

When Does It Become Social Justice? Thoughts on Intersectional Preservation Practice

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By Andrea Roberts

Over the next six weeks the Forum blog will be [publishing stories](#) that respond to the question: When does historic preservation become social justice? We start with an introduction by Andrea Roberts, founder of the Texas Freedom Colonies Project and a scholar of heritage conservation and urban planning. Interested in starting a discussion about the series? Sign up for [Forum Connect](#).

William Murtagh, the first Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places wrote that, “at its best, preservation engages the past in a conversation with the present over a mutual concern for the future.” Written more than 29 years ago, Murtagh’s seminal work, *Keeping Time*, posits that historic preservation is not merely a field, but a distinct set of theories and a way of looking at the world that acknowledges agency and power. This has, at different times, made the field appear passive, conservative, and elitist or—as it did in 1966—cutting edge, pluralistic, and forward thinking. And when Murtagh wrote these words in 1988, preservation was flexing its muscles.



Small bay on Lake Oahe near where the Dakota Access Pipeline is being constructed. | Credit: [Photo](#) by [Argyleist](#) licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

The National Trust for Historic Preservation started its [Endangered Places program](#) in 1987. And Section 110, which attempted to put meat on the National Historic Preservation Act's bones, had recently obligated all federal agencies to establish preservation programs for the identification, evaluation, nomination, and protection of historic properties. Even though shrinking the federal government was en vogue at the time, historic preservation managed to institutionalize itself at the federal level. Much like the call to affirmatively further fair housing at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the protection of historic sites was suddenly framed as a citizens' right and government obligation by a newly minted movement.

At the same time, what makes a place, site, or structure worthy of protection and recognition is best determined at the local level and may or may not have national significance. Murtagh, [recalling his beginnings as an "uncivil civil servant"](#) remarked

that the national register and related government regulations should be about the local and specific.

A Moment for Intersectionality

Recently these tensions between the federal and the local, the activist and the laissez faire, and the civil and uncivil have emerged again. Eight months after the initial explosion of resistance to the Trump presidency arose on November 9, 2016, the sense of upheaval has not abated. The persistent push to create a new normal has been dedicated in part to protecting the civil rights gains that women, people of color, LGBTQ people, the poor, immigrants, the differently abled, and the formerly incarcerated had made not only during the previous administration but also since this country's inception.

This moment has challenged our definitions and methodologies, requiring us to operate from more sophisticated frameworks. Intersectionality, a concept pioneered by [Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw](#), represents one such framework. Applied broadly in social justice theory and practice, intersectionality refers to the reality of experiencing disadvantage or exclusion based on the intersection of multiple identities rather than just one. Instead of addressing class, race, and gender separately, intersectionality analyzes the unique interactive effects of these multiple identities.



Who started the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York City? Transgender activists of color Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. | Credit: [Photo](#) by [yosoynuts](#) licensed under [CC BY-ND 2.0](#)

In the historic preservation field, this framework goes beyond diversity and inclusion to acknowledge and make visible the unique ways in which [discrimination erases the experience, heritage, and contributions of those living at the intersections](#) of, for example, race, gender, class, and/or abilities. Historic preservation that is seeking to authentically engage with social justice must address both the institutions that perpetuate identity-based inequities and the resistance to such systems. Such advocacy might include challenging preservation regulations that disproportionately exclude sites associated with marginalized communities, like low-income historic neighborhoods that are suffering from demolition by neglect.

The previous president, though not fully intersectional in his approach, valorized the diversity that has shaped the American story and supported using public funds

to protect public lands, structures, and places that reflect our shared progress and identity. He often [made reference](#) to sites that are federally recognized for their association with resistance, speaking truth to power, and social justice:

“ We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still, just as it guided our forebears through **Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall**, just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great **Mall**, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone, to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth. [Emphases added.] ”

The end of the Obama administration brought a new political era.

