



A STATE OF OPEN MIND



Thoughts from Five Decades of
California Humanities Leadership:
Bruce Sievers, Jim Quay,
Ralph Lewin, and Julie Fry

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FOREWORD

Stories drive the humanities. Stories of people, places, cultures and history. Stories that are personal, political and shared. Stores of community lives and ties that bind. As a writer and organic farmer, stories help frame and define the world all around my fruits of labor and this state I call home.

Oral histories capture storytelling. They allow us to probe the thinking of people and we are allowed to step into their experiences. These oral histories of those who led the California Humanities provide us with a window into the evolution of an organization and embrace the spirit and energies of a state and the people.

The many layers of California Humanities are reflected and shared by these leaders and reflections. Like conversations with good friends, we gain insight in what shaped the history of this organization and a broader understanding of humanities in California. The tone is honest and direct, not a speech nor policy paper. These stories capture authentic human experiences.

As a former Council member and Chair, I have witnessed this organization grow and mature. These four leaders have left their stamp on the state and opened the door for continued redefining and renewing. I thank them for their work and spirit and you too will engage in their life with the humanities.

While I was on the Council, I enjoyed a simple framing: California Humanities is the “I” between human and ties. That’s what the humanities are all about, “us” as the link between “human” and “ties”.

Enjoy
In gratitude
And celebrate stories.

David Mas Masumoto

PREFACE

Imagine almost 50 years of memories at our fingertips, a collection of California stories and people and places. That is what we sought to collect in 2019 through oral history interviews with the humanists at the helm of California Humanities since 1974. Bruce Sievers, Jim Quay, Ralph Lewin and me – honored to number among this organization’s leaders – sat down with archivist Debbie Kahn, along with long-time employees Felicia Kelley and John Lightfoot. With beginning and ending thoughts from former board member David Mas Masumoto, author and farmer, and his daughter, the artist, farmer, and cultural organizer Nikiko Masumoto, we invite you to enjoy the history of California Humanities and the efforts made across many years and many programs to connect us all across the state.

*Julie Fry
President & CEO,
California Humanities
(2015-2023)*





Reading through the thoughts and memories of the past four leaders of California Humanities recalling close to 50 years of impact is a humbling experience as I step into the role as the new President & CEO of California Humanities. While the organization has evolved from its initial purpose in 1974 of exploring assumptions behind policy issues, at its core is uncovering stories that illuminate our vast experiences as Californians so that we can better understand and appreciate experiences that are not our own. This is key in developing empathy which is fundamental to bridging our communities across the state. Following the legacies of Bruce Sievers, Jim Quay, Ralph Lewin, and Julie Fry is daunting. But their words and stories in this publication highlight the brilliant foundation on which to further build and leverage the humanities with social justice to address inequities and systems that have traditionally, and often unconsciously, excluded Californians from fully participating in all that this great state and nation has to offer.

*Rick Noguchi, MFA, MBA
President & CEO,
California Humanities*



*Left to Right: Bruce Sievers, Jim Quay, Julie Fry, Ralph Lewin
California Humanities' 40th Anniversary Celebration, November
2015. Photo: Carlos Torres*

1

COMMUNITY



A business executive, a medieval historian, and a labor leader walk into a bar. The reason for this most unconventional convening? The humanities, of course. These three individuals—alongside others hailing from a diverse array of fields and political orientations—counted among the founding board members of what would later become California Humanities. From its earliest moments, the organization’s board “represent[ed] quite different viewpoints,” remembers Bruce Sievers, the organization’s first Executive Director. “You could see the major threads of the incredible diversity that makes up California.”

When it was founded in 1974, though, the group bore a different name, one reflecting that era’s particular conception of the humanities: the California Council for the Humanities in Public Policy (CCHPP). The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) had commissioned CCHPP, and fifty-five other state humanities councils across the country, to use “the humanities [to] illuminat[e] the roots and assumptions behind vital policy issues,” says Sievers. Sievers’ own background in both fields—a PhD in International Relations, followed by a role on the Montana Committee for the Humanities—positioned him well to head up an organization aiming to synthesize the two.

Once it had set up camp in its new San Francisco office, the CCHPP sought a theme for its first year of projects. As they learned to turn their professional and philosophical differences into generative energy during their board meetings, Sievers and his colleagues realized that their own membership’s varied

backgrounds inherently reflected one of California's most distinctive qualities: its profound diversity. After all, observes Julie Fry, the organization's fourth President and CEO, even the types of diversity to be found here are legion:

What a special place this is. One of my personal values is that of diversity in many ways, and I think there's so much to be found in California—from a geographical point of view: cities, suburbs, rural; from a typographical point of view: mountains, oceans, deserts, forests; and from a people point of view. . . . We're as big as a country.

The state's beautiful and infinite variety also comes with unique challenges, however. "Even at that time, 1974, there was the important question of 'What holds this polyglot state together?'" says Sievers. His successor, Jim Quay, concurs:

Only a little bit over half the people who live here were born here. I'm not a California native. . . . There's a kind of inherited community in [other, more homogeneous states] that you have to work on, it seems to me, in California. Now, that's also so rich. The multicultural variety here is just staggering, but it's also a challenge.

Helping Californians of many languages, ethnicities, geographic locations, and socioeconomic positions to find common ground would become both an abiding spiritual value of CCHPP and a highly practical function of its work. The theme that the organization eventually settled on—"the pursuit of community in California"—also evoked a central function of the humanities themselves. In order to forge a sense of collective meaning with our neighbors, we must cultivate a deep interest in people different from ourselves, and a willingness to listen deeply to them. At a 1978 forum that CCHPP organized on food policy, Sievers recalls:

We convened people from some of the big ags, the food companies, fourteen environmentalists, historians and other scholars with critical perspectives, and they spent basically a year meeting about once every six weeks. I do remember towards the end of that project several people standing up [and] saying, “I never, ever in my life would have talked to this person before, in terms of my policy differences or in terms of potential criticism that might arise, but I’ve learned so much from this process and really respect this person.”

Though it would not be until 2012 that the organization would adopt the tagline “a state of open mind,” the sentiment behind that motto has clearly been integral to the organization since its inception. That open-mindedness extended, too, to the many forms and formats that humanities programming could take, thanks in part to the NEH’s early decision to encourage its member councils to break new ground with their programming. One of the CCHPP’s bolder creations was therefore also among its first: *We the People*, organized in 1976 in response to the U.S. bicentennial. Humanist researchers and television producers collaborated to create a series of fictional documentaries called *Eyewitness News Year 2000*. These video reports presented news from the future on topics predicted to be of great import to turn-of-the-millennium Californians, from war to pollution. The program’s viewers were then encouraged to engage with scholars and policymakers in public dialogues on the issues raised by the videos. This exercise provided a forum for people who might not normally engage with public policy—but were nonetheless impacted by it on a daily basis—to learn about the subject at hand, voice their concerns, and generate solutions.

