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National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

A Conversation About Philanthropy and Preservation as Justice

SHERRILYN IFILL AND DARREN WALKER

Sherrilyn Ifill: I can't think of anything better than the opportunity to be in conversation with the man I'm about to introduce. Darren Walker has been such a visionary in strengthening and undergirding the work of the National Trust's [African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#) and marrying the work of the fund to the work of social justice and racial justice, which lies at the core of what much of the [Ford Foundation](#) does. I'm privileged to know him. I have learned so much from him. I know that we are all going to learn a lot during this conversation. I'm eternally inspired by Darren Walker who will join me for this conversation.

Darren Walker: Thank you, Sherrilyn. It's always great to be with you. So honored that you're here.

Sherrilyn Ifill: This is a period in this country when we are all deeply anxious about the future. We're all worried about the future of democracy in this country. We're all worried about the future of racial justice. We recognize that we're in a very perilous moment.

Graffiti on Decatur House in Washington D.C.

PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



And so we're all thinking about the future, and yet we're having a conversation that's largely about the past. And so I wanted to begin by asking you to talk a bit about why this moment actually is precisely the moment when we have to be talking about the past—about the past and the truth, about the stories that undergird our present and the stories that will propel our future. So that we understand when we talk about preservation, we're not talking about something sitting in amber that exists only in the past, but something that has deep resonance today.

Darren Walker: Well, I think, Sherrilyn, one of the reasons you and I are worried about the future is because of how our stories about our past have been told. Preservation has been about so many Americans—who we are as a people, a nation, a culture. That has been the mandate of historic preservation in this country historically—the preservation of American history. Regrettably, the preservation movement, if we were to be honest, has been part of a larger system—a system, regrettably, of white supremacy and a system that was designed in a caste-like hierarchy that places at the top of that hierarchy Western European ideas of civilization, what constitutes cultural treasures, what our story is.

And we know that, unfortunately, those charged with preservation over the last 200 years have not told the full story of America. They have not preserved the full history of America.

And so, therefore, historic preservation, must be righted. It is in desperate need of expansion, to include the fullness of our history, both the boundless, courageous, noble men and women who built this country and the romanticized things that we learned about them—our founding fathers in particular—but also the reality of the scourge of enslavement of people of African descent, the treatment of immigrants and people who were indigenous to these lands.

And we now must, ask how do we preserve those histories? To me, that is the exciting work of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. It's that the National Trust for Historic Preservation has recognized that its job has not been done, and that it, as the most important historic preservation institution in America, must do better to fulfill its mission.

PRESERVING THE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Sherrilyn Ifill: I often think that our history, the history of Black people struggling in this country, is deeply embedded in the physical landscape. When we think about discrimination, the worst of discrimination during the Jim Crow era, we actually think about the physical manifestations, right? We think about sundown towns where Black people could and could not go, we think about water fountains that say “colored” and that say “white.” We think about bathrooms that say “colored” and say “white,” and there is a physicality to it. And we recognize that. But it’s interesting to me that, having removed the signs that said “colored” and “white,” it’s as though people now don’t see the physicality of that history in the landscape. For me, this really came to the fore as I began to [research and study lynching](#). But even before that, when I was doing work in Maryland on behalf of Black communities fighting against environmental encroachments, finding a Black cemetery that housed the bodies of Black Union soldiers was a way for us to keep that encroachment of the developer from happening in this small, rural Black community. So I always thought of it as a kind of activism. So I want to hear you talk a bit about what is hiding in plain sight.

Darren Walker: Your excellent research on lynching is where I would start, because there are many painful moments in the physical spaces and places that have represented our history. Those hanging trees, those public places where we were killed are historic places of pain and trauma for us. And we should recognize those places, and the courageous work that you have done, and Bryan Stevenson has done, to lift up those places that are sacred. Hiding in plain sight is the physical manifestation of our labor, because most of the historic structures in this country were constructed by Black people—whether we’re talking about the White House or the state capitol of many Southern states, of course our nation’s capitol, Mount Vernon, so many historic buildings. And yet those stories have never been told.

When the Ford Foundation supported the [Sally Hemings Project](#) at [Monticello](#), I learned, with absolute horror, that when the heirs of Jefferson and the family that purchased the Monticello site to turn



Mulberry Row, Monticello.

