

## What Kind of Public Art Do We Want Now?

*A conversation with PSU Professor and York historian Darrell Millner, the unidentified York artist, and Kristin Calhoun, Director of Public Art, Regional Arts & Culture Council*

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Conversation transcript:

[00:00:00] **RACC:** Hey All! Welcome to a new audio recording brought to you by the Regional Arts and Culture Council. An independent nonprofit organization, we support greater Portland's creative economy by equitably providing funding and services to artists and art organizations, managing and growing our diverse nationally acclaimed Public Art program, and developing long lasting public and private partnerships. We connect artists and creatives to opportunity and access.

Today's show looks at the ways that artists continue to push boundaries, expand our imagination and open doors to new conversations about the role of public monuments in national and local conversations about systemic racism, representation, and injustice.

We'll be talking with PSU professor of history and black studies, Darrell Millner, and the unknown artist who created a bust of York that mysteriously appeared in Portland's Mount Tabor park this spring, and was recently vandalized and destroyed. Kristin Calhoun, RACC's Director of Public Art, moderates, the conversation.

[00:01:02] **Calhoun:** Hello, this is Kristin Calhoun with the Regional Arts and Culture Council. I'm the Director of the Public Art program. And I am here with Professor Darrell Millner and the artist who created York, a sculpture that was recently atop Mount Tabor. I will turn to them now and ask them to introduce themselves a little bit more. Professor Millner. Do you want to start?

[00:01:24] **Millner:** Uh, yes. I am a retired professor of black studies at Portland State University. I've been teaching black studies here since 1975 and York has always been one of my favorite historic topics. And, um, I'm very happy to have a chance to talk about York's story with the, uh, with the group today.

[00:01:47] **Calhoun:** Artist?

[00:01:48] **Artist:** I'm glad to be here. Um, I'll looking forward to answering questions, um, and very honored to be here with professor Milner. Cause it was from Professor Millner that I learned much of what I know about York. And also, uh, thank you to start with, thanks to Kristin Calhoun and the Regional Arts and Culture Council for their support and guidance through this whole journey.

[00:02:11] **Calhoun:** Thank you, Professor Millner, I think I'll start with you. And you know, you've, you've been in Portland and teaching about York, since the 1970s, as you said. And can you tell us a little bit more about your journey as a scholar of York? Um, what led you to York and, and, um, you know, maybe up until the, the piece that you wrote about York, um, which I think is part of what inspired the artist.

[00:02:41] **Millner:** I've always liked history and, uh, living in Oregon, it's pretty difficult to avoid the topic of Lewis and Clark and, uh, So, you know, I, I, I learned as much about Lewis and Clark as I could over the years. And one of the things that I learned was that William Clark had a slave that made the journey here with them between 1804 and 1806.

And, uh, as I kind of acquired that information, it was apparent that, of all the people on the expedition and all the stories that were attached to it, the story of York was the most neglected and the most abused over the course of 200 years of telling the Lewis and Clark story. And that interested me as a professor of black studies and I've always found that the students that have come to that story over the years, uh, first of all, have been surprised and also have been uh, very interested both in the details of the story itself, but also in the way that the story has been told in different generations of American culture and history, uh, because it reveals as much about American racial history as it does about the individual story of York. So, uh, I think it's fair to say that it's been one of my mainstay topics in terms of teaching both the general black history and also the history of blacks in Oregon.

[00:04:08] **Calhoun:** Great. Thank you. And artist, what, what drew you to York and the York story and to deciding to create this piece of artwork?

[00:04:19] **Artist:** I think Professor Millner has it right. It's a story that just isn't told. Um, and, and it's not told by, you know, it's not an accident it's not told or York- York was erased from our history.

Uh, he wasn't included in the history that I learned about Lewis and Clark. And as I told the story of York to others, I was always struck by how few people had ever heard of him. And I, I feel very fortunate to have had this opportunity to help get the York story. And I, and I would add from the onset, how grateful I am to Commissioner Carmen Rubio and parks director, Adina Long for, for their quick endorsement of the installation.