Since the 2016 election, a number of activist groups have been deliberate about recognizing intersectionality and acting accordingly. On November 11, 2016, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) hosted a diverse group of social justice activists on a webinar called, “[#SocialJusticeSOS: What We Need to Know About What Happened, What's Coming and Why We Must Join Together Against Hate.](#)” The AAPF initiated a conversation aimed at jointly contemplating an intersectional response to the new and unexpected reality. Among the panelists were organizers like [Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter](#) and [Dallas Goldtooth](#) of the Indigenous Environmental Network and water protectors at Standing Rock; historians like [Mary Frances Berry](#); law professor [Sumi Cho](#); pioneering critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw; author of *The Vagina Monologues* [Eve Ensler](#); and anti-racist activist and author [Tim Wise](#). Though they may not identify as historic preservationists, these public intellectuals and activists were all gathering in the spirit of preservation—that is, a commitment to protecting a heritage and an ideal of what it is to be American and to resisting hate. Also in response to the explosion of right-wing violence and hate speech after the election, the Southern Policy Law Center began [Hatewatch](#). The AAPF gathering, the coalescing of intellectuals and activists around intersectional response, the tracking of hate crimes, the sanctuary movement for immigrants, and events like the women’s march should call forth an equally active and assertive response from historic preservationists concerned with

social justice.

Preservation Becoming Social Justice

Like preservationists, those on the front line of social justice struggles are rethinking their tactics in this politically discordant, anti-federal government era. In this context, how can preservation heed Murtagh's call to "seek a mutual concern" about the future? In a divided electorate, what are our shared concerns for the future? How might we balance national concerns with the specific and the local? And can a new, social justice-centered historic preservation emerge from these shared challenges?

Certain qualifiers that preservation has embraced in recent years indicate areas in which the field strives to be relevant: right sizing; greening or sustainability; and, most recently, equity. Preservationists have argued for a shift toward a people-centered history. Even the National Trust for Historic Preservation has talked about inclusivity, about preservation's role in telling the American story, about revitalizing depressed communities, and about recognizing places rather than just individual structures. I argue, however, that—while the turns in historic preservation practice and scholarship reflect a kind of progress, one in which certain professionals and academics demonstrate a willingness to take on issues like climate change and improving the quality of life in depressed areas—we remain challenged by the concept of social justice in preservation because social justice work asks something more of us. But what is the "more"? How does the practice of historic preservation become social justice practice?

