



S3:E7 A MONUMENTAL PULL

Paul Farber in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Stephanie Fortunato: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and the Global Cultural Districts Network in which we explore what's happening around the world at those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato, director of Special Projects for GCDN. I'm speaking to you from Rhode Island, the ancestral land of the Narragansett, the Pokanoket, the Nipmuc, and other Indigenous peoples. I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here and to all the First Nations people on the many lands of which we're listening today.

My guest today is Paul Farber, someone whom I've hoped to speak with almost since we started this podcast. He's a brilliant curator, historian, and educator from Philadelphia, which is also home to Monument Lab, the non-profit public art and history studio, which Paul co-founded in 2012, and of which he continues to lead as director.

Paul and his collaborators at Monument Lab have contributed so much to the field and our wider appreciation for monuments as symbols of power and privilege through their scholarly and artistic research. Their pioneering studies, artistic projects, and provocations in public spaces have helped open up new and important ways for communities to engage in public conversation about past and present, all while imagining an abundance of new possibilities for the future, which some of you may also know is my jam.

Paul is co-curating an exciting new exhibition with Dr. Salamishah Tillet for the National Mall in Washington DC that will open up later this summer, and I'm very grateful that he is with us on The Three Bells today to talk about it. Hello, Paul!

[00:01:45]

Paul Farber: Stephanie, it's so great to be here with you and talk to you again and, um, what a treat to be in conversation.

[00:01:51]

Stephanie Fortunato: You know, I have been following your career for a few years now.



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Stephanie Fortunato: Um, fortunate to have some mutual friends and, and to have been in contact with you in the past. Uh, but I really first became aware of the work when Monument Lab installed sculpture by Terry Adkins, alongside an outdoor classroom at Philadelphia City Hall plaza that invited members of the public to submit proposals for monuments.

You know, at that time I was grappling with the complex legacy of ad-hoc decision making that had been made over time in Providence. Um, and that really was our inherited commemorative landscape there. And I was having a really hard time interesting others and helping to sort out what had happened, let alone have a conversation about how we could standardise the process and do better.

And I remember reading about this Philadelphia project and thinking what you and your collaborators did was just so compelling, a bold and direct action in civic space, and I really admired that. So how did you decide to use your scholarly and artistic practice to investigate monuments?

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Paul Farber: Well, it's been quite a journey and as you mentioned the word team, you know, I get to work with such a remarkable group of collaborators - artists, researchers students and teachers. And I think that really characterises all of this, that, you know, a lot of Monument Lab was the idea of kind of finding your people. No matter what the sector may be, but what are the shared spaces? What are the shared values and what are the real intentions that you want to put out there? And I think, you know, from the beginning, or even before the beginning I went to do a PhD because I wanted to teach, write, and do the work of social change.

And I knew I could do that in an academic setting, though that's challenging in its own right. But I also knew I could do it outside of that academic setting. And I think that grounding, especially with mentors who care deeply about the book and about the classroom, but also like the question of who and why, who you're responsible to, it really set me in a path.

And you know, I think early on, I think that you know defining your people that included you know, meeting Ken Lum. At a time where I was finishing up my PhD and figuring out next steps, and um, he's the co-founder of Monument Lab and we became really kindred spirits before there ever was a monument lab.

People like Laurie Allen, who I grew up a few blocks away from in Philadelphia, but we didn't meet until we both were working at Haverford College and um, was our first research director. People like Sue Mobley, who's our current research director in New Orleans and just so many other people. I think the key part here was the questions that we're asking ourselves.

There's not one answer. But the multitude of responses and the kind of chorus of people sharing, is a good thing. That rather than looking for single fixes, how do you respond in ways that are deeply local that care a lot about the matters at hand, but also work with the parameters that you have.



