

TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2020 Book Awards Keynote Roundtable

The Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards are presented annually to three outstanding scholarly books published in the United States. The 2020 winners are Leah Price for *What We Talk about When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading;* Sarah Parcak for *Archaeology From Space: How the Future Shapes the Past;* and Sarah Seo for *Policing the Open Road: How Cars Transformed American Freedom.* During the ceremony, the authors shared their thought process that sparked their ideas, marveled at how much our quotidian experiences tell us about the human condition, and reflected on the individuals who spurred them on to pursue the work we honored.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org.

Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On this podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today we are going to do something a little different. This episode was taped at the Phi Beta Kappa Annual Book Awards event, which this year took place virtually on December 3rd, 2020. I hope you'll enjoy the conversation that we had with three extraordinary authors and prize winners.

This is how we celebrate at Phi Beta Kappa. This is how we mark our birthday, as it were. Our founding was December 5th, 1776, so this Saturday will actually mark 244 years in the history of Phi Beta Kappa and the role that we've played in American society, which is extraordinary and singular. I can think of no better way of capturing that than in the

words of one of the legendary historians, John Hope Franklin. This is what John Hope Franklin wrote in 1989 about Phi Beta Kappa. He asked, "How is it that an organization with relatively obscure and inauspicious beginnings and with nothing much in the way of a power base is able to enjoy considerable respect and a reasonable amount of influence? Surely one reason is that for more than two centuries, Phi Beta Kappa has stood for the highest academic and intellectual standards. In a country that historically has placed such great stock in material and practical things, its people have always been able to muster some respect, however grudging at times, for things that exalt the mind and the spirit."

"The very age of Phi Beta Kappa," Franklin said, "invites veneration, to be sure, and in a nation given to symbols, nothing epitomizes excellence more than an honor society born just five months after Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence." So, how fitting 244 years later we gather virtually, because of the conditions which we face ourselves, showing that some things last, some things transcend, and some things have to transport and change, and we represent all of that in Phi Beta Kappa.

And so, tonight we celebrate. We celebrate what is the best in the liberal arts and sciences, and it is my great honor to present the recipients of the three Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards.

Each award will be presented in the order of establishment of that award, and after the presentation of each award, we will have an opportunity to hear from each winner. After those awards are presented, we are going to have a panel question and answer session with the authors, in which I will engage in conversation with them and then you will have a chance to ask questions through the chat function.

So, let's get started with our first award, which is the Christian Gauss Award, which is the oldest of the three Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards. It was established by the Phi Beta Kappa Senate back in 1950 to recognize outstanding books in the field of literary scholarship or literary criticism. Christian Gauss was a distinguished scholar himself at Princeton University, teacher and dean, he also served as a senator for Phi Beta Kappa and was also, like John Hope Franklin and Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. The winning title of the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Award this year is What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading, by Leah Price, published by Basic Books.

Mark Twain famously remarked that the report of his death had been greatly exaggerated, and perhaps the same can be said of the long predicted death of books. Leah Price has presented us with a challenging good news-bad news story. It seems we're reading as much as we ever did, but maybe we never read as much as we

thought we did. Still, the world that she describes and celebrates is a bookish world, to be sure. Books continue to play a central role in our lives, even in the format that has changed over time to include the various electronic devices on which many of us experience our reading today. Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Chapter President Maya Jasanoff put it just right, she said, "Leah Price's contagious delight in books makes this book a delight." Leah Price is the Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers University. At Rutgers, she founded the

Initiative for the Book. She writes for the New York Times Book Review, London Review of Books, San Francisco Chronicle, the New York Review of Books, and many others. She's the author of *How to Do Things* with Books in Victorian Britain and The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel.

Leah Price:

We have probably all thought about the ways in which during this pandemic some doors have closed for the book and other doors have opened. I tried to argue in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* that the book has become a not smartphone, a recipient for all our hopes and fantasies about a world beyond social media, and we've seen a meteoric rise in eBook and audiobook downloads during the pandemic, both from bookstores and also from public libraries. So, I'm heartened by this vote of confidence in the book and I'm very much looking forward to hearing about my two co-awardees' books.