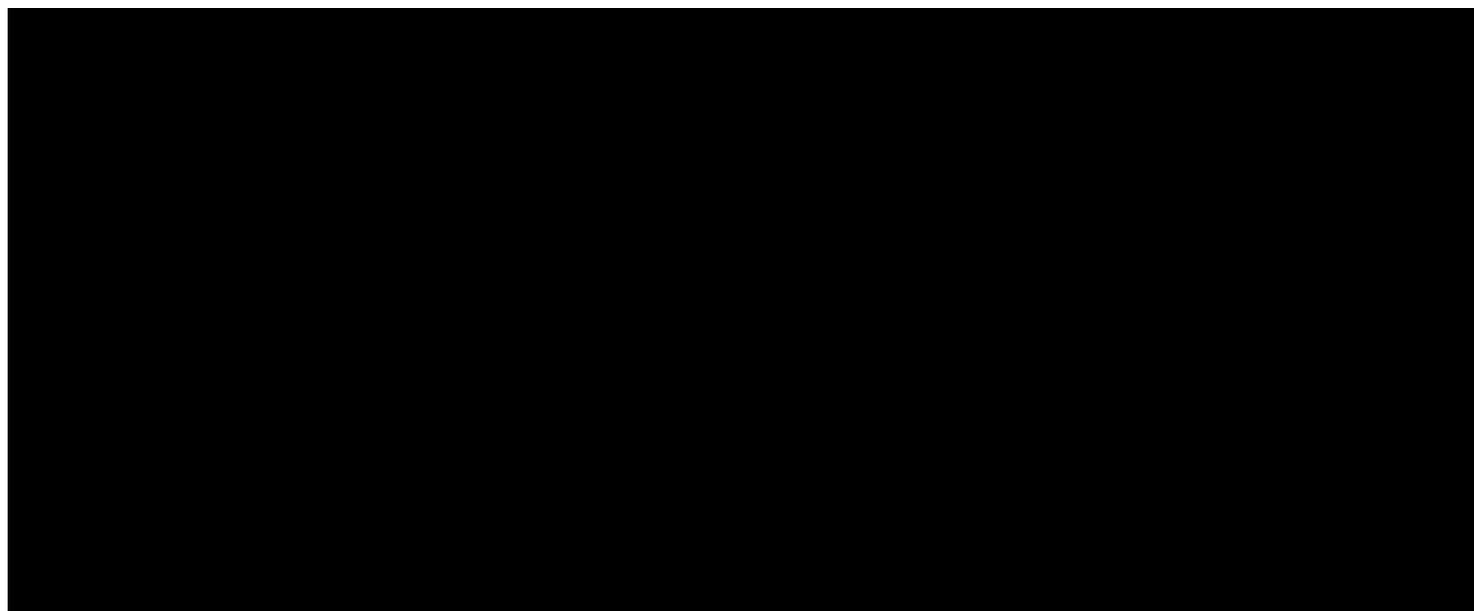
1. Embrace the "non-experts"—scholars and writers engaged in new forms of preservation. To remain relevant, the field must expand its definitions of what constitutes historic preservation and make room for varied approaches to practice that may come from unexpected or neglected corners of America.

Around the same time that Murtagh published his periodization of American historic preservation in the late 1980s, several historians, geographers, archaeologists, and black feminists created [a wealth of scholarship](#) illuminating a hidden heritage of place-making and conserving. African Americans and other underrepresented groups have valid preservation practices rooted in social justice. For example, the

National Museum of African American History and Culture was arguably made possible thanks to the groundwork of the Black Arts Movement, which gave rise to some of the first large-scale, community-based museums.

[Dolores Hayden](#), [Clyde Woods](#), [Katherine McKittrick](#), [Mary Seis](#), and [Angel David Nieves](#) are among those who made place-making and other acts of community preservation legible as acts of resistance and self-definition. In [We Shall Independent Be](#), Nieves writes that “space making” and community building in city streets, on the edges of plantations, and at [Rosenwald Schools](#) were acts of [self-definition for African Americans](#). Intersectional archaeologists Whitney Battle-Baptiste¹ and Carol McDavid² analyzed their profession and African American material culture. Their work illuminated the significance of involving descendant communities in excavation and of documenting how both sexism and white supremacy silence and distort public history. Similarly, activist and civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson forces us to confront persistent landscapes of mass incarceration and racial violence through his [Community Remembrance Project](#). Project volunteers and descendants of victims collect soil from lynching sites, placing it in jars that will be housed in Alabama in a memorial to lynching victims and survivors.

Instead of seeking to preserve buildings in amber, these preservation practices are participatory, creating dynamic intellectual spaces and memorials. These spaces both creatively conserve and confront heritage that is associated with difficult memories and with resistance to multiple, inextricably linked forms of subjugation.





2. Listen to women of color and others living at “intersections” to gain an understanding of intersectional oppression. Centering, for example, the history of transgender women of color in the interpretation of the Stonewall Inn requires that we understand the persistent ways in which that group experiences discrimination differently, though not necessarily more.

Similarly, understanding Rosa Parks’ role in the 1955 Bus Boycott must include a recognition of her equally courageous act in 1944, when she was sent by the NAACP to investigate the rape of a young sharecropper. She would go on to travel throughout the South in the 1940s, building resistance to the ritualistic rape of black women and initiating her long career as a social justice activist.³ What routes, back roads, and trails, did she cover during these dangerous investigations? Are they not worthy of historical markers? Recognizing black women’s distinct experience of and response to racism as it is enacted on their bodies provides important context for Parks’ contribution to not only to the Civil Rights Movement but also to the women’s movement, both of which often downplay black women’s identities.



