



SEISMIC

SEATTLE, CITY OF LITERATURE

EDITED BY KRISTEN MILLARES YOUNG



SEATTLE
UNESCO
City of Literature



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Seattle Public Library is on Indigenous land. These are the traditional unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Duwamish people.

ti dʒidʒələlɪç sʰəlali ʔal tə ʔaciʔtalbixˠ swatixˠtəd. tiɪʔ
ʔaciʔtalbixˠ swatixˠtəd xˠwiʔ ləʔabʂid ʔə tə dʒixˠ ʔaciʔtalbixˠ,
ʔə tiɪʔ dˠwˠdəwˠabʂ

ABOUT THE COVER

I want the image to convey both celebration and struggle. Both have been part of my experience as a writer/artist in Seattle. We're haunted by Amazon and faced with rising costs of living. But there is a strong system of support and camaraderie among the artist/writer communities here that I also want to celebrate.

—MITA MAHATO

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INTRODUCTION


As editor of *Seismic: Seattle, City of Literature*, I asked artists and storytellers to reflect on what it means for Seattle to be a City of Literature. While celebrating Seattle's inclusion in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, this collection is not a commemoration. It is a call to action. How can literary culture influence social change? *Seismic* is a living portrait of a city we love too much to lose.

If I had to tell you why Seattle is a literary city, I would say it is because I was able to become myself here. I learned how to inhabit my mind in this place. To hold space for your own story can be a revolutionary act.

The kindness and cruelty I have encountered in our region and history have compelled me to claim my own responsibility. When I first moved here in 2004, I became a reporter for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, now gone. Hurrying around town to conduct interviews on deadline, worried about the game of chicken that we play on sideroads, I learned to cope with the dark, wet chill of our winters. I was born in a state as hot and humid as a person's mouth. Freed from hurricanes, I am haunted still by the specter of a subduction-zone earthquake. Keep what you'll need handy.

I didn't always expect disaster. They say anticipation is the greater part of pleasure, and maybe there is a sick edge to knowing it could soon be fractured, this city, and with it, our fragile bodies, houses, psyches. I don't know how we tolerate the cognitive dissonance of planting our lives in unstable soil. Those who moved here chose our fate within a seismic reckoning which I've come to see as myriad. Not just geologic but cultural. Not just topographic but economic. Not just immediate but historical.

This place helped make me who I am. Like so many settlers before me, I aim to stay. No es fácil. Food and shelter cost so much that people go



without and are blamed for it. This, too, is a reckoning we must face—the compression of oncoming waves of workers in diaspora, come to seek jobs that may not provide. And yet, provide we must.

As a City of Literature, we carry stories for the unborn. What will we tell them of our time?

That in a pandemic we were asked to choose between profit and our vulnerable, elderly neighbors? That death forced us to keep a social distance? That to confront and heal our racial divides, we came together—or broke apart?

These essays represent a vision for our city that channels the best hopes of its artists, who were asked for their opinions prior to the pandemic, and whose wisdom should be considered as we revitalize our city's neighborhoods and cultural institutions in the wake of COVID-19.


Reader of the present, take note: the reader of the future will study our society for clues about what and whom we protected. They will see whether we preserved and shared our abundance.

The corporate wealth which controls public process would have us believe anything is achievable if we work harder. A freelance veteran of the gig economy, I am here to tell you that such lies are designed to divest us of our labors. We are ceding control of the narrative. To what end?

Shall we tell them that ours was among the first generations to listen to women, and that when we spoke it was a howl?

That the earth spoke, and we did not listen?

We cannot answer these questions alone. Take strength in knowing that Seattle writers, readers, literary organizers and activists have counterparts in Barcelona, Baghdad, Bucheon, Durban, Lviv, Melbourne, Milan, Nanjing, Odessa, Prague, Reykjavik and beyond. Together we can own up to our role in the long story of living. For the great honor of curating this collection, I thank Stesha Brandon and the board members of Seattle City of Literature,



who through their efforts have created a sanctuary for ideas. If the personal is political, then the local is global.

Our action must be collective to address the scale of the problems delineated with grace and clarity by contributors Claudia Castro Luna, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore and Dujie Tahat. Where do we find the hope? Look to the Lorde, Anastacia-Renée tells us. Find your purpose under pressure, writes Wei-Wei Lee. Walk these streets and see them for their lyric power, commands Jourdan Keith. Take stock of nature and our history, write Timothy Egan and Charles Johnson. With her visual essay, a cut-paper collage for the cover of *Seismic*, Mita Mahato reminds us that the beautiful struggle precedes and will outlast us.

We, whether newly arrived to Seattle or generations deep, are on Duwamish land, now deforested and poisoned by the hands of our forebearers, who straightened rivers, sluiced hills and flooded shorelines in the name of prosperity that has not been shared. It is time to honor the Treaty of Point Elliott, signed in 1855 by Chief Si'ahl, our city's namesake and the great-great-great-great grandfather of Ken Workman. Native words anchor this collection, which opens with an exhortation by Rena Priest. Their stories have lasted for millennia. And that is what UNESCO reaches for—the millennia, not just those which have already unfurled but those which remain for others to endure.

Note the recurrences in these essays. They are intentional. What must be remembered bears repeating. Resilience is a quality cultivated under duress, over time and against the odds. To hold space for these stories is a sacred duty and a real joy in my literary life, in gratitude for which I remain,

Yours,
Kristen Millares Young



RENA PRIEST

Now' Siam! Ce-whel-tenaut tse ne sna'. Che Xwlemi sen. I'd like to begin with an acknowledgement that Seattle was built on the homelands of the Duwamish, who still live here and continue the beautiful legacy of hundreds of generations of strong and resilient people.

I am not Duwamish, but it's told in Lummi lore that at one time, Komo Kulshan (Mount Baker) and Kwome (Mount Rainier) were married. For one reason or another Kwome decided to leave Komo Kulshan and move south. Along her path she made the islands of the Salish Sea. On a clear day he can see her standing so tall and beautiful with the sun on her face. When she catches him looking at her, she gets mad and draws the clouds around her again. That's why it's cloudy here all the time.

Full disclosure: I have never lived in Seattle. I have spent most of my life 90 miles to the north on the Lummi Reservation or in the nearby town of Bellingham, but I have been seeking the creative sanctuary of Seattle since I was a teenager. I would paint on my cat eyes and red lips and drive for 90 minutes so I could write in a different café and watch the rain from a different window. Seattle is the quintessential writers' city. The weather requires inventive ways to keep entertained indoors. Storytelling has always been handy.

Over the past few years I have made friends among Seattle writers and been honored to participate in literary events around town. Every event I attend teaches me something new, evokes feelings, brings me into contact with people who make words into power. This could be true of literary activities in any city, but it's especially true in Seattle, where story and song are an integral part of the culture. In this region, storytelling has been a way of life since time immemorial. Coast Salish people celebrate story through dances and songs, through totem poles, legends, family anecdotes—and literature.

Story is a way of seeing each other and ourselves. Story is a way of surviving.

Here I must pause and acknowledge that I was about to lie to you. I wanted to give you the literary tour guide's version of Seattle. Writing about Seattle in an authentic way is difficult for me. Writing about anywhere in the Salish Sea bioregion is a challenge because in order to keep from alienating people, I have been taught by polite society never to publicly acknowledge the true story of the people who belong to this place. We don't say "genocide." We don't say "murdered, cheated, displaced and starved." We don't say those things. *Tell a different story, sing the people a song.* So I tell you how nice the people are in Seattle's literary community, which is certainly true, but it omits this other story. Please don't be alienated.