Lawrence:

Thank you for making a passionate case for books. This is Phi Beta Kappa. We tend to take books pretty seriously, but you know, there's nothing wrong with preaching to the choir. The choir tends to say, "Amen," and that's nice once in a while. So, congratulations, and thank you for your wonderful words in the book and your wonderful words at this ceremony.

Our next award is the Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science, which was established in 1959 to encourage literate and scholarly interpretations of the physical and biological sciences and of mathematics. The winner of this year's Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science is *Archaeology From Space: How the Future Shapes the Past* by Sarah Parcak. Space archaeology uses pathbreaking remote sensing technology that has opened up extraordinary discoveries from ancient civilizations across the globe. In this book, we learn of long forgotten roads, fortresses, whole settlements. If we are to preserve our shared global past and learn vital lessons from those who came before us and with whom we in fact share genetic materials and share some fundamental and basic traits, then space archaeology will play a vital role, and Sarah Parcak will be our guide.

Sarah Parcak is a National Geographic Society Archaeology Fellow, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and a 2013 TED Senior Fellow, and a 2016 TED recipient. Sarah serves as the Founding Director of the Laboratory for Global Observation at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She and her husband, Egyptologist Greg Mumford, work together on the surveys and excavation projects in Egypt. She has worked with NASA and the U.S. State Department, and has academic collaborators across the globe.

Sarah Parcak:

Our world will change and is changing in ways we do not expect and at rapid speeds we'll find challenging to predict. But with archaeology, we can see a far broader range of outcomes and possibilities for future survival by studying the diverse ways past cultures from around the world coped with changes of all types, from war, to climate change, disease, natural disasters, and this is typically done not by studying what happened to kings and priests, but through the remnants of everyday people. I wanted to show what archaeology can teach us, and it is that humans have this immense capacity for innovation and creativity, and in a world with so many challenges, we have to shed a

light. We have to put a spotlight on things that can give us hope, and I think that's what archaeology can do.

It shows our humanity. It shows our great potential. It shows all of our problems, but also where we could potentially go.

Lawrence:

Thank you, Sarah, for inspiring, uplifting words. I also will now share with you the one line that I took out of the citation, because I thought it was too bad a pun, but you've now inspired me to bring it back to the fore. And that is, I was going to say your work gives new meaning to the term bottom up history, which of course was meant to be a pun about archeology. But you actually make it in a more profound way. Bottom up history is history told not from the perspective of the kings and the powerful but from the everyday, and your space archeology work very much does that and connects us in a very profound and compelling way with our ancient forebears and therefore with those that will come after us. Congratulations on winning the Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science prize.

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize is the youngest of our three book prizes. It was established in 1960 in the name of the great Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize recognizes studies that contribute significantly to historical, philosophical, or religious interpretations of the human condition. The winner of the 2020 Phi Beta Kappa Ralph Waldo Emerson Award is *Policing the Open Road: How Cars Transformed American Freedom* by Sarah Seo, published by Harvard University Press.

Professor Seo reexamines well-known doctrines and reveals to us a transformation of American freedom, where the automobile plays a surely unintended but just as clearly undeniable role. At a time when cherished concepts such as privacy, freedom, liberty, and equality draw intense scrutiny, *Policing the Open Road* offers new and powerful insights into how our society got to where we are, which is essential if we are to imagine how we might get to where we aspire to be.

Sarah Seo is a Professor at Columbia Law School, where she teaches criminal law, criminal procedure, and legal history. Since the publication of *Policing the Open Road*, she's been advocating for the removal of civil traffic law enforcement from police duties. Before joining Columbia, she spent four years at Iowa Law School. Between law school and graduate school, she clerked on the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York and the United States Court of Appeals for the 2nd Judicial Circuit.