Rosa Parks' childhood home near Abbeville, Alabama. Parks would return to Abbeville in 1944 as a representative of the NAACP to investigate the sexual assault of local civil rights activist Recy Taylor after an all-white jury failed to indict the white attackers. | Credit: [Photo](#) by [Pat Henson](#) licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

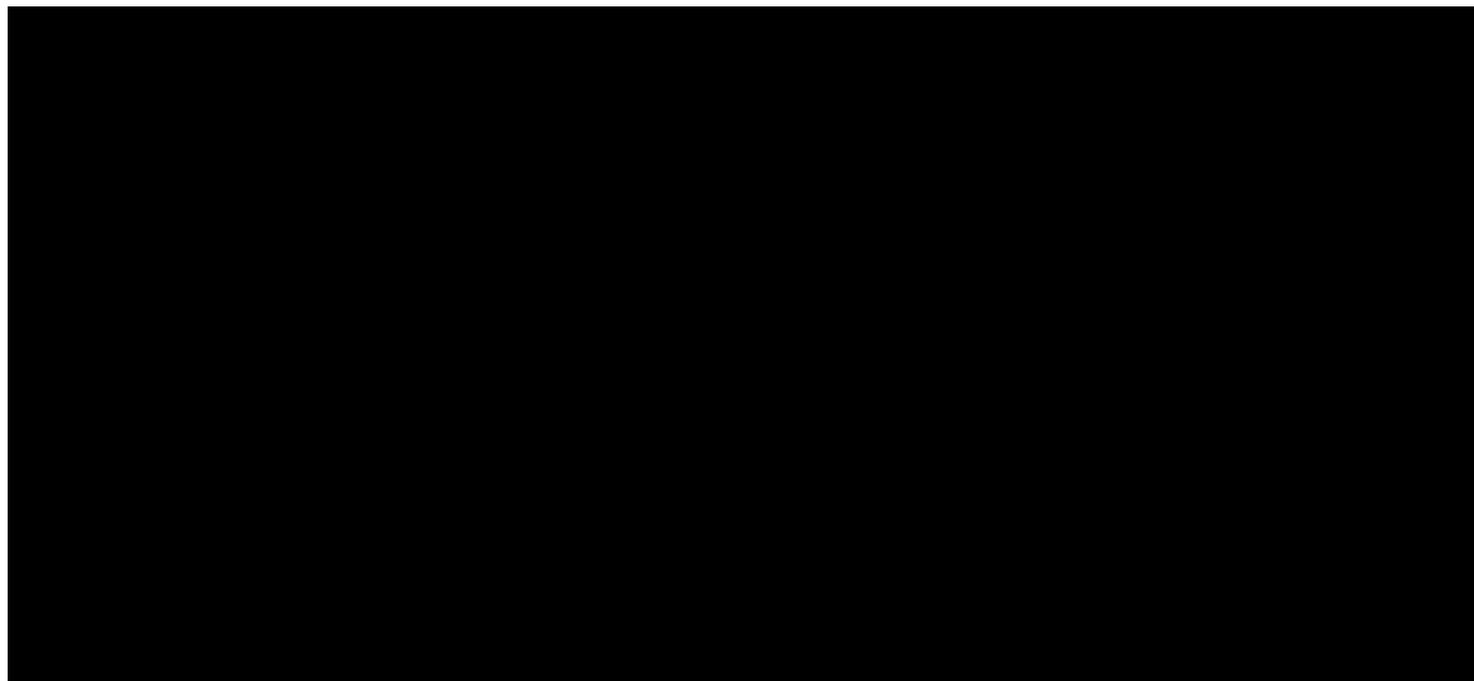
3. Recognize the links between the global and local. The global shift to right-wing populism brings up once-latent fears of difference and diversity. Preservationists must make spaces dedicated to commemorating past resistance available to those resisting this rising tide of discrimination and hate. They should also seek opportunities to close urban-rural, white-black, gay-straight divides.

