**Address to the 18th International Conference of National Trusts**

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What a privilege to be here. Thank you to everyone who brought us together today – thank you, to you all, for all you do every day do to conserve our important spaces and places. And beyond conserving our heritage and our critical geography Trusts also do that other increasingly important thing of being forums in which we can convene conversations, gather together as communities, as nations and be inspired. And if ever there was a time when we need conscious sharing, it is now. Thank you.

It is wonderful to be here, to be part of a moment when Trusts from all over the world gather, to be reminded of the universality of the aspirations of Octavia Hill – that magnificent desire to connect us all with great landscape and great culture, to inspire us through heritage and geography. It is a noble and timeless aspiration that links us back to critical human needs, whoever we are, wherever we come from.

And I do not think the word **need** is too extreme, **we need** culture, **we need** access to beauty and nature.

Archaeologists working in Tanzania on the uniquely important site at Olduvai Gorge have found evidence of human activity that dates back over 300,000 years. It is a fascinating site. And the qualities we have in common with even our earliest ancestors – are many of the important drives of fulfilled and happy modern human beings - that powerful desire to capture our shared stories, and to reflect on the majesty of landscape. Even 300,000 years ago our ancestors endeavoured to be consciously connected to place, to be defined through culture and beauty. And it is that drive that brings us together today, that fundamental human need, as Octavia Hill put it, ***we need beauty in our lives, whether beauty of nature or of the arts***.

And although access to heritage and the landscape would appear to be an un-controversial human need – these things are for most, a very occasional luxury.

I would love to see heritage and nature more accessible, better promoted and for their unique potential to draw us together, more effectively deployed in these testing times.

We need heritage – we need culture.

At the beginning of 2013 may of us watched in horror as dozens of Mali’s most ancient monuments were deliberately damaged or destroyed. In a campaign of systematic vandalism, Ansar Dine, an Al Qaeda affiliated militia, pushed further and further south from their desert strongholds into regions of increasing historical importance, destroying tombs, burning manuscripts and damaging buildings. They eventually converged on the city of Timbuktu.

Timbuktu is a World Heritage Site, known as the *City of 333 Saints, it*is the home of 16 shrines of Islamic Saints, of Sufis. It was an obvious, high value target.  The fighting was brief but devastating, destroying parts of the city’s world-famous Mosque - one of the ancient madrassas, or schools, that make up the University of Timbuktu. It is a collection of buildings believed to have been built around 1327, mostly out of straw and wood with some limestone reinforcements, and is completely unique.

Some five years later, the first members of the Al Qaeda affiliated militia, Ansa Dine who had orchestrated the attacks were indicted for war crimes and sent for trial at The Hague.

And one of the most notorious was Ahmad Al Mahdi Al Faqi, a young Malian - a man charged **not** with genocide, or ethnic cleansing, but with being one of the instigators of a campaign to destroy some of Mali’s most important cultural heritage.

This wasn't vandalism, these were not thoughtless acts – one of the only things that Al Faqi said when asked to identify himself in court was that he was graduate, that he was a teacher – he was like us, someone who is invested communicating story.

He wanted to send a message - this was deeply considered – a waging war in the most powerful way that could be envisaged: destroying narrative, destroying, heritage, place. The attempted destruction of nine shrines, the central mosque and perhaps as many as 4000 manuscripts, was a considered act. They understood the power of these histories, of landscape, of narrative to hold communities together and conversely that in destroying these sites and their stories, they hoped to destroy a people. In cutting the cultural knot that held these communities together, they hoped a society would simply unravel.

But just as the Ansa Dine insurgency was driven by powerful narrative and ideology, so was the local population’s defense of Timbuktu and its libraries – these were communities who had grown up with stories of the Mali Empire, with great West African histories, they lived in the shadow of Timbuktu’s ancient mosques and libraries and listened to songs of its origin. And they were not about to give their heritage up without a fight. Over the difficult months of the 2012 Ansa Dine invasion, Malians risked their lives to secrete and smuggle documents to safety, doing what they could to protect historic buildings and defend the ancient libraries. Although they were not always successful, many of the manuscripts were thankfully saved. Today, although not wholly out of danger, each of the shrines damaged during the uprising has been rebuilt and the 14thcentury mosque that is the symbolic heart of the city has been restored.

Even in the bleakest periods of occupation enough of the population of Timbuktu would simply not bow to men like Al Faqi to allow their history, their heritage to be wiped away.

What you do Matters - this really matters.