Sarah Seo:

The core of my argument is that positive laws, that is laws that are enacted for our safety and our well being, but aren't necessarily rooted in morality, these sorts of laws are necessary in a modern society, and traffic laws are a prime example of that. But these laws also require law enforcement, but enforcement opens the door to discretionary power, and discretion opens the door to discrimination. As American society became a car society, many people were pulled over for traffic violations, and they asked what is freedom when they're heavily regulated and policed in the very symbol of their freedom, the automobile?

Traffic stops are still the most common police encounter and people of color experience more intrusive and violent traffic stops than white people, and these traffic stops often serve as the entry point to the criminal justice system. My hope while writing this book was, and I suppose I can also say that I had to have faith that history can help us figure out what to do today. So thank you for engaging with my book, and I really hope that it will continue the dialogue about what needs to be done for a more just and equal justice system.

Lawrence:

So, let me remind all of you joining us tonight that if you have questions you'd like to have contributed to this discussion, you can put them in the chat, they'll be sent along to me and we can have them added to the conversation. Let's get started now with a couple of questions to pose to each of you.

I think most of us experience that the hardest part of a project is coming up with the idea. You know, I was always told that coming up with the project, with the idea for a book, that's half the work. I'm not sure, by the way, that it's true that it's half the work. There's plenty of work that comes after that. But in some ways, it's the steepest climb to come up with a topic.

So, something made you all ask these questions. I mean, Leah, look, we're all interested in books. This is Phi Beta Kappa. But most of us don't write a book about books, so what got this as the project? Where did that come from? Where did the idea come from for each of you? So, Leah, let me start with you.

Price:

So, I don't want to put words into my fellow panelists' mouths, but it seems to me that all three of us are interested among many other things in a certain kind of dailyness in what fairly humble, material kinds of practices or traces can tell us, and for me as a scholar, the most daily of objects is the book. It's the tool that I use to apprehend the world, and so I think for me it's always been inescapable to think about that tool, to look at that tool rather than looking through that tool at the ideas that it contains. And this is one reason that I was glad that you began with that wonderful quotation from John Hope Franklin, Fred, because Franklin contrasts the material world with the worlds of the mind and the spirit, but it seems to me that in different ways, all three of our projects are bringing together the material world with the world of the mind, whether that's the space age technology and the digging in the dirt or whether that's thinking of how a very mundane kind of daily object like the automobile is a pivot of very far-reaching legal and social changes.

Lawrence:

One of the challenges that I always set for myself every year at the Book Award dinner is to show the common threads among the three winners, and I always tell the recipients when I congratulate them, when I first tell them they win, that the connections will emerge. You'll see. The thing will reveal itself. This is the first time anybody ever did my job for me. Leah, you put the thread right through the through line, through the three works, and did it beautifully. Sarah, what would you tell us about where all this digging in the dirt comes from?

Parcak:

So, I think for me, I've always loved the dirt. I've always loved exploring. And it was about four or five years ago a friend said, "Gosh, you should really write a book. A popular science book about what you do." And I said to my friend, "Well, that's... I'm really glad you think that, but it's not that easy." But I was out with my husband on a date night and I have to credit one of our wonderful local restaurants, Chez Fonfon, and I may have had more than one adult beverage, and the idea just came to me.

And the reason it did, and kind of connecting to some of Leah's points about the dailiness of the work that she and Sarah and I do, I was talking to my husband and hemming and hawing, going, "Gosh, a book. What could I possibly do? My work is so nerdy. How could I make it something that the general public would want to read?" And we're in this very crowded, intimate space, and everyone's talking, and amidst the warmth, and the humming, and the closeness, and seeing all of these humans interact, it just hit me. Archaeologists, at our core we're basically gossips, right? We're telling these intimate, intricate stories of how different peoples existed, and looking around the room and seeing the different ways that everybody was connecting with each other, that's at the core of what archaeology does and what it teaches us. It's all about human connection. It's all about the different ways of being.