4. Recognize the relationship between environmental protection, minority land dispossession, sacred commons, and resource extraction. Intersectionality is a challenging idea that calls upon us to confront the unique, multidimensional, and constantly mutating nature of injustice and supremacy. Struggles for power, sovereignty, and self-determination can be expressed through struggles to preserve spaces like African American or all-black towns and settlements or Standing Rock, a sacred space that merits protection simultaneously

as an ancestral burial ground and as a source of clean water. Organizing and raising consciousness around inadequate environmental and cultural resources is an opportunity for the preservation and environmental movements to create new alliances.

5. Be easily accessible to social justice advocates. Social justice advocates should be invited to capitalize on the ability of preservationists and cultural resource managers to construct context and significance, both of which buttress social movements' claims to space. Look to social justice advocates to learn about spaces of significance that, while they may stretch our frameworks for significance or integrity, are meaningful and worthy of protection and recognition

6. Embrace difficult and dark heritage. Be prepared to educate and organize [around heritage that would otherwise go unseen](#)—like [Shockoe Bottom](#) in Richmond, Virginia. Without community pressure, a baseball stadium would have been built on the ground where a historic black community of the enslaved and formerly enslaved once lived. Preservationists must be willing to discuss the ways in which supremacy and privilege distort our views of ourselves and other communities, even in the context of supposedly pluralistic place-making. Preservationists must also contextualize structures and sites within larger and sometimes difficult concerns—those that are critical to systemically addressing inequalities in the local community.



7. Understand that some communities are addressing economic and heritage conservation more so than preservation of structures. Preserving place shouldn't limit the reasons for protection or significance to one lens, such as period or builder. Preservation should also center community survival, empowerment, and identity. Artistic expression and traditional practices, though intangible, are often the only ways that identity can be affirmed, and sometimes no specific structure or building accompanies such practices. Inclusive preservation recognized and protects both the spaces and the practices associated with communities. For example, descendants of Texas Freedom Colonies, settlements founded by former slaves, deploy oral traditions and ritual performance during homecoming celebrations not only to honor ancestors but also to keep young people coming back, retain control over land, cooperatively maintain cemeteries, and reproduce their identity.



Jasper and Newton county Texas Freedom Colony homecoming presidents in Shankleville, Texas, in 2014. | Credit: Photo by Sarah Juneke

Many lessons can be learned from the self-identified historic preservationists who will be sharing the field's practices in this series and from contemplating those practices as the vehicle for achieving social justice. And even more may be gained from those who don't self-identify as preservationists.

The work of many writers in this series will attest to the existence of historic preservation as social justice practice. These preservationists center social justice and leverage heritage conservation or preservation as a strategy, rather than an end in and of itself. They challenge and transform, acting from an intersectional consciousness that connects, for example, race, gender, environmental degradation, and heritage conservation. Their work is simultaneously about preservation; transformation; and resistance to the ways in which white supremacy, sexism, xenophobia, ableism, homophobia, and racism contort themselves to inhibit agency and undermine past gains in equity and justice.

Dr. Andrea Roberts is the founder of the Texas Freedom Colonies Project and a scholar of heritage conservation and urban planning whose research frames African American planning and historic preservation as social justice practice. She is specifically concerned with grassroots planning history and contemporary preservation practices within freedmen's settlements.

Notes

1. Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Maria Franklin, *Black Feminist Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011).
2. Carol McDavid, "Beyond Strategy and Good Intentions: Archaeology, Race and White Privilege," in *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007): 67–88.
3. Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010).

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