PHOTO BY [MIKE](#) LICENSED UNDER [CC BY 2.0](#).

it into a historic site, one of the first things they did was to raze any reminder that there were once slaves physically on Monticello.

So the little Mulberry Row, which was where the slave shacks were, was eviscerated because what they wanted was a narrative of greatness, of purity, and a narrative that was without the stain of the reality of Monticello. How might visitors even imagine this 2,000-acre plantation being able to generate the income and to hold all of the dignitaries, and of all of this, without some understanding of the role of the slaves? And yet those slaves' houses and any physical representation of the slave was just simply eradicated.

And that is in many ways the challenge we are faced with in the country and that is with us today—acknowledging the unpleasantness, the distastefulness, the immorality associated with these historic sites and the men and women who made them.

Sherrilyn Ifill: You said that so powerfully, Darren. It is an effort at erasure, it is an effort at removing the evidence. It's almost like evidence tampering—removing the evidence that they knew, the evidence of the immorality. I've been thinking about the presidential

order that just came out about [teaching about diversity](#) and teaching about the [1619 Project](#), and the kind of attacks that have come. And I really believe that there is an effort to erase a history we've only just begun to fully know. We have so many amazing scholars who are excavating such powerful messages and lessons from our history, whether we're talking about lynching or whether we're talking about the 1619 Project, or whether we're talking about the extraordinary work of Henry Louis Gates and so many other scholars, and [Pulitzer Prize-winning historian] [Annette Gordon-Reed](#) with the Sally Hemings Project at [Monticello](#). We're in a kind of a golden moment of being able to reveal this history, and precisely at that moment, of course, there's going to be backlash.

But preserving the physical evidence in the landscape is such a powerfully important part of this work. It's so critical that we can say, that's what the schoolhouse looked like that Black people tried to create for themselves in impossible circumstances. This was the courthouse lawn where 2,000 white people came to hang a Black man right outside the Hall of Justice with all of the law enforcement officers looking on. This is the reason why Black people live on the south side. This is what happened in lower Manhattan in this period. The physical evidence is so powerful.

And I liken it to when people say, it's really powerful that people are seeing cell phone videos of police violence against unarmed African Americans. And I'm always of two minds. I say, well, we've been talking about this forever and it shouldn't take the visual, but it does for many people. And so we know how powerful it can be when people can see with their own eyes what something is. And I think likening the effort to preserve our own history to this, to ensuring that there is physical evidence that cannot be washed away or erased, is critically important at a moment when there's tremendous backlash against telling the truth about this, as you say, stained, tainted, unpleasant, immoral history.

GIVING VOICE, RESTORING DIGNITY

Darren Walker: Don't you also find, Sherrilyn, that it is in part a backlash to the contestation of the very question of "What is it to be an American? What is our history?" And I think one of the

reasons institutions like yours, the [Legal Defense Fund](#), are so essential is because the courts are a critical place where that story gets told. We are unable, often, without the rule of law to actually fully acknowledge that, because there are so many stakeholders in that narrative. And when those stakeholders are challenged, sometimes we've got to go to court to actually get them to acknowledge, as we say, what is right in front of them.

Sherrilyn Ifill: That's the sweet spot of being a civil rights lawyer. I taught law for many years, and when I would be teaching my students about a particular matter that we were trying to think through, I would ask, "Now tell me, how are you going to present this to a court?" And usually, at first, the students would respond, "I would just say that ..." And I would stop them and say, "Your job is actually not to do all that talking." Our job as civil rights lawyers is to master the process so well, and to master the elements of the substantive law so well, that we get the opportunity to give *our clients* the chance to tell their story. What they have been prevented from doing is articulating their own narrative of justice, of power, of equality, of opportunity in their community.

And, in fact, it's one of the reasons why we think trials are so important, because we want to create that opportunity. I can't tell you how many times, if you've been a civil rights lawyer, that your clients will say to you, whether you win or lose the case, that the most important moment was when they were on the stand and had the chance to finally be heard. "Everyone had to stop," they will often say, "and listen to me." "Even the judge seemed to be listening." "I'll never forget the chance to tell the story of what happened."

And sometimes when we lose a case, we as the lawyers will be despondent and it'll be the clients cheering us up, because they will say, "Yes, but remember that day when we got to tell the story and everybody had to listen. Everybody knew what the truth was when I was speaking" or when this particular person from our community was speaking.

