Plenary Session with Terry Tempest Williams
October 17, 2013

Jonathan Katz, NASAA CEO: We are delighted to start this session off with a reading from Wyoming's sixth poet laureate, Echo Roy Klaproth. A teacher and fourth-generation rancher from Shoshoni, Wyoming, Echo is many things and very much a poet of place. Her work, which includes three books of poetry, captures the essence of Wyoming's ranching heritage. She's here with us today to celebrate poetry, to celebrate Wyoming and to add her welcome to our keynote artist, Terry Tempest Williams.

[applause]

Echo Klaproth, Wyoming Poet Laureate: You want to know how a simple old ranch woman becomes Wyoming's state poet laureate? I don't have a clue.

[laughter]

I will tell you the very first time I got up to read one of my poems in front of an audience, other than maybe my mother or my brothers, was in Jackson, Wyoming. The Bar J Wranglers have a place right down the road here, and I went there one evening. One of them had me get up, and he said, "I want you to read that grass poem." I stood in front of him with a piece of paper and did like that for the whole time, and the turn-on was people responded to a few words that I had put down on a piece of paper. It was an amazing thing. Ah!

I am also not as deeply rooted perhaps as [Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources Director] Milward [Simpson], but my family, my two great-grandfathers on my dad's side, one came north with cattle drives back in the late 1800s. The first time, he came with a herd and was working for someone. The second time, he chose to come up by himself, and he called it a "cow hunt." And it is recorded in *Wyoming Livestock Journal* as "He put brands on any of them little dogies that didn't have a daddy."

[laughter]

And so he actually had to leave Wyoming for a while [laughter], and he sent Amanda and the children back down to Round Rock, Texas, because he was in

hiding for a little while. And then, when Wyoming became a state, guess who became Wyoming's first state brand inspector?

[laughter]

One of the ironies of life, huh?

I'm very proud of my heritage, and I'm very humbled by this appointment. I'm serious when I say I'm not the most prolific, and I'm not the deepest poet in the state of Wyoming. But my husband said to me, "Just go and do what you do and be who you are," and that's the very best advice, isn't it, for all of us, in life? It is, it is.

I had the privilege of introducing Terry earlier this week at the Wyoming Arts Council conference, and so I went on-line—because I had never had the privilege of meeting her—I went on-line, and I found words that described her. And when I introduced her, I had no idea the impact that she would have on me. So I say to you today, yes, she is an astonishing writer: I got the quote, "a manifesto, both fierce and compassionate." But the quote that I had only copied before I can now speak from the heart. Terry Tempest Williams is one of our most eloquent and elegant voices of the American West.

She illuminates and demonstrates a rare courage and strength and desire to live a life with greater intention. That's encouraging to me. Her perceptions give voice to narratives of hope. It's that side of her and those intentions which I believe are meant to challenge us all.

In her book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* I found words that inspired me. And so without her permission (but she's since allowed me)—rather than doing a traditional introduction, I took poetic liberty, plucked some of her words, and rewove them into what we call a "cento [collage] poem," and I've titled it "Looking for Golden Threads."

[Looking for Golden Threads
Words by Terry Tempest Williams / Arranged by Echo Klaproth]

A mosaic is a conversation
between what is broken and redesigned
in a pattern through the play of light.
A mosaic is a conversation with time:
a narrative arranged and rearranged
o'er the Old and New Testament eras,
seeking beauty in all things common,
creating lines side by side as in rhyme.

Mosaic is a metaphor for life
when out of randomness comes created order.
And although imperfect, man finds beauty

crafted out of community.
From issues shaping America West
comes allegory aligning progress—
a kinship between our paved-over souls
and being part of something bigger than us.
And so it was and is in our broken world,
a woman stands on a descending staircase,
dares to ask, "Can we have a change of heart?"
and, "How do we translate God's amazing Grace?"
She has met long silences among us
but enters into the mosaic of life,
the paradox, seeking unity in all
and finds dignity's presence, beauty sublime.

The pattern is the thing, the play of light,
so she lives her life looking for golden threads,
perceives and receives, *We are not alone*
but belong to a quivering web of faith.
Finding beauty in a broken world is
the work of daring and inspires action.
It's not knowing how much we are needed
but believing beauty belongs to everyone.