I was one of those foreigners who fled Mali just before Ansa Dine’s initial attack - and whilst waiting to fly out, as I sat in the airport, I could not help thinking about a passage of British history - When during the second world war, as the Luftwafe rained down more than 30,000 bombs on London, killing more than 40,000 people, there was a recognition, that even whilst a World War raged that there must be a consideration of heritage, of place.

If the war was won – and along with the lost lives, history and heritage were also its cost, that would be a lasting and bitter pill to swallow. There was broad acceptance that along with freedom, its greatest expression: culture was fundamental to what the war was about.

And so, a decision was made to move the national collection of art out of the city. Slate mines in Wales, hundreds of miles from London, were filled with the nation’s greatest treasures – The National Gallery was emptied, shuttered and closed.

But as the bombs continued to fall, people began to lament the loss of culture - there grew a broadly supported opinion that despite the risks, it was better to continue to show great art, (even at risk to life and heritage –) because when faced with the possibility of death every day, Londoners on balance felt that art, history, heritage, were critical to their well-being, that the freedoms that heritage represent were integral to the fundamental rationale for the war.

So policy was reversed - And for much of the war, thousands would queue everyday down the steps, along the streets across Trafalgar square to see handfuls of paintings on the National Gallery walls. And with music venues and concert halls blacked out for the war, Kenneth Clark, the director of the National Gallery invited Myra Hess, one of the most loved pianists of the age, to play lunchtime piano recitals in the gallery. By the end of the war she had performed two thousand concerts to more than a million culture hungry Londoners.

Wherever you live, whoever you are, access to great culture is important – it should not be a privilege or a luxury, it is important to understanding who we are. It is a powerful thing, a wondrous thing that can bind and make sense of us – but, as Ansa Dine knew, culture when deployed offensively, it has the power to divide and destabilize us. Whilst it can define who we are, we can allow it to conversely define who we are not, who we choose to privilege and who we want to exclude. But whilst terrorizing forces might try to destroy societies by destroying culture, by controlling the narrative of landscape – in this time of widely polarizing sociologies, could we not do the very opposite, could we not use heritage, the environment, culture to draw communities together to forge common narrative and shared spaces where we can all feel comfortable?

In 1845, Benjamin Disraeli wrote in his book Sybil that Britain was effectively ‘*two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor*’.

To some degree he was playing politics, Britain has always exhibited profound division, and sociological complexity – we have an enduring obsession with class, loathing and loving it, we have allowed it to define us – but there have been passages of our history when those differences become heightened, politicized and troubling. And he recognized, that governments and cultural institutions have a role in finding ways of coaxing us back from polarizing extremism and bringing us together, of finding points of commonality. One of the great contemporary examples of this has been the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s reaction to the terrible mosque shootings. Her instinctive, unrehearsed reaching out to declare universal outrage, to bind her nation around values of tolerance and inclusivity, was moving and magnificent. We do not have to feel helpless, we can all have roles, big and small in making our communities feel more at ease with themselves, in brokering access to important shared spaces and stories. Octavia Hill saw that, and her hope was that the National Trust might be a mechanism for addressing some of those acculturated inequalities through beauty, through inspiration, through access to open space – she famously wrote – ‘ *we all want beauty - This is true of all classes; we all want quiet; we all want beauty for the re­freshment of our souls. Sometimes we think of it as a luxury*,’ she wrote, but inherent to being human is to crave beauty, to want to have access to it in our daily lives.

I think the founders of the National Trust of England and Wales, hoped that through inspiration, through contact with culture heritage and countryside that we might not just be uplifted, but that culture might help us forge an important, a critical commonality, the sort of shared understanding that is important to healthy societies. This is the stuff that in my mind makes the Arts and heritage really important- what we do is **not** just about beautiful things, it has the potential to operate as the glue that meaningfully binds us. These are the things that made that Blitz moment so powerful, not just what culture can mean to us, but how it can become a powerful cohesive force.