Within a few years, however, the California council had moved away from its focus on public policy, dropping the phrase from its name. With this semantic change came existential

questions: what and who were the humanities “for,” anyways? In an age before popular humanists like Ken Burns had brought widespread recognition to the field, the early leaders of humanities organizations had their work cut out for them in making specialized disciplines like philosophy and history legible and relevant to those outside the academy. Sievers recalls a telling moment from an early planning meeting of the Montana Committee for the Humanities: after a lengthy discussion with about eighty members of the public on the importance of the humanities, and what future programming should look like, the committee received a check made out to the Humane Society. “We realized we hadn’t quite gotten the message out to everybody,” says Sievers. “We needed to work on communicating the nature of the program to the general public.”

Fry indicates that this work of translating and bridging has remained a fruitful challenge for the organization, even throughout her own tenure from 2015 on. “I’m a firm believer that everybody is interested in [the humanities], in one way or another,” she says. “They just need to get that invitation to join in, to come through the door.” It is the nonprofit’s obligation to make sure that door remains wide open to all:

California Humanities plays the role of a connector. At one end of the spectrum—think about it as a U-shaped bell curve—there are the traditional humanities disciplines: anthropology, history, foreign language, criticism, literature, all important as the grounding of the humanities. And at the other end of that bell curve is a family sitting around a dinner table talking about their history and culture and family traditions. I feel that we’re in between those two poles, and we’re uniting them.

An early success in bringing these twinned social spheres closer together came with Humanists in the Schools, which the California Council for the Humanities (CCH) piloted in 1978. For more than a decade, this initiative embedded humanities scholars in public

schools across the state of California in order to enrich education across the state. “We’d get these great letters back from teachers or others saying, ‘This has made such a huge difference in my classroom,’” says Sievers. And humanists in other states took notice, too, with both the NEH and the Smithsonian Institution basing similar programs on the Californian model.

Another effort to bring the humanities directly to Californians’ ears and minds took the form of California Times, a radio program that the California Council for the Humanities administered from 1980-87. The weekly series spotlighted issues of interest to Californians, inviting anthropologists, ethicists, historians, and other humanists to share their expert perspectives on subjects ranging from childhood literacy to the insanity defense in legal proceedings. Eventually, this format was distilled into three-minute broadcasts by CBS journalist Charles Osgood, who delivered the snippets during peak commute time. The Osgood Files, as they were called, were “a way of very effectively, very efficiently using resources to reach a whole range of people who would never otherwise have access to this material,” says Sievers.

Although “the pursuit of community” no longer serves as California Humanities’ official theme, it’s a sentiment that still lies at the heart of the organization today—and at the heart of a California that only becomes more diverse with each passing year. As Felicia Kelley, with California Humanities since 1997 and currently the Project and Evaluation Director, says:

The humanities are essential to us as citizens—not just of our own communities, our state, and our country—but of the world. The humanities help us understand other people and get to know who they are: people who have their own histories, interests, and values. Through the humanities we can try to discover what we have in common and how best to communicate with each other.

A CONVERSATION WITH BRUCE SIEVERS

Knowledge is power

I would argue that the knowledge that emerges from the humanities is still crucial to what goes on in society in terms of understanding how people behave, what motivates them, what the dynamics of thought are, how one should consider ethical and political issues, and so on—all of which are crucial to all of society and have fundamental roots or foundations in the humanities.

The perils of technology

A continuing primary concern of my own research and writing has been the issue of reductionism. It is quite appealing to reduce certain kinds of complex problems to seemingly simple levels of analysis or public agendas. But this kind of reductionism does not do justice to the complexity of intellectual or public life. And technology tends to encourage that. A classic question these days in philanthropy is “What is the bang for the buck?” Well, understanding society is so much more complicated than just talking about an efficiency standard of “bang for the buck.” So the degree to which technology encourages thinking in that narrow direction, I think, is challenging and problematic.

Gratifying moments

One of them was . . . something that initially was called California Times, which was a radio series of half-hour programs on really interesting and important California issues that many people had not heard about. The producer would get historians, cultural anthropologists, ethicists, and others to explore them. And they were extremely insightful programs that reached audiences throughout the state—I think at one point there were something like 20 or 25

California public radio stations that would play them every week. So we were getting real outreach.

Meaningful initiatives

We the People and, of course, the Humanist in Schools and Humanist in Residence programs—I always felt that those were real gems. The documentary work that we were funding really seemed to be of important and lasting value. And then there were individual programs where some complex policy issue was being discussed, like food policy, or it might be bioethics, in which a humanities scholar would provide a brilliant analysis of some aspect of the issue that was not part of the common public discourse. This was so insightful and refreshing in terms of the perspectives that should be brought to that issue. It might differ fundamentally from the policy direction toward which I was personally inclined, but it was using the humanities in the best way possible. Several projects sponsored by the World Without War organization were examples of this.

Some of the most interesting and exciting of these programs occurred in the rural areas of California. I remember driving up to Weed one day for an event. I forget what the topic was—perhaps an environmental issue—but it was a great program that the local sponsoring organization put together up there, and one could feel felt this is something that really had durability and brought exactly the kind of perspectives we were hoping to have brought into the public arena. And it was reaching somewhere we didn't normally reach.

A life's work

Somebody once said we keep rewriting our dissertations our entire lives, and it's kind of been like that for me. I'm very still fixated on this issue I talked about before—

reductionism, the tendency to oversimplify social issues, trying to reduce everything, say, to metrics, as opposed to broader, more humanistic criteria of judgment. After I left the Humanities Council, I became the executive director of a private foundation, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund in San Francisco. And I stayed in that position for 19 years. So much of what I learned through my work at the Council I applied to that work—in terms of dealing with a broad set of issues in communities, the kind of choices one faces in how to approach funding certain subject areas, bringing in new perspectives, the sensitivities of grantmaking, and so on, and I had a really wonderful time there. And after retiring from that, I've been for the last more than 15 years, consulting and teaching part time at Stanford—a course on philanthropy and civil society. And I finished a book on civil society a few years ago. So I'm very interested in how this arena, this sort of civil arena and civic discourse is critical to the democratic process and to bringing in these kinds of fundamental reflections about the nature of values and ethical choices that we have in society.

As I say, I keep rewriting the dissertation, but I do think understanding what counts as knowledge and what counts as valid knowledge is absolutely critical, and it's going to be even more so as AI comes along and as the digital world reigns ever more supreme. For a long time, I've been working on a book—that may or may not ever get finished—on the problem with these sorts of metrics and measurable outcomes and how that narrows so much of what philanthropy is trying to accomplish and how one assesses that. I've also been working more recently with some international colleagues on a “Pursuing the Common Good” project. So you can see the continuing threads of my grounding in the humanities.