Thank you so much.

[applause]

Jonathan Katz: Wow. Well, we have a very special opportunity here in Jackson, Wyoming. Those of you who have been to NASAA conferences before know that we always try to engage in keynote roles local artists of national renown. We look for artists who can speak both to their own work and to the public purpose and meaning of their art and of the arts in general, people who embody how the arts help us as individual citizens understand and consider the most pressing issues of our time.

We have wanted to work with Terry Tempest Williams for years, but schedules and stars have not aligned until now—and as it turns out, the stars and schedules have aligned perfectly, because here we are, Terry's home state, a community she adopted some years ago, a place she's held dear since childhood. Perfect.

An artist and advocate, Terry bears witness to her own life and to the world around her, her abiding connection to wilderness and landscapes, especially her beloved West, goes hand in hand with her abiding commitment to exploring the intersections of human and natural interests. As she asks in *The Open Space of Democracy,* How do we create and abide by a declaration of interdependence, one that acknowledges the holistic nature of our relationships with the human and

natural world? And in her writing, she explores how the artistic process is part of that inquiry.

With that, I ask Terry to join me here on stage. She has created something especially for us. She will share that with you. Then she and I will talk for a bit. Then you will be invited to engage in a conversation with her. I have rarely developed an affection so quickly for a new friend. I know you'll feel the same way.

[applause]

Terry Tempest Williams: Good morning. Thank you, Jonathan. I'm nervous. It will get better.

[laughter]

Thank you, and thank you—the North Bear singers were so beautiful this morning, to just ground with their drumbeats, heartbeats, what is essential. And thank you, Echo—a new friend as well. I so appreciate your grace, eloquence rendered in your life on the page and in the world as a ranch woman; the range of our memory, you remind us. And thank you to all of you for your presence here and the work that you do. It not only opens our minds, but you opened Grand Teton National Park.

[laughter]

So I think there's something to the power of the arts to persuade politics to do otherwise.

I was late this morning because I was so excited. A friend of mine who works in the Park Service said, "We've just taken the barricades down." Last night after we had this wonderful meeting with Jonathan and [NASAA Chief Program and Planning Officer] Kelly [Barsdate] and [NASAA Chief Advancement Officer] Laura [Smith], I was driving home, and I honestly have never—I've been coming—I'm a migrant to Wyoming—I have never seen so many elk. I think word must have got out that the park was going to reopen, and so they were all fleeing again.

[laughter]

But there were literally hundreds of elk, beautiful, massive, gorgeous elk, just literally right over here, underneath this approaching full moon. So, tonight, as you're going into the museum, keep your eyes open. They're here, and drive slowly.

I would also encourage you just to go into the park—it's just a mile or two away—because there is a stillness—I've been skirting the edges—that I haven't seen in years.

Roll call [a reference to NASAA's annual roll call of the states, held earlier that morning]. I have never felt so at home.

[laughter]

And last night, I was talking to my father, and I said, "I'm so excited. I'm speaking to NASAA," and he goes, "You know nothing about space."

[laughter]

And this is my father who very recently at a family gathering said, "Terry, I'm so glad you have a hobby," and I thought golf, you know or croquet, and he meant writing. As you are each introducing yourselves in your home states and my home state—I feel like I have two home states, my adopted home in Wyoming and my home state of Utah—when I heard [during roll call], "We're the two nondrinkers," I stood up to see if you were my relatives. And I will forever remember the folks from South Carolina…

[laughter]

The art of experience is what I want to honor today, what you do as the leadership of our state arts organizations around this country. I want to acknowledge [Wyoming Arts Council Manager] Rita [Basom] and [Wyoming Arts Council Chair] Karen [Stewart] and Milward—what you do for the state of Wyoming is what brought me here—Lynnette Hiskey, director of Utah Division and Arts and Museums; and Margaret Hunt, former director of the Utah Arts Council; and I would include Cinda Holt, who now works in the state of Montana—we go back: we have a history from Sundance to the Utah Arts Festival to a love of the American West. It is so great to be home with you—all of you—dreaming, honoring, enacting, supporting dance, music, theater, the visual arts, the literary arts, all the arts of the imagination. You create, lived, experience—not virtual, but real, reminding us what it means to be human, reminding us not only what is possible, but necessary.

My deepest gratitudes to Jonathan, to Kelly, to Laura for your leadership, your vision, for the passion that is guiding this organization. What you [the audience] should know—and you know this already—they know you not only by name, but by story and by love. Last night, we were talking about what matters to us, and I asked them what programs are you most proud of. Poetry Out Loud, giving students a voice, the experience, the lived experience of embodied poetry, speaking the words, feeling the words, hundreds of thousands of students in this country, having the strength of a known poem.

Working with the Center for Creative Aging, Jonathan was talking about how the arts can enhance rather than dismiss our senior people to move, to paint, to sing, to draw.

And, Kelly, your question last night haunted me, stayed with me: "What is our relationship to the pressing issues of our time?" And you spoke of a program that is now being initiated, working with veterans and their families, embracing issues of care, healing, homecoming. We are weavers, you said, and indeed, when I think of Echo's poem of the golden strand, the golden threads, all of us, each of us here are weavers of support—you, your financial support, supporting the arts and artists. As I said on Monday, every time you support an artist or an art organization, you are supporting a declaration of independence, interdependence.

I honor, Laura, your leadership, from the ground up, bedrock commitments, from personal pocketbooks—all of yours, not just corporate or federal support, walking the talk. And I want to be able to participate, and I want to give you just a small offering. [Presents contribution to Laura.]

[applause]

I remember the wonderful writer John Nichols, who wrote *The Milagro Beanfield War*. You know, we as artists have an odd relationship with money. In so many ways, we operate on a gift economy, and we don't know how to balance our checkbooks. But I remember John said money is energy, and artists have energy. And I just want to thank you: as a literary artist, thank you for helping us.

[Terry initiates applause.]

The tapestry with which each of you create your own communities give us something to stand on and people to stand with during this time of extraordinary uncertainty. And I've been thinking a lot about the arts. It's really where my commitment lies, art and wildness, and they're two of the same things—public art, public lands—I see no separation in terms of how we express creation. And perhaps the most important role we play now as artists, as art educators, administrators, leaders, is to help our communities embrace transitions. We are in a place we've never been before, and art helps us make that transition. It bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart, and we feel it.

Helping our children find their voices from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood, providing experiences that create a transition from loneliness to engagement. A festival embraces everyone in the celebration of a place, a moment, an idea. The transition of aging, the transition of being at war to being at home. The transition of fear to awareness to engagement.

And Milward knows better than anybody what that kind of fear can create. In the state of Wyoming, we've all been grappling with public art. Who would have thought that a swirl of sticks and a few lumps of coal could have created such controversy at the University of Wyoming, with Chris Drury's installation piece, Carbon Sink, telling the story of pine bark beetles, whitebark pine, fossil fuels and climate change? In the State of Wyoming, that's explosive. Laws were changed. Our now-governor, Matt Mead, has veto power on all public art. He doesn't want

that power, and so you are the ones, the leaders of our states and the arts, that have to confront this kind of fear every day.

And I was sitting here thinking if anyone knew the joy, the coyote clan that exists in this room, we all would be howling.

[laughter]

Making art is a gesture of respect and gratitude.

I want to tell you a story, and I'm very mindful of time; this will take about 10 minutes. I have been anticipating you for a long time, because you are my tribe, you are my people, and I wanted to write something for you that in some way signified the power of art to transform our lives, to make peace with that part of ourselves that is broken. So I want to share that with you, and it has to do with an artist named Naomi Natale. Have any of you heard of her? She created an extraordinary public installation, art installation, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., this last June, June 8th, One Million Bones.

I want to read one page from *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* that sets the stage of why this mattered to me and to our now-adopted son Louis Gakumba, who is a genocide survivor from Rwanda.