Uh, it was really, you know, their endorsement allowed it to stay in a large way and having that memorial there, the York memorial on Mount Tabor really spread the York story in a way that, you know, in truth made my head spin. I was really struck by how quickly it traveled. It, it pointed to how hungry people are to have a broader and, and clearer sense of the complexity of, of our history, that particular story, but our history in general,

[00:05:27] **Calhoun:** Professor Millner, I'm uh, I'm curious about your observations, about how the telling has been used and has changed over the years, or has it changed over the years?

You know, the exclusion, the, you know, I think that's part of what we're dealing with in monuments in general, in Portland and across the country or world for that matter. Um, Is that, you know, who, who, who was deemed worthy of being recorded and upheld? Um, it is, I think, reflective of who had power. Right? So I'm just curious in your observations about that.

[00:06:05] **Millner:** Well, it was no accident that the York story disappeared from the Lewis and Clark expedition and the way it's been presented to American students of history. You know, the reality is that the dynamics of race in our generation are very different than they were in the founding of the country. Uh, there was a fundamental contradiction as the country was founded at the end of the 17th century or the 18th century, the founders wanted to create a Democratic society. Yeah. And they also wanted to maintain a slave society. At the same time, there was a fundamental contradiction between those two concepts. You can't really be both at the same time without that contradiction becoming very apparent. Yeah. What seemed to be the, uh, the attempt on the part of the founders and many people, uh, who have come to tell our history since is to reconcile that contradiction, by making it appear that slavery, particularly black slavery was a natural condition.

That Blacks should occupy in the country, uh, that blacks were especially suited to be slaves. And therefore slavery was not a, uh, uh, well, not an imposition or an abuse of their condition in the country. And so what that required on the one hand was a way of defining and describing the black experience in black individuals in a way that was consistent with the status of slavery and.

The reason that that affects an individual like York and the Lewis and Clark story is that, uh, the participants of the expedition, uh, were lying nice. They were in many ways, some of the first celebrities in American culture, uh, they were considered to be mighty men. They were considered to have accomplished state, tremendous, uh, you know, a tremendous task and for a slave to be included in that kind of category.

Would have been a contradiction of everything that, uh, was a part of the prevailing definition of what black people were capable of. So the easiest way that, uh, subsequent generations of American storytellers, American historians dealt with that contradiction. Was to simply pretend that York didn't exist.

If you pretend that he wasn't there, then he didn't participate, that he didn't make contributions. And you don't have to, to, uh, eventually explain why a black person was capable of doing the kinds of things that the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition were recognized and acknowledged for doing.

So that was really the first, uh, response. The first reason that York was, uh, uh, disappeared, if you will, from the Lewis and Clark expedition and every subsequent generation. Uh, American culture, uh, had a way of defining York in ways that seem to reduce that contradiction between, uh, the reality of a black man who was capable of great deeds, who was capable of heroic actions, uh, and who also was contained in that institution of slavery.

So, that was really what, uh, what defined and characterized, how York was presented over the course of about 200 years. So that was really the first kind of chapter of telling the York story. Now of course, and thankfully, uh, our racial dynamics have changed over time. And, uh, hopefully we can recognize the kind of progress that has been made as far as race is concerned.

Eventually the institution of slavery was ended after the civil war and eventually black people over a very long time in a very difficult journey began to acquire, uh, a different kind of status and condition and the context of American culture. And probably the highlight of that journey in the 20th century was what we call the civil rights movement of the 1950s and sixties.

And it was during the civil rights movement that, uh, Americans finally decided, uh, that it was just no longer acceptable to pretend that blacks weren't fully human beings and fully capable of all the activities and achievements that any other group of human beings might be capable of. And that was probably a bad idea that especially younger black people didn't have anyone to look to.

And the way we tell our stories of American history, uh, that would be a focal point for them to understand the kind of, uh, events and the kind of achievements and the kind of progress that have been made. And so in the civil rights period, they began to tell the York story in a different way. And, rather than present York as the traditional Sambo, which is a very derogatory way of addressing and describing what a black man is capable of.

They began to present him in a much more heroic mode that is. In many ways, the stories about your ex activities on the Lewis and Clark expedition were exaggerated. Uh, and sometimes there was simply fabricated. Uh, there was an instance, for example, when York is supposed to have saved William Clark from a flash flood, that didn't happen on the expedition, but that's a heroic story.