After I left the staff of the California Humanities, I was on the Council board for the regular term of six years. And then not too long after that, I was named by President Obama (I have to throw that in!) to the National Council on the Humanities. State programs are a very large piece of the NEH budget, but there's also research, fellowships and so on—different areas of humanities inquiry that the Endowment supports—and it's interesting to gain a perspective on all of that. Also, I would like to think that I've been able to, maybe a few times in my best moments, bring some perspective from the state view of what it's like to be out there on the front lines, where state programs are every day, dealing with public issues and real members of communities. So it's been really fun and worthwhile. I can't believe it's been 35 years, but I guess that's how long it's been since I was the first executive director of California Humanities. But that experience remains indelible in my memory.

2

DIVERSITY THROUGH MEDIA AND FILM

Focusing exclusively on what we share in common, however, runs the risk of glossing over or erasing difference altogether. In the 1980s, the CCH began to ask itself how it might forge connections across the disparate parts of the state while also preserving and respecting the range of experiences and identities here.

One answer, the CCH soon realized, already existed in the state's film and media industries—the largest in the nation. Hollywood, and a similarly robust radio world, offered readymade structures of media expertise and innovation. Grantees could take advantage of these resources to amplify their own voices and call attention to issues that mattered to their respective communities. Furthermore, cable networks and the like also had an unparalleled “power to reach people,” Sievers points out, an important aid in the quest to bring the humanities to constituents of a state as enormous as California. For these reasons, CCH became one of the first state humanities councils to prioritize inventive uses of media.

Among the earliest beneficiaries of this strategy were the audio artists Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva. The Kitchen Sisters, as they are also known, received a CCH grant in 1978 and began producing radio pieces together. They have since created more than 200 radio documentaries, focusing on little-known and untold stories of American Culture and tradition, from profiles of Vietnamese nail salon workers to conversations with underground hip-hop historians.

Radio also brought the organization its second Executive Director. In the early '80s, Quay participated in a CCH initiative

that placed humanities scholars in non-academic fields, using their specialized knowledge to serve the wider public. Quay, a recently-minted English PhD, was hired to be a humanist-in-residence at California Public Radio, where he interviewed writers, professors, and politicians and produced programs on subjects ranging from poetry to cognitive science, always using the humanities as a lens to more fully interrogate a given topic. Listening, for Quay, is one of the key skills that the humanities cultivate:

You don't have to have an advanced degree or be a professor to practice the humanities. You only have to open yourself to the stories of other people, living and dead; reflect on what these people did and why; and reflect on what their actions mean to us today. And that requires people to exercise their moral imaginations. I see the public humanities as creating occasions for people to exercise their moral imaginations, and to practice and not just study the humanities.

Moral imagination—and moral courage—were also in the DNA of many of CCH's filmmaker grantees in the 1980s, from Jon H. Else (whose *The Day after Trinity* examined J. Robert Oppenheimer and the invention of the atomic bomb) to Paul Espinosa (whose documentaries highlight the many struggles that Latinx people face in America, from the immigration process to educational discrimination). So, too did the Council itself serve as a shaping force in grantees' projects, often pushing them to add more dimensions to their coverage. After all, Fry posits, one of the main virtues that the humanist orientation can bring to the arts is an insistence on depth and complexity: "the humanities [bring] the critical perspective. Where is the inquiry, where is the sharing of ideas in this, where is the historical research?" In the case of those early filmmakers, Quay says, this "very often [meant that] we had to insist on balance. Almost universally, filmmakers would say it

was a big a pain to have to do that—but it made the film better. I was rather proud to hear that.” For example, the CCH offered Rob Epstein a small grant to develop his script for a documentary about the AIDS quilt, but with a few caveats, such as the requirement that he include an anthropologist among his interviewees. Epstein subsequently received a far larger funding package from HBO, and, as Quay recalls:

I called [Epstein] up and I said, “Look, Rob, we will understand if you want to tell us, with our \$7,500 and our conditions, to go take a hike.” And he said, “No, absolutely not. You were the first money in this film, and the conditions were actually quite useful, and I want to make sure you have a credit line in this film.”

The movie, *Common Threads*, went on to win an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, bringing a story of queer liberation and healing after disaster to an audience far beyond California.

This original focus on handing the mic to California’s most marginalized people lives on in the CCH’s more recent enterprise, the California Documentary Project. Founded in 2003, the CDP has powered projects like Emily Cohen Ibañez’s *Fruits of Labor*, a profile of a high school senior dreaming of college while she works in the strawberry fields of California’s Central Coast, and the Oscar-nominated *Crip Camp* (dir. Nicole Newnham and James Lebrecht, 2020), which chronicles the rise of the disability rights movement that led to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Of course, the most important measure of a documentary’s success is not what it achieves on the screen, but off of it. John Lightfoot, the organization’s Director of Media and Journalism Programs, recalls seeing the humanities in action at a screening of a California Humanities-funded film entitled *Real Boy*. The 2016 documentary about a transgender teen and his mother was shown at Bakersfield College.

The screening coincided with the recent suicide of a young transgender person in Bakersfield, so the subject was already on people's minds. There was also concern that the subject matter might not be as welcome by some in the community, but the screening was packed, with students, faculty, and community members, including relatives of the young person who had died, in attendance. After the screening, filmmaker Shaleece Haas and a student from Bakersfield College's Gender and Sexuality Awareness Club led a conversation that allowed audience members to talk candidly about identity and gender and to ask questions that may have been too uncomfortable to raise in another setting. It was an incredibly powerful example of how the media projects we support can help bring people together around complicated and emotional issues.

Indeed, the CCH often turned to honest community discussions as a means of giving a wide variety of people an opportunity to speak their otherwise unheard truths. In 1988, the Council administered a program called Talking About Vietnam, a series of conversations based in libraries across the San Francisco Bay peninsula. Prior to the 1980s, "there was a great national silence [around Vietnam], caused by grief or shame, I think," says Quay. "These programs helped break that silence and brought together vets and civilians."

This role of assembling people from diverse backgrounds who might not otherwise have the opportunity to be in the same room—and ensuring that all sides are heard—remains among California Humanities' highest callings. Ultimately, America's broader reckoning with multiculturalism throughout the 1980s and '90s taught the organization to thread the needle of seeking common ground among Californians while preserving diversity in all its richness. Practically, too, the Council's finger remains on the pulse of a given era's trends and patterns in the arts and humanities because the organization is constantly in contact with the field's

most cutting-edge thinkers. As Quay observes:

Early on, we realized that we were getting proposals, say, from the African American community in Sacramento that was trying to preserve its history (say from the '20s and '30s), and there'd be a proposal from Sikhs in Yuba City wanting to do the very same thing. . . . We realized that while we could see the commonalities between [our grantees'] stories, they weren't seeing the commonalities between their stories. So the Council was in a unique position to, if you like, show the communities how their stories were more alike than different.

