
York of the Corps of Discovery

Interpretations of York's Character and His Role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1803, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark assembled a diverse company to accomplish a task set for them by President Thomas Jefferson and authorized by Congress — to travel from the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Coast, crossing outside the borders of the United States to describe an unfamiliar landscape, to find a viable commercial route across the continent, and to establish relations with unknown Native peoples. Joining the two captains and the soldiers they had recruited for the expedition was York, Clark's black slave. By winter, the Corps of Discovery had been joined by a French Canadian, Toussaint Charbonneau, who would serve as an interpreter, and a young Indian woman called Sacagawea. The western frontier has always been notable for its interracial and intercultural complexity, and the Corps of Discovery reflected that reality. The diversity of the Corps, according to historian James P. Ronda, is one of the reasons the expedition has such appeal for modern Americans. “[I]t's not just a white man's army,” Ronda writes, “but rather a group of people from many different racial, ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds. . . . This is a crazy quilt that was and is America.”¹

One of the most interesting and useful stories to emerge about the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition is that of York, who participated fully in the journey and contributed in significant ways to its success. Because race has played such a complex and powerful part in American history, York's story can take us beyond the particulars of the expedition to an exploration of the racial realities and dynamics of American



The Naming of Mt. Jefferson (1988), a bronze by Michael Florin Dente, portrays York on the far right, along with William Clark (middle) and an unnamed American Indian (left). The sculpture is located on the University of Portland campus in Portland, Oregon.

life. It is also useful to examine how York is portrayed in the scholarly and popular writing that has been published in the two hundred years since 1805–1806. Those images and characterizations offer insight into the racial preoccupations of individual scholars and writers and the nation's collective obsession with race.

The Lewis and Clark expedition was not the first overland journey across the North American continent. As early as the 1530s, four Spanish *conquistadors*, the last survivors of a failed expedition to conquer Florida in 1528, traveled across the continent from Florida to Mexico on a route that transversed the present-day American Southwest.² In 1792, over a dozen years before Lewis and Clark journeyed west, fur-trader Alexander McKenzie led a party of approximately ten adventurers across Canada to the Pacific Ocean.³ And Lewis and Clark's journey did not represent the first time a significant American presence had been established in the Oregon Country. That distinction more properly falls to Captain Robert Gray, who led sailing expeditions to present-day Oregon in 1788 and 1792.⁴ On his 1792 voyage, Gray is credited with being the first non-Native to enter the major river of the Pacific Northwest, which he named Columbia after his ship. There were undoubtedly other white explorers who traveled through the far west of the North American continent before 1805 whom we will never know anything about.⁵

If Lewis and Clark do not have the distinction of being first, what, then, was the significance of the expedition and what makes it different from the explorations that preceded it? Part of the difference is in the voluminous record the two captains kept of their activities and observations. It is the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition — along with the field notes, maps, collections of specimens, and other documents of the journey — that are the most remarkable and lasting product of that experience. And it is through the journals that we find the clearest and best-marked path to an understanding of York. As we re-examine the York of the journals, however, it is necessary to clear up some long-standing misconceptions.

As a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, York was the first documented black American slave to travel across the continent. Each qualifying adjective is necessary. York was not the first black nor the first slave to cross the continent or be involved in western exploration. That distinction falls to Esteban, or Estevanico, one of the four Spaniards who as part of the shipwrecked expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez crossed from Florida to Mexico in the 1530s.⁶ The first blacks may have come to present-day Oregon as early as 1579, although they did not cross the continent to get there. There is some evidence that Englishman Francis Drake landed on the Oregon coast in that year. Drake may have sojourned at Little Whale Cove, near present-day Depoe Bay, for an extended period as he made his ships ready for the trans-Pacific voyage home to England, becoming the first Englishman to sail around the world. There is clear evi-



The Corps of Discovery took many trade items and gifts along with them, including medals that depicted President Thomas Jefferson on one side and the message of “peace” and “friendship” that they hoped to convey to Native peoples they encountered. York’s role in those encounters was often instrumental in calming fears and avoiding hostilities.

dence in Spanish colonial archives that among Drake’s crew on that voyage were at least four black men and one black woman. Should Drake’s visit to Oregon be authenticated, those people would represent the beginning of the Oregon black experience.⁷

At present, the earliest black person that we know was in Oregon was associated with Captain Robert Gray’s first expedition to the Pacific Coast in 1788. In a violent encounter with the Native residents of Tillamook Bay, one of Gray’s crewmen was killed. His name was Markus Lopus, and he was a black man. When his death was recorded in the ship’s log by Robert Haswell, Lopus became the first documented black person in Oregon history.⁸ There are additional references to blacks in Native oral traditions that precede even Lopus. So, while York was an important figure in western exploration and Oregon history, his distinction lies not in being the first of his kind here.⁹