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Paul Farber: And in the very beginning, Monument Lab was a classroom experiment. We utilise the space of the classroom. Things you can't do in a classroom and things you can. And I think, you know, just again, those relationships really grounded our work and got us started. But they also carry us through today.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I just love that. I have to say, what you did in Philadelphia – I remember looking at all of that and I was just rereading some of the creative speculations, and it's really like a love letter to Philadelphia, but by the people of Philadelphia, and that's such a beautiful thing to be able to put that out for people to respond to.

[00:05:45]

Paul Farber: I mean, yeah, it was, it was a love letter. And let me say, you know about love, love's a complicated thing.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs) You said it.

Paul Farber: Well, hey we all live in it, whether we say it or not. And that love means having deep pride from where you're from and also learning about what you don't know. And listening to what needs to be heard.

It also is wrestling with the challenges. And I think, you know, Philadelphia is a city like many of the places that we live, a profound dualities and complexities. It's a home of freedom in which enslavement and land dispossession are braided through. It's a place of home for so many people and displacement. And it's a place where the blueprint for democracy was laid down in a way that it is yet to be completed. Now nearly 250 years later and I think that love letter to the city and the various love letters from artists who were from here, or artists who had something to add. They weren't from here, but they wanted to share a love letter from their own city.

I think that really set up that framework. And I appreciate you bring in that notion of love, not just because we're the city of brotherly love and sisterly affection, but the necessities, the responsibility that come from that. And I think what struck me powerfully and still does to this day, is the more that we at Monument Lab in the very beginning, tried to understand the past, present, and future of our city, we were speaking to fellow Philadelphians in really amazing ways that broke down legacies of division and boundary. But we also started hearing some people in other cities, New Orleans, Chicago, LA, and elsewhere that said, okay, well, as you're getting to know your city, I'm actually sharing with you what I'm doing in mine.

And that's been a path to respect local knowledge and expertise at the same time as building coalitions with people across locations.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, you've engaged this huge network of collaborators, of partners, artists, students, activists across cities, but I am kind of interested in something that I read on Monument Lab's value statement.



[00:08:03]

Stephanie Fortunato: And it is a statement that you wrote about collaboration with boundaries, right? You say, 'We are committed to working with individuals, organisations, and institutions, but only build trusting relationships with those that share values and honour a collective sense of process.' It feels to me that this is such a wise criterion for moving forward collectively and thoughtfully, but also seems incredibly challenging to uphold this value in practice, like in public with real community members.

And I just wonder like how do you apply this will, how do you structure processes and creative explorations that allow for the space needed to intentionally bring partners together to invite participation fully and critically in an age when conversations about monuments are so emblematic of the great divisions and mistrust that can be present in society?

Tell me, how do you do it? (laughs) Small question, right?

[00:08:59]

Paul Farber: (laughs) How much time do we have? We could go, we could do the whole podcast in this. No I, I appreciate and that, that value that we shaped with our staff several years ago and we've kind of kept with us since. It's a really important one. You know, we've collaborated with hundreds of organisations, artists, collectives, and there is great mutuality in what we do together. And there are different things that keep us tick or we have to contend with.

And I think that we can be in a space for any of us as collaborators, you know, climbing almost all of our projects in some kind of way. We can do so mindfully, not just of the great things we can do together, but of the boundaries and the gaps. Like, you know, it's a matter of understanding that like when Monument Lab is going through something, whether good or bad, we want to understand a way to share the energy properly with those around us and appropriately. And it doesn't mean that making our problems everyone else's to solve is the way, but we also do want partners who will recognise that, recognise our sense of timing.

Like if we're closed for the week, because we have a staff retreat. We let you know that, you respect that and you say that's great. I hope it works out and let us know on the other side. I think that one of the biggest factors in this notion of collaboration with boundaries is about recognising power differentials, and I mean power, not in some static sense that only certain people have power and some don't. But you know, and then just to be clear, like we started as a classroom project and we were a passion project long before a monument or a lab. And we're now in a really fortunate position to be able to have full-time staff.