A CONVERSATION WITH JIM QUAY

War stories

As you might expect, the programs most gratifying to me are not necessarily the biggest or even the best, but ones that meant something personal to me. One was the “Talking About Vietnam” project. The American Library Association was encouraging “Let’s Talk About It” programs naturally. Because of my interest in the Vietnam War and Walter Capps’ interest in veterans, in particular, we thought: “Let’s talk about the Vietnam War.” First we sponsored a countywide series with the Peninsula Library System and later got NEH funding for a statewide program. Before 1980 or so, no one was talking to or about Vietnam veterans. . . . Walter had created a class at UC Santa Barbara and rather than just lecture, he gave the podium to veterans to tell their stories. It was powerful. Students would write about how life-changing it was to hear those stories. In those programs, I think, you see the seed, of what became “California Stories.”

Making history come alive

Another [gratifying moment] was the 1991 “Longing for Community” project in Riverside. It’s a program where a scholar embodies a historical figure, and I’ll use Jefferson as an example. Clay Jenkinson, this very gifted young man from North Dakota, would stand before a public crowd. For the first thirty minutes, he would speak to them as if he were Jefferson, using as much as possible things Jefferson actually either wrote or said. Then, for the next half-hour, he would take questions from the audience, in the guise of Jefferson. For the final thirty minutes, he would take questions and speak to them as the scholar talking about Jefferson.

The reason that was so powerful is that—let’s take the issue of Sally Hemmings, the Black mistress that he had. As Jefferson, Clay doesn’t mention her. During the Q&A, one of the first questions that comes up: “What about that?” As Jefferson, he denies it: “None of your business.” In the final Q&A, Clay comes back and says, “Now, I want to return to your question. The reason I answered the way I did as Jefferson [was] because that’s how Jefferson handled it all of his life. But here’s what we now know.” So it gives you this nice 360-degree view of the character, and in a way that’s very accessible to the public.

Unforgettable programs

The California Community Heritage projects in ’99 and 2001 were larger grants—and I still remember the projects about the L.A. River and “Faces of Fruitvale” and “Telling the Truth in a Small Town,” which was Kate Magruder getting Ukiah to talk about World War II stories. She’s one of those genius project directors that you wish you could clone. Also, the rapid creation of the 9/11 Community Dialogue Fund, shortly after it happened showed the council’s ability to respond quickly to a major societal cataclysm.

Why literacies matter

In 1989, at a conference on scholarship in the public humanities, I identified four trends I thought would continue into the twenty-first century: migrations of people across national borders, continued population growth, continued development and deployment of information technologies, and changes in media and communications. Thirty years later and two decades into the twenty-first century, I’d say all those trends are still pretty much powerfully in play. And I argued that they required three literacies: multicultural literacy, civic literacy, and

community literacy. And all of those require the humanities, it seems to me. If anything, I think the need for those literacies has increased and is not likely to wane any time soon.

3

HISTORY



Santa Barbara, October 1992: James Rawls, a historian specializing in California's long past, stands before an outdoor audience, holding a yardstick. An early autumn breeze lends a slight chill to the air. "Let's imagine that each inch is 1,000 years," he says, pointing to the ruler. "Columbus came along a half-inch ago and California an eighth of an inch ago." He pauses. "California's Native Americans have been here for the whole yardstick." The audience hears this in stunned silence.

Rawls's striking lesson in scale took place during "Columbus & After: Rethinking the Legacy," CCH's entry in a nationwide commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in North America. In the same year that Berkeley would become the first city to rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day, sixteen events across the state wrestled with the violence, oppression, and transformation that European conquest brought for indigenous peoples across the Americas, including California.

In the 1980s and '90s, CCH increasingly turned its sights towards creating spaces to recognize and rethink the history of the Golden State and its peoples. In 1994, the organization's mission statement had evolved to reflect a broader national attention to ethnic and other forms of diversity, listing the pursuit of "increasing multicultural understanding" among its ideals. Kelley sees these two values—a willingness to look to the past, and a respect for equity and diversity in the present—as interdependent:

I think our past and present practices of making it possible for people to learn about California history and current realities are so important. Because how can you function as an active member of society if you don't have that kind of understanding about yourself and the people around you?

As Quay, the Executive Director of CCH at that time, asserts, "Historical reflection is an exercise in humility." It's an ideal that must be cultivated not only by individuals, but also by institutions, like CCH itself. The organization had an opportunity to put this aspiration into practice at another "Columbus & After" event, this one based in Ukiah. A historian was playing Columbus in a "Chautauqua" (a format popular among humanities organizations in the '90s, and still in use today: a scholar embodies a historical figure, delivering speeches and fielding audience questions in character). Protestors appeared at the performance and displayed fifteenth-century wood cuts depicting atrocities committed against indigenous Americans during and after the explorer's arrival. Even more explosively, one of the activists stood in front of the stage, moaning mournfully from behind a veil as Columbus delivered his lines. Despite its challenging nature, the organizers chose to allow the demonstration to continue, and Quay now cites the moment as one of the most gratifying of his career: "All points of view were [allowed] within the tent, and it was civil. It might've been painful at times, but it was civil."

In fact, during these decades CCH consistently embraced anniversaries as opportunities to encourage honest encounters with the collective past, in all of its beauty and its disgrace. A 1998-99 series entitled "Rediscovering California at 150" marked the sesquicentennial of the beginning of the Gold Rush. "We were very careful not to call it a 'celebration,' since not everybody could celebrate the things that happened. But remembering together, that was important," says Quay. It was "probably the most ambitious thing we did" during his tenure, encompassing museum exhibits, a literary anthology co-published with Heyday Books, thirteen

Chautauqua characters, and themed discussions at libraries. In an address reflecting on the event series, Quay remarked:

Though the sesquicentennial commemoration may seem to be focused on events in the past, it is really an act of self-definition for this generation of Californians: What will we admire? What will we condemn? What will we choose to remember, and who will we choose to forget?

In addition to organizing events about the broader sweeps of national and state history, CCH also created opportunities for Californians to explore and revive local history. The ongoing Rural Museums Consortium initiative (later renamed the California Exhibition Resources Alliance) provided exhibit funding to under-resourced rural and urban museums. Throughout the '80s, CCH convened annual public humanities conferences, based in a different region each year and concentrating on themes such as "Sense of Place." California Humanities' imperative is to "make sure that reaching the far corners of our state continues to be a priority," says Fry.