And, uh, that's a dramatic change in the way that the York story was being told. So in the civil rights period, there was a uh, a significant attempt to kind of make York, uh, appear as a superhero on the expedition rather than a Sambo. And, uh, the problem of course, is that those stories that were fabricated, and that's never a proper way to address history.

Uh, the achievements of York's and the contribution of your work on the expedition did need to be exaggerated to be important, and to be, uh, revealing about his qualities and the character of what he was capable of. So in some ways the superhero phase of, uh, uh, of the York story is just as bad as the Sambo phase.

They both were uh, they both were inaccurate. They both were untrue ways of representing what York actually was and what he did on that expedition. So, uh, that was the second chapter. The third chapter came, uh, when the country was interested in celebrating the bicentennial of the York story. And, uh, you know, this was one of the, uh, one of the opportunities for historians to tell the new York story with more honesty and more accuracy, uh, and, and tell the, your story in a way that it deserved to be told. And York still arose from that challenge, uh, as

a heroic figure, because some of the things that he contributed and some of the things that he did were truly historic and heroic.

Yeah, so that was the third chapter and attempt to, uh, address the realities of who York was as a human being and as a member of the expedition. And now I think we've come to the fourth chapter with our little adventures with the York statue on Mount Tabor, but those other attempts to tell the York story, you know, they were reflections of what race was and the dynamics of race as they stood in those generations of American history that they were a part of.

And I think the same is true for the York story on Mount Tabor today, it's a reflection of the racial dynamics that are unfolding in our country, in the present generation, uh, both in the positive and then in the negative. Reflections of that moment. So the, York story is a continuing story. It changes over time as American racial dynamics and racial policies and racial interactions change over time.

And I think if anything positive has come out of this situation is that the York story has become more widely known. And also the history of how this story has been told has become more examined and has been a gateway really, to understanding not just the story of York, but understanding how American history has reflected the racial needs of the dominant society over the course of about 225 years or so.

And I think that's a very positive aspect of what we've gone through.

[00:14:38] **Calhoun:** That's right. Uh, you know, I guess it was over a decade ago, you, you and I worked on a project, um, for Lewis and Clark College to, to do a York sculpture at Lewis and Clark, you were on a selection panel. I'm also curious about your observations of that moment, what 13, 14 years ago, uh, versus this moment, like it's, it's, you know, the time the timeline has, has come together a little bit more, but the depictions and the sort of moments are still a ways apart.

[00:15:15] **Millner:** Well, let me say, I think we did a pretty good job with that York statue on, uh, on the campus of Lewis and Clark. And I encourage anyone to go, uh, and take a look at it today if they have the desire and have the opportunity. And I think the difference is. Uh, the process through which the statute was created on the campus compared to the process that brought York to us, uh, you know, on the top of Mount Tabor. And we went through a very formal process. Uh, we had a very diverse group of individuals with backgrounds in the academic world, in the, uh, in the world of public art, all of those things. And so we deliberated and we talked about the images that we were, uh, that were possibilities. And we looked over the artists who had applied to make the statue.

And so it was a very deliberative process that unfolded over a number of months. And I think the product that came out of it was good, but it certainly was not the kind of, uh, it was not the kind of process through which York came to the top of Mount Tabor in our most recent episode. And so I think the difference there is reflective of, uh, you know, changes in what we might call the social contract.

That is a part of how society operates today. Uh, you know, the York statute came to Mount Tabor in large part because the statute that was previously there was, uh, was taken down, was torn down in a very unofficial kind of processed, uh, the statue of Harvey Scott that had been there for decades, uh, was a reflection of an earlier period of public art in which the people who were selected and, uh, the kind of story that was attached to their selection.

And the reason that that public art was created very, very much a reflection of who was the, uh, Uh, which group was the powerful group in American politics and American culture in American society and the reacts. That brought that statue down in our generation is a part of the response to a changing nation and a response to changing racial circumstances that now does not find those earlier heroes of American culture as acceptable as they once were.