The majority of our time we didn't, so we're, we're in a different role now, like we'll work with institutions that are much bigger than us. And we try to figure out like what's the right differential in terms of not just what we do together, but what we do separately.

When we work with a grassroots collective or an artist or sometimes we're going to do that on behalf of a larger institution, like a state government or a museum, and we got to shift our power in another way and say, all right, like, what is something that we can actually absorb or handle.



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Paul Farber: And that has sometimes been making sure that artists have insurance so that they watch out to not indemnify themselves to think about research needs and to recognise that there's sometimes that we actually can't fix the problem. And that's okay.

I think that idea really to me points this notion of coalition. Coalition doesn't have to be permanent, they're about understanding the bigger picture. They're about getting tasks done or holding together moments and movements in both.

And so I think with that mindset, we try to do our best, and I will not say we are perfect like that, but we've tried to remove perfect from the goal set. Because perfect is a pitfall to say the least, but it is about trying to figure out what are the boundaries, and the boundaries are healthy for healthy relationships too.

And I think this is just an ongoing learning process and as we move forward, I can tell you like we've just had the great opportunity to work with some partners and especially some artists who share the best of collaboration. Those moments of revelation, insight, purpose, we are doing it.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah.

Paul Farber: And they help us set a high mark for it because they also have separate lives and we can wish them the best in that and we can appreciate what they're doing outside of our collaboration.

And make sure that we incorporate that into the overall relationship as well.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I love the way that you centre the purpose of what you're doing together and the purpose of doing that in sort of a time-bound constraint, right? Like creating coalitions to get something done and then celebrating those relationships and what everyone is bringing to the table. We're better together, I guess, is what I'm saying. (laughs)

[00:13:05]

Paul Farber: Yeah. And with boundaries too, because there are sometimes where let's be real, like the relationship is not mutually nourishing or beneficial, or is uneven and disproportionate and the way that things get done, like I, and so I believe it. I love the power of that.

But Stephanie, I'll also take a moment, I'll tell you something that um, is a pet peeve of mine?

Is the email that says, can I pick your brain?

Stephanie Fortunato: Mm.



[00:13:31]

Paul Farber: And I'll tell you why. There's a few reasons. One is it just sounds weird. Like, wait, do you want to appreciate the brain? You want to pick at it? Okay. But even more so, it's not a relationship build.

Stephanie Fortunato: No, yeah.

Paul Farber: But if saying there's a transaction here and there is a one way, I have to say I have great mentors and mentees.

And those relationships, we are activating one another's brains all the time, and we are asking favours of each other, like, that's a kind of interdependency, that's a beautiful thing about relationships, but you don't do that with people you don't know.

Stephanie Fortunato: Right.

Paul Farber: And so I think like one of the best ways to get to know someone and have the opportunity to mutually energise one another's brains, is to read their work or read their material or figure out what they care about. Find when it is appropriate and when the timing is right and the compatibility is there to find a way to have coffee or, tea and it's not just when you need something.

You know, relationships of all kinds are about timing and compatibility, and as many of us know, sometimes you've had one and not the other. But I think that those are the moments, those are really energising when it's not the call 'Can I pick your brain?' or when someone says that, like, oh, I want to steal that idea, it's like...

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs) No!

Paul Farber: Cringe! Cite, cite the idea. Share the idea.

Stephanie Fortunato: Right, right. Engage!

Paul Farber: Yeah, like, I mean, you got to come correct a little bit. And I think you know, we all sometimes overstep a boundary and then you try to say, oh, you know what? My bad, let me peel it back. Let me reset myself. Because it's hard. It's a lot of spoken and unspoken things, but that's the beauty of a moment where there is kismet synchronicity; synchronicity meaning same place, same time, same way.

Which is that for where you are in that moment and when you are in that moment. You and another person or group of people are able to see, hear one another as equals and also recognise the inequities that may be part of that, right? And recognise the inferences and the baggage of that, and nonetheless, find a way to connect and see a way through.