> "I want to tell you a story," says Louis, as we sit on Mama Chakula's porch [in Rwanda], where we met almost 2 years ago.
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> "There is a woman who was married to a pastor. It was a happy family. Some people say they were a family of six; others say they were eleven. The woman was away, and when she returned, she saw how the Interahamwe were butchering her children on the ground along with her husband.
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> "After the war, the man who murdered her family came back from the Congo,[" Louis said, "]and when the Gacaca [the grass courts] called him to explain what he had been accused of, he said, 'I accept everything I have been charged with, and from the depth of my heart, I apologize.'
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> "The woman said, 'I saw everything that happened. I know you killed my family. I loved my children and my husband. I am now alone. I have nothing. But I now choose to forgive you and to take you into my home. You will live with me, and I will do whatever it takes to make you feel like my own son.'
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> "Can you be in the same shoes with this woman?" Louis asks.
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> Louis then says, "Rwanda is struggling with peace one person at a time. This is as hard as growing wheat on rock. We are finding our way toward unity and reconciliation on a walkway full of thorns, and we are walking barefoot."

> Louis stands up, walks over to the balcony that overlooks Gisenyi into the Congo where he was born.
>
> "We are trying to forgive, but to forgive is to forget, and we cannot forget. Perhaps there is another word. I am searching for that word."

Louis Gakumba and I participated in the ritual with 10,000 people on the [National] Mall of Washington, D.C.: one woman's vision, Naomi Natale, of a million bones. What would a million bones look like laid out on the Mall, the most public space in the world, to say: Never again. No more genocide. No more war. No more violence. May our dead be remembered.

When Louie Gakumba said, "There must be a word, I am looking for that word," after we laid down those bones, he turned to me and said, "Art."

It began with rain. In rain, we found our place among the piles of bones. Who could blame the dead among us for weeping? We dressed in white to honor them, thousands of people all in white were making a pilgrimage to the most public of spaces in America, to lay down these bones in the name of those who have died through genocide. One million bones. One million bones speaking to us through the Rwandans, through the Congo, through Sudan, Syria, Cambodia, Burma, East Timor, the Holocaust, and all those through time who have perished through the ravages of war. "Never again" was the mantra written on our collective hearts.

We came in white to honor the bones. In ritualistic fashion, we were paired with another, each of us carrying a bone from the edges of the mall. We found our place, and in pairs, we walked inward toward the white center path. We paused. We laid down the bones like a story shared. We turned and walked back to gather more as we were met with two others walking toward the center with bones.

"Repetition is spiritual," the artist Kiki Smith has said, and so the work of the day began. We are what is left. We are walking trauma. "We resist this legacy of loneliness," speaks the poet Hakim Bellamy, as we blanket the mall with bones. Killing any one of us kills all of us. We are not survivors. We are all the same.

The man I walk with is from Rwanda. He, too, is dressed in white. On his left hand is a scar from a machete. We walk in silence. One million bones, one million Tutsis slaughtered by hand, by neighbors. Twibuke, we remember. Is repetition spiritual, or is it genocide? Call it a genocide in Rwanda.

Another man I meet is a potter in Indiana, who heard of this project and devoted one day a week for a year to making clay bones, shaping them, firing them, imagining them here. He is here. His bones are here. He is paired with another and lays down the bones made by many.

Barbara Johnson is a teacher. She has made over 5,000 bones by hand with the hands of her students in Maryland. They walk together, each of them changed by the bones they created.

The Art of Revolution is an organization cofounded by Naomi Natale and Susan McAllister, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that believes art can transform public opinion into creative action on behalf of social change.

"A dream of a dreamer is about to happen," says the Rabbi Bruce Lustig of Washington, D.C. That dreamer is Naomi Natale, who has held this vision with others since March 2010. It was the story of Rwanda that haunted her, one million Tutsis murdered in 100 days in the spring of 1994.

"In times of war, create something," says Maxine Hong Kingston. We are still at war in Egypt, in Syria, in Congo, in Afghanistan. Natale saw one million bones laid across the Mall in Washington, D.C., as a declaration of resistance, insistence that the bones of the dead from all wars not only be remembered but recognized.

"When you make a bone with your own hands, your mind begins to change," she said. Over the past 3 years, over 2,000 schools across America have participated in this action, creating an awareness of genocide and current atrocities with artists, teachers, community groups, art organizations and individuals from all 50 states; individuals from around the world also engaged in this creative action to end suffering; and UPS, with its hundreds of drivers agreeing to pick up any bone made in the United States free of charge and deliver them to the Mall on Washington, free. We were all dressed in white but the UPS men and women.

[laughter]

The bones are beautiful. Each individual bone is someone. "Together, they are beautiful," Naomi Natale says.

The rabbi continued, "We all share the same bones. We are all fashioned from the same body. We are bound together by bones." He paused and looked out over the audience on the vast green lawn. "Today, we will lay down the bones on the conscience of the world." This we did, thousands of us, returning again and again to the bone piles, picking out a femur, an ulna, a hand or a skull, ribs resembling commas, the continuation of violence, eight bones at a time, carried across the lawn as a wave of white moved from the center to the periphery—just the opposite of how change organically occurs, moving from the edges to the center. A blanket of bones began to cover the green, and it was beautiful in its disturbance.

Two by two, we engaged in a walking meditation, the carrying of bones, the laying down of bones. "The closest I came to laying bones down was with my uncle in Kigali, where newly found bones were being buried by their beloved," says my Rwandan friend, Louis, as we walked toward the center, our eyes facing forward,

again, with the handpicked bones cradled in our arms. "Today, I can now bury them," he said.

What began as metaphor became gesture. These bones are no longer made from plaster or clay or papier-mâché. They are infused with the marrow of memory.

John Dow, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, spoke, "I was so honored to lay the first bone. It was not a bone from the United States. It was not a bone about or from Naomi Natale. For me, this bone was very close to me. It is the bone of my brother, my sister killed in Sudan. I must take care of it and lay it down with respect." He paused. "2.5 million people in Sudan have died. How many bones? Each one of us has 206 bones in our body. Two and a half million people. I ask you how many bones?"

He continued, "The question before me as I kneel down to place this bone is a simple one. What are we doing here?"

I am here because I have seen thousands of bones exposed, exhumed, and speaking in Rwanda. I am here because I love a Rwandan named Louis Gakumba, who is now part of our family. I am here because the blood and bones of Indian people are buried in the history of these United States. I am here because my husband Brooke [Williams] fashioned a bone that belongs to a bird and asks us to think of the others beyond our own species who have also been slayed. I am here because I believe the art of revolution is an internal revolution that radiates outward. And I am here because I belong to the board of directors of the Compton Foundation, who helped fund this project, and I needed to see how a proposal written on paper becomes a pathway to peace.

"These bones are inconvenient and uncomfortable," says Naomi Natale. "It is so easy to decide this work is for others; but maybe, just maybe it could take us carrying human bones to make us aware of how we are all connected as we feel the weight of this responsibility. The work we decide is not for us is left for our children." The work we decide that is not for us is left for our children.

A woman asked my Rwandan friend, if he could change the world today, what would he do. A deep silence followed, as he held a long stack of femurs in his arms. "I would change myself," he said.

On Sunday, June 9, 2013, One Million Bones were laid on the Mall in Washington at the feet of the United States Capitol. A candlelight vigil was planned at sunset. I walked down the center path through the mosaic of bones leading to the Capitol, and I wondered how many members of Congress would bear witness to these bones on their way to work the next day, or would they avert their gaze, or worse, fail to even notice the landscape had changed?

"If these bones speak to us, they will allow us to stand to honor our promise to the future of decency, kindness and advocacy," the rabbi said. Never again. It is happening again.

I found the bone that my husband made in the Red Rock Desert of Utah that I carried with me. I found each bone resident with the intention of the one who had made it, many with their accompanying messages written on the plaster or clay surfaces. I found the configurations of bones that Louis and I had laid down as a pair among the rest of the bone carriers dressed in white, and I felt the unbearable weight of the bones at dusk and their indomitable reflective light at sundown.

As we lit our candles in the name of community, it began to rain. The flames were doused. We lit them again, sheltered by our hands, and again the flames went out. This vigil, this action, call it the Ceremony of One Million Bones, began and ended in rain. The tears of the dead were among us. Beginning and end. We laid our candles down, and with the rain as our witness, we walked the center path through fields of light bones, shadowed by the bones that were broken. Never again. It is happening again. We walked with the bones, believing in the power of our own light guided and illuminated from within.

Thank you.

[applause]