So, you know, it's a process that is not an official process any longer. It's a process that arises out of. Kind of a changing social environment in which individuals make their decisions about how they're going to react to, uh, the objects of, of public art. Uh, and I think that's unfortunate in, in many ways, but.

Unfortunate or not. It seems to be where we find ourselves at this time. And I think it's a reality that everyone who's involved in politics involved in are involved in, uh, issues of race as we're dealing with them in American society today. You're going to have to evaluate what that means for the kind of gestures that we make and the kind of heroes that we select and the kinds of circumstances in which we present them to American culture.

All that is changed. We're in a completely different place now than we've ever been in American society before. And so we have to consider new factors and we have to consider new ways. Public art process to unfold. And I think, uh, you know, the York story now is the perfect, uh, is, is the perfect situation that has captured those changes that we have to take into consideration now that we never had to consider before.

[00:18:56] **Calhoun:** Excellent observations. I couldn't have said it better. Thank you so much for that. Artist, this is a point where this is sort of a great segue to, um, introducing what it was that you did and how you made your turn voices about this. You know, you have said that you were inspired by the piece that, that, um, Professor Millner wrote that sort of talked about this, this change between the, the sandbox to the superhero, to them.

No, not quite to the moment that we're in now, that that piece that you wrote was a little bit older than that professor Wilner, but can you kind of walk us through your journey with, with this and your decision-making and you know, how did, how did you decide a, to do this, um, B how to render it? Um, I think those are, those are pretty interesting conversations.

[00:19:50] **Artist:** Um, yeah, I would, there's a number of things to address. And again, I, I would, I would underscore what you just mentioned about the thoughtful, um, comments by professor Millner, uh, on shifting eras and the relationship between art and protest and where we find ourselves today. Um, as far as, uh, unsanctioned art going up in general, it's not a new thing in the art world.

Um, it has, it has really, since, since graffiti and graffiti's shift to, um, sort of legitimate galleries, but before that it was active act of, of marking your territory, putting out your beliefs, uh, engaging with the community in a way that was direct and, and asked for, for response provocation in a way, I would say that there's a differentiation between the creating of something and the tearing of something down.

I'm not sure that I can articulate exactly what that is, but I feel it's a difference. I've visited Mount Tabor often for a very long time during COVID it became a place I went to daily. I of course, had seen the Harvey Scott sculpture over the years, but to be honest, I never took the time to learn who he was or to really examine the sculpture very closely until it was torn down.

Um, once, once it was, it was toppled, I've looked into who he was and, and, and who had made this sculpture and why it was there and sort of put that behind me in a way. But the empty sculpture pedestal, right. Really was what captured my imagination. I just looked at them that sculpture, that empty pedestal really daily.

And then it just struck me at once that, um, that I had something to offer, which was a number of years ago. I had, I, I did what sculptors do. I was trying to sort out my feelings about them. The stories I was being confronted with. And one of them was the stories of story of York. And I had made a portrait that, that I had considered to be a study for York.

There had been some conjecture that York's ancestry may have come from Ghana. And I have, uh, a friend from Ghana and I had him pose for me and I, I based a portrait on him and, and the very, very few descriptions we have of, of York physical disruption. It's it just sort of struck me one day that, that that would be a fitting portrait to put on that pedestal.

Keeping in mind that we're, you know, this was Portland, uh, there was still smoke in the air. There were protests. The Black Lives Matter movement was, was having a big influence on the, on, on everyone. Certainly on the way I was thinking about race and, and our history. I just spent quite a bit of time then looking closely at the pedestal and deciding on, I went ahead and carved that sculpture out of styrofoam at the scale that seemed appropriate. And, and, uh, got it up there early in the night and waited from that point. Yeah. I feel as though my role in the project is very much like everyone else's - I waited, I watched, I listened. It became separate from me. It became something that belongs to the. I would say that I thought of it in terms of a gift to the park and to Portland.

And I certainly was profoundly moved by how the park adopted it. Uh, I am in great debt to the Park workers who kept it in such good shape and cleaned it up when there was small amounts of vandalism and kept the area clean. And as I've also been just profoundly moved by the folks I've seen up there, uh, particularly teachers, uh, but I've seen so many teachers who have put the York story into their curriculum and brought their students up to up to York.