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MUSIC TRANSITION



[00:15:51]

Stephanie Fortunato: So you are co-curating the pilot art exhibition for this new Beyond Granite initiative. Can you tell me a little bit about this?

[00:16:00]

Paul Farber: Yeah, I mean this is, you know, kind of a project in the lifetime. It is part of an initiative run by the Trust for the National Mall, the National Park Service, and the National Capital Planning Commission. It's about understanding and kind of bringing forward new perspectives for the National Mall and understanding the ways that our activism protest, public gathering, have long been a part of the mall.

You know, when Monument Lab was brought on as the curatorial partner, we reached out to Salamishah Tillet, who's a dear friend and mentor and collaborator to join us. And so she and I are serving as co-curators, and we really, you know, tried to root ourselves in the multiple histories on the mall, and we really focused on Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter Sunday performance against the backdrop of segregated DC and a performance in front of 70,000 people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

That, to this day, resounds and echoes as a profound statement of power and presence. And you know, when we were reflecting on Marian Anderson's performance and thinking about the power of art, the power of song, we encountered this quote by educator Mary McLeod Bethune, who was present that day. She described what it felt like to be there, and she called it a 'pulling together of real democracy'.

And so we titled the exhibition *Pulling Together* as a way to kind of put forward a vision for how artists working in public spaces can help us understand our past, our present, our future. This is a project that you know, we really wanted to rise to the occasion and make it timely. And it's hard to pull together projects this fast. We've been working on it for – while the idea has been circulating among the project, we're partners for some time, we've really been working on it for about a year and a half.

We've been so, lucky to work with this group of six artists, Derrick Adams, Tiffany Chung, Ashon Crawley, vanessa german, Paul Ramírez Jonas, and Wendy Red Star, who went fast into action. And seeing what the artists are coming up with, you know, you'll see six powerful projects that are speaking to one another and to this moment and other moments. And I think, you know, at the heart of what we try to do, we like projects that have a question, that don't have a one answer, but have a multitude of possibilities.

And the question we ask all our artists, and we'll be asking people who come to the exhibition, is what stories remain untold on the National Mall? And let's be really clear that a story that may be told many times over may not rise to the level of spotlight resourcing recognition, but is nonetheless there.

And so what we wanted to do is really capture that as a tension and allow the artists to mark presence and absence. And it's just, while this is a profound lift and a, like a collaborative one you know, at the highest degree, what gets us as a team going, seeing how the artists have responded to that question and are bringing their best. They're bringing beauty, they're bringing truth, they're bringing justice, they're bringing participation to a space that has a very complex history.



[00:19:44]

Paul Farber: It's a place of great civic pride. It's also a space that has the legacies of enslavement and land dispossession, and has been traumatised over time, and I think it's those visions of whether it's Marian Anderson in 1939, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 or AIDS activism in the late eighties and early nineties, especially by those with the AIDS Memorial Quilt and ACT UP nearby the mall.

That's what's grounded us to keep focused on what's necessary and what's possible at this space.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, it's so beautiful. I mean, it's just such a beautiful prompt and what that inspiration of using that moment of Marian Anderson performing on the mall, it's such a, it speaks really, I think to the ephemeral nature of the National Mall as a space, right? The ephemeral and the lingering memories that can come from experiencing something with others in an iconic space, something powerful that can happen from that.

Do you think about iconoclasm or do you just, you have to kind of like put that out of your mind when you're approaching these projects?

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Paul Farber: The question I ask myself, and I want to ask with artists is like, what's our relationship to the monument landscape that we've inherited, and what are the ways that we feel that we have a stake, that we have the power to change things. And we may not have the power to change it all, like in a snap or in a magic wand but we can be part of collectives that can do that.

When we're approaching the National Mall project, you know, I think we were thinking a lot about the ways that granite, marble, bronze, especially on the National Mall, is made most fully active and vital when people have come there to long for and demand fuller freedom. You know, there are, the Lincoln Memorial is iconic and the words that Dr. King delivered in 1963 are inscribed into the marble after an Act of Congress made that possible. But I'll tell you that um, because I've been underneath the Lincoln Memorial, there's always a puddle right around on top where Dr. King and Marian Anderson stood, and when you go underneath, you see a stalactite forming. That peoples' presence on that site has changed the marbling granite. So what are the ways that when we don't have the time, the money, or the official power or the you know, ability to enact change? What do we do?

Well, you gather around monuments that exist or you build your own, and that's how you make your presence felt. So for this project I have to say like, you're not going to make a project that's bigger than some of the monuments we've inherited, but how do you work with the sight lines? How do you find symbolic spaces?

How do you tap histories and then create an experience for people who have either been to the mall many times, or those who are coming for the first time, or those who even read about it, you know, in a far off place, that they understand power and presence in different ways based on what an artist wanted to bring to the surface?



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Stephanie Fortunato: And you're returning to a structure and form that I think you've used in the past that I think really successfully allows you to sort of approach this iconic space in a sort of experimental way.

Thinking about prototyping, how did you come to this idea of prototyping as the form that allows us to investigate possibilities in new ways?

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Paul Farber: Over a decade's worth of work in monuments, what I can tell you is that no monument is permanent. They have the aura of permanence. They all require money, maintenance and mindsets to keep them up, as I will often say. And I say that in part, to share that with others, but I say it to myself because there is something about being in front of something that, that stands well over you. Or when you physically touch it and embrace it, it doesn't shake or move that you say, what if, this has been here forever? What if this will be here forever? And yet, truly the history of monuments as you may already know or you can easily find out, is that monuments change all the time.

They change, of course, because of weather, because of their physical conditioning. Most agreements with fabricators who are putting out bronze structures often have a life of 15 to 20 years before drastic renovation or preservation will be needed, and they often need constant care.

And so you started to realise, actually all monuments are prototypes. Very few in history have survived without iteration. Meaning, without preservation, without addition, without extra landscaping, without changes to that, without moving them from one place to another.

Some of the monuments from antiquity had been stashed in like secret places during war and conflict, or even like fell into a latrine and got preserved for centuries. You have other moments where a public art project gets put out for a temporary basis and then fundamentally changes the story of a place, the love statue in Philadelphia.

Not too far from our offices here at Monument Lab was a temporary project and now you can't imagine the city without it. And so I think what we tried to do is to, rather than take on the binary of temporary versus permanence and reify that binary, instead say, let's actually operate in the middle, because that's truly where we are. Yes, some things are more fleeting and ephemeral than others, but it doesn't mean that they don't make an impact. And likewise some of the things that are slated for so-called permanence become obsolete or become something that doesn't stick around.

You know, we hear in this debate of like, well, like what do we do with monuments and we don't want to remove history. One, history doesn't live inside of statues. History lives with people, and I don't hear that uproar when neighbourhoods, especially black and brown neighbourhoods are uprooted for the purposes of urban renewal or gentrification. That's history in even a more large scale way. And it's palpable.



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Paul Farber: And so I think, I want to see a spirit of not just this kind of critical reflection that monuments are far more complex than we think. They're central to our cities and towns, to our zeitgeists, but they're very complicated and misunderstood, but also to appreciate that innovation is a good thing. Testing is a good thing because that's what we're constantly trying to do. We're iterating on our democracy just as we're iterating on the symbols of our democracy. So that as Claes Oldenburg once said, that proposing monuments is like composing with a city.

So I think the idea of the prototype for us gives access to artists to be hopefully more able to embrace the experimentation even as they take on the responsibilities of representation in a city. And I think, you know, our prototypes have had different kind of outcomes. We've seen some of our prototypes be adopted as public art in a more enduring way. We've seen some of the prototypes lead to artists being brought on for Percent for Art projects, and sometimes the prototype just opens up a conversation that leads to policy change or different sets of relationships, and all the above are welcomed by us.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: What are some of the themes that are coming out? If you can give us a little foreshadowing on the proposals that, that you've been working on here um, what are some of the themes that the installations on the National Mall will explore?