Through these and other initiatives, local history often became an occasion for community-building. For instance, in 1986, a fire destroyed 20% of the Los Angeles Public Library's collections, including much of its photographic archive. In response, Carolyn Kozo Cole and Kathy Kobayashi invited various Angelino communities to lend photographs from their own families' archives for reproduction, also collecting relevant stories and context from the lenders. The project resulted not only in the recovery of a large swathe of Los Angeles' visual history, but also in an expansion of the sorts of people represented in that history. Initially focused on Black, Latinx and Asian American communities, Cole and Kobayashi subsequently used a grant from CCH to broaden the project's scope to include L.A.'s Middle Eastern communities, too. The Council's goal of "connect[ing] people with their own histories [is] particularly important in communities where the history has

been erased or forgotten or suppressed,” notes Kelley.

These decades were not without their challenges. In any given year, says Quay, “[t]he big problem that I encountered, that everybody encounters [as a leader of CCH], is a state the size of which and the population of which dwarfs what your budget is. I mean, it just makes it really impossible. So how do you deal with that?” But political shifts at the level of the federal government could make this equation even more impossible. “The political changes were also difficult, from Republican administration to Democratic administrations at the presidential level—what that meant for support,” says Lewin. Just such a shift in 1995 brought the organization’s financial challenges to the point of crisis: Republicans, having regained control of Congress the previous year, made massive budget cuts to the NEH.

Happily, though, state humanities councils put their heads together, and pointed to their track records of ambitious programming in order to successfully defend their national funder. “We managed to save both the NEH and the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts],” says Quay. “And I think we were able to save them because you had state councils in all the states doing programs, being able to talk to their congresspeople and saying, ‘Look. This is what we do,’ something really tangible.” The organization’s mission of making the humanities visible and intelligible to skeptics through a nonpartisan approach had proven both a valuable service to the public and a practical strategy for self-preservation.

A CONVERSATION WITH RALPH LEWIN

Bridging cultures

My mother is German and lived through World War II. Her father was a prisoner of war, and she didn't see him for six years after the war. And my father is Jewish and grew up in Boston. So I have these two histories that course through my veins. Part of the reason I found the work at California Humanities so interesting is that through our work we often try to bridge cultures.

An early love of libraries

The humanities have been important to me all my life. Growing up in our home, books were always important, and conversations about ideas always important. And outside of the home, I was a frequent user of libraries. In the '70s, I'd ride my Schwinn with its banana seat to the local library. And I couldn't believe that this place would trust me to take their books for free and then return them. What I loved about libraries was that the librarians would take you seriously and ask what your interests were. And when they discovered your interests—as a young boy, one of my interests was fishing—they would start by giving me magazines about fishing. And then before I knew it, I was reading Ernest Hemingway, thanks to the librarians. So the humanities, they've always been there.

Changing values

The whole notion of society would not exist if it weren't for the humanities. Everything in society is defined by them. How we are with one another, how we define right or wrong—these are all questions that the humanities have always addressed and defined. On the other hand, there are very real challenges to how our society values the humanities. At a lot of universities, science and engineering

are exploding. Humanities, not as much, in terms of resources. So how do we think about the humanities and the impact they have on our world?

Enriching lives

I think California Humanities is in a unique position. Can you think of another organization whose mission is to promote the humanities statewide? I can't. In a state as large as California, with a budget as small as California Humanities, the challenge is how do you effectively use that platform to be a voice for the importance of the humanities in each of our lives? I really think that that's a critical role that California Humanities plays, to remind each of us, as Californians and as a nation, that the humanities make our lives richer.

Start in San Diego

I started out as a Program Officer in San Diego and opened the San Diego office for California Humanities. San Diego wasn't new to me because that's where I grew up, but I'd been away for a while. I started just a few months after the L.A. riots/rebellion, and San Diego was on edge, asking itself if this could happen in San Diego. And it was within that context that I opened the office and created a community-wide project that explored what community means. These conversations were really tough—I remember a person saying to me, "We don't even know what San Diego is." And so we created a yearlong project called Searching for San Diego, where we [conducted] oral histories in five different neighborhoods. Groups organized to interview one another about why they came to San Diego, what they found when they got here, and what they expected. What was the reality, and what did they think about the history and future of the place? So we created these oral histories and then we had events in the five different neighborhoods where people

went to each neighborhood and learned about the place. It was fantastic. At the end of those five events, we had N. Scott Momaday come—the author of *House Made of Dawn*—and he spoke directly to the notion of place. It was a great humanities project, I thought, in terms of bringing people together to talk about the meaning of place.

Making an impact

We created a number of initiatives. Searching for Democracy, in 2012, created all sorts of conversations. We had a kickoff event at the Japanese American National Museum and the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Los Angeles. We involved authors like Rebecca Solnit and Daniel Alarcón. We had people come together for discussion groups. The California State Library has been very important both as a network and co-founder, and another crucial partner was the California Center for the Book. And we had this project called “War Comes Home,” which was an exploration of veterans’ experiences and families’ and communities’ experiences after enduring war. When people go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam, how do we deal with that aftermath? Those initiatives were a real highlight for me. That kind of thing makes you feel good, knowing that the work you’re doing is having an impact on people.

4

STORIES



“With almost 40 million people, we have a lot of stories,” Fry says of California. The thrill of coming into contact with that wide range of human experiences was part of Fry’s own initial attraction to working with California Humanities. Having herself lived in “very, very vastly different places,” from the Midwest to the American South to England, Fry says, gave her an intimate affection for “the heart and soul of the humanities, because it was about those human stories that I really wanted to know more about.”

If the size of our state makes for a veritable goldmine of narratives, then the humanities give us the tools to mine that precious ore. As Lewin highlights, the perspectives offered by history, literary studies, and the Classics equip us to do the “hard work [of] connect[ing] individual stories with larger stories, larger humanities stories. So: you tell me your ‘coming to California’ story. Well, how does that connect with other ‘coming to California’ stories or how does that connect to the theme of arrival that the Greeks were thinking of years ago?”

Although storytelling would not become an explicit focus of the CCH until the early 2000s, the topic also emerged periodically in the organization’s earlier years. Motherread (TM) was a national program, piloted by the North Carolina Humanities Council, that helped incarcerated mothers and their children stay connected through reading and talking about children’s books. CCH brought the program to Los Angeles in the wake of the 1992 unrest in that region, implementing it in partnership with social service agencies

in low-income communities of color throughout the county. Participants included fathers, grandparents, and other family members as well as mothers, many of them Spanish speakers. Extensive evaluations showed that the program enhanced communications skills, fostered appreciation of books and reading, and strengthened family ties. “It wasn’t just the mother reading the book, deciphering the book, but also talking about the book with the child,” remembers Quay. “And it just does amazing things for the bond between the mother and the child, but also the child’s curiosity about reading anything in school.” Although no longer administered by California Humanities, Motherread lives on as an independent initiative to this day.

It was in 2001, though, that the organization explicitly began to position itself as a steward and solicitor of Californian stories, both fictional and otherwise. Driven by a “desire for more programmatic coherence” among its offerings, CCH’s leadership determined to refocus its resources into a single statewide initiative going forward, says Quay, who was executive director at that time. “We had commissioned a public poll about stories and found that the California public believed that the telling and sharing of stories was a good way to connect with their fellow Californians.” A shift towards storytelling struck staff as “a friendly way, too, of getting people to see themselves not just as consumers of humanities, but as also the generators of humanities content.”

The resulting California Stories Initiative would run from 2001–2009, creating containers for people across the state to reflect upon and record the narratives that made up their own lives as individuals and communities. “Storytelling” was capaciously defined, encompassing photography and oral history, documentary and online exhibitions, allowing Californians to give voice to their life experiences across many different mediums. The initiative also encouraged local partnerships, resulting in the rich cross-fertilization of perspectives: local history societies joined forces with school districts; museums with the local media; libraries with faith-based organizations. The first phase of the Initiative offered up three new story-based grants: the California Story Fund, the

California Documentary Project, and Communities Speak. Together, these opportunities gave rise to projects such as Anne Hoiberg’s museum exhibit *Tears of War: The Many Faces of Refugee Women in California* and Candacy Taylor’s “Making Connections,” a collection of interviews and photo portraits of San Franciscan career waitresses.

With *Motheread*, CCH had capitalized on the ways that fiction can serve as a skeleton key for unlocking non-fictional truths. A 2002 campaign structured around *The Grapes of Wrath* encompassed upwards of 800 events across the state, from exhibits to book clubs in seven languages, film screenings to Depression-era-style meals. John Steinbeck’s novel invited reflections on a theme familiar to anyone who’s lived in the state for long, says Lewin, namely “that notion of ‘coming to California’ . . . [W]e talked about the Joads and asked ourselves, ‘Who are the contemporary Joads and how are they being treated?’” Nor were such modern Joads merely the subject of these conversations, Lewin continues. They were also active participants:

I remember an evening in Yuba City, which is part of Yuba County, one of the poorest counties in California, and going to a café and listening to a young kid, who was in high school, who had recently emigrated from, I think, Oaxaca and wrote a poem about *The Grapes of Wrath*. In that poem, he talked about how he saw himself as one of the Joads and he saw himself as part of this great California tradition. And I talked with him afterwards and I said, “What do you make of that?” And he said, “Well, I don’t feel isolated any longer. I’m part of something larger.” And I just found that so moving and so validating in terms of the importance of the humanities and the work of California Humanities.

Subsequent phases of the initiative—*California Stories Uncovered*, and *California Stories: How I See It*—carried forward the first

stage's ethos of handing the microphone over to those who haven't held it before. As Fry puts it, "How do we make sure that there's equity and access in terms of sharing these stories, that we're making sure that voices that don't always get to be heard get to tell their story?"

Among those less listened-to voices are veterans'. "War Comes Home," launched in 2014 and engaging nearly two million participants in total, aimed to bridge the gulf between people who serve or have served in the military and those who haven't. The initiative included public conversations in which veterans could share their experiences; a traveling exhibit of veteran's letters and journals; and a statewide reading and discussion of Vietnam vet Karl Marlantes's *What It Is Like to Go to War*. The project also demonstrated that storytelling need not be limited to traditional mediums. Supported by a California Humanities grant, the Contra Costa Public Library developed an online exhibit of photographs and stories called *War Ink*, with content contributed by California veterans. Later nominated for a Webby award, the site showcased images of the tattoos that vets bring home from war, and the often-difficult experiences that these markings memorialize.

What are the stories—false and true—that we tell ourselves about the U.S. as a nation? Part of the answer lies in our political discourse. In 2011, the runup to the midterm elections pitting incumbent Barack Obama against challenger Mitt Romney left Americans feeling like "the country was as polarized as they'd ever seen it and things could never get worse," recalls Lewin. In response, the nonprofit (now called Cal Humanities) organized a slate of "Searching for Democracy" programs striving to get Californians talking about the nature and needs of our political system. For instance, California Reads, a "Big Read"-style program conducted in partnership with public libraries, used five significant books to stimulate reflection upon and discussion of the meaning of democracy in communities across the state. Performances, film screenings, community forums, and author talks used works like *Farewell to Manzanar*—Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memoir of her time in Manzanar, a Japanese internment camp in Inyo

County, California—as a jumping-off point for interrogating America’s political past and present.

After all, as Fry notes, the sense of political impasse that many Americans felt before and during the 2012 election has not abated in the years since. Nor has our need for the humanities, which help us make sense of, and work through, such divisions:

So many recent events have shown how we’re a divided nation, and that’s why all of us in the humanities are trying to break down those barriers. If we boil the humanities down to their essence, they’re about how we express our human experience . . . And that is essential to every aspect of our society, to how we relate to each other, to how we understand each other across what seem to be great divides. We want to keep doing that, not in a political way—we’re a firmly nonpartisan organization—but in a personal way. Sometimes it’s about one person sitting across from another person and making a connection.

Today, although storytelling no longer constitutes California Humanities’ main theme, it remains one of the organization’s leitmotifs. Two grant lines under the umbrella “Humanities for All” support a broad range of public humanities projects, including many that employ narrative methods—interviews, oral histories, and nonfiction writing workshops—to collect stories, particularly those of underserved communities. Many grantees make use of platforms provided by the visual and performing arts—exhibits, installations, and performances—to share these stories and reach wider audiences. Furthermore, when it transplanted its offices from San Francisco to Oakland in 2015 (a move accompanied by a name change to the present-day California Humanities), the nonprofit decided to use the new building’s existing gallery walls to display various forms of California self-expression and documentation in a series of Art of Storytelling exhibits and associated public

discussions. A first exhibit featured textiles from the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland, says Fry:

They brought in these beautiful narrative quilts that helped to tell local stories. We had a quilt that had some Black Panther imaging and text, and so at the opening reception we had some Black Panther Party members come and talk about not only their experiences in this [building, a century-old] market over the years, but also the importance of the telling of the Black Panther story in a different way, reaching a different audience.

A home for stories: the present physical space of California Humanities embodies the organization's ongoing work as a whole.

A CONVERSATION WITH JULIE FRY

An early love of humanities

I grew up in Port Edwards, Wisconsin, a very small town. My mother was the town's third-grade teacher, so we knew everybody. And we had this wonderful combination of freedom to explore the rural areas around us and a chance to partake in what I now realize were public humanities—a rich library system and lots of opportunities to interact with arts and culture such as they were in a small community. I was also a writer. I remember being fascinated by history. I wrote stories about pioneers—under a nom de plume, no less. So I feel like the humanities were always really crucial to who I was, without always thinking of them as the humanities. They made me who I am.

Raising awareness

Apart from developing new programs and raising visibility, one of the other important things we've done is look for new resources for the humanities. We've diversified with foundations and corporations and individual donors, and all of that also helps raise our visibility as well as our credibility. Something that has surprised a lot of people is that we're a nonprofit. We're not a state agency, and therefore have never gotten state funding. And so over the past three years, we took baby steps to build relationships in Sacramento, to develop a strategy for how we go about seeking state funding. And bit by bit, over the past few years, we have added different advocacy and information-sharing efforts in Sacramento, from having individual meetings with our elected assembly members and senators to tell them about what we do, but also to hear from them—what are their priorities? It's been a tremendous way for us to learn about what's important in different parts of the state. And for the first time ever, we received a million dollars

from the state of California. I think it's a huge recognition of the work that this organization does. And it allows us to put more money out into the far corners of California through increased grants, through increased public programming, in a way that we hope will continue to demonstrate that the public humanities are a worthwhile investment.

New initiatives

We used to have a grant line called Community Stories. They were \$10,000 grants for local stories. But we realized that the grant amount was often too large for some public humanities projects and grassroots organizations—and they were too difficult to apply for. Also, it wasn't enough money for some of the larger cultural institutions. And so our staff developed a new grant line, Humanities for All. The grants are smaller, up to \$5,000, and they have a more streamlined process. We also developed Humanities for All project grants, which are \$25,000 grants for longer-term projects where the review process is a bit longer. And we've found that our ecosystem of grantees and grant applicants is much larger. Both the larger institutions and smaller, community-based organizations are applying again. It's introduced us to new partners, it gives us more to talk to our elected officials about, and it gets money into organizations that in some cases have never received a grant.

A new image

“When I joined, we were Cal Humanities, and I found that people always thought we were associated with UC Berkeley because of that “Cal.” I also felt that it was giving short shrift to California: We are about California; it's a beautiful word, let's not shorten it. We were also moving our office, and we needed to reprint all our materials anyway, so that seemed like a good time to refresh our logo. And that led to refurbishing our website and amping up our presence.

One of my first official acts when I started with California Humanities was to negotiate the final terms of a lease. The rental market for offices in San Francisco was changing, but it also symbolized a fresh start for the organization. We moved out of San Francisco and found a new home in Swan's Market, a hundred-plus-year-old market that has been serving people in Oakland for a century. We also have gallery walls in our new office, and we've treated it as an exhibit space where we can tell humanities stories.

5

FUTURE



To ask what the future holds for California Humanities is also to ask what the future holds for California itself—and America itself. Our state is already “looked to as a bellwether for so many things, and we take that seriously and respectfully,” says Fry. Quay agrees that the state’s reputation as innovator should be viewed more as an ongoing call to action than as a laurel to rest on: “It isn’t that we solve the problems first, but we encounter a lot of the problems that societies are going to have, here, first.”

Among the arenas in which California consistently sits at the vanguard, Lewin notes, are “the fight for social justice [and] tremendous leaps in our understanding of technology and how it could be used in our lives.” A humanist perspective is essential to both endeavors. The inventions of Silicon Valley, for instance, consistently raise “questions of ethics, questions of history, [and] questions of justice, and these are all areas that are just steeped in the humanities,” he says. Indeed, the skills that California Humanities helps to foster can serve as important checks and balances to the narrow view of life that technology sometimes encourages, as Quay highlights:

The humanities are both a complement to technology, and, if you’d like, a critic of technology, [serving] to remind us of what being human really means. I think of my friend Mas Masumoto, who is a peach farmer. He’s afraid that people who only see peaches in supermarkets don’t really know what a

real peach tastes like or feels like. Well, if you only know the world through certain kinds of technology, you might not know what it actually means to have a live human encounter, and that's a profoundly nourishing experience to have.

At the same time, the humanities are by no means a luddite enterprise. California Humanities continues to encourage experiment and exploration in the humanities through endeavors like the Schwartz Prize-winning Library Innovation Lab program, which provides funding and professional development for libraries to design and implement public humanities projects that will engage immigrants and promote more inclusive communities. One library in Orange County, for instance, celebrated its largely Latinx community through exhibits, talks, and film screenings about the local *lucha libre* wrestling scene. Another library, this one in Sutter County, created a pair of podcasts—one in Farsi, one in English—featuring the voices and experiences of Afghan women who have immigrated to the region.

Indeed, even as they encourage us to question new developments in the world, philosophy and history and sociology also equip us for change, Quay points out. “[Humanities] knowledge is required whenever human beings reflect on their lives and are trying to decide what to do next. Global warming caused by climate change is a problem nobody ever thought about for hundreds of years,” for instance. And although this phenomenon has gained far more attention in the past few decades, STEM writing often does not dedicate any space to the “justice and human values issues” intrinsic to climate change. “Science can tell us what is happening and why, but you need the humanities to decide what the human response should be to that and why.”

California Humanities has long applied this fluency in change to its own organizational structure and philosophy. For instance, when Fry, the organization's most recent CEO, was hired in 2015,

it was with the understanding that I was being hired as a change-maker—not to make major changes, but to come in with a new set of perspectives. I think [it mattered] that I was coming from the arts, culture, and philanthropy fields, which were different than ... my predecessors, who were solidly grounded in the public humanities.

This professional background gave Fry a desire “to move away from silo-izing—[the notion] that the arts were over here and the humanities were over here and academic humanities were in another place altogether.” She was determined to instead treat them “all [as] part of the same ecosystem.”

As it adapted a more capacious definition of the field in which it operated, California Humanities simultaneously broadened its approach to seeking funding and began to meet with state elected officials in Sacramento and in their districts. In 2018, grantees and board members from the nonprofit presented to the Joint Committee on the Arts about the value of the humanities; the following year, the organization convened the nation’s first Humanities Advocacy Day, meeting with Senate and Assembly members at the State Capitol. These efforts, bolstered by the support of then-California State Assembly Member Rob Bonta and State Senator Ben Allen, successfully procured state money for the organization for the first time, in the significant sum of \$1 million, followed by \$2 million in 2021. Furthermore, a new strategic framework, drawing on a statewide tour of listening sessions and finalized in 2016, overhauled California Humanities’ priorities for how best to serve practitioners in the field and the residents of California. The organization recentered itself around three overlapping pillars: public engagement that responds sensitively to communities’ specific needs; field-building with a network of humanists throughout the state; and ensuring that K-12 education centrally includes the humanities.

This last tenet, in particular, reflects one of the more profound changes the organization has undergone since its birth in

the '70s. One of the requirements initially issued by the NEH had been that state councils must direct their programming towards adults rather than children and adolescents. Fortunately, this stricture was later relaxed, a development that pleased then-CEO Sievers. "We began to discuss how important it is for people to get an acquaintance with the humanities early on," he says, a realization that led to the founding of the above-mentioned Humanists in the Schools initiative.

It is the flame of Humanists in the Schools that California Humanities has continued to keep alight, nearly a half century later, with its recent reorientation towards young people. The new strategic framework resulted, for instance, in the birth of CA 2020: Youth Perspective and the Future of California, an initiative supporting engagement with the humanities by the state's youth. These efforts include an ongoing subset of the California Documentary Project grant known as CDP NextGen, which supports media literacy and training for young Californians under 18. Beneficiaries have included filmmaking programs for Filipino-American adolescents in L.A. and for immigrant and refugee students in San Diego.

Another endeavor known as the Emerging Journalist Fellowship, introduced in 2019 as part of the national Mellon Foundation-supported initiative Democracy and the Informed Citizen, offers financial and professional support to aspiring reporters at community colleges throughout the state. The fellowship has made possible student projects like "Chronic Catastrophe," a podcast that chronicled the effects of recurrent climate disaster in Sonoma County and that was eventually picked up by NPR for national distribution. California Humanities' most recent youth-focused program is the Civics + Humanities Middle Grades Grant Program, developed after an extended period of research and development and intended to empower a pipeline of California students to access humanities-rich education throughout their school career and into their adult lives as participants in a civil society.

Young people's passionate participation in these and many

other California Humanities ventures gives the lie to scare-mongering narratives around the so-called “crisis of the humanities,” which focus on recent drops in enrollment in humanities courses and majors and on the increasing precarity of careers in associated disciplines. According to Quay, this tension—not just between younger and older people’s ways of engaging with the humanities, but also between the academic and the public faces of the field—begs us to revisit questions that the California Council for the Humanities pondered in its earliest years: where do the humanities happen, and who practices them?

I would talk to academic humanists who were fretful about the crisis of the humanities. . . . Their FTE [number of working hours] is going down. Fewer students are flocking to them. And I would say, “You might be looking in the wrong place for the light,” because, in the public, book groups were forming. There were all these manifestations of interest in the humanities. . . . Maybe that’s where the good news is. Maybe there is no crisis of the humanities. There’s a crisis to connect to those audiences.

Lynne Cheney, former Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, had this expression “the parallel school.” The notion that there are these other institutions out there which are performing an educational function. . . . I thought we [at CCH] were really part of those. . . . I think that’s where to look for the key is out there, where the light really is, where the audiences really are.

In the spirit of calling attention to examples of this “parallel school,” California Humanities produced a video series called *We Are the Humanities* in 2016. In short interviews, California Humanities asked twenty-four prominent Californians, from actor

John Cho to astrophysicist Jill Tarter, to reflect upon “What the humanities meant to them,” says Fry.

How did they connect with [the humanities] in their early years? Why were they important? It raised the visibility of California Humanities. . . . but it also got people talking about the humanities. It was good for people to say, “Ah, [the humanities are] about that experience that author [and featured interviewee] Isabel Allende had in her home country, going to school, and when her mother sent her letters, those letters are a part of the humanities.”

Initiatives like We Are the Humanities, crucially, both cultivate and publicize the state’s vibrant humanities scene. Providing young people with concrete examples of what it looks like to live and thrive as a humanist might inspire them to seek experiences in those fields. And such experiences, in turn, lay the groundwork for informed citizenship itself, says Fry:

Young people make up a huge percentage of California’s population. They are our future, but [we should] also [be] thinking about them from a leadership point of view. We’re not necessarily saying we want every young person to get a degree in the humanities. We’re saying we want every young person to take seriously their role, their civic role, their local engagement role, their community role, and that the humanities are a great pathway to that. So really thinking about, how do we make sure that the humanities are part of civil society, that they help strengthen democracy?

It is in this “how” that the humanities, and the work of California Humanities, dwell and will forever continue to evolve—not in static answers, but in the continuous unfolding of questions.

AFTERWORD

As I read this woven history of California Humanities, I am struck by the generational significance of this collection of remembrances. What I hear in this archive of work is an on-going conversation between Californians about how we make meaning of our lives together. These pages are full of sacred questions; the kind of questions that both nourish and stimulate, stirring deep questions about how we belong, what civic and collective wounds need tending to, and what we can grow to understand about each other. But what resonates most with me, is this lens of reflection through four waves of California Humanities history.

There is something powerful about thinking of four generations of humanities workers. The cycle of four generations seems ecologically sacred in California: it takes four generations of monarch butterflies to complete one cycle of migration. I recently gave birth to another generation in our farming family. Tears rose through my body when our child got to meet a great-grandmother on my wife's side. An aunt captured a photograph of that precious moment and a cousin profoundly pointed out: between these two a great-grandmother and a baby, there was a span of 100 years. As a Yonsei, fourth-generation Japanese American, I spend a lot of time thinking about generational transfer of stories, knowledge, wounds, and healing. What is our responsibility to the future? What kind of ancestors will we be? How do we practice keeping memories alive across and between generations?

On the surface, this document captures movements, transfers and change across more than four decades of California Humanities. Within the archival purpose is a calling. The story of California, and the gifts humanities offers, is unfinished. It reminds us that the promise of California Humanities depends on us. Do we

return to the lessons of the past? How do we adapt and remember? Do we run from conflict and challenge? Or do we turn instead to the practices of our 'human ties'? How might we continue to invest in our collective possibilities, gathering, connecting, and belonging?

In my early years of apprenticing as a young farmer with my father, I learned a key lesson for longevity in agriculture. It wasn't a technique or a particular skillset; it was not financial nor mechanical knowledge. My dad told me stories of hardships and calamities our ancestors faced, and together, my family has continued to witness challenges like unprecedented weather patterns. The story of our lives in California is tethered to the same lesson which resurfaces again and again. It can be encapsulated in two ordinary words: next years. We must believe in the power and possibilities of next years. This same spirit is written throughout California Humanities, each voice rings of "next years."

Nikiko Masumoto

California Humanities, a statewide nonprofit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, promotes the humanities—focused on ideas, conversation, and learning—as relevant, meaningful ways to understand the human condition and connect people to each other in order to help strengthen California. California Humanities has provided grants and programs across the state since 1975, with support provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the State of California through the California State Library, and private foundations and donors. To learn more, visit calhum.org, or like and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.



Our Mission:

To connect Californians to ideas and one another in order to understand our shared heritage and diverse cultures, inspire civic participation, and shape our future.



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