Octavia Hill’s aspiration that the Trust speak to and for everyone was not part of a diversity action plans – these were the founding aspirations of our mother organization – similar sentiments underpin the founding missions of many public cultural and civic institutions of a similar age. This is not just about serving a broad constituency, it is recognizing that in part our role is to constantly push at boundaries, to never become complacent, but to have a conscious aim to be ever more inclusive, to see the ongoing diversification, the broadening of those we serve as being a core, consistent and unending goal. As Hill intimated, she did not want to feel satisfied serving a loyal minority, or even the majority – her goal was to genuinely drive to engage, to touch us all. We might argue that not everyone could ever feasibly be engaged with what we do, but we can consciously be open, we can meaningfully celebrate our aspiration of inclusivity, so that even those who we do not directly touch, understand the value of what we do and the possibility of engagement. They know that should they ever wish to …, they would be welcome and feel comfortable

I am a proud ex-trustee of the National Trust of England and Wales. And I know it is one of the most successful and well-run institutions in Europe – we serve millions of people very well. But some might say that we have over time drifted away from that original set of radical aspirations, today we super-serve a very loyal constituency of people, most of whom look like our staff, shop and live in the same places, and share similar values. We make our members feel very special, it is a wonderful club to be a part of. It is a business model that works when measured on spreadsheets, but somehow there is a dissonance, it does not feel right for many who care.

Harbermas wrote very affectingly about how institutions and nations suffer a natural erosion of legitimacy over time if they do not constantly robustly interrogate and nuance their priorities, values and remit. If they do not reinvest in thinking about how they robustly re-engage with their core objectives. It is a phenomenon that inevitably leads to a kind of disenchantment. But for us, I don’t think we need to profoundly spiritually change - in fact, I think we need to look backward, I think we need to have the confidence to embrace our past, our shared underpinning founding aspirations. The need, that Hill identified remains current – we face the same kinds of need for culture to deliver that magical thing that it does at its best of drawing us together, of building cohesion and social catharsis. Great culture well deployed is kryptonite to fascists, anathema to fundamentalists and a bolt of lightning to the complacent who hate change.

We need National Trusts.

And this is a strange time, globally, we are living through a period of unprecedented peace, of fewer major wars than for some considerable years – yet we feel more insecure and divided today globally, regionally, nationally, than at any time in recent memory. Across much of the world over the course of this decade, populations have drifted apart, polarized and attitudes to identity have hardened. Surveys show that, one of the things we share, that is common to cultures across the globe, is that the majority of us, feel we are more racist – and alongside that ambient growing anger, three quarters of us simply feel more unhappy - beyond this just being about ethnicity, this is also about a more fundamental societal dysfunction, of which the rise in racism is merely a symptom.

We are simply less at ease with ourselves

I am British, European and proudly so – but I must admit to feeling less comfortable on the continent of my birth than at any other time in my life.

And I know I am not alone.

The present climate for minorities is difficult, uncomfortable. But I am also aware that phenomena like Brexit and Trumpism did not come from no where, they are not expressions of illegitimate feelings. We are all feeling scared, concerned.

What Jacinda Ardern demonstrated is that there are ways of beginning to draw broken societies back together, by reasserting shared values, by considering and brokering new shared narrative and by being respectful – and the heritage sector has a role, robustly asserting that we are for everyone, that we can be the shared space where we as modern nations can reflect on our past, on the very best of what we can be, and at times lamenting and learning from our darker historical chapters, so that we can grow together, inclusive of all, and be defiantly proud of that

Respect is important.

Gathered here in Bermuda, with its long complex history, with its ties to UK, the US and Africa, is very moving for someone like me. I am reminded of how, people of colour have fought desperately hard to maintain and preserve their stories – across much of the colonial period the people of the Caribbean fought often under threat of punishment, fought to practise their own religions, to celebrate carnival, to keep history alive, ordinary people and were prepared to make great sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice to hold onto their story.

This heritage really matters – we must respect it.

And now living in the US as an immigrant – I feel that powerful draw back to Britain ever more profoundly, I feel the power of heritage all the more palpably.

We should be working with these immigrant, and minority stories to enrich and strengthen wider national narratives.

Many of my parents’ generation – who embarked upon great trans-continental migrations, often with no more than a what they could carry, but they carried with them stories – and against the onslaught of the challenges of settling and integration, it was those stories that underpinned, and strengthened families and communities.

And now as an immigrant to the US myself, I have been starkly reminded of how important, how exclusive, how alienating heritage narratives can be.

It has made me think again about the messages that we, British send to people of African descent, about how we see them, and how we see their histories.

As a country we have never formally sought to offer an official apology for our imperial projects. We haven’t sought reconciliation or to offered compensation for colonialism or our imperial wars, we have not sought to return war plunder, to posthumously expunge the records of those who were criminalized in struggles for freedom, to truly acknowledge the contribution of peoples of our once colonies to our present prosperity and security, to offer reparations for slavery or examine the ongoing legacies of colonialism for its ex-colonies and the neighbors.