I think during, you know, during the time when schools were physically closed, there was a place where classes were meeting and, and the York monument, York Memorial was one of them. And, uh, that was very heartening to see that York Memorial acting as a, a starting point for historical discussions.

[00:24:12] **Calhoun:** Great. And I have to ask you a question that I know a lot, a lot of people want to know: why are you anonymous?

[00:24:24] **Artist:** Um, my decision to, to put it up and remain anonymous had to do predominantly with two things. One is, I'm fully aware of the, of how mystery attracts attention. I think a lot of folks came up just to see it. They, they felt something mysterious had happened. We need to see it. So using mystery as a kind of element of the unexpected, attracting an audience.

And then the other is that, um, I didn't really want people talking about me, you know, to the degree that people can talk about who I might be or who I am that 's a pretty small concern compared to the attention being kept to York. And that's where I thought being anonymous would keep the story focused on York, which is not uncommon.

I think most of us, when we go to memorials, we don't ask ourselves who made the Memorial. We remain present with the people honored there. Um, even at some of our most famous memorials, P most people are unaware of who designed them or made them, you know, you're there at the Vietnam Memorial to do a rubbing, to take a name. It's very much about those folks. So the challenge of memorializing in a way I think is, is also to edit out the, the sort of artists behind the design. I think that's when, you know, the design is really worked when it's out strides the individual of the person who made it or their intention. And, um, there were times when I felt that the York Memorial was doing that was.

Standing on its own and becoming a kind of pilgrimage for folks to go and visit. And it was very touching to see.

[00:26:04] **Calhoun:** Professor Millner, I know that you've told me that, that you went up there multiple times a week while it was up any reflections on, on what that experience was for you.

[00:26:15] **Millner:** Well, Mount Tabor has always been interestingly enough, one of my favorite parks in the city of Portland. And, uh, you know, I've gone there many times over the years for, uh, the things that Tabor offers to an individual who just likes to get out and enjoy some of the, uh, the quiet, enjoy some of the open space that's available in the city. So, uh, I was a regular Mount Tabor, uh, uh, user. It changed when the, uh, when the York statue appeared and.

It was just a different experience going there and, uh, you know, doing the things that I usually did, but then seeing the face of yours you're clinking down from that pedestal, uh, it was comforting. It was, uh, it was inspiring.

And, you know, it was a physical personification of what I think the significance of the York story kind of presents to us.

So it made a change in my experience with Mount Tabor. And the other thing that it did was allowed me to see how other people responded to the statue as well. And, you know, I, I have a history. I have a history with York myself, but of course I would never intrude on any of the other people who were beginning their, uh, their journey with York as they, uh, stopped and looked at it and talked about it.

Uh, it was just a very fascinating, uh, fly on the wall kind of experience for me to see the reaction that that statue had. In the, uh, in the lives of the people now who came there sometimes on purpose sometimes accidentally, but who interacted with the statute. Uh, so, you know, it became a very personal thing for me.

And I will confess, uh, when the statue was destroyed, that was a hurtful thing. It was a hurtful thing for me. And I'm sure it was a hurtful thing for many of the other people who had, uh, you know, become comfortable with it, inspired by it. And, uh, for different aspects of their understanding of American culture and history had opened up.

So it was, it was a hurtful experience for me when I saw the, uh, you know, when I saw the photos of the statue after it was taken down. Yeah. It's a continuing kind of reaction that I have to that whole York experience. Uh, it makes me lot more to have to go through that again, you know, and, uh, part of the conversation at this point is, well, what should we do now?

Uh, the, the original York statue. Yeah. Everyone understood to be a temporary kind of statue. It was, decisions were going to have to be made about what would happen both to here and what would happen to replace it if, if that decision was made. And as I thought about those things and the last kind of stage of, uh, of, uh, your statue's life, so to speak, you know, the one thing that I did not want to happen was for York to become, uh a stationary target of continuing the abuse, uh, become a target of those people in American society.