It's about the stories. It's about who we are. It's ultimately about what makes us human, right? That's the windmill at which archaeologists tilt constantly. And it's both fixed and ever changing. Our common humanity has not changed in the 300,000 years that we've been human. I think if we were to travel back in time, we would find the peoples who lived in sub-Saharan Africa were not altogether too different from us, even though we think we're modern. We're still the same and it all started in that restaurant, understanding that the core of what I do, and the core of what my colleagues do, is about human connection and that feeling of warmth, and excitement, and gratitude.

Lawrence:

And the timing of when it comes out in some ways is perfect in that I'm sure I'm not the only one who had the experience during this pandemic of feeling much more connected with the ancients because the arrogance of our time, of thinking that we've outgrown certain things, and we've moved past certain things, boy, we sure don't feel that way right now in the time that we're living through. You know, you hear about plagues past, but this was our plague present.

So, hearing how people have dealt with those plagues a thousand years ago, or 100,000 years ago, tells us something about people who share a lot of our DNA. We're dealing with some of the same problems. So, Sarah, what got you interested in cops?

Seo:

The interest came while I was clerking for two federal judges right after graduating from law school and I noticed that the criminal docket was about a third of the docket, and most of the criminal cases involved drug cases. And so, I wanted to know, and a lot of the defendants in these drug cases were people of color. And I was just surprised that most of the criminal cases that came through federal courts in New York were drug cases and I wanted to know more about the history of the War on Drugs. And it's a huge topic, so I focused on law enforcement and the War on Drugs, and as a legal historian there's really one major constitutional amendment that governs what the police do, and

that's the Fourth Amendment. It guarantees your security against unreasonable searches and seizures, and so a seizure is whenever a police officer stops you, either in a car, traffic stop, or on the street, that's a seizure under the Fourth Amendment.

And so, that's really the first moment in the citizen or individual police encounter, and so the Fourth Amendment governs that first moment, and it's really the only constitutional provision that regulates what the police can and cannot do.

So, I began my research, and I was surprised that Fourth Amendment cases were really rare in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the number of Fourth Amendment cases exploded to hundreds suddenly in the 1920s. And when I started reading these Fourth Amendment cases, a common theme was cars. These were car stops and searches. And so, the focus on traffic, and the explosion of Fourth Amendment cases with the mass production of cars was starting to make sense, it was starting to click.

So, all of these threads were coming together and so that's how it really began, with noticing the prevalence of drug cases in our society today. And of course, in my book I end with the War on Drugs.

Lawrence:

Sarah, we got a question that came in that asks whether you connect your work in some ways with Michelle Alexander's path breaking work, *The New Jim Crow*?

Seo:

I'll begin with my belief as a historian that what we do is to explain how we got from A to B in chronological order, and history is not monocausal, but multicausal. There's so many causes that explain how we got to where we are today. And so, Michelle Alexander provides one explanation or causal explanation for mass incarceration, and I provide another causal explanation, and a very different one at that. So, Michelle Alexander focuses on the severe laws, drug laws and sentencing laws that were passed in the latter 20th century that explain mass incarceration today. My book offers a very different explanation. It starts in the early-20th century with cars, and very provocatively or controversially, I argue that modern policing started, and the police's inordinate discretionary power began with the need to regulate traffic.

And in the early-20th century when cars were just becoming mass adopted by American society, most people who owned and drove cars were not people of color, they were well-to-do white people. And so, really modern policing I argue had its roots in the need to discipline, regulate, and police white people who drove cars and refused to obey traffic laws. And so, it offers a different explanation. I don't disagree with Michelle Alexander's. I think it adds to her account, but it's a different account for sure. And ultimately how I connect the policing of what I call everyman, because a lot of early car advertisements referred to the everyman. This is a car for every man.

