020. Hometown sports are more than just games—they shape our lives, and *Hometown Teams* examines the many roles that sports play in American society, including how they unite us and celebrate who we are as Americans. See the exhibit at a venue near you.

AUBURN:

White River Valley Museum
May 4 – June 16, 2019

SPOKANE:

Spokane Public Library
June 22 – August 4, 2019

TIETON:

Tieton Arts and Humanities
August 10 – September 22, 2019

LA CONNER:

Skagit County Historical Museum
September 28 – November 10, 2019

ILWACO:

Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum
November 16 – January 5, 2020

LYNDEN:

Lynden Pioneer Museum
January 11 – February 22, 2020

HOQUIAM:

Polson Museum
February 28 – April 10, 2020

RENTON:

Renton Historical Museum
April 16 – May 28, 2020



Langston Collin Wilkins chosen as new director of the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions

We're excited to announce that Langston Collin Wilkins is the new Center director, taking over

for Kristin Sullivan. Langston was previously the traditional arts specialist for the Tennessee Arts Commission and a program officer for Humanities Tennessee. He received his PhD in folklore and ethnomusicology from Indiana University in 2016. He also holds a Masters degree in African American and African diasporic studies from Indiana University and a Bachelors of Arts in English from the University of Texas at Austin.

New podcast explores the Alcatraz you've never heard of, and it's here in Washington State

A prisoner makes a beautiful violin from scrap wood and the heat off a radiator. A group of dads explain their imprisonment to their sons and daughters by writing a children's book. A new podcast series explores stories like these from the prisoners and staff of McNeil Island, a forgotten island prison 11 miles from Tacoma.

Built before Washington even became a state, the McNeil Island Penitentiary stood for 136 years, and its relative isolation made it a little-known entity. Yet, according to Gwen Whiting, lead curator with the Washington State Historical Society, "no other prison represents as many different eras in incarceration history as McNeil does." When McNeil closed in 2011, it was the last remaining island prison in the United States.

The podcast was created by the Washington State History Museum and KNKX Public Radio, and supported by Humanities Washington. Listen to the full series at forgottenprison.org.



▲ Vintage cyanotype image of McNeil Island prison. | Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.



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Leave a legacy for Washington State that promotes a deeper understanding of the self, of others, and the human experience in order to promote the common good. Planned giving could allow you to make a more substantial charitable gift than is possible during your lifetime, and can offer significant tax advantages for you and/or your heirs.



For more information please contact,
Shelley Saunders, at 206-682-1770 x103
or via email at shelley@humanities.org

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OUR MISSION

*Humanities Washington opens minds and bridges divides
by creating spaces to explore different perspectives.*

OUR PROGRAMS



FAMILY READING uses storytelling and discussion to explore cultural and ethical themes in children's literature and emphasizes the importance of families reading together.



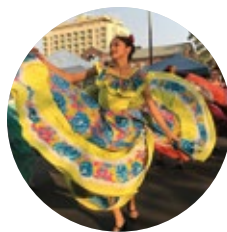
WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE builds awareness and appreciation of poetry – including the state's legacy of poetry – through public readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations throughout the state. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



GRANTS assist local organizations in creating opportunities for their community to come together to discuss important issues using the humanities.



SPEAKERS BUREAU draws from a pool of leading cultural experts and scholars to provide free conversational lecture events for community partners to offer local audiences throughout the state.



CENTER FOR WASHINGTON CULTURAL TRADITIONS is a new effort to amplify our state's rich, diverse living cultural treasures through research and special programming. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



THINK & DRINK brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms around the state.



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