You are not willing to face our history, uh, honestly, or directly, and, uh, who want to take the opportunity. Defacing or destroying a statue about an individual, like your as a way of making a political statement. And certainly that's a consideration at this point, given the kind of precedents that have been set by both sides in terms of how they react to those pieces of public art.

And it's still a concern that I have, and I don't know if there's any, any resolution that I've been able to, uh, to imagine of what the next steps are, where do we go from here? You know, what kind of, uh, what kind of next chapter is the York story going to be a part of? And so I'm still at that place. And I think that's a part of the ongoing conversation that, uh, this event that we have here. And that the podcast is a, it is certainly, I think rightfully a part of, so I don't have the answer to that, but it's certainly something that is before us that we will have to make decisions about.

[00:30:39] **Calhoun:** That's right. That's right. I, you know, definitely we've had a lot of, um, people reaching out, wanting to, to contribute to a permanent piece. And I think the piece of that, but that is maybe a challenge is it's jumping over the question of what you've just been talking, talking about. Should it become a permanent piece? What are the, what are the risks and benefits and, and how do those line up together? And I think, I don't think we know the answer to that in this moment.

Um, I am interested in hearing from the artist, just sort of on the technical side of things, you know, we'll, we'll circle back to the more, um, conceptual and, uh, you know, the, the sort of place in history and all of the aspects that you were just talking about, professor Milner, but just on the sort of purely technical side, if you were to put it in a permanent situation, what would that take?



Both in terms of effort and money and timelines on those sorts of things. What, what - Artist, what do you think that would take?

[00:31:53] **Artist:** Well, I, I realize you're asking me that the technical question, but I'll, I'll answer the other, the other question first. I think first it, it takes the city to decide that that's the direction to go.

And if the city decides, uh, a permanent York Memorial on mountain Tabor is the direction to go, I'm available to help, and I have everything needed to reproduce what was there in bronze. The question then would be one about the pedestal, whether it would make sense to completely replace the pedestal, uh, which in some ways makes some sense to me.

And, replace it with, uh, the, the permanent narrative that, that hopefully, uh, Professor Millner could help with. That would be lovely. I think, I mean, I we're all hearing today how insightful his thoughts are and the, also the replacing of the pedestal could, could add to durability. Um, certainly bronze is the most durable public art material we have learned.

Bronze sculptures can be toppled, but most of them are installed without anyone thinking they will ever be attempted to be toppled. So they weren't secured in ways that you would secure something if you were afraid that it, it, it might be vandalized. So certainly in this case, um, a permanent installation, uh, would be made in such a way.

That'd be very difficult to vandalize in a, in a significant way. But again, I don't want to sound like I'm in a position of promoting such a thing. Professor Millner has it right. I, I produced a temporary sculpture from the beginning. The materials I used were to look like bronze, to give it to kind of authority that we have given to, um, historical figures in the past. Bronze is a good material for that. It immediately gives weight to the subject in a way historically and publicly. Um, but it was styrofoam. And I, and I think in some ways the vandalism that ultimately took York off the pedestal was it was partly due to the fact that it became known that it was made from materials that weren't permanent and that it was, it was in truth, quite easy to deface and to, to destroy. I am also sympathetic to Professor Millner's comment about this is a sort of suffering of seeing it, it taken down. I was actually surprised how, how much, that, how badly I felt about that, uh, as well. And, uh, in truth, I haven't, I haven't gone up to Mount Tabor since then. I probably will. Um, I understand there's been a lot of lovely notes placed there and flowers and, um, I would like to see that. So I think I will, at some point make my way up to Mount Tabor.

Um, as far as costs go, I think we, I think that's a bigger discussion about that deals with scope and scale and how it is being done because as, as I think the City has probably learned from the Elk, um, you know, there's going to be as much money put into the pedestal of getting that Elk back is probably the Elk itself. So it's, um, it's, it's a difficult thing to off the cuff. Talk about budget. I think

[00:35:27] **Calhoun:** That's fair. Yeah. And we circle around to that, that decision-making process. Um, I don't think any of us have a crystal ball on that in terms of, I think especially one of the things that I've been thinking about a lot is this idea of, you know, sort of a heroic thinking and what that implies. And, and yes, there was this heroic figure of Harvey Scott up there. Harvey Scott was an awful person. And we'd been advocating for that sculpture to come down, um, for a while. Not, not that I necessarily agree with exactly how it came down, but I do definitely think it was necessary for it to come down, but is replacing a heroic piece with another heroic piece what is demanded or, or needed or desired in this moment?

[00:36:21] **Millner:** Well, if you're asking me that question, you know, my feelings are that I would love to see a permanent York presence at the Mount Tabor site. And if it could be done securely and safely in a way that would make it very difficult for, you know, the kind of destruction and vandalization that we've seen, uh, happen again, that would th that would be very pleasing to me.



And I think the thing that historically has been missing from public art is the narrative. I think the narrative is important and if such an effort was made in the future, I would want it to include, you know, some, uh, some narrative that will explain the significance of York and explain, you know, the, the, the role that York as an individual and the role that some of the issues that he kind of opens the door to, uh, have played in American culture and American history.

So, you know, I would love to see a permanent York there, but I would also like to see more information about the story and the significance of both public art and the individuals who we choose to, uh, to make the objects of public art available. I'd like to see much more of a kind of educational context attached to that.

And I did want to say at some point in our conversation today, ya know - there's much more to the York story than simply a statue on the top of the hill. And for those people who would like to learn more about your story, you know, fortunately there's some information that they can turn to both in, um, both in kind of convenient forms, one shorter and one longer.

But if you want to know some of the details of the York story, and it's a very interesting story, he was actually the first documented black person to, uh, to come to the area that we know as Portland today, uh, which you did in April of 1806, uh, when Lewis and Clark went to, uh, to the Pacific, uh, and then returned, uh, both going down and then up the Columbia River. They missed the mouth of the Willamette. Uh, they were told about it by an Indian group that they encountered on their way back to, uh, to the east in 1806. And that's when they sent a special party back up the river to kind of explore this new, uh, this new river that they knew, knew nothing about at that point.

And eventually went down to look to, to the Willamette, uh, in the area that we know as, uh, the Bluffs over the Willamette where University of Portland is today. So York certainly is a, uh, I think he's a very appropriate thing to recognize both the Lewis and Clark experience. And, you know, the, the part that Portland's experience is going to play in terms of being a test to that.

So what we need, if we're going to go forward is to allow people to have more access to the York story, not just a statue about York, and these are the places that they can go if they would be interested in learning more about York. One is a longer book by a man named Robert Betts. That's called *In Search of York*, Robert Betts, *In Search of York* - available often at Powells Bookstore, but certainly on Amazon and also on the Powells book, uh, website. And a shorter version of the York story appears in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* put up by the Oregon Historical Society, called *York: the corpse of discovery*. And that would be from the *Quarterly* of Fall 2003.

And if you can't get down to the society, then you can, uh, you can view it online. It's available online, uh, from *The Oregon Historical Quarterly*. So, for people who want to learn more about your, you know, those are, uh, very available and accessible ways to do that.

You know, often when I talk about, uh, race and American history and in the context of what we have come to call the cultural wars of today, uh, you know, there has been this concept called cancellation of individuals, so important people in history, important people in contemporary society.

And, often, because I talk about race and talk about black history, people have accused me both in person and in other forms of wanting to cancel out from our considerations of history - people like Lewis and Clark or people like Columbus or George Washington, or, uh, I was amazed to, uh, to find out recently that Abraham Lincoln had been added to that list.

Well, Uh, I think there was a big mistake made in the way that cancellation is being presented in the context of these arguments today, uh, for a person like me, I don't want to cancel any of those individuals from our understanding or, or, uh, are accessed to in history. I want to tell more of their stories, not less, and the way that the stories have been told in the past simply have been inaccurate and dishonest. And that's really the problem. If

you tell the full story in the context of, uh, the world, the culture, the circumstances that it emerged from, I can't see how that's going to be a negative thing. Um, and so I'm in favor of public art. I'm in favor of identifying these people. Sometimes even perhaps the worst of the people, but telling their story in a way that helps us understand the individual in the context of their time and place. And so if a York statute was going to be placed on a permanent basis, somewhere important, and I think Mount Tabor is a very appropriate location. Uh, I would be very sad to see it simply placed as, uh, a work of art in the old tradition that doesn't have an opportunity for people to learn more about the story, uh, and not cancel out the, uh, unsavory aspects of the past, but to put them in their context so that we can understand where we've come from.