In legal papers, the everyman was referred to as a law-abiding citizen. Why does a law-abiding citizen violate traffic laws? This was a big problem. And so, my book tries to explain how we got from the need to police every man or the law-abiding citizen to the end point of how the police power came to focus on people of color, in their cars,

driving while Black, for example. And so, that's kind of the narrative arc that I tell in my book.

Lawrence:

Sarah Parcak, I've got a really interesting ethics of archaeology question that came in for you. What do you see as some of the greatest ethical stumbling blocks or pitfalls that archaeologists face when it comes to using remote sensing data?

Parcak:

That's a great question and actually I wrote an op-ed for the New York Times about a year ago discussing the ethics of remote sensing generally. More specifically, some mentions for archaeology, and that was around the time that our soon-to-be-former President Trump released an image of a missile launch site in Iran. Very naughty of him. He took a picture, and it revealed our essentially technological capacity for imaging, and his was a low resolution screenshot, and it showed that we have the ability to image anywhere in the world at a resolution of 5 centimeters per pixel or better.

So, yeah, I think we have a real duty of care when we're considering any kind of remotely-sensed images, and the main issue, of course, is that in so many cases, these are archaeological sites. Not in the sense of in the past, but these are places that are still honored, revered, and lived in by Indigenous peoples today that are deeply connected to or part of the same people or groups that made them hundreds if not thousands of years ago. And those peoples did not consent to be imaged and they did not consent to have those sites imaged. So, I think there's a lot that we can learn from, whether it's informed consent, or trying to connect with people in those communities, but we have Google Earth imagery for the whole planet almost.

And I think we have to be very careful. Certainly, one of the big issues that my colleagues and I face when we're sharing information, and this is oftentimes when I'm working with collaborators in country, so these are Indigenous archaeologists. They're very excited about the data. We're excited about the data, but we can't publish the coordinates of the sites that we find because, of course, they could potentially be looted. So, there's a tension between wanting to discover sites, because a country can't protect sites from destruction unless they know where they are, versus making sure that the data isn't released so that looters and other folks that might destroy them will attack them.

So, these are things we think about very deeply and very carefully. It's something I think a lot about, especially. I run a citizen archaeology crowdsourcing platform that allows the world to look at satellite images and we work very closely with governments to make sure that those sites are protected.

Lawrence:

So, let me ask you each a question that is actually based on something I typically say when I speak at Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremonies, including the virtual ones we did this year. So, one of the things I always say to the students who are being inducted is even though I haven't met them, but by the fact that they're sitting there, I know three things about them. One is that they have gotten themselves to one of the 290 schools that's got a Phi Beta Kappa chapter. The second is they obviously challenge themselves academically, performed at the highest level. And from those two things, I can infer a

third, which is that they have been deeply blessed that somewhere along the line, somebody - parent, friend, teacher, somebody - said the right word at the right time that opened a door that sent them in a certain direction, that said something is possible. And I have to tell you, when I do this at the ceremonies, the live ones or the virtual ones, you can look around the room or the screen and you can tell people are doing it. You can see it in their eyes. They're picturing the person.

So, that's what I want to ask each of you, if there's a somebody who played that kind of role, maybe it's a couple of people. I don't know, why don't we go in reverse order for where we started? I think Sarah Seo knew this was coming, and then Sarah Parcak and Leah Price. Sarah, was there somebody who said the right word at the right time, turned the key, and you said to yourself, "You know, I could be more than I thought I could be."

Seo:

There were so many people in my life like that. One is a college professor, Christine Stansell. I also went to Princeton for undergrad and she taught history there, and I took as many history classes as I could with her. And I had never considered academia, never considered even being a historian until she talked to me on graduation day. She came to me and said, "You know, your thesis could really get you into a graduate school program for history." And later, in grad school, when I was feeling like I couldn't think creatively as required for the discipline of history to write really great history, she again told me, "You do think creatively. You do. You can write. You can do this." And so, she encouraged me at several points in my academic career.