These omissions have left an odor, an uncomfortable collection of unresolved national issues that have skewed the history that is taught in schools and hamstrung curation in state-sponsored museums. It has meant that it is easier for national institutions to tell partial stories, to engage in complex intellectual choreography as part of a process of avoiding these difficult issues.

Avoidance and denial saves resource, it minimizes heartache and it does that important thing of safeguarding reputation, but it harbors dissonance and denial that is deeply unhealthy, it fosters bad histories and we simply know it is wrong

And as Trusts we are some of the few organizations with the authority and remit to address these pressing things. We can shift the tone, we can be the needed cathartic force.

And, we should do this for everyone – for our nations, for the sake of good history, for those whose histories have been for too long neglected or ignored.

Despite everything, I am optimistic.

It would be easy to think, like many in the press and politics, that global politics, the healthy regional culture, that societies are all broken, riven irrevocably – that the divisions are deep and increasingly intense. That the splits across nation, across class, across geography, increasingly across ethnicity and religion have rendered our sense of identity, somehow compromised.

But I only think that this worldview becomes true if the narratives that underpin who we are as democracies fail – if our sense of cultural heritage fails, if to a large degree - what we as an heritage sector does, what Octavia Hill sought and what you do, fails.

I believe we have a job to do – it is as necessary as the job defined for National Trusts, as when we were first constituted by our founding forebeares – a job to contribute to the healing process through beauty. We are uniquely placed to shape and negotiate a renewed more considerate culture and heritage sector – it was through shared history that we were once more closely and overtly bound by bigger principles, and I think, it is through renewed sense of culture and heritage that we might currently seek some catharsis, that we can reconstitute our shared sense of self. If we look back at the ambition and fearlessness shown by our forefathers, at how they felt that culture might make a difference – and it is hard not to feel that we are not doing their legacies justice.

I would love to see this sisterhood of trusts resolutely setting the tone, our sector should be far more demographically complex and reflective of those we serve,– and if we choose to change, we will reap the benefits of reflecting the broader populace in our membership, programming, in the profile of staff, in our attitudes, in those we fund - the benefits will be huge. We will grow memberships, audiences, we will increase income, widen the pool of talent from which we draw, feel more relevant, supported and vital whilst simply becoming a happier more resolved place to be.

 We must demonstrate that we care – and that could start with our volunteers, they are for most visitors the first and last Trust staff that they see – we must be even more effective in making everyone feel welcome, but that must extend to every level of our staff including and especially our boards, and it should be reflected in our programming.

And the benefits we would yield …

And for me whilst I am convinced by arguments about accountability, relevance, profitability, and legality – It is also about simply doing the right thing.

And now is the time !

After decades of real progress in the area of diversity, as we falter as a planet, there has never in my life-time been a more important time to act if we want to maintain that momentum.

The presentation of Cultural Heritage is critical to understanding who we are. It is the mirror that we hold up to ourselves, the portrait of ourselves that we show to others – and there are times, like now when delivering the right heritage stories can offer profound catharsis, can broker reconciliation, can give mental space for reflection, can be the perfect tool for easing soft diplomacy and brokering closure on difficult passages of history.

It is natural when we go through difficult or troubling times that we might want to return to *the comfortable*, to *the past*– that we seek out the reassurance of our cultural touchstones. Our shared Heritage is the family photo album, the frayed blankie; that might be lovely intellectual comfort eating when things are going well, but when we pass through periods that leave us shaken, then these tokens of our past become essential, critical anchors to understanding who we are, reminding us of our values and suggesting possible paths through present challenges.

But we must be brave and in this time when many are retreating, we must be more expansive, imaginative and bold – we must use heritage to reach out, to touch everyone.

We are one of the few organizations with the reach, authority and remit to address these pressing things and we must.

And - the benefits will be huge. We will grow audience, we will increase profitability, widen the pool of talent from which we draw, feel more relevant, supported and vital whilst simply becoming a happier more resolved place to be. That strange core dissonance that I feel palpably in most heritage organisations would disappear.

Look at the best global corporations, - they have diversified, and they have been driven by the bottom line, we should do it,  and be driven by doing what is right.

We should be at the forefront of exploring history, and we should be finding ways of more openly dealing with difficult aspects of this history and our contested past, accepting that none of us are unaffected.

We have the wonderful privilege of presiding over the places where many narratives begin and where they are interrogated. Let’s turn that into a font of inspiration for all.

This is not just a fight for diversity, it is about healing, about catharsis, about the well-being of our planet – about, in the true Spirit of Octavia Hill, intellectual leadership and doing the right thing.