Because if you don't understand where you've come from, you don't understand where you are or where you want to be and how you might want to get there. So I'm in favor of public art. I'm in favor of a permanent York, but I want it placed in a learning environment in which the York story can be really most useful to us.

[00:43:03] **Calhoun:** Thank you. I definitely agree with that vantage point. And I, it leads me to a question that I wonder do - what do you think about Harvey Scott? What do we do? What do we do with Harvey Scott?

[00:43:19] **Millner:** Right. I didn't expect to have to make that decision. Yeah. Well,

[00:43:22] **Calhoun:** I'm, I'm not trying to, I'm not trying to totally put you on the spot, but I just, I, I just, um...I

[00:43:28] **Millner:** I think, I think we have to recognize the, uh, the complete and the comprehensive and the full nature of the history that, that has preceded us. And so I'm not opposed to a statue of Harvey Scott, as long as it's a statute that does include that larger story, as I've said, not just an attempt to kind of glorify or to lionize a person like him, but to tell who he was and what he stood for and let people make their own decisions about that. But I don't, I don't think that you, I don't think that you do anything, uh, of a useful positive nature when you hide the truth.

And when you're inaccurate about the way in which you present these individuals of these earlier eras of American history, I think you tell the story, you tell it as completely as you can, you tell it honestly, and then you let people decide about how they feel about it, how they react to it.

[00:44:26] **Calhoun:** One of the conversations I have heard, um, with artists recently, that I find quite compelling is, is talking about resources and the use of resources. So if we were to re-install one of those pieces, we are continuing to commit resources to that, that perhaps should be committed in other ways, like telling stories more fully, or, you know, talking to the story about your and putting it in the context of you know, why was York left out of the story originally and how is the conversation evolving? Um, and I, and I find that to be a very compelling argument.

[00:45:13] **Millner:** Well, I would agree with that. And I would just add that you know, whatever can be said about statues and public art... uh, people do respond to them. People do react to them. Uh, I've seen the reaction of people to the, uh, to the temporary York statue.

As I walked by and overheard conversations, uh, you know, they can be a rallying point. They can be a focal point. Uh, they can have meaning for people and they can bring, bring people to look at both history and the society that we live in today in different ways. So, uh, you know, I think we have to appreciate that there is a place for that kind of a contribution that public art can make.

Um, I just don't think we've done well in the past. You know, if we, if we go forward with the concept, then we have to try to do it better.

[00:46:08] **Calhoun:** Well, yes. And acknowledge and in full force, the, the impact that hero-ized figures can have on an ongoing basis, too, especially to communities that have been left out of the narrative.

Well, I want to thank you both so much for, for joining us and for your contributions, both to -Artist, to the, the, the physical presence, to getting people up and out and, and looking at the work. And most definitely also to Professor Millner for, for inspiring this work and telling the stories and contributing to Oregon history in such a, um, eloquent and forceful way over so many years. I have, you know - big gratitude, big gratitude. Uh, any, any closing comments for either of you?

[00:47:09] **Millner:** I think we've covered the ground pretty well. The tell the truth.

[00:47:12] **Artist:** I would add that, you know, I've always, I've always known and believed that that art is completed by the audience. And, uh, in this case, I just want to thank the people of Portland for completing this art in such a complex and beautiful way. And, uh, it's been a very touching experience for me.

[00:47:32] **RACC:** Thanks so much for listening to this important conversation. You can find links to images of York and the books and articles referenced by professor Milner in the conversation notes.

It is the Regional Arts and Culture Council's responsibility to commission care for and maintain the city of Portland's Public Art collection. And we want to hear from listeners as we engage with the community and questions about what public art can mean and how it can reflect our values. Participate in the conversation by subscribing to our online newsletter at [racc.org](http://racc.org), forward slash about, forward slash newsletter.

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