The second person Is my mother, who actually never went to college. My family immigrated to this country from South Korea when I was five years old, and my father was the only one in my family who could speak English when we immigrated. My mom knew not a single word. And of course, I was five years old and I didn't either. And so, my mother and I learned together. She helped me prepare for my history exams, all sorts of exams, and I really learned the love of learning and I learned my curiosity about the world from her, because that just... That's just who she is. And she's been my number one encourager.

Lawrence:

Sarah?

Parcak:

Wow. Yeah, you could see me thinking. There are so many. I have been so blessed. So, so much of what I do as a scientist, as a scholar, and how I exist as a teacher, as a professor, and as a human being is because of my grandfather, Harold Young. He was a forestry professor at the University of Maine in Orono, and he was one of the pioneers in using aerial photographs in forestry. He was a forestry professor. It's funny, I've been able to with Google Scholar look up a lot of his early papers and I don't know if it's possible to plagiarize via DNA, because our writing is very similar, and I didn't know that, and our words are virtually identical when we're talking about the applications of these new technologies to our respective fields. So, he's the reason I took my first remote sensing class as an undergraduate at Yale. At that point, unfortunately he'd passed away due to cancer, but I thought, "Well, gosh, my grandfather was able to use aerial photos in forestry, and I grew up listening to him tell me all these amazing stories, and being outside in the woods, and learning about respecting nature and exploring. You know, I

bet loads of people have used satellites to map archaeological sites, but you know, it'll be fun to learn what my grandfather did in a new way." And I found out that virtually no one had applied it to Egypt and that opened up a new world.

The other person that helped to inspire me to do more and to be more was my first mentor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where I teach, and that's an amazing human named Tennant McWilliams. He was the long-time dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, now the College of Arts and Sciences, and from the moment I met him in my job interview, goodness, almost 15 years ago, he saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself. And that was someone who could be a leader in science. And he believed in me, he supported me with such grace and humanity, and his only rule was that I would continuously pay it forward for the rest of my career.

He helped me to start my lab and he's been a dear friend since.

Lawrence:

I don't think you can plagiarize through DNA. I think you can just be inspired through DNA and it's pretty powerful stuff. Leah?

Price:

So, like my two co-panelists, I'm daunted by this question because of all the people who it's impossible to name. I learned to do research in book history by teaching book history, and as a literary critic who has always had fantasies of being a historian... Literary critics these days tend to want to be something else, and some of us wish we were cognitive psychologists, some of us wish we were political activists, some of us wish we were philosophers. I've always wished to be a historian and I learned how to fake it better by spending the past couple of decades co-teaching classes, both undergraduate and graduate, with two colleagues at my former university, Harvard, Ann Blair and Jill Lepore, and I've learned so much from them about how to read and how to teach that helped me also think about how to write. So, that's an experience whose intellectual dividends I still feel every day. Every time I write, every time I read, I feel that I'm channeling their intellectual generosity.

And the other category of gratitude that is all of the librarians, both in public libraries and in special collections, who have taught me about how to see books, how to observe books, how not just to look through them, to use them as a kind of optical device like a pair of glasses, but not just how to see the world through books, but also how to look at books as carriers of the labor that went into their making and as carriers of the human relationships that go into the preservation and transmission and discoverability of books. I would just say that like many scholars, at some points I've had the fantasy of I found this, I stumbled on this, I discovered this book, but I've never actually found it or stumbled upon it because there is always a long line of librarians who have put the book on the shelf, and put the book in the catalog, and described the book in ways that made it recognizable to me as something good to think with.

Lawrence:

I think this was a very special night and to have all three of you representing the highest values of the liberal arts and sciences made this a wonderful occasion. Thank you for sharing your work with us and allowing us to honor you. We look forward to continuing

to follow your work. You're now members of the Phi Beta Kappa family whether you like it or not and we cherish the members of the Phi Beta Kappa Family. Congratulations to all of you.

Lawrence:

This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is managing producer and Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "2020 Book Awards Keynote Roundtable." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, January 1, 2021. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