It is, therefore, important not to consider York as an exotic aberration of his time and place. In fact, considering the racial realities of the first generations of Americans, it would be surprising if someone like York had not been a part of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Black slaves represented a significant percentage of the nation’s population in the first national census in 1790. More particularly, within the geographic and social elite

that dominated national politics at the time, slaveholding was a widely practiced and socially accepted behavior. Most of the country's black population lived under the control of a slaveholding class that also controlled the national government. Virginia, where the Clark family had its roots, was 41 percent black in 1790. The number of blacks within the total population in that first census, at 19 percent, was second only to people of English descent as a recognizable group in the new nation.¹⁰

Thomas Jefferson himself, the energy behind the Lewis and Clark expedition, was a slaveholder of long standing when he sent Lewis and Clark west, and he would continue to hold slaves until his death in 1826. Some of Jefferson's slaveholding behavior would generate a family controversy regarding his relationship with one of his female slaves, Sally Hemmings, a controversy that lingers on to this generation. Like Jefferson, the men who formed the United States constitution in 1787 grappled with the role of blacks and slavery in the new nation, rigging together a series of compromises over how blacks would be counted, the fate of fugitive slaves, the status of the slave trade, and guarantees that the new government had a responsibility to put down slave insurrections. The presence of York on the expedition merely reflected the degree to which blacks were an intimate and often important part of national events and the dynamics of the Lewis and Clark generation.

In addition to re-examining the role that York played in the expedition and other aspects of his life, it is also useful to analyze the way the York story has been shaped and presented in the two hundred years that followed the expedition. In essence, for each generation since 1805–1806, the York story has been presented in a form that reflects the interracial behaviors, politics, and dynamics of that generation. The scholarly treatment of York can be categorized into two broad interpretive traditions: the “Sambo” and the “superhero.”

In the Sambo tradition, York's role and contributions are systematically reduced to behavior that was considered fitting and appropriate for an individual who is passively and submissively content in a condition of chattel slavery. The Sambo stereotype of the black male evolved as a way for pro-slavery advocates to defend that institution by proclaiming that slavery was the proper condition for blacks to occupy because it was consistent with their natural inferiority. This characterization began to appear in the founding father generation shortly after the American Revolution as the contradictions inherent in the establishment of a slave state in the emerging democracy became apparent. It gained strength through the

antebellum era and climaxed in the Reconstruction years following the Civil War when many advocates of anti-black activities relied upon it to justify creating a subordinate role for former slaves. According to the stereotype, Sambos possessed an inherent set of personal characteristics, qualities, and inclinations that defined both their capabilities and their aspirations. All of this made it apparent that slavery was the best condition for blacks to occupy, not only for the good of the general society but also for the good of the Sambo. In this tradition of scholarship, the York story functioned to validate current racial theories and behaviors imposed on blacks by a dominant and hostile majority population. A black man such as York could not have appeared to be manly and heroic, as white members of the expedition were portrayed, because that characterization would have called into question the theories and practices of prevalent racial public policy. As a result, the creation of York as Sambo often relied on quite questionable techniques, such as ignoring the positive aspects of York's character and his contributions, distorting some incidents to cast them in the most unfavorable light possible, and projecting onto York unsubstantiated qualities such as a thick "Negro" dialect and an insatiable sexual appetite.

Within the "superhero" school of interpretation, York has been elevated to near superhuman status and his contributions to the expedition were unsurpassed by others in the Corps of Discovery. The superhero York is the quintessential role model, a courageous, ingenious, brave, and self-sacrificing black hero who has overcome all of the obstacles that slavery and a hostile frontier threw at him. This York ultimately prevails; he is a figure not only for blacks to admire but also for them to emulate. The practitioners of the superhero tradition were no less willing than those in the Sambo tradition to sacrifice accepted scholarly methodologies to further their objectives.

Of the two traditions, the Sambo tradition dominated the presentation of York for most of the past two hundred years, and it still can be detected in some treatments of him during the bicentennial observation. The superhero tradition is most closely associated with the Civil Rights era of the mid-twentieth century, but it too can be detected in the scholarship that has appeared since that time. Examples of the Sambo tradition especially continue to shape the modern portrait of York, and material that has long been out of print or little used is being rediscovered or reissued as the excitement surrounding the bicentennial grows.

