



BLACK HISTORY MONTH ADDRESS

Delivered at Boston City Hall

by Taneshia Nash Laird

Inaugural President & CEO, Greater Roxbury

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I want to begin by thanking Lori Nelson and her team for putting together this event and inviting me to keynote.

Good afternoon—to Mayor Michelle Wu, all the elected officials and esteemed city and state leaders present, all of you distinguished guests, our collective, which is the wonderfully vibrant community of Boston—I am honored, profoundly honored to join you today in the kickoff of this celebration of Black History Month to say some remarks amplifying the national theme of “African Americans and the Arts”.

My name is Taneshia Nash Laird. As a creator, I am a curator and a film and live event producer, as well as the co-author of the critically acclaimed book “Still I Rise: A Graphic History of African Americans” which tells our history from 1619 to the election of President Barack Obama in comic book/graphic novel format in 240 pages.

I am also the inaugural president and CEO of the Greater Roxbury Arts & Cultural Center, an arts organization we affectionately call GRACC where the culture of people of African

descent is lifted up and where social justice and economic development go hand in hand. I am proud to build this organization currently above the Snipes shop in on Washington Street, with a future home in a state of the art 34,000 square feet visual and performing arts center right there in Nubian Square.

Some of you are aware that I am a recent transplant to this city, and, from Day One, I have felt embraced by the hospitality this metropolis is capable of extending. So, in appreciation of that support and of this year's theme of African Americans and the Arts., I wish to sing a serenade of Black Boston's contributions to the arts and national culture.

Those who know music know that serenades are often multi-movement structures. So allow me to begin my serenade with a spotlight on a figure whose legacy serves as a towering beacon, guiding our mission at the Greater Roxbury Arts & Cultural Center—Elma Lewis.

A daughter of Boston, Elma Lewis was a visionary who deeply understood the power of the arts to uplift, educate, and unite. In 1950, she founded the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury, creating a nurturing ground for young talent to flourish in the realms of dance, music, and visual arts. Eighteen years later, she expanded her vision with the National Center for Afro-American Artists, a hub that celebrated and showcased Black excellence in the arts. Elma Lewis was nationally recognized as one of the first class of MacArthur Fellowship recipients, known as the genius grant.

Elma Lewis's work is a model for GRACC, inspiring our efforts to continue her legacy of cultural empowerment and arts education. Like her, we believe in the transformative power of the arts to tell our stories, to honor our history, and to enrich our community. Our resident companies at GRACC - Origination, Castle of Our Skins, the Roxbury International Film Festival, and the Front Porch Arts Collective - carry forward this mission. They use dance, music, film, and theater to weave the rich narratives of Black experience, resilience, and triumph, ensuring that the arts remain a central pillar of our community's identity and strength.

In celebrating Elma Lewis today, I reaffirm our commitment to her vision: to create spaces where the arts act as a bridge between generations, where Black stories are told and heard, and where the cultural legacy of Boston's Black community is preserved and cherished for future generations.

And for the next movement of the serenade, allow me to lift up that today's Black History Month festivities include readings by local poets. I hope that everyone will listen to them attentively. I do not request this to be polite. For, of course, we understand that the art of poetry is a signature feature of Boston's past. It was here, right here, in colonial Boston, that this continent brought forth an enslaved African woman who became acknowledged as America's first Black literary genius: I sing today of Phillis Wheatley.

And a century later, this city would host—in the 1890s—that Black Creole woman and poet born as Alice Ruth Moore, but known later in life as Alice Dunbar, the wife of the

prominent poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Yet her husband might have never known of her if it wasn't for her poetry published in a New England literary journal. That—and the black and white photo of her included in those pages and which captured his romantic heart. A dear writer friend of mine describes her in his work of lyric fiction: “That girl was fine—make you wanna holler fine!”

I also sing Boston's Black musicians. Thus, decades after Alice Dunbar's passing, I sing of the Boston-born alto saxophonist known to jazz lovers across the globe as Sonny Stitt.

Fast forward to the 1970s, and I must sing, and I do so nostalgically, of a woman who shook the world and made Americans shake on the dance floor to the sounds of throbbing music. Thus, I sing of that Queen of Disco, the iconic Boston girl Donna Summer.

And from my middle school years, I also sing of the talent that erupted in the 1980s of a group with the members we know as Ronnie, Bobby, Ricky and Mike, yes, I, Taneshia, longed to be the Candy Girl of the legendary group New Edition.

In my college years, I was introduced to Boston's hip-hop scene and so I must shout out Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs who rapped lines like “I'm from Roxbury, the 'Bury, but not the fruit y'all” and I will pause to say, that I was pleased to leverage my role as an advisory board member to Grammy Museum to get several Boston's hip hop artists from Ed OG

and the Bulldogs to my new friend The Dutch ReBelle in the museum's Hip-Hop America: The Mixtape Exhibit celebrating 50 years of the genre.