And it's a reminder for me of how powerful it is, and how important it is, for a people who have been denied the ability to tell their truth, to live their truth and tell their story, to have the opportunity to have their story told.

Darren Walker: And that's what preservationists do. Preservation gives a platform.

I wanted to hear the story of Sally Hemings. I wanted to hear her voice. I wanted to hear the voice of her and Jefferson's children. And even though Madison Hemings had been silenced, because he gave an oral history in which he described how Jefferson treated him and Sally's children different, that they were special. They were never allowed to go out to the fields with the other slave children. They lived a "privileged" existence—as slaves, let me be clear. But it was only the advocacy, the demands of people like Annette Gordon-Reed [that brought the true story to light].

And, of course, technology once again, thank goodness, rears its head. So just as in the cases that you litigate, where you see the video, making it undeniable, we now have DNA. And so that technology took away deniability for Jefferson's white heirs, because they had denied forever the voice of Madison Hemings and his siblings when they gave oral histories in the 1850s and '60s. The testimonies were deemed to be scandalous and outrageous, and they were deemed complete fantasies. And now we actually know they were true.

And we as a preservation movement now need to be giving truth to those voices, to validate and valorize them, just as we have done for so many other great American heroes. And we need the work of preservation today. It has to be about both looking back and taking of corrective action, like the Monticello Society has done by having that first-ever exhibition on Sally Hemings. Because it took 200 years for Sally Hemings to get her dignity. And the work of preservation ought to be not just about beautification and fixing things up, but it ought to be about restoring dignity. Because we have given not only dignity, we have valorized, deified through preservation so many, and we have not even recognized the fundamental humanity of so many other critically important people throughout history.

So I want to see those people. It enrages me that it took 200 years for Sally Hemings to get her dignity. For most of our American history, the narrative around Sally Hemings was that she was a loose woman who slept with a lot of Jefferson's friends. And that narrative that took her dignity away had currency in the highest

circle of history and scholarship. And now we know the truth. How many other stories like that do we need to right?

Sherrilyn Ifill: Oh, that's so powerful Darren.

And when people talk about repairing the harm, or reparations, for lynching, one of the things I have on the list is finding the unmarked graves of people, these innocent men who were killed. And even if they weren't innocent, they didn't deserve to be burned to death and hung by a mob.

But there have been many instances when the families were even afraid to come out and claim the body, because there was such violence happening around the community. And so, yes, also recognizing these places where people who suffered were just kind of thrown away. So your call to dignity is so powerful and important.

CLAIMING FULL CITIZENSHIP

And I'm curious about what you think this means for our citizenship. And by citizenship I don't mean in the purely legal sense. I mean, the 14th Amendment. The opening line of the 14th Amendment gives birthright citizenship, which is quite controversially talked about in some political circles these days. But the purpose of birthright citizenship was to ensure the citizenship of Black people, both formerly enslaved and free, who had had their citizenship essentially stripped by the Dred Scott decision. So it ensured that we were all full citizens of the country. And then, of course, the 14th Amendment includes the equal protection clause and so forth. But that word "citizenship" is weighty.

So what does it mean to be a full citizen? To walk in full, what you described as, dignity is one of the elements of it in my view. And dignity also means that you have a claim to the place where you are.

And I worry sometimes that the failure to have preserved the historical truth of our presence, of our influence, of our building with our own hands, has often put left Black people in the position as though we have no claim to the space—you know, to Manhattan, to certain places that have been kind of distanced from us, even those Southern plantations that you talk about that so assiduously

sought to hide the slave cabin part and instead gave tours of the big house to show off all of the luxury without regard to how that luxury came to be, and who cared for it, and who financed it.

And so I actually think of this very much as being about citizenship and belonging, and giving Black people, or restoring to us, a sense of our claim to the space. We are not just wandering on this land. We really built this place. And the preservation movement, it seems to me, provides a way of establishing that. I'm curious about your reaction to my framing it that way.

Darren Walker: I think you're absolutely right.

And as a lawyer, you know the history of physical property in this country and the importance of it in the narrative of wealth accumulation and creation, and the narrative of economic mobility. From the beginnings, all of the Homestead Act transfers of millions of acres of free land to whites and so forth, to the redlining in the 1960 and 70s—all of this was a conspiracy, if you will, designed to keep Black people from owning property.