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Paul Farber: For the projects on the mall, that will be up August 18th through September 18th, because that allows us to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the march on Washington.

What we'll see are projects like vanessa german's Of Thee We Sing, which is this innovative statue of Marian Anderson that honours her powerful 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert held up by a sea of hands and historic photos. Um, Let Freedom Ring by Paul Ramírez Jonas, which also kind of picks up on the Marian Anderson connection because it's an interactive bell tower where passers-by can play a monumental bell and share their own stories of freedom. And it plays My Country, 'Tis of Thee, which is a song that Marian Anderson sang, which Dr. King cited in 1963's I Have a Dream speech. But for this installation, it plays all but the last note. So the song is unfinished. You come up to it and you ring the bell to finish the song.

And, you know, working with these artists like Paul Ramírez Jonas is such a gift because he's going to bring to life something. We've, you know, I live in a city of a famous for a bell that's broken. You never get to ring it yourself, and here's going to be an opportunity. It's symbolically lives with you and it resonates.

And you have to figure out, like when you make a declaration, that's one of the ways that you get to be in this spot to ring the bell is what do you want to be free from? And what do you want to be free to? And those are questions that the artist wants us to ponder. Um, and everyone will leave with some kind of takeaway of their own state.



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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, it's so good. Going to inspire so many rituals and ceremonies and thinking, ugh, wonderful.

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Paul Farber: Yeah, and then, and you know, there's Wendy Red Star's *The Soil You See*, is a monumental fingerprint that's around eight or nine feet tall that really takes on the legacy for her of, um you know, she's of the Crow nation and she's bringing forward the names of Crow Chiefs who signed treaties with the US government in dialogue with the nearby signers of Declaration of Independence Memorial and putting them in conversation. So, each of them are creating a world to operate within, and to see the world that we're in now and draw these, all these kinds of relationships.

So those are, those are just a few examples. But you know, whether you're like, we want people to come to the mall, I should also say that, you know, a few different, kind of prominent entry points at the mall near the Smithsonian Metro, near The Lockkeeper's House, we're going to be setting up welcome centres where local artists and educators will be asking the same question that we're asking our artists: What stories remain untold on the National Mall? And having like multi-generational and multilingual experiences that not only allows you to see the art, but to offer your own stories as well.

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, my god. Paul, what a dream job. This is amazing.

Paul Farber: I feel lucky every day. It's hard work, but there's so much joy and purpose and at it, I get to work with some remarkable people.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, you have definitely established a beautiful practice that invites those remarkable people in, and in such generative ways, and you're living in this sweet spot of possibilities, imagining futures, histories with contemporary artists, with communities. I just want to thank you so much for the work that you're doing and for joining me today to talk about it. It's really been a delight.

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Paul Farber: Stephanie, thank you so much, and your questions as always, when we get a chance to talk, are so nourishing and full, and I'm so excited to hopefully see you on the mall and get a chance to talk again soon.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yes! I'm going to look for flights. (laughs) It's so great. Well, thank you so much. I can't wait to see the selected artists installations on the National Mall.

The *Pulling Together* exhibition is scheduled to open on August 18th in Washington DC. We'll have those details on our show page where you can also find other episodes of this podcast.

[00:32:21]

MUSIC TRANSITION



[00:32:26]

Stephanie Fortunato: I hope my conversation with Paul Farber opened new meditations for you about public history, public space, power, privilege and how working with artists can elevate and invite more nuanced, more inclusive perspectives about moments in time, issues, places, ideas that are dynamic, ever-changing and impossible to fix or bound by time and space. It sure did for me.

And because my co-host and I often try to wrestle with big existential challenges on The Three Bells, I wanted to use this time in that spirit for a personal reflection about a monument that matters to me.

