

Blake Garland-Tirado

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted October 9, 2020

Interviewer

We want to start by asking you for a brief bio. How would you want to be introduced to a broad audience of people coming to the monument site?

Blake Garland-Tirado

So, my name is Blake. I am a master's student at Syracuse University in Religious Studies, and I started a petition to remove the statue, which, as of October 2020, is at 18,600 signatures.

Interviewer

Thank you. To start open-ended, what are your thoughts about this monument?

Blake Garland-Tirado

Based on the petition, I think the statue is completely racist. I think that it offends many Indigenous and Black people who live in Syracuse. And I think that the history of Columbus himself is a huge offense to these marginalized groups who have experienced some of the worst results of Christopher Columbus's exploits. I don't think there's a reason for us to venerate such a man with a statue in the middle of our city.

Interviewer

Thank you. You've spoken about this a little bit already, but what histories does the monument or this site represent to you, and what histories does it misrepresent?

Blake Garland-Tirado

I think, by and large, the statue misrepresents the history of Italian Americans. So, you know, Christopher Columbus was born in Italy. And I think that many Italian Americans grab on to that aspect of his past. But Christopher Columbus was—his explorations were funded by the monarchs of Spain. And his resting place is currently in Spain. And so, you know, the history of Christopher Columbus is a mixing bag between his birthplace in Italy and who he worked for. And I think that many Italian Americans tend to grab on to that. He also represents some of the worst human characteristics, you know, violence, genocide, exploitation. And I don't think these are the histories that we want to remember, that we want to hold up and view as important aspects of our collective history here.

Interviewer

Thank you. What do you want people to know about the monument that you think they might not be aware of?

Blake Garland-Tirado

I want people to know what the statue represents exactly, and the history of Christopher Columbus himself, and the history of the statue. Some of the history of the statue includes some connection with fascist regimes in Italy. I mean, the traveling cost for the statue itself was in part funded by Mussolini. And so there's a connection here between where the statue came from, who funded it, and perhaps some of the issues in fascism that we're dealing with today in America. So I think that the statute does need to be studied, it needs to be in a museum, so we can grapple with our current history, what's

happening in America today, our own history and involvement with fascist regimes. But I think people need to remember where the statue came from, who it represents, and some of the ideas that Columbus represents, which aren't great.

Interviewer

Thank you. Are there any other stories or histories that you would want people who come to the site to be aware of?

Blake Garland-Tirado

Personally, I'm African American and of Puerto Rican descent. And so Christopher Columbus has had a direct effect on my family lineage. I mean, when he stepped on Puerto Rico, which at the time he had called San Juan Bautista, he had raped many women on Puerto Rico, he had exploited the labor of many men. And he outright killed many native Puerto Ricans. And Christopher Columbus's exploits in the New World also opened up passages for the Atlantic slave trade. And so my family history is very much directly related to the terrible things that Christopher Columbus has done, and the things that he has brought to the Americas. And many people in Syracuse can attest to similar stories. So I think that people who have a positive opinion on Christopher Columbus need to remember that he has done very terrible things to many people that still have effects today.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. I think the last question I have for you is: what do you think would be ideal next steps for this site?

Blake Garland-Tirado

I think the first step that we need to do is simply remove the statue, take it down and put it in storage or something. A lot of the conversations today get caught up in what needs to replace the statue. And I

think that's going to be a conversation that we're going to have for a very long time. And I think that in this political climate where there's so much polarization and disagreement on whether a statue can be racist or not, it's something that I don't think many people today in government, and the local Syracuse government, are capable of answering. And I do think that conversations on what replaces Christopher Columbus need to be left to a future generation that might be more capable of mediating conversation and dialogue. Because personally I have no trust in today's government of Syracuse to make that decision. But yeah, I think the first step is taking down Columbus.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. That covers my main questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say or speak to that hasn't been covered in the questions so far?

Blake Garland-Tirado

Not, not off the top of my head. I don't know what else to say about it. I mean, I do think that it's—I don't want to say the word “ridiculous,” but my experience with this statue, trying to take it down, has gone on for months. And, you know, I didn't think that it would take so long or cause so much ruckus locally, to take down a statue that is blatantly offensive and racist. And it struck me that there are many people in Syracuse, who are running this city, or who have very strong ties to the government here, who do hold very racist viewpoints and values at their core. I mean, how can someone be okay with a statue to someone who caused genocide and the Atlantic slave trade? I don't know how anyone can actually be okay with that. And I think it speaks more to the people who wish to see it standing than it does about the people who seem to be fighting extremely hard to take it down. The fight shouldn't be like this, you know. I think it's kind of sad that this is the conversation we have to have, of whether a statue to someone who didn't discover anything, who killed millions or caused the death of millions of people and enslaved people, continues to stand tall in a very important part of the city's downtown area, in front of a church of all places. So yeah, I just think it's really sad.

Interviewer

Absolutely, that's certainly understandable. Thank you so much for sharing your views on the statue and being willing to answer these questions.

Blake Garland-Tirado

No problem. Thank you for reaching out to me.

Biography

My name is Blake and I am a master's student at Syracuse University in Religious Studies. I started the petition to remove the Columbus statue in downtown Syracuse, which as of April 2021, sits at roughly 18,700 signatures.