And so property, which is discussed in our founding document, has been the basis of wealth. Think about all the people of our generation who came from working-class backgrounds, but their grandparents or parents bought their house with the GI Bill, and that house today is worth \$800,000 or \$900,000. The proceeds of that estate go to the grandchildren who can use that as equity for their startup venture, to start a business, or whatever. We don't have that because we have been systematically denied the opportunity.

So the built environment, property, we are so removed from that. And property has been, in part, a way in which dignity was framed in this country. I remember, and you probably have relatives too, that somebody would say about them, "She owns some property" or "They own an acre somewhere." I mean, the whole idea. I remember I had a great-aunt back in Louisiana who owned two or three acres somewhere, and that got talked about in my family like it was two or three acres in Manhattan or something. It was such a rarity that it was discussed in these revered terms. But I do think that there is an effort underway to address that.

I am impressed and inspired by current preservation movements.

I was just speaking with folks at Colonial Williamsburg. The [first African American church in this country was in Williamsburg](#). It was razed at some point a very long time ago, and the foundation is currently under a parking lot. To their credit, Williamsburg has made reclaiming, re-imagining, and engaging on this historic site a priority. And they put in place a really interesting, exciting team of archeologists, archivists, Black scholars, and others who are going to lift up and give [dignity to this congregation](#) whose church was literally razed and erased. And only recently did Colonial Williamsburg embrace that part of its history.

So it is indeed time, because we were not afforded dignity, and things that told our story were erased, were razed, were treated indifferently, including as you say about lower Manhattan—Black bodies in caskets, in graves. And so we have a chance today. And so I am actually very hopeful, very excited. And I know you and I, working on the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund with Brent Leggs and Paul Edmondson and everyone at the Trust, are very excited about the prospect for the future. It is going to take hard work because, as you know from your work in the courtroom and in the street, there is resistance to the very idea of marking, memorializing, the full history of this nation.

CHALLENGING INGRAINED ASSUMPTIONS

Sherrilyn Ifill: We're having this conversation as though anything we're saying isn't controversial, but I suspect there are some rooms in which it is controversial. Certainly for you and me and for the audience listening today, it probably is not.

So what is the challenge? What is it our own community should begin to understand about preservation, and what steps we can take in our own lives and in our own communities to ensure that materials, documents, places, and so forth simply don't pass out of our community? And how can we really support, and gather support for, the fund? What is it people are missing? How do we strengthen this movement?

Because it's time-sensitive, right? You just talked about this church being razed. You've got to get there, and you've got to help people understand the role that they can play, because we all have,

we all are touching artifacts of our history, right? It's our grandmother's this thing, or the house where we grew up, or the place where we used to go—and sometimes we just think it's part of our family lore without connecting to the larger significance of it. So what do you think is needed to really shore up this process of getting people to understand the urgency of the work?

Darren Walker: Well, I think we have to admit the sad and distressing truth that white supremacy has taken hold on white people and Black people. We know from our own cultural practices that we have been taught that whiteness is superior to blackness, and that all cultural dimensions associated with whiteness are more important.

And so we Black folk have not fully appreciated our history, because we've been taught, actually, that it is not as important. We have to unlearn certain things, so that we can become advocates for our history, which is American history. We have to be advocates for that history, and not simply say, "Oh well, that was just some shack," or "That's just some little house," or "That's just some beer joint," or whatever—when, in fact, that represents something profound in the narrative of this country. I think we have to acknowledge that.

I think what is hard is acknowledging that there are people in this country for whom the idea that our history, the history of Black people in this country, is important, is vital, and that the history of America cannot be told without our history—that there are people in this country who find that idea repugnant and reject it out of hand. And I think we have to know that. You obviously know it from your work, but in this space of preservation, what we are having is a contest for the narrative of who we are as a people. And to some people that idea is settled. It's not up for discussion. It's not up for revision. It's not up for expansion. It is what it is.

And I think we have to challenge that, and help them to see that actually among all of us there is history, there are cultural treasures, in all of our communities. And that we have to lift all of us up if we are, indeed, to tell the full story of the American narrative.