Before English and the written word came here—in the time before the guns and smallpox and conquest; before children were taken from their parents to attend residential schools to become strangers to themselves and their mothers; before we signed treaties and said goodbye to our relatives on the other side of invisible borders, confining us to reservations—in the time when we were all together, the people had elaborate and rich mythologies.

Then as now, stories connected us to our world and taught us to acknowledge the sacred in others. Then as now, the people traveled to neighboring villages to potlatch and share gifts. The people gathered to learn something new and to be in contact with others who hold words as their power—stories of how we survive and make something good with our lives.

In Xwlemi Chosen (Lummi language), we have a word that talks about the time when we were all together: Elhtalngexw.

The etymology breaks down like this :

elh ta (alhle) = we are here

tol = out to sea

Ingexw = people living together in a village

All this is true. We are here, and we have rich mythologies. I first learned of this word in relation to our ancient flood story. An elder had a dream and told the people to build two canoes and tie them together and fill them with strong people to rebuild the nations. The floods came, and when they subsided, the survivors paired off and walked in separate directions to build new villages.

Before they parted, they agreed that they would always recognize each other as coming from the same village. They would be the survivors of the flood. Elhtalngexw talks about the people during the time before the floods, when we were still a strand interwoven with the radiance of waterways, landscapes, animals—the people and places we loved—before we were separated by the lonely belief that god plucked us out and placed us above all life on earth—removed us from our seat in the dignified living world to stand solitary and isolated by the directive “. . . have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Dominion is lonely.

Below the waves the unheard, unseen world sings. In the trees, the birds sing. The sun lights the earth another day. I wake to alarms in the dark. The sacred celebration of sunrise—the birds and fish singing—all of that happens as I sit in traffic thinking of my ancestors, feeling the heaviness of grief. To tell you my true story about Seattle and literature, I must confess wonder: What new stories can we tell to return us to our old belief where the highest form of wealth is to be together with the life of our planet—to wake in a clean and abundant world at dawn, face east and sing?

¹Etymology provided by John Ballew, who was a student of George Adams, whose teacher was Agatha Charles-McClusky

BIOGRAPHY


RENA PRIEST is a poet and a member of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation. Her literary debut, *Patriarchy Blues*, was honored with a 2018 American Book Award. Her most recent collection, *Sublime Subliminal*, was selected as the finalist for the Floating Bridge Press Chapbook Award. Priest's work can be found in literary journals and anthologies, including *For Love of Orcas*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Diagram*, and *Verse Daily*. She has attended residencies at Hawthornden Castle, Hedgebrook and Mineral School. She is a National Geographic Explorer and a Jack Straw Writer (2019). She holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College.

TIMOTHY EGAN

From where I write, inside an off-plumb farmhouse in a city not yet two centuries old, I can see water and bruised clouds that bunch up above a cedar forest and the occasional pair of bald eagles, mated for life. I'm smack dab in the middle in a metro area of better than 3 million people, and yet nature is never far. It's in that sky of many moods, it's on that horizon where glaciers on the Cascade Mountains crest remind us that even in August, precipitation has a long memory, it's in those sidewalks where thorny blackberry vines have forced their way through cracks.

The question I often get from people new to the city where I was born is: Why do people so love the decidedly retro written word in a technopolis, a place so gleaming with digital distractions and digital aggressions? The answer is simple, though it took an outsider to say it most elegantly. The British-born writer Jonathan Raban, who dropped anchor off our shores about 30 years ago and never left, said Seattle is the only big city in the world that people move to into order to get closer to nature. I would elaborate on his fine words with the added note that Seattle is also the only city in which you can see three national parks—Olympic, North Cascades, Rainier—from a good perch in a downtown skyscraper on a clear day.

Nature, in the form of the predominant gloom that pervades our skies for much of the year, forces us inward—to a creative frontier that matches the geographic one. Thus, an obscure poet at a midweek reading on a winter's eve, hoping for an audience beyond a few bookstore employees, will be happily shocked to find the room packed. People in Seattle love to come in out of the rain and tell stories, or to hear them. And nature, because it still surrounds the city, because it still defines the city in things like an urban salmon run or orcas breaching in waters close to the metro area (both endangered), prompts pulse-raising trauma about how quickly this planet could die. When wildfires rage in the forests around us, the air in the city is a



choking reminder that all the latest material comforts in a prosperous city cannot shield you from an overheated world.

Nature is not an abstraction in this City of Literature. It's elemental to who we are—the quirks, the passions, the aspirations. It defines us and our literary imagination.

The second thing is isolation. It still means something to be at the far *edge* of the continent—to be considered “out there,” in the most northern and western big city in the Lower 48, away from the mainstream, away from the heartland, away from anything that came before it. With isolation comes liberation, a sense of *why not?* You see this in our music, our theatre, our visual arts, our love of film fests, our architecture and of course the books that blossom from the many seeds of Seattle's peculiar insularity. At the edge, failure is an option, because to try greatly and fail means that you attempted something original. For such an effort, if I can generalize, you will not be shunned in Seattle.

I see some similarities to Ireland, the country of my ancestors, another place at land's end under sullen skies. Through song, verse, fiction and polemics, the Irish use storytelling to make sense of their lives and as a force for change. The Irish love their writers. But also, there's a long history of poets of sedition.

Though Seattle could not match its sister city of Galway in number of authors forced to the gallows by colonial overlords for the crime of free speech, the city's chroniclers do not hold their tongue when picking a just fight. On first glance, Seattle is a city of reserve, of hushed exchanges in polite settings. This is a misreading. Argument, loud and occasionally inchoate, is a more pronounced character trait.

But our politics are not always consistent. Seattle is the largest city in the world named for a Native American—the indefatigable Chief Sealth, of the Duwamish and Suquamish, whose name was softened by those who pushed his people aside. The honorific did not extend to the most basic human right: early on, the city passed a law making it crime for a Native to



live in the place where Sealth's ancestors had been living for centuries.

Recognition of that dark past forms part of the reason why Seattle has—in the modern age, at least—opened its doors to refugees, immigrants and outsiders of all stripes. They join a steady flux of new arrivals remaking the city by the day, people who might occasionally look at the sky with the same sense of wonder as Sealth did. Change is a constant in Seattle. Blink and you miss a remake of the skyline. What is changeless in this lovingly odd, lyrically defiant City of Literature is the belief that narrative can keep us whole.



BIOGRAPHY

TIMOTHY EGAN is the author of nine books. His book on the Dust Bowl, *The Worst Hard Time*, won the 2006 National Book Award for nonfiction. His *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* was awarded the Carnegie Medal as the best nonfiction book of 2012. *The Immortal Irishman* was a New York Times bestseller. His most recent book is *A Pilgrimage to Eternity: From Canterbury to Rome in Search of a Faith*. Egan writes a biweekly opinion piece for the *New York Times*. As a *Times* correspondent, he shares a Pulitzer Prize. A third-generation Westerner and father of two, Mr. Egan lives in Seattle.

JOURDAN IMANI KEITH

I

I create myself, breathe lavender breath to escape the cage of my skin . . .

I wrote this line before I knew I would walk through a city called Seattle, before I knew I would step over squares of lavender light in its sidewalk. For years, I ignored them—squares cut into concrete to let the sun reach the underground, to let the sun into what remained after the fire. Perhaps my poem was prophesy, perhaps it was ghost, holy and waiting for me. If you are quiet enough you can hear the past and future here in Seattle. *Shhh*. Do you hear the longhouse stories told by the People of the Lake, before we came (all the we that is not them, that is not Duwamish). *Shhh*. We are walking on Lushootseed words, like the early grass, like the rattle of the camas flower dried in the wind. We walk on a city that was and is and will be. Any city that comes through fire has its own holiness. Any city that walks on water carries cathedrals inside.

II

Are we the most unchurched city—this City of Literature?