Paul Russell Cutright has suggested that the literature about the Lewis and Clark expedition can be categorized into adult nonfiction, adult fic-

tion, juvenile accounts, and periodicals.¹¹ It is also possible to distinguish between the popular and scholarly literature on the expedition. Much of the popular literature falls into the category of adult fiction, especially at the turn of the twentieth century. A typical early example of the portrayal of York as a passive, happy slave is found in *The Conquest: The True Story of Lewis and Clark*, published in 1903 by Eva Emery Dye. Even though Dye's work was romanticized historical fiction, many readers nevertheless accepted it as historical fact because of the extensive research Dye had conducted. In the book, York is presented as a loyal servant who refused to be separated from his beloved master even after Clark supposedly freed him at the end of the expedition. Dye described Clark's journey to the East upon his return to wed Julia Hancock and included this vision of York:

York had followed silently through all the journey — York, no longer a slave, for in consideration of his services on the expedition the General had given him his freedom. But as a voluntary body-guard he would not be parted from his master. "For sho'! who cud tek cah o' Mars Clahk so well as old Yawk?"¹²

Several points are notable here. First, recent scholarship has clearly shown that Clark did not free York when the expedition returned to St. Louis. Instead, Clark kept York an unwilling and increasingly bitter and hostile slave for perhaps ten years after the expedition ended.

Second, there is no evidence that York used the "Negro dialect" that Eva Emery Dye attempts to reproduce in the novel. York's lifelong position as Clark's body servant, which placed him in more intimate contact with the master class of the "big house" than with the "field hand" element of plantation life, suggests his language patterns may have not deviated markedly from Clark's. It should also be noted that many members of the Corps of Discovery were from agricultural communities or small towns in the South and the western limits of the United States, and they undoubtedly spoke a dialect of English that reflected those roots. Nevertheless, writers generally selected York as the only member of the expedition to speak in a non-standard language pattern. That Dye attached such dialect to York in her novel reveals more about the racial needs of early twentieth-century America than about how York might have actually spoken. White writers at the turn of the century — whether writing out of ignorance, paternalism, or antipathy — characterized black language in this degrading manner to suggest the presumed intellectual and cultural inferiority of the race. In the Sambo tradition, York is consistently "tainted" by his use of such a dialect and by a subservient personality.

Julia Davis, in her 1937 book, *No Other White Men*, makes a more

egregious contribution to the Samboization of York. The book stands as a compelling example of how far some writers were willing to go to transform the York of the expedition to the York that fit the racial presumptions of early and mid-twentieth-century America. The incident occurred in October 1804 as the Corps traveled up the Missouri River. At the village of the Arikara, in a flurry of horseplay with local children, York had pretended to be a recently tamed wild animal. Clark describes the incident on October 20, 1804:

... the Inds. much astonished at my black Servent, who make him Self more turrible in thier view than I wished him to Doe as I am told telling them that before I cought him he was wild & lived upon people, young children was verry good eating Showed them his Strength &c. &c. —

... Those Indians wer much astonished at my Servent, they never Saw black man before, all flocked around him & examined. him from top to toe, he Carried on the joke and made himself more turibal than we wished him to doe.¹³

Sergeant John Ordway recounted the same event in his journal:

the Greatest Curiosity to them was York Capt. Clarks Black man.all the nation made a Great deal of him.the children would follow after him,& if he turned towards them they would run from him & hollow as if they were terreyfied, & afraid of him.¹⁴

York's behavior was clearly consistent with that of a playful adult having a lark with some jovial children. In the hands of Julia Davis, however, it becomes something dramatically different. She offers this version of events:

[York] took off his hat and showed his wolly head. "I am' no man!" he cried. "I'se a wil' beas' outa de woods!" When the interpreters explained this the Mandans fell back in a body, and York, delighted, bared his teeth and growled and howled until their spines were chilled.

"Cap'n Billy done cotch me! Cap'n Billy done tame me! He de taminest man in de worl! He done tame fo' bears to wait on him at table. You all bettah mind out how you fools wid Cap'n Billy."

This created such a sensation that York could not resist going himself one better. With a wild whoop he picked up the nearest member of the party in his great arms, and pranced around the circle roaring like a lion. The Indians ran for their lives, and the captains rushed out to see what was the matter.

Only Cap'n Billy could have made himself heard above the din, but he had a strong voice and he let it out. The ferocity in York's face faded to startled innocence. Clark glared at him, biting his lip to keep from laughing.

"It is not necessary" he said at last, "to frighten our Indian friends. Suppose you give them a dance instead." Crusatte struck up his fiddle and York began to shuffle, back and wing, heel and toe, no bones in his hips and no bones in his legs. . . .¹⁵

Davis's remarkable version of this incident has much more to do with her own racial notions and the prevailing stereotypes about blacks in the nation in the 1930s than with the original event. Her identification of the Arikaras as Mandans might be attributed to simple ignorance or careless error, but the other imaginative augmentations are more difficult to forgive. As is typical in the Sambo tradition, Davis has York speaking in a broken Negro dialect. She moves Clark to center stage, emphