

# Surrendering to racialists, Philadelphia officials cancel contract with white artist to create Harriet Tubman sculpture

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15 September 2023

The City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture and Creative Economy (OACCE) has backtracked on its offer to artist Wesley Wofford to create a sculpture of abolitionist Harriet Tubman to be permanently placed in front of City Hall. The OACCE decision, in response to attacks from right-wing, racist forces, is a shameful capitulation. The decision encourages the imposition of a de facto quota system, setting a dangerous precedent in terms of the production of artwork based on race, gender or ethnicity.

The controversy erupted in 2022, when the city hosted a sculpture of Tubman for three months outside City Hall to commemorate 200 years since the celebrated abolitionist's birth and her connection to Philadelphia, the city she first fled to when she escaped from bondage in 1849. The nine-foot, bronze "Harriet Tubman: The Journey to Freedom," a traveling sculpture depicting the famed abolitionist leading a child by the hand, was created by Emmy- and Academy Award-winning artist Wesley Wofford, who is white.

The sculpture received a very positive reaction. The media estimated that close to 4 million people either traveled to see the work or viewed it via social media. In March 2022, prompted by this positive response to Wofford's work, the city of Philadelphia's OACCE, unable to purchase this piece, offered Wofford a \$500,000 commission to design a similar sculpture to place permanently in front of City Hall.

The news of Wofford's commission drew both national and local attention and interest. The city called for a virtual public engagement session on June 15, 2022 to provide a platform for artists to discuss the sculpture and offer their feedback. However, this opening was inevitably seized on by advocates of identity politics to inject racist poison into the process.

Some of the comments from participants reveal the degraded intellectual character and fundamentally mercenary aims of upper middle class identity politics.

According to *Art Forum*, one participant, Maisha Sullivan-Ongoza of the Sankofa Artisans Guild, sought to compare Wofford to a white slave owner for daring to create an artwork based on Tubman. According to Sullivan-Ongoza, Tubman "risked life and limb to be free so that no one white person would benefit off her person. And now we have someone white benefiting off her."

Needless to say, Sullivan-Ongoza has no problem with any artist-entrepreneurs of the "proper" racial makeup financially "benefiting" off of Tubman's person. Various race-obsessed participants denounced the lack of a "process," meaning that the city did not consult them first before awarding the commission.

For his part, Wofford has argued that "Art is supposed to be a universal language that transcends gender, race and culture."

For a time, city officials defended Wofford. Kelly Lee, the director of the OACCE, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that "Philadelphia would not be commissioning this permanent Harriet Tubman statue if not for the public's positive response to Wofford's temporary statue."

The city even went so far as to publish statements online from Tubman's maternal relatives stating that the beloved abolitionist "worked with people of all races who were like-minded, and Mr. Wofford is like-minded ... Harriet Tubman stood for people of all races."

These enlightened comments were drowned out by the race zealots. Eventually, the city's Democratic Party-led government capitulated to these forces. Within a month, the city's website announced it would be going in a "new direction" with its Tubman project. "After extensive

engagement with the community and stakeholders,” it said, “the City has decided to initiate an open Call for Artists to commission a permanent statue that will be located on the North Apron at City Hall.”

The city received 50 applications. Unsurprisingly, the top finalists were all African American. The *New York Times* quoted artist Tanda Francis, one of the finalists, saying that Tubman was “an ancestor. We [black people] should be telling our story.”

On September 5, the winning sculpture was selected. It is currently being reviewed by members of the city and the Tubman estate. Results will be announced in October, with plans to install the monument by fall 2024.

There are issues of considerable historical, political and artistic importance raised by this tawdry affair.

Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), born in Dorchester County, Maryland to enslaved parents, was a major figure of the Civil War era.

Tubman is best known for guiding dozens of slaves to freedom in the North in the years following her own escape in 1849 until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. The work was immensely dangerous, and her life was in constant danger.

During the war, Tubman first served as a cook and nurse in the Union Army. She later worked as a scout and a spy. She is credited with being the first woman to lead an armed expedition, in the June 1863 raid on Combahee Ferry, South Carolina, which led to the freeing of over 750 slaves. She is widely celebrated as a remarkable fighter for human freedom.

In regard to race and art, the *Times* writes that the “controversy over the Tubman statue is part of a broader conversation in the art world about to what extent racial identity should matter.” Continuing, it argues that “Some say that artists should have the freedom to pursue their vision on any subject regardless of their race or ethnicity, while others believe that identity and expression are inextricably linked and that art about Black people should only be created by someone who has shared their history.” The *Times*’s sympathies clearly lie with the latter view. This is the newspaper that spawned the deplorable and historically false, and discredited, 1619 Project.

The Wofford-Tubman episode is only the latest in a series of race-based provocations and attacks on democratic rights in art. One of the most notorious incidents of this sort was the campaign in 2017 to censor white artist Dana Schutz at the Whitney Museum of American Art for her depiction of black youth

Emmett Till, murdered in 1955 Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: “The program of ethnic or racial particularism in art and culture, which insists that the various peoples and nationalities are incapable of communicating with and understanding one another, is thoroughly repugnant. It is part of the ‘anti-Enlightenment’ tradition, which rejects rationalism, democracy, egalitarianism and universality.”

Some 30 miles south of Philadelphia, in Wilmington, Delaware, there is a well-known, nine-foot-tall bronze sculpture of Tubman and Thomas Garrett, a prominent white figure in the Underground Railroad. Garrett assisted some 2,300 slaves to freedom over the course of four decades. According to the National Park Service, the sculpture commemorates “the trust and friendship between Quaker Thomas Garrett, and Harriet Tubman during their most critical collaborations from about 1854 through 1860.” Garrett “raised money to aid Tubman’s missions and supported her in his home.” The sculpture, entitled “Unwavering Courage in the Pursuit of Freedom,” was created for the City of Wilmington by Mario Chiodo, a white artist from the Bay Area. The sculpture is popular with local residents.

The advocates of removing white or any other color artists from the artistic process have nothing to do with the heroic struggle led by Tubman against slavery. They are traveling in an opposed direction.

One can only imagine what the reaction of such social forces would be to the appearance of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s—a white woman’s—1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were it to be published today!

The racist censorship of Wesley Wofford’s “Journey to Freedom” lifts the lid on the foul, anti-democratic swamp that makes up modern-day identity politics. It should be opposed.



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