JESUS CHRIST MADE SEATTLE UNDER PROTEST—that is what I was told when I moved here and lost my way. It's a mnemonic for the pairing of downtown streets—Jefferson and James, Cherry and Columbia, Marion and Madison, Seneca and Spring, Union and University, Pike and Pine. "Memorize it," a stranger told me when I asked for directions. "No one is from here. No one knows where things are."

Below our feet, whether we know it or not, every Seattle writer, every Seattle reader walks on stories. We walk on mountains pushed into the sea. Seattle, unchurched? Doesn't every place have a spirit? Literature is a cathedral. Cathedral—the Latin word is seat.

III

Literature is a seat on Broadway—on Capitol Hill. August Wilson sat at the Broadway Grill, wrote plays on the backs of flyers, and at B&O Espresso, he lingered. Was he there when it felt like I was in a version of Paris that I could afford? Did you see him? When he moved here, was Seattle still second in the nation for theaters, for playwrights, right behind New York? Literature is seat. At Café Septieme, with its red walls and white butcher paper tabletops stained with ideas and circles of coffee marks, the biscuits and mimosas were sacraments before conversations that were first drafts of poems and love affairs. Stories sashayed by, pretending to be villanelles, or stopped to peck your cheek and be gone like haiku written in the Panama Hotel. Yes, it is the *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*.


IV

Literature is a seat, the one left behind when you are rounded up and interned. It is a historic landmark. It is a cathedral. It is a brothel after the fire. Literature is an alley, a rusted car in an open field. It is a *Triggering Town*. Literature is a rebellion, it is tear gas, it is a madrona tree, peeling. Literature is a forest. It is a ripple through deep dark brown bark. It is a pierced tongue; it is green hair, literature; it is a triple-shot espresso and it is a seat, a seat, a seat, a cathedral of scented words, like lavender squares just above something that was always there and has never been there before. Literature is a dropped call along the rise of Columbian Way from Rainier Avenue. It is the Mountain, her snowy skirt pretending not to hide fire. Literature is ashes near the playset. It is an unopened umbrella in the rain.

V

for a soul that dangles off the edge of a continent

From the porch of Hugo House, an old wooden building that we knew was haunted—I mean why wouldn't it be? It was a funeral parlor. We all said there was a baby's coffin above the stairwell to the basement. There was an archive in that raw cool room underground; it held every word



somebody didn't want to wait to hear was valid. The Zine Library WAS AS REVOLUTIONARY AS the second Battle in Seattle when tear gas clouded the fields of Cal Anderson Park, the police in riot gear pushing the WTO protestors up to Broadway on Capitol Hill, and to where the KFC was. From that porch at the edge of the continent, men who stayed sober so they could come inside and sit at the library in Hugo House looked out for you until nightfall, then they crawled into bottles and porch talk before sleeping bags—well, it doesn't matter, right? They are cathedrals.

Hugo House lived up, in subtle ways, to its reputation as being haunted. From the top step of the front porch, if I paused long enough on my way in/ on my way out I could see the coming ghosts of bookstores disappearing. I could see the coming ghosts and like the streets of downtown they are still there, lights underground, coming ghosts of bookstores disappearing the replacement of homestyle cafes where you barely felt like you had left your house and somehow ran into everyone you knew. I could see the coming ghosts. Should I tell you about the literary ground we walk on like lavender glass squares cut into the sidewalk? A whole city of literature underground—you'll have to take a tour, look for the headstones of Red and Black Books, Bailey/Coy Books, M. Coy Books, the bigger version of Twice Sold Tales with cats and books.

VI

On the bookcase next to my writing chair is a coaster I have been carrying around since I was a teenager. It depicts Basilica Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, a cathedral in Quebec. Twin Spires, the Romanesque entries of three large doors say holy words are spoken here. I come from Philadelphia, a city defined by cobblestones and connections to our country's history; colonial pantheons. I have often looked at Seattle and bemoaned the lack of distinguishing architecture with the exception of the Space Needle. Some would say Smith Tower.

Literature is a cathedral. A cathedral is a seat. Here sits the spirit of revolution in Red and Black Books on 15th across from where the Rite Aid is now. Here sits the spirit of Dorothy Allison unfolding as we sat in folding

chairs at Bailey/Coy Books on Broadway, where we floated after writing napkin poems at brunch or paused at the A-frame sign with a literary who-wrote-it and the promise of a book discount if you knew.

VII

Seattle is not a place of stone cathedrals. We are not noted for ancient hallows but there is something sanctified about Seattle. It is a house for words. And words—as former Washington State Poet Laureate Elizabeth Austen says with the title of her work—words are *Skin Prayers*. Here, we are the stories made flesh.

BIOGRAPHY

The City of Seattle's 2019–21 Civic Poet, **JOURDAN IMANI KEITH** is a storyteller, essayist, playwright, naturalist and activist. A student of Sonia Sanchez, her TEDx Talk, "Your Body of Water," the theme for King County's 2016–18 Poetry on Buses program, won an Americans for the Arts award. Her poetry is largely anthologized and was long-listed by Danez Smith for the *Cosmonauts Avenue* poetry prize. Keith's *Orion Magazine* essays "Desegregating Wilderness" and "At Risk" were selected for the *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015* anthology. She has been awarded fellowships from Hedgebrook, Wildbranch, the Santa Fe Science Writing Workshop, VONA and Jack Straw. Her memoir in essays is forthcoming from University of Washington Press.


CLAUDIA CASTRO LUNA

Seattle takes words seriously. On any given day, libraries, bookstores, schools, literary nonprofits and cafés host readings, slams, open mics and writing workshops. Poems feature inside buses. Hundreds eager for literary talk gather in lecture halls to enjoy top-tier visiting writers. At first glance, this bustling activity fits the image of a world-class literary city. Yet at a recent reading with almost 800 in attendance, I again noticed that people of color were largely absent. It was not the first time I recognized the lack of racial diversity in the crowd.

Seattle has public, private and nonprofit programs that teach writing, promote literary engagement and fuel communities of thought. Unfortunately, there are far fewer opportunities for writers of color, many of whom speak languages other than English. The evening I describe was representative of both the caliber of literary programming available and the city's racial and economic divide. A third of us are people of color, and our numbers bulk up the city's lower socioeconomic strata. African American residents, for instance, earn less than half the income paid to their white counterparts.

In this sense, I view the Creative City designation not as an arrival but a portal to discover new ways to engage many more residents in the literary life of the city. What is at stake for Seattle is not guarding a literary legacy but envisioning one. The UNESCO designation is an invitation to redefine what a literary city looks like. Seattle could have the makings of a literary renaissance that inspires cities around the globe to reframe what constitutes literature and who has a right to create it.

The evening in question displayed the distance between the prevailing progressive notion of ourselves as a multiracial, multicultural, dynamic city and the reality on the ground. The divide is evident, not only in the



geographic spread of our neighborhoods, but also in who is present and who absent from high-caliber cultural programming. It begs the question, literary programs for whom and by whom? These questions should be the core narratives of the City of Lit designation. Not only what types of stories are important, but who tells them, who benefits from them, and what they chronicle about our city.

As the city's first Civic Poet and now, as Washington State's Poet Laureate, I've had the privilege to share literary spaces in all corners of the city. Students in Seattle Public Schools and the greater Seattle metropolitan area speak 130 different languages. I have visited classrooms where a Honduran child might sit across from a Nigerian youth who is next to her Yemeni friend. I have witnessed these extraordinary immigrant youth for whom English is often a second, third or even fourth language share powerful accounts and poems of their exodus from difficult places around the world to Seattle. Through these stories of courage and resilience, youth make sense of themselves and forge deep personal connections with each other.

As much as Seattle is a literary beacon to the world, the world lives and breathes in Seattle. At a recent event, a Somali gentleman told me a story from his childhood about a flying lion. Not an imaginary one, but a real animal who—in pursuit of village goats penned for the night—leapt over him and his young cousin as they counted stars in silence outside their hut in the countryside.

Another time at a senior center, a grandfather who had folded into himself in a chair slowly straightened as he recounted life in the Bolivian Altiplano. The aching vastness of the Andean landscape manifested before our eyes as he spoke with simple beauty of planting and harvesting potatoes and quinoa with his daughter. Riding in a Lyft on a recent evening, my companion referenced *Vis and Rāmin*, the 11th-century Persian love story by the poet Fakhruddin As'ad Gurgani. Our driver could not resist chiming in. She knew the tale. Her husband, she said, could recite entire sections by heart. Good stories, heralding creative engagement with the world through



words, emerge everywhere regardless of location or income.

In comparison to sister UNESCO cities, Seattle may appear to have a recent literary footprint. But for ten thousand years Coast Salish peoples have thrived along these steely waters. To them belongs a rich, nuanced and extensive catalog of tales and stories passed down orally for generations. The literary traditions of first peoples and many stories by our newest residents hinge on orality, on showing up in person.

Participation in literary creation can be a catalyst for civic engagement. Actively sharing each other's stories can forge common agency. The right to story is particularly important in our rapidly changing city with its widening income divide, ever-rising cost of housing and everyday displacement of communities of color. The tech sector favors a younger, wealthier population. Whose narrative will we inhabit? Whose stories will be told? And who will get to convey our history to future generations?

Seattle can indeed be creative by fostering more spaces and events grounded in the diversity of experience, languages and traditions in our midst. Validating orality, centering the traditions of first peoples and expanding our excellent programs to our newest residents could narrow the gap between who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be.



BIOGRAPHY

CLAUDIA CASTRO LUNA is Washington's State Poet Laureate (2018–21), an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow, and Seattle's inaugural Civic Poet (2015–17). She is the author the collection *Killing Mariás* (Two Sylvias), finalist for the Washington State Book Award 2018, the chapbook *This City* (Floating Bridge) and *One River, a Thousand Voices*, forthcoming from Chin Music Press. Castro Luna has an MA in Urban Planning, a K–12 teaching certificate and an MFA in poetry. Born in El Salvador, she came to the United States in 1981. Living in English and Spanish, Claudia writes and teaches in Seattle where she gardens and keeps chickens with her husband and their three children.

CHARLES JOHNSON

Seattle has many profiles, but for the last 43 years, the “River City” I’ve known best is the one she shows to artists transplanted from elsewhere, like me. It is a remarkably liberal city—often called a “city of neighborhoods,” residential and industrial, radiating out from a relatively small downtown area—with a distinguished history of supporting progressive causes. Among these are the Seattle General Strike in 1919 (the first official general strike in United States history) and the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, when as many as 75,000 people converged on the city from around the world to protest the World Trade Organization’s plans for globalization.

In its cultural texture, Seattle has always struck me as being, until a few years ago, a less expensive version of San Francisco. Clearly, these days we’re struggling with soaring housing prices and gentrification that has increased homelessness and forced many black residents in the historically black Central District to move farther south. Like Rome, Seattle was built on seven hills, and both cities are well acquainted with earthquakes. Both once burned to the ground. Both have steep streets, which caused considerable chaos when car-congested Seattle experiences heavy snow, which shuts down schools and makes hills treacherous. And both, after early periods of ethnic conflict (to name a few of Seattle’s stains, the anti-Chinese riots of 1885–86 and the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II), now feature racially diverse populations. Among these are Native Americans, whites who sprang from Scandinavian and German stock, Chinese and Japanese, Senegalese and Eritreans, Hindus and Sikhs, Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese and Jews and blacks whose families moved into the territory in the years between Seattle’s 1853 establishment as a settlement and the Klondike gold rush of the 1890s. That boom period turned a timber town into the main transport and supply point for miners in Alaska and the Yukon. According to archaeologists, humans have lived here for thousands of years.

But for any traveler or transplant with a literary sensibility, one of the most striking things about everyday Seattle is its typically West Coast, laid-back attitude and frequently cited civility. The late William Gerberding, a former president of the University of Washington (number ten in the *U.S. News & World Report's* Best Global Universities ranking), once called the Northwest "this little civilized corner of the world." Perhaps that fabled civility, despite the "Seattle Freeze" friendliness that forecloses actual closeness, is the reason so many young, single, iconoclastic, open-minded and driven people do seem to thrive here. Some 63 percent of Seattle's residents have bachelor's degrees. It is listed as one of the country's top three most literate cities (often with Minneapolis and Washington, DC). The IT industry employs many people in health, medicine and aerospace. It is one of America's least religious cities and most supportive of LGBTQ communities. There are about 100 theatrical production companies here, about two dozen live theater venues, and an opera house notable for its production of works by Richard Wagner. But literary events thrive here as well, among them Humanities Washington's yearly Bedtime Stories gala, where for twenty years I've composed a new story to read with other writers on a festive night in October, the proceeds from the event supporting cultural and educational programs.

Furthermore, there is a pre-given poetry in the extravagant beauty outside our windows: the looming volcanic cone of Mount Rainier and, west of the city, the Olympic Mountains descending into Pacific rain forests; to the east there are desert lands, glacial lakes, 3,000 kinds of native plants, and hundreds of islands in Puget Sound. The presence of so many talented local writers and musicians—grunge, avant-garde jazz, rap and indie rock are big here—is enough to have made Seattle a magnet for world-class artists like the late painter Jacob Lawrence and playwright August Wilson. But in addition to its art galleries and festivals, among them the yearly Bumbershoot and Bite of Seattle events, the city is synonymous with Starbucks coffee, Microsoft, the Space Needle, Amazon, Boeing aircraft, the Museum of Pop Culture that honors hometown heroes like Jimi Hendrix and, perhaps more than anything else, rain that has become nearly mythic



in the popular imagination.

The truth is that Seattle's climate is mild with wet winters, and until recently cool, dry summers. (Sadly, climate change is everywhere.) The place has a Mediterranean feel. But, yes, starting in October the sky melts steadily until March. Coming to Seattle from the environs of the Chicago area, I learned to love the rain, the misty, meditative mood it creates and moist evening air that sets parts of the geography to gleaming and hazes others in an atmosphere that is a perfect trope for the brooding inner climate.


BIOGRAPHY

DR. CHARLES JOHNSON, University of Washington professor emeritus and the author of 25 books, is a novelist, philosopher, essayist, literary scholar, short-story writer, cartoonist and illustrator, an author of children's literature and a screen- and teleplay writer. A MacArthur fellow, Johnson has received a 2002 American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature, a 1990 National Book Award for his novel *Middle Passage*, a 1985 Writers Guild award for his PBS teleplay *Booker*, the 2016 W.E.B. Du Bois Award at the National Black Writers Conference, and many other awards. The Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association was founded in 2003. In February 2020, Lifeline Theatre in Chicago debuted its play adaptation of *Middle Passage*. Dr. Johnson's most recent publications are *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* and his fourth short story collection, *Night Hawks*, which was nominated for a 2019 Washington State Book Award.

MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE

I moved to Seattle in 2012, a year before the publication of my memoir, *The End of San Francisco*, and people would ask: are you going to write *The End of Seattle* next? I would laugh—I had lived in Seattle two times before. The first was for a month in 1994, when I was 20, and I carried *The Courage to Heal* around like it might save me. JoAnne and I shared a bed for a month, and it never felt crowded—when something like this happens to you in a nonsexual way, you know it will last forever. Soon enough JoAnne moved to San Francisco to live with me, and even if I tell you she died only a year later, this doesn't mean we didn't have a life together, it just means it ended way too soon, after the hospital refused to care for her because she was a junkie. The first time I ever felt relaxed was in Seattle, sharing anger like a hug and when I came back for a little over a year in 1996 and '97 I felt that calm too but it was too calm so I moved to New York. And when I moved back to Seattle in 2012, it felt like it hadn't changed nearly as much as any of the other cities I knew and that's why I laughed.