CONNECTING PAST AND PRESENT

Sherrilyn Ifill: Darren, I want to pick up on a thread, because I'm sure that there are people who think about this. I'm talking to you from Baltimore, and just a few weeks ago, I took a drive to see [the brownstone](#) where Thurgood Marshall grew up in West Baltimore. And I hope that people will take an interest in trying to bring some of the preservation attention to that home. I'm very into this, getting inspiration from understanding where people came from.

I'm in Baltimore, and Baltimore is a place with many, many challenges. LDF (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund) does a lot of litigation work here, really working incredibly hard with a community that is struggling to keep its head above water, but with a people with tremendous dignity.

I'm sure that there are people who, when they hear about the preservation movement—you said earlier, this is the thread I want to pick up—they should know it's not just about prettying someplace up. I wonder if you could expand a bit more on the connection between preservation and the existing community that surrounds the edifice or the space that you're trying to preserve. Because there are real, live, current people with real challenges and problems living there.

I would love to know your thoughts about how we can marry—because I'm always thinking from an activist perspective—how would you marry that activism to the work of preservation, so that we're really trying to create a seamless story that extends back into history but recognizes the relevance of the moment. And then, to end where I began this conversation, that takes us into the future, that undergirds us for the creation of a vital future. How are you connecting those two things in your head, and how might we on the outside of preservation be more affirmative in making those connections?

Darren Walker: I think, as you say, giving the example of Thurgood Marshall's home, these places are often in communities that have been abandoned or that have experienced disinvestment.

I think of my time living in Harlem in the '90s, a few blocks away from [Langston Hughes' brownstone](#), and the number of people who did not know that Langston Hughes lived on 127th Street in Harlem. It is actually a source of pride in a community that

is often told, benignly or implicitly, “You aren’t important, and where you live is an undesirable place to live.” When that place was the birthplace of American poetry and the Harlem Renaissance, when that place was the place where people met to plan the March on Washington, when that place was the place where Malcolm X was murdered. When those stories are told, when those markers are put out there, when attention is drawn, people say, “This place matters on 127th Street, where Langston Hughes wrote ‘Let America Be America Again.’” It says something to the those people on that block, sitting on their stoops. It says something to the people when they drive by saying, “Oh, we’re in a really bad neighborhood.” When they see this beautifully restored brownstone with signage on it, just like they see down on Fifth Avenue in front of Henry Clay Frick’s house, they say, “Okay, this community has some history.”



Langston Hughes' brownstone.

PHOTO COURTESY TOO ARTS COLLECTIVE

Most importantly, the Black people who live in that community know their history, are lifted up by that history, are given dignity by that history. That to me is the connection with the built environment—the intangible way in which preservation works to grab hold of us and bring us into our history but also root us in our own dignity. That I too dream, I too can see how Langston Hughes dreamed. I can imagine him sitting out on his stoop, the way I’m sitting out here on my stoop.

That’s what historic preservation can do. That is the magic of this movement. And where we are now is probably the most exciting time in the history of historic preservation in our country.

Sherrilyn Ifill: That so powerfully summed up, I think, what preservation is all about, and what the PastForward conference is about, and the extraordinary work that the Legal Defense Fund is

trying to do. I think it just perfectly encapsulates the power of this movement. It's exciting, certainly, to me.

People should also know that, when you get that marker and you preserve that space, it helps us as civil rights lawyers to make demands of why you can't gentrify, of why you can't tear down things around it, of why this is not an opportunity zone that can be exploited for people who are not in this community, and so on and so forth. It actually helps us to be able to do our work around housing discrimination and transportation and so forth.

I think we all need to feel excited and encouraged at this moment in our country. And I think it's the sankofa bird that looks back to look forward, and I think that's what we have to do. I think we have to make sure that we have shored up our foundation, and our foundation is this important history.

I love talking to you. Thank you so much. This was such an oasis in my afternoon.

Darren Walker: Thank you, Sherrilyn. Always great to be with you, my sister. **FJ**

SHERRILYN IFILL is president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. DARREN WALKER is president and CEO of the Ford Foundation. Both are members of the Advisory Council of the National Trust's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.



RESOURCE

An Opportunity in Crisis by Brent Leggs



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Preservation and Inclusion Tools and Resources



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Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation's Potential as a Path for Equity