Patience and Fortitude are the marble lions on the steps of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. I've just learned from the library's website that they were designed by sculptor Edward Clark Potter, and carved by the Piccirilli brothers using pink Tennessee marble. Their names have changed over time. And it was Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who first called them Patience and Fortitude for the qualities that he felt New Yorkers would need to survive the economic depression of the 1930s.

My grandmother, who was born in Brooklyn in 1920 and who took almost as much pride in New York as the things that she collected over her lifetime, would frequently remind us that she was a product of The Depression. My grandmother, is the reason that the lions are significant to me.

Santina Gullo known to family and friends as "Santa" up until she turned 70 and then decided she wanted to be called Tina, was the daughter of Italian immigrants who came to the United States from Sicily via Ellis Island like many others, although of course not all. She fell in love with learning at a very young age, and always expressed gratitude for that kindergarten teacher who saw something in her, who taught her to speak English and for inspiring her to be a great student, a lifelong learner, and a teacher herself later in life.

Honestly, we should thank her too. It was important to my great-grandmother that my grandmother attend college. She herself worked as a seamstress making samples for some of the big fashion houses in New York, and she did okay for herself purchasing a brownstone in Brooklyn where the family lived for many years.

But she valued education and wanted a different life for her children. So my grandmother attended Brooklyn College where she studied the classics. She wrote about Dante's Inferno, and I have her dog-eared Italian dictionary on my desk as a token, or maybe I should say a personal monument from this time in her life.

My grandparents met at Brooklyn College. They started dating at a time when they needed chaperones to go out in public. And like all young people in love, they found a workaround. They would tell their Sicilian families that they had to study, and then they would go and meet at the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue.

This story about a slightly rebellious act was so out of character with the steady people that I knew as grandma and grandpa, and always stands to remind me of their humanity, their youthful pursuits and indiscretions, and how that led to my beginning.



[00:35:34]

Stephanie Fortunato: So to this day, whenever I'm in the city, I feel compelled to pay my respects to my grandparents not by going to the cemetery, but by swinging by to visit with patience and fortitude.

These lion sculptures are meaningful to me in ways that many other monuments are not. They prompt me to think about the role that this library has played in so many New Yorkers lives, and more generally what these palaces for the people can offer communities. I think about learning, I think about the indigenous understanding that our experiences and decisions are linked to the seven generations past and the seven generations ahead.

I think about the "American Dream" and the ways in which my family's story reflects the myth, the places and points of privilege where it diverges and converges. Mostly though, I think about my grandmother, how much I miss her. I find being there deeply comforting. Grandma passed the month before I started grad school and started working on these things in earnest professionally.

I was working part-time for the Rhode Island Black Storytellers then. An organisation dedicated to promoting the awareness, appreciation, and application of black storytelling in Rhode Island through performance, education, and cultural experiences. One of the co-founders, storyteller, Valerie Tutson, shared a dear thought with me at the time that I have cherished and tried to pass along to others since. She said, no one is dead unless or until he or she is forgotten. Now, she often shares that in connection with a folk tale from Liberia. And while I wish I knew that story to tell, what is perhaps most appropriate here is the call to remember by sharing the stories of what and who is important, saying the names of those who have been lost can be such a powerful political act of resistance, as well as a deeply personal prompt for remembering.

We don't really need another monument to remember anything, but if you find one that matters to you, one that speaks to you, spend some time with the memories. Objects cannot compete with the impermanence of human life, but sometimes they can help ground us in profoundly human and important ways.

Monuments are more than just aesthetic objects and official histories. More than just representation of places and the context of their installations. Monuments are about the people who bring them to life and the communities that take the time to make sure that the stories continue to be told. I want to thank Monument Lab for their work, and I want to thank my grandmother for all that she gave me.

The Three Bells is produced by the AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. This podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. It will help others find it too.

I'm Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you so much for joining me. Until next time, onward.

[00:38:40]

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