Seattle to me has always been a middle-class town, and even if this is everything I hate about it, it might also be part of what has made it feel calm. Six years ago, I may have laughed when people asked me if I was writing *The End of Seattle*, but there is no question that we are living it now. Seattle is now a city of displacement and desperation, where rent has basically doubled in seven years and we have no meaningful protections, where even people against gentrification say of course they support increasing the density. But what kind of density are they supporting? A density of overpriced crap; a density of bland homogenization; a density of corporate exploitation masquerading as necessary growth.




Everyone talks about the need for affordable housing, while the city shuts down the largest public housing project, displacing hundreds of families and destroying the country's first mixed-race housing project to make way for a billionaire to build luxury apartments. How did they do this? By changing the zoning to increase the density. When developers control the language, everyone else loses. "Affordable housing" for middle-class people becomes the priority instead of low-income housing for poor people. "Increasing the density" of corporate profit becomes the rule instead of expanding the possibilities for public housing and communal care. If the tech zillionaires that run this city would just be forced to contribute a tiny portion of their earnings to city services, we could easily have free public transportation and housing for everyone. Instead Metro ends the Ride Free Area due to a funding shortage after a tax repeal, and homelessness and housing instability soar to record highs. If this isn't dystopia, I don't know what is.

I go on walks. Mostly around Capitol Hill, where I live, but also to other neighborhoods. Once a week I have an appointment in Eastlake, so I walk down the hill and over on Lakeview, where I see the backsides of everything. For several years, I would pass a muddy area with overgrown weeds on a small cliff between Lakeview and the ditch next to the highway, and in that little patch of land there were people creating a home. Some of them were living in tents, some were sleeping in piles of belongings exposed to the rain. Maybe the luckier ones were in campers nearby. It was a culture of drugs and desperation, but it was a culture.

I always feel a kinship with anyone struggling desperately to get by, and so even though I was not a part of this culture I felt something like hope when I walked past. Hope that this city could still be a place where people on the fringe can survive. Isn't this why we come to cities?

So sometimes this was my favorite part of the walk, just seeing people and saying hi. Then one day I walked by and there were giant tractors tearing everything up. At first I felt a panic because what if people were still sleeping in the grass like they usually were, but then I just felt an incredible



anger like I wanted to push the tractors over the cliff, and then of course this feeling faded into the usual helplessness. Once the rage would have lasted longer, but that was before twenty years of debilitating chronic health problems that brought me back to the city where I first found calm. But here so often it feels like the middle-class imagination has conquered everything, and even if this doesn't include my dreams it means I rarely feel connected to something larger than loss.

Now there are nine gray rowhouses overlooking the ditch next to the highway. Each one sold for \$895,000. Most of them look as bland as before they were inhabited, but one has a cute little metal table outside with chairs, and pots of chrysanthemums. One time I saw the guy who lives there and I waved, but he didn't wave back. Still I have a fantasy that he'll invite me in, we'll cuddle in bed and I'll tell him about the people who used to live where he lives now, and maybe he'll agree with me about the injustice, even though he's part of it. Even though all of us are part of it, especially those of us with the privilege to live in a place that won't be taken away.

When I hear the phrase that Seattle is a great literary city, I want to scream. Because when people praise what Seattle is now, it feels like they're praising displacement, homogenization, the streamlining of the imagination to become a tool of social, cultural and political obliteration. I don't believe that literature is automatically a force for good, especially if it participates in the self-congratulatory boosterism that celebrates Seattle as it is now. If we cannot critique what we love, then we don't really love it.

If this is a great literary city, how do we expose all the layers of violence so we can imagine something else? How do we write what we really feel, so we can feel what we really need? How do we use language to expose hypocrisy rather than camouflaging harm? I want to live in a city that doesn't destroy the lives of the people who are already the most marginalized by systemic and systematic injustice. This may be too much to ask of literature, but it's not too much to ask.

BIOGRAPHY

MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE (mattildabernsteinsycamore.com) is the author of three novels and a memoir, and the editor of five nonfiction anthologies. Her memoir, *The End of San Francisco*, won a Lambda Literary Award, and her anthology, *Why Are Faggots So Afraid of Faggots?: Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform*, was an American Library Association Stonewall Honor Book. Her latest title, the novel *Sketchtasy*, was one of NPR's Best Books of 2018. She is currently at work on a new anthology, *Between Certain Death and a Possible Future: Queer Writing on Growing Up with the AIDS Crisis*, and her next book, *The Freezer Door*, a lyric essay on desire and its impossibility, set in Seattle, will be out in fall 2020.

WEI-WEI LEE

There's an East Asian tradition my parents performed for us, me and my sisters, when we were very little. The word in Mandarin is 抓週, and there's no good translation for it other than one suggestion I scraped from the internet: drawing lots.

The tradition goes thus: when the new baby is about a year old, a small ceremony is held where the baby is surrounded with representative objects, and whichever the baby grabs is indicative of who they'll grow up to be. As lovingly and cheerfully recounted by my parents at just about every family gathering, my eldest sister went for the stethoscope and book, indicative of academia, a future in medicine. My second sister grabbed a book and pen, indicative of academia, creativity, artistry.

I crawled for a New Taiwan thousand-dollar bill and turned right around to give it to my mother. This is the story they love telling the most. Indicative of a life of fortune and plenty. Something in business, perhaps? A career that would bring wealth.

There is a reason I found drawing lots a fair translation. We were drawing our lot in life, or so the tradition goes. Of course, it's just a household ritual, and people know to not put too much faith in it.

But there is a reason my parents still tell the story, and it isn't just because it's funny.

I was raised in an East Asian household, the product of two generations of hard work, sacrifice and academic excellence, in an Asiatic region that put a lot of focus on academia. My lot in life was to be something tremendous—a doctor or a lawyer, a dentist, professor or diplomat. Those were my parents' dreams for me.

They told me I could be anything . . . as long as it put food on the table. I could study anything provided I could get a job afterward. Most everything had to have an outcome to it, a reward. Otherwise, what was the point? What was the point of learning piano if I couldn't show off my skills to other people, relatives with children my age? What was the point of being good at English if I didn't put it to good use by going to competitions? (What was the point of being born, if I didn't know due diligence?) The lessons of success, clawed from the dirt and passed on parent to child, can fall into the realm of brutal efficiency.

I've loved writing since I was a child—have been writing since my stories found their way onto paper and into computers. My parents saw no reason to discourage this pastime as long as it came second to my studies. Of course, it came with the tagline that it wasn't anything I should really pursue unless it proved to be a lucrative option. Again: efficiency. Why expend time and effort on something that wasn't going to keep me alive? I have known, since I started writing, that until I managed to publish a bestseller or two, this would be nothing more than a mere hobby.

Poetry, however, has been a different beast altogether. For one, it was fostered in Seattle, encouraged in the loving arms of writing groups and workshops. For another, I was writing only for myself. I only wanted to capture raw feeling, persistent phrases that rustled around my head and demanded to be heard. I had no limitations, no expectations, no goals in mind. Neither, in fact, did my parents. I didn't tell them I read at Benaroya Hall until after the fact, and I didn't even tell them I'd entered the Youth Poet Laureate contest until I was home from reading alongside other finalists at Northwest Folklife. It was something just for the two of us, between me and the city of Seattle.

