

Comments at 2018 Mountain West Arts Conference Luncheon

Thank you to everyone at the Mountain West Conference, and thank you to Alyssa Grove for inviting me. In May 2017 I was named Utah's poet laureate, an honor which has not only opened me up as an arts educator but is now changing me as an artist, which is deeply exhilarating. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but today I want to say a few words about why art and writing are necessary, and what we lose when we devalue or defund the arts.

Recently, I was approached by the UAC and Max Chang from Spike 150 to write a poem about the transcontinental railroad, a project that truly excites me. Over the next year I'm planning to write a book-length poem about the railroad, one that will focus particularly on the people the railroad affected but whose stories have been, for whatever reason, historically suppressed or erased. All of us here today know, for instance, about the extraordinary number of Chinese men who made the transcontinental railroad. As a nation, however, we know little about these men's specific histories, their lives. We know them as numbers: the numbers of workers, the number of dead. Part of my concern as a poet is how to make these numbers human to us, how I might make the absence of the Chinese—the loss of those men, whether to death on the railroad or to silence in our history books—physically palpable to a reader. On top of that, however, I want to make their experiences building the railroad immediate: I want the reader to imagine herself as part of this creation, to feel—if even distantly—what this labor demanded of its workers.

This kind of work, what I call “representational anxiety” is something familiar to poets who write about experiences they know a reader cannot experience, or is likely never going to experience. This representational anxiety dogged a lot of famous poets who wrote about war, for example: something I learned while doing research for a book of essays I'm currently writing about poetry and war. One of the things I learned was that a surprisingly large number of soldier-poets from WWI (like Wilfred Owen) believed that poetry—more than any other form of media—was *the best way* to share their wartime experiences with those who hadn't fought. And by sharing these experiences, perhaps their poems might help prevent a war like WWI from happening again.

Most of you might think this is a foolish idea. I'm a poet, and even I think this is insane. But poets like Owen didn't say this because they believed people loved poetry more than any other art form or medium. They argued this because they saw daily that, in the trenches, soldiers sang and recited poems to each other. Poetry was memorizeable, shareable. Its effects on a listener were, unlike novels or newspapers, viscerally immediate. You didn't have to go to the cinema or purchase a paper or wait for a letter to arrive to get the news that a poem contained within it. You didn't even have to physically carry a poem on you, like a book or a photograph. You could compose a poem in your head, you could sing it, you could share it and, by sharing it, allow someone else's memory to carry that poem for you. Poetry banded soldiers together—especially if the poem was one they knew from school or had heard in church or read in a popular paper. Poetry, and reciting poetry, created a sense of fellowship and camaraderie; more importantly, it created a shared cultural memory of the war that could be quickly and

easily transmitted. It made the soldiers more than fellow troops: in some sense, it made them bodily receptacles for each other's memories.

This is what the media scholar Alison Landsberg calls "Prosthetic Memory." According to Landsberg, this is any interaction that occurs between a person and a historical narrative of the past, usually one the person is likely to encounter in either a movie theater or a museum. In this encounter, Landsberg argues, the person "sutures herself" to the larger narrative represented by the media she encounters in this space, taking it into her own memory, her own experience of being alive in the world. In that sense, she transports these memories inside of herself, "challenging," as Landsberg says, "authentic" or "authoritative" notions of history.

Memory used to be transmitted primarily from parent to child, person to person. But what if the parent is absent or dies young, what if the parent cannot transmit her memory to her children? And what about a culture which itself is increasingly fragmented into various, sometimes contentious, groups? What hope do we have of transmitting memory when everything about our digital lives encourages us to retreat into our own private beliefs, desires, fears? When we no longer meet each other physically in actual spaces but online? What happens when witnesses are eradicated, when the larger historical narrative of the past erases the testimonies of minority communities? In such a case, alternative testimonies and memories are required. Movies, television, books, paintings, photos, poems: that is the role these art media can play now. These aren't just diversions, or cultural entertainment: they forge, for better and for worse, our shared understanding and remembrance of the past.

Memory and memorialization is at the heart of nation-making: for better and worse, we are our public monuments, our statues, our state-sanctified odes and elegies. Poor memories, I might argue, fuel nationalism: expansive, prosthetic memories, however, create citizens. How do we create a sense of national unity if we do not actually listen to all the people inside of our nation? If we do not allow all of us the opportunity to create the poems, the stories, the artworks that will preserve the communal histories that would otherwise be erased? Art gives us access to memories we do not have and experiences we have not lived. Art is not a frivolous endeavor, it is one of the primary ways we establish ourselves as a nation, as part of the nation. That, I think, is something that Wilfred Owen understood, and it is something I am learning today. Art makes us the citizens, and we should be so proud to have young people, like Rebecca Akec, and programs like Poetry Out Loud, become part of the communal memory that makes us who we are.

— Paisley Rekdal