

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks on Presenting the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal**

*September 10, 2015*

*The President.* Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat, have a seat. I always do pretty good with writers and scientists. [*Laughter*] That's sort of my crew.

Hello, everybody.

*Audience members.* Hello.

*The President.* On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House for one of our favorite events of the year—love this event—when truly extraordinary artists and innovators and thinkers are recognized for their brilliance while the rest of us look on and feel totally inadequate. [*Laughter*]

I want to start by thanking a few members of our audience who help sustain the arts and the humanities in America. We have Members of Congress here. We have National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Jane Chu. Where's Jane? There she is. The National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman, Bro Adams, is here. And the Cochairs of the Presidential Committee on Arts and Humanities, George Stevens and Margo Lions. There they are.

One of our great poets, Emily Dickinson, once said that "truth is such a rare thing, it is delightful to tell it." The truth is so rare, it is delightful to tell it. And that's especially true in Washington. [*Laughter*] The men and women that we honor today, recipients of the National Medals for the Arts and the Humanities, are here not only because they've shared rare truths, often about their own experience, but because they've told rare truths about the common experiences that we have as Americans and as human beings.

They span mediums and methods. We have artists, actors, writers, musicians, historians, a landscape architect, and a chef. Without them there would be no Edible Schoolyard—[*laughter*—no Jhumpa Lahiri novels, no really scary things like "Carrie" and "Misery." [*Laughter*]

They are versatile—poets and opera singers who were also master teachers at liberal arts colleges and Detroit Public Schools; philosophers who wrote novels. They are visual artists who work filling pages that spilled over to screens, three-dimensional gallery floors, and most of a New York City block.

And they all have one thing in common: They do what they do because of some urgent inner force, some need to express the truth that they experience, that "rare truth." And as a result, they help us understand ourselves in ways that we might not otherwise recognize. They deepen and broaden our great American story and the human story.

So we celebrate writers like Larry McMurtry, who grew up on a Texas ranch without books, but went on to pen a multitude of memoirs and essays, more than 30 novels, and cowrote screenplays for films like "Brokeback Mountain." He wrote about the Texas he knew from his own life, and then the old West as he heard it through the stories of his grandfather's—on his grandfather's porch. And in "Lonesome Dove," the story of two ex-Texas

Rangers in the 19th century, readers found out something essential about their own souls, even if they'd never been out West or been on a ranch.

We celebrate historians like Everett Fly, who studied to become both a building and landscape architect and who got his start studying forgotten African American towns and communities. Deep in the stacks of the National Archives, he encountered a map of a Freedman's Village that is now Arlington National Cemetery, which inspired him to research further. "Once I got to the National Archives and saw all of those records," Everett says, "I knew I just had to keep on working." And because he kept on working, we have come to know some 1,300 African American and Native American towns and structures across our country.

We celebrate incomparable musicians like Meredith Monk, who has been making music with the instrument of her voice for 50 years. Her singular blend of harmonies, yowls, rasps—*[laughter]*—have punctuated concert halls and films, as well as the performances of her fellow recipients here today. "I've been in fashion and out of fashion," she says. I can relate to that. *[Laughter]* "I just keep on trucking along. It's an inner necessity to work, and that's not going to change. I need to create." I need to create.

I suspect those are words that every honoree here has felt throughout their lives. And as individuals, as a nation, we are beneficiaries of that need. Fifty years ago this month, right here at the White House, President Johnson signed the Arts and Humanities Bill into law and created the NEA and the NEH. At the time, he said, "In countless American towns there live thousands of obscure and unknown talents. What this bill really does is to bring active support to this great national asset."

Half a century later—because of their raw talent and their passion and their need to create, but also because our country invests in the arts and the humanities as great national assets—some of those once obscure and unknown talents are rightly being recognized. That's what we celebrate here today—our fellow citizens, from all walks of life, who share their gifts with all of us, who make our lives and our world more beautiful, and richer, and fuller, and I think, most importantly, help us understand each other a little bit better. They help us connect.

And, as Emily Dickinson would say, that is the truth. It's delightful to tell. Or in the words of one of the recipients today, we like you. We really like you. *[Laughter]*

Now it is my privilege to present these medals to each of our recipients as their citations are read by my Military Aide. And I'm going to stand right here.

*[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Jillian C. Malzone, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Maj. Wesley N. Spurlock III, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President.]*

Let's give one more big round of applause to our outstanding recipients. *[Applause]*. Yay!

So, obviously, we are extraordinarily honored to be able to just provide this moment of recognition to just some outstanding artists and writers and historians and actresses. We are grateful for the joy that you've brought us, and I'm grateful that I've gotten promises for at least a couple of signed books. *[Laughter]* And I think Alice said she's going to cook me something. *[Laughter]* So nothing unethical, just a little bit of—*[laughter]*—but I want everybody to enjoy the White House. We're not kicking you out right away. *[Laughter]* I think that there's a wonderful reception to be had here.

And once again, on behalf of Michelle and myself, let me just say thank you to all of you for everything that you've done for us. Okay?

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:51 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to 2014 National Humanities Medal recipient Alice Waters, executive chef and owner, Chez Panisse restaurant; and 2014 National Medal of the Arts recipient actor Sally Field. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal, presentation.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Adams William D. "Bro"; Chu, Jane; Field, Sally; Fly, Everett L.; Lahiri, Jhumpa; Lion, Margo; Malzone, Jillian C.; McMurtry, Larry; Monk, Meredith; Obama, Michelle; Stevens, George, Jr.; Waters, Alice.

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