I grew up in Taiwan, and I've done some growing here in Seattle. Taiwan will always be my motherland—it's the setting for all my memories, the foundation of who I am. It gave me discipline, identity and a story. But Taiwan tends to foster creativity for display, like something to only be lauded and put up in gleaming glass cases, and I am older than the girl



who entered competitions just because it was, would be, an honor.

Seattle has given me freedom. It has afforded me the luxury of writing for the sake of feeling, without expectation or the pressures of succeeding, with my friends, classmates, school writers' club and the Youth Poet Laureate Cohort. We trade our written stories across the table and listen spellbound. We read our poems aloud and sink into the words like a warm bath. We paint to provoke feeling. We speak and the words resonate. We create because it is in our nature, manifesting in our poetry slams, art galleries, and coffee shop concerts, from murals in Sodo to the painted array of electrical boxes in Lake City. We create no matter who we are.

What it means to me, to be here in this city, is to be where creativity is so cared for instead of being sown and grown and harvested until the fields go dry.

I never really thought I could be a poet, in every sense of the word, until I was on stage at Benaroya, although I'd been writing poetry for years by then. I hadn't thought my poetry could amount to anything. I'd been trying to wrangle my parents' expectations for so long that I didn't realize I had my own expectations to contend with, too.

If you are, as I am, presently here in Seattle—whether you are passing through or staying put—remember that we each have a little magic, and the city brings it out in us. We are capable of creating such things as no one has ever done.

We are more than what people want to see, sometimes more than even we ourselves expect to see. We are not bound to the lots we draw.



BIOGRAPHY

WEI-WEI LEE is recently graduated from Nathan Hale High School and was the 2019–20 Youth Poet Laureate of Seattle. She was born in the States but grew up in Taiwan and has only been stateside for four years. Seattle is the first city in the US she has ever known and loved. Though she first started writing around age eight, she only began writing poetry at fourteen—but she’s since fallen in love with it and hasn’t stopped. Poetry, for her, is largely based on pure feeling and imagery. In her work, she hopes to pay tribute to both Taiwan and America and do them proud.

ANASTACIA-RENÉE

I woke up on a chilly Sunday morning in our apartment (across the street from where Kingfish Café used to be) and felt as if I were nudged or pushed or energetically prompted to serenade myself with Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." And I did. I played the song and belted it from my gut and just as I arrived at the part of the song where I usually shut my eyes to feel the song deeply

*Young, gifted and black
We must begin to tell our young
There's a world waiting for you
This is a quest that's just begun*

my eyes rested upon Audre Lorde's *I Am Your Sister*. I have moved around numerous times in this black body and as a mother (Kansas City, San Diego and Japan) and for that reason I find it challenging to feel anchored to any particular place. But no matter where I've made my home, four things have tethered and centered me: 1. Parenting 2. Remembering the power of my lineage 3. Reading 4. Writing. Because Seattle, more than any of the other place I have lived, has a more robust literary community, I have been able to see aspects of myself in organizations like Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and Northwest African American Museum. I have planted myself, grown and opened up spaces for others to grow and flourish in organizations like Hugo House and Jack Straw.


When I grab a copy of *I Am Your Sister* from my bookshelf and head to a local restaurant on my street (one that has replaced a Seattle staple), I am greeted via body language by a family of tourists who can't seem to keep their eyes off me and the book. The body language appears subtle. Short glances up and down, whispering under the breath and stopping to stare at me on the way to the restroom. I say to Audre Lorde (yes, I talk to her

often), "What do you want me to receive from today's sermon?" And she says (as I pick a random page from the book and stick my index finger on a paragraph), *When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable.* The tourist family continues to stare at me and by now I assume soon they will make small talk and say what many visitors have said by asking me where I am visiting from or where can they get authentic soul food or if I work at the restaurant.

Something about this family was different. I let my intuition lead me back to Lorde. In my bag I also had a copy of *Zami and Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974–1989*. These three books have served as literary sanctuaries for me. Though I am definitely in my reading and writing zone, I feel my happy place, also known as Lorde haze, will soon be interrupted. And it is.

The touristy family members walk over to my table in matching sweatshirts. Five smiles are exchanged and there is a pause. I cannot tell if the awkward silence comes from me or from them. I chastise myself for assigning them a name, but this is what writers do. After the pause we all began to speak at once. They say four variations of "Hello" and I simply say "Hi" with a half smile and hugging all three books to my chest. I find myself waiting, almost counting the seconds to guess how long it will take for the questions I am used to, but one of the family members practically leaps out of their sweatshirt and says to me, "I just couldn't help notice that you are reading Audre Lorde and her work changed my life . . . I mean my whole perspective . . . I mean, she is, by far, one of the most influential authors and essayists of all time."

I was so stunned by what the family member said that all I could do was smile hard and nod profusely as they followed up with, "You are not the first person I have seen posted up somewhere reading or writing. Seattle must be the right place for that."



Long after leaving the restaurant and in fact for weeks I thought about this exchange. Not because it ended differently than I've been conditioned to expect, but because the family member was right. And the quote that Audre Lorde guided me to was also right. And in this way we were brought together.

My literary roots have grown in Seattle, and I feel fortunate to be planted in a place that values writers, values literature, values libraries, values bookstores, and is not only rich in its literary history but in the current roster of writers. But if I could make a wish upon a book or ask "the Lorde" Audre for a blessing for this city, it would be to add more platforms, avenues, megaphones and bridges for voices who live between the lines, in white spaces and in the margins.

I feel hope for the direction that Seattle is moving. We are remembering that *Without community there is no liberation*, Audre.

BIOGRAPHY

ANASTACIA-RENÉE is the author of five books and a TEDx Speaker, Deep End Friends podcast cohost and interdisciplinary artist. The recipient of the 2018 James W. Ray Distinguished Artist Award (Literary) from Artist Trust, Seattle Civic Poet (2017–19), and Poet-in-Residence at Hugo House (2015–17), she has received fellowships and residencies from Cave Canem, Hedgebrook, VONA, Artist Trust, Jack Straw, Ragdale, Mineral School, Hypatia-in-the-Woods and the New Orleans Writers' Residency. Anastacia-Renée's work has been published in *Foglifter*, *Cascadia Magazine*, *Pinwheel*, *The Fight and the Fiddle*, *Glow*, *The A-Line*, *Ms. Magazine* and a host of others.

DUJIE TAHAT


The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.

—Audre Lorde, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*

I walk around Seattle looking at houses I'll never own. I imagine one full of twenty-somethings who work at nonprofits and couldn't afford living in the city if they didn't have four roommates. Next to them is a retired couple on fixed incomes who pays a greater share of their earnings in taxes than their neighbors across the street, whose parents helped with their down payment. In that house, they signal their politics with an omnibus liberal yard sign: love is love is love, Black lives matter, women's rights are human rights.

In Seattle politics, we rely on symbols as a proxy for action—perhaps it's the only way to build a "progressive utopia." We love being the future. Our contemporary cultural and political discourse has been propelled by the forward-facing engines of industry and colonialism. Expeditions. Timber. The Gold Rush. The Space Needle. Boeing. Amazon. Our city's narrative is defined with moments of achieving new heights, staring down the unknown, embodying the "tip of the spear," "innovation" and "disruption."

It is praiseworthy for Seattle to be recognized as a UNESCO City of Literature—an important and vital achievement that recognizes the hard work of countless artists that made this city what it is. We belong—in yet a new way—to a global community. This is good because the world is in a dire place, and we need more reasons to come together. It represents an opportunity for Seattle to partner and learn from our sister cities how best to employ literature and this designation to improve the material lives of those at the margins. As far as I understand literature to have a purpose, it is meant to reflect back to us our fullest selves, to speak truth to power, and




to be a site for greater individual and communal reimagining. If we don't take this task seriously, the honor serves simply as a laurel hung from the drawing room walls of those of us living in safe, material comfort.

Seattle is experiencing unprecedented transformation with profound implications for the future. Yet in the strict confines of high art and cultural discourse, many institutions remain unwilling to reckon with the ways culture is displaced from the city. It cannot be because cultural institutions are apolitical—not only because there's no such thing but because many of these organizations willingly come together to fund electoral campaigns when what is on the ballot are public subsidies. What becomes clear is that it is not the city's culture being curated but rather institutional balance sheets.

The hypocrisy is starkest when cultural institutions display Black and Brown art but not the artist. And if they do champion and claim Black and Brown artists as worthy of their space and acclaim, they hardly extend the same level of commitment and support to the communities those artists come from. No amount of rationalizing can explain the discrepancy between racially diverse public roles like fellowships and artists-in-residence at those same institutions with staff and board positions held almost exclusively by white people.

Start by hiring more Black, Indigenous, People of Color who come from historically BIPOC neighborhoods. Then increase funding and programming that serves young and vulnerable people in those communities. Taking on a more explicit role in the political machinations that determine the quality of life for so many Seattleites—now that is the radical work of culture. Inevitably, some will question how we pay for it and what resources can we devote, which leads to an existential, difficult conversation about the current model of arts institutions.

Philanthropy, which is the predominant model of literary and cultural organizations in our city, is failing us. If one builds an organization centering wealthy white landowners, then that is the culture being curated.




If we cannot find a way to pull from the margins, our city's art and literature will suffer and become watered-down cultural products that prop up the settler-colonial, capitalist project, which pays some well and costs most others their lives.

To break the cycle, we have to envision the role and mission of arts and literary institutions in our city. Instead of building business models around those with the money to meet annual development goals, what does an art institution look like that owes the communities that make the most vital artists making the most vital art? What does it mean for the institution to take an active role in reimagining its place in not just culture but our city's economy? And are those same institutions and their leaders ready to cede power in the name of art and culture?


A different kind of literary institution means reinterpreting what a core mission, vision and values mean when cast upon a wider field. Many arts institutions today are "committed to racial equity" but don't have the courage to take a position on upzoning, land use policy or ending the sweeps of homeless encampments. In this era, the arts are an active practice. Housing, human services, the role of government—these are the defining fights of our time and will shape the future of our city. Washington state has the most inequitable tax code in America. Seattle is home to the two richest people on the planet along with a dozen other billionaires while over 11,000 people live unsheltered in the streets of our county. Tens of thousands more are on the brink of losing their housing, and yes, BIPOC are disproportionately represented here at alarming rates. These everyday facts of life are not ancillary to culture but the very stuff that comprise it. If institutions really mean what they say about their commitment to racial equity, none can sit idly by.

Seattle has a long tradition of arts organizing deeply rooted in community. Arts groups like Creative Justice, the Vera Project, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute, Youngstown Cultural Arts Center and Youth Speaks Seattle—of which I am an alum—have been leading the way. They represent an orientation to literature, art and culture that is more



akin to culture workers around the globe. They envision artists as leaders who not only engage and shape communal discourse, but practice the values their arts convey. They each, in their own way, provide education and childcare services. They advocate—in politics and government—for systemic changes that serve community. They work on prevention as well as remediation of individual and communal problems. And they are committed to improving the overall quality of life of everyone who comes through their doors. These organizations do not make good business sense or even philanthropy sense. However, they are saving lives—mine included. If we can bring together the scale of funding and influence that large-scale institutions have with the community-based orientation and practice these arts organizations provide, we may yet live to see everyone in this city flourish.

I love Seattle and often turn to its literary scene as reprieve from a politics that dehumanizes those suffering the most. If literature and art are an effective antidote, we must attend to how so many artists have been pushed out of Seattle as the city's economy "soars." My family still might be. When our art spaces refuse to acknowledge or address this ever-growing loss, they become complicit in the marginalization of the very culture these spaces claim to cultivate. What's rendered invisible is not just the brilliant literature produced by a talented individual but the whole community that made that individual possible in the first place. And because of the way our economy is structured, our immigrant, BIPOC, queer and trans communities bear the brunt of our collective inaction. Of course, art cannot feed, clothe or house our neighbors, but it can and does improve the quality of our lives, which has a direct bearing to the kinds of change we wish to enact while living amongst each other. What if arts instructors devoted themselves to the same task? What if we lived the values of the art we make and champion? What a radically welcoming city we might become.



We need more activist politics in our art institutions. We need leaders willing to risk their power, those with the courage to align themselves with people and principles. Now is the time for such ambition. If there's hope to be found in our city, it is how we come together—hopefully led by our literary institutions—to be the bulwarks our people deserve.

BIOGRAPHY

DUJIE TAHAT is a Filipino-Jordanian immigrant living in Washington state. They are the author of *Here I Am O My God*, selected by Fady Joudah for a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship, and *SALAT*, selected by Cornelius Eady as winner of the Tupelo Press Sunken Garden Chapbook Award. Their poems have been published or are forthcoming in *POETRY*, *Sugar House Review*, *the Journal*, *the Southeast Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Asian American Literary Review* and elsewhere. Dujie has earned fellowships from Hugo House, Jack Straw Writing Program and the Poetry Foundation, as well as a work-study scholarship from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. They serve as a poetry editor for *Moss* and *Homology Lit* and cohost the Poet Salon podcast.

KEN WORKMAN

the great-great-great-great grandson of Chief Si'ahl,
or Sealth

as told to editor Kristen Millares Young

To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and seemingly without regret . . .

Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors . . .

At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land.

—Chief Si'ahl, namesake of the city of Seattle

I will speak, and I will tell you what I know. People call them stories. I'm just telling you the truth, and people say it comes out as a story.

I was born in Seattle and imprinted upon the smells of Seacrest Cove Park on the shores of Alki Beach in 1954. Whenever I get near that park, I feel more alive.

Growing up, my backyard was what they call Puget Park. There was a creek, hills, trees and wild forest everywhere. It fronted the entire west bank of the Duwamish River. Spring was the best time of year following the long, dark winters. Springtime's when the big leaves come out on the maple trees, and the whole world comes alive again.


My brother and I played in the woods. Later in life—I am 66 now—I realized we were right there in close proximity to the Herring House village site, the last Duwamish village on our river. So many memories. Blue heron nests high in the trees, crawdads in the creek, raccoons and Christmas trees. Paddling in a dinghy on the Duwamish River. So many memories, but it took my whole life to understand that I grew up surrounded by ancestors—not a metaphor, but a biological reality.

Let me explain.

In 1854, according to Dr. Henry A. Smith's 1887 account in the *Seattle Sunday Star*, Chief Seattle was making a speech where he taps Governor Isaac Stevens on the head and says, *I am going to look over the treaty you've given us, but you should know the first thing we require is unencumbered access to our burial grounds.* And then he says, *You abandon your dead; you think they are powerless, but the ground is more living to our feet than it is to yours. When the lights are out and the streets are empty, they will throng with the ghosts of my people.* And he talks about the hills, the valleys and how *even the rocks resonate with the memories of my people.*

When you take what Seattle said in this speech, which Dr. Henry A. Smith wrote in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887, putting in flowery stuff, when the way we Duwamish talk is more factual—when you start stripping everything away, Seattle was talking about the cycle of life, recognizing that we Duwamish are a part of everything—the tree, berry and even the blade of grass . . . everything! I went *holy moly*, and I started working on what he said in a context of science, which has confirmed the cycle of life and everything it implies.

Burial sites, kyo-ali, are a corpse place. Cemetery. So when relatives would pass, if a high-status person, you got elevated—buried among the branches of trees. And if you had a canoe, that meant you were really high status, so you were placed in your canoe and raised up high to decay naturally. All that biological material that was the person decays and moves down into the ground naturally. After all, we know that here on



Earth, gravity pulls at a somewhat constant 32.167 feet per second squared. In springtime, all that stuff that's in the ground—which was Grandpa and Grandma, Auntie and Uncle at the molecular level—gets sucked back into the trees. The trees—they're connected by fungi—so the trees are talking to each other, sending these nutrients that were Grandpa and Grandma back and forth. And they help each other—the mother trees help smaller trees and other living things, as Professor Suzanne Simard of University of British Columbia explains through her research.

So you see, the Duwamish have been in this ground for so long that all that stuff—the biological material that was them—is all around you. We're in the trees, the grass, the berries . . . everywhere. By logical extension, we are in the deer that eats the grass.


Seattle burned down in 1889—and was rebuilt around 1909, that's the current downtown Seattle in Pioneer Square—so now you have lots of 100-plus-year-old buildings that are starting to modernize. People are sandblasting the paint off the superstructure of massive timber beams. Those beams were made from trees grown right here. A simple trigonometric function will tell you that the DNA of the Duwamish people are in the buildings in Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle.

So he was right, Chief Seattle, when he said that *when the lights are out, and the streets are empty, our ghosts will throng among you*. You built your city out of us. We are all around you—living—and we are also the ghosts that are in the trees. We are under the streets and in the buildings. The hills and the valleys, even the rocks resonate.

We Duwamish are living. We are still here. Even when you do not see us. We are everywhere. So say, "Thank you, Grandpa and Grandma," the ancient ones that have passed on, for your lives. Say, "We see you in what we consume as food today. We recognize you in all things."

This concept is universal; it's not just the message of Chief Seattle.

I am just a voice telling a story, but it's really the story of the whole planet,



and only in modern society have we lost our minds, put bodies in hermetically sealed boxes in the ground, so the biological materials of those that have passed never mix back into the ground. It's as if a steel plate were shoved between dynasties, between modern human beings and all that came before. Humans have been self-exiled from becoming one with the rest of the planet.

We've got stories in the tribe, the North Wind's Weir story, on the Duwamish River, about when it was cold, and there was a great war, and then it wasn't cold anymore. In our stories, we can track the ice sheets back to 10, 12 and 14,000 years. And all that time, as Duwamish, we've been living and dying here on the hills and valleys of Seattle.


Modern people are breathing the air provided by our Duwamish ancestors through the trees.

The new people, the white people . . . their DNA record here is but a handful of generations. They are a proud people, and this is good, but they are going to have to go a long, long way to catch up with the Duwamish in terms of generations. Our DNA record is ten thousand years old. We are still here. We are in the ground, and we have come up through the trees. The world will have to dig deep and long to fully extricate the last Duwamish bones, should it be the world's desire to keep us from our land. We are in the ground, trees, berries and every blade of grass.

We are grateful for everything, even the blade of grass that gives its life so something else can survive. Do not waste a single life, for it is through that existence that we continue to endure today.

Be grateful.

This is who we are. I am KW, ahta duwabsh, of the Duwamish.



Editor's note: this essay is a distillation of an oral history shared in 2019 by Workman, who cited a speech given in 1854 by his ancestor Chief Si'ahl, a renowned orator of Suquamish and Duwamish parents. Si'ahl's speech, reconstructed with questionable veracity by Dr. Henry Smith, was published in 1887 in the *Seattle Sunday Star*. Smith claimed he took notes during Si'ahl's original oration, said to have been delivered in Lushootseed, translated into the Chinook language and translated again into English.

Si'ahl is believed to have delivered his speech in the presence of Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens; both men were signatories to the 1855 Point Elliott Treaty, during which Si'ahl and more than 80 other tribal leaders ceded their ancestral lands in return for the establishment of reservations, continued hunting and fishing rights, access to ancestral burial sites and other promised tribal benefits.

The Duwamish Tribe exchanged more than 54,000 acres of their homeland—including Seattle, Renton, Tukwila, Bellevue, Mercer Island and much of King County—for a reservation and other treaty benefits that have never been accorded by the US Government.

To this day, the Duwamish Tribe—the People of the Inside, dx^wdəwʔabš—awaits federal acknowledgment.



BIOGRAPHY

KEN WORKMAN is the great-great-great-great grandson of Chief Seattle. He is a retired Systems and Data Analyst from Boeing's Flight Operations Engineering Department, and he is a former Duwamish Tribal Council member as well as a former Duwamish Tribal Services 501(c)(3) president. Ken is a member of the Duwamish Tribe, the first people of Seattle, and a current board member of two nonprofit organizations—the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition and the Southwest Seattle Historical Society. Today Ken enjoys retired life living on a river in the mountains east of Seattle.

BIOGRAPHIES

MITA MAHATO is a Seattle-based cut-paper, collage and comix artist and educator whose work focuses on lost, discarded and disappeared animals and objects. Her book of comix poetry, *In Between*, is listed in *The Best American Comics 2019* and her silent comic book *Sea* received the award for *Best Comic Book of 2017* from Cartoonists Northwest. Her work is published in *ANMLY*, *Coast/No Coast*, *Shenandoah*, *Illustrated PEN*, *MUTHA*, *Drunken Boat* and *Seattle Weekly* and has been exhibited widely (including at SOIL Gallery, Seattle; Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago; Schnitzer Museum of Art, Pullman; and Antenna Gallery, New Orleans). Mita is associate curator of public and youth programs at the Henry Art Gallery, serves on the organizing board for the arts organization Short Run Seattle and teaches community art workshops to all ages.

KRISTEN MILLARES YOUNG is the author of *Subduction*, named a staff pick by the Paris Review and called “whip-smart” by the *Washington Post* and a “brilliant debut” by the *Seattle Times*. A prize-winning journalist and essayist, Kristen serves as Prose Writer-in-Residence at Hugo House. Her reviews, essays and investigations appear in the *Washington Post*, *Lit Hub*, the *Guardian* and elsewhere, as well as the anthologies *Pie & Whiskey* (a *New York Times* New & Noteworthy Book), *Latina Outsiders: Remaking Latina Identity* and *Advanced Creative Nonfiction: A Writer's Guide and Anthology*. She was the researcher for the *New York Times* team that produced “Snow Fall,” which won a Pulitzer Prize. From 2016 to 2019, she served as board chair of InvestigateWest, a nonprofit newsroom she cofounded to protect vulnerable peoples and places of the Pacific Northwest.

ABOUT SEATTLE CITY OF LITERATURE

Founded in 2013 to manage Seattle's bid to join UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, Seattle City of Literature is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving our city's literary community by connecting it to the world.

In 2017, Seattle was designated a UNESCO City of Literature in their Creative Cities Network, and at the direction of the city of Seattle, the Seattle City of Literature nonprofit helps manage the designation. This includes local programming and relationship-building with other Cities of Literature and Creative Cities around the world. Find more information at seattlecityoflit.org.


The Partnership with Seattle's Office of Arts & Culture, The Seattle Public Library and The Seattle Public Library Foundation

As of 2019, the nonprofit organization Seattle City of Literature entered into a limited agreement with the Office of Arts & Culture, The Seattle Public Library, and The Seattle Public Library Foundation.

This agreement shifts the management of the Creative City designation under the aegis of The Seattle Public Library for a period of two years. During this time, the Seattle City of Literature nonprofit organization will advise programmatic decision-making and raise funds to help support program initiatives.

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This collection, a living portrait that recognizes Seattle's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature, was made possible with the support of Seattle City of Literature, The Seattle Public Library Foundation, Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, The Seattle Public Library, and the Connie and Gary Kunis Foundation.