Shout out to Dart Adams who helped me compile that list of Boston artists that deserved to be enshrined in the museum in Los Angeles.

But the artistic legacy of Black Bostonians extends far beyond poetry and music. Thus, I sing of the painter Paul Goodnight, who was one of the first Black Boston artists I became aware of when I began to study Black contemporary artists and whose legacy endures through his art and his progeny who we just heard from

I sing too of Roxbury-born Richard Yarde, whose watercolor paintings earned him fame and exhibitions in the Museum of the Fine Arts and New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. And before he passed in 2011, he had taught generations of art students at institutions such as Wellesley College, UMass and Boston University.

Since I invoked Boston University, we should celebrate the legacy of Derek Walcott, a playwright and professor at that august institution who founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre in 1981. Mr. Walcott was also a MacArthur Fellow and won the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Alas, not to be forgotten is the art of dance and how Tai Jimenez - now the director of the Dance Theater of Harlem's ballet school - made history in 2006 as the first Black

female principal dancer at the Boston Ballet, bringing her gifts of kinetic expression to the stage.

Ladies and gentlemen, the movements in my serenade are not just some mere spasm of artistic name-dropping. The names and the legends I have cited are only some of the stars etched upon the sky of Boston's cultural legacy. They are guiding lights for aspiring talent incubated by this city to embrace and accept as proud examples of the Black excellence that commitment to their artistic practices can create.

Unfortunately, we now live in an era when some detractors frown on what they call "identity politics." They suggest that we all should blend into some amorphous, tasteless, and indistinguishable porridge they call "American." For decades those same forces of the 19th century, of the 20th century, and even now into this millennium, proclaimed that this nation was nothing more than a melting pot whose contents were only to be defined by the ingredients they assumed came first—notwithstanding that Black Americans have been here for 400 years.

So, to all of America, I would assert that Black Boston's past is so much more than Crispus Attucks and the one-time homes of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King—as proud as we are for their respective historical roles. We are more than that. We are also an incubator and host of artistic talent. We are a crucible of American culture.

Through my work in cities on both coasts of this nation, here is what I have observed: Culture shapes the arts; the arts shape our identities; our identities shape our

neighborhoods; and neighborhoods shape the character of a city. You cannot have a first-class city without a vibrant arts and culture scene. And just as diversity is a welcome addition in the workplace or in the restaurants we love to patronize, vibrant cities are marked by their cultural diversity.

So, let us view the arts as essential to human existence—as something central to making us humane. A famous philosopher once wrote: “Without music, life would be a mistake.” It would be a mistake of the highest order for Americans to ignore the role that Black musicians have played in defining American character. What the world knows as the soul of America would never, ever be complete without its legacy of gospel music, jazz, rhythm & blues, the Motown era, Donna Summer’s disco tunes, and the hip-hop revolution.

That same philosopher also said, “We have art in order not to die of the truth.” Well, the undisputed truth is that the souls of Black folks in America have survived what Shakespeare might describe as the slings and arrows of outrageous racism—and we have done it through our genius for the arts.

As I bring my serenade of Black Boston's artistic legacy to a close, let us reflect on the symphony of stories, struggles, and triumphs that have been the backdrop of today's gathering. From the poignant verses of Phillis Wheatley to the soul-stirring melodies of Donna Summer, from the groundbreaking canvases of Paul Goodnight to the innovative choreography of Tai Jimenez, we've journeyed through a rich heritage that not only defines Black Boston but also enriches the cultural fabric of our nation.

Our serenade began with a single note of gratitude and has swelled into a chorus of celebration, recognition, and resolve. As we conclude, let this not be the end of our song but rather a crescendo that propels us forward, encouraging us to carry the melody of Black history and culture daily. Let the stories of those we've honored today inspire us to continue their legacy of creativity, resilience, and excellence. Let us be reminded that our collective history is not just a series of notes from the past but a living, breathing composition that continues to evolve and inspire.

And so, as the last notes of our serenade linger in the air, let us make a pledge—not only to remember and honor the contributions of Black artists, musicians, writers, and dancers but to actively support and uplift the voices of today and tomorrow. Let us commit to being the audience that listens, the hands that applaud, and the voices that cheer on the next generation of artists who will continue to tell the stories of our time.

In the spirit of those who have laid the foundations upon which we stand, let us move forward with pride, determination, and an unwavering commitment to ensuring that the arts remain a vibrant and essential thread in the tapestry of our community. Let our actions reflect our dedication to nurturing a world where every artist is celebrated, every story is valued, and every voice is lifted in a never-ending serenade of Black culture and heritage.

Thank you, Boston, for your embrace, energy, and enduring support of the arts. Together, let's keep the music playing, the paint flowing, the words writing, and the dance moving. Let's ensure that the serenade of Black Boston's contributions to the arts and national

culture continues to resonate, not just during Black History Month but throughout the year and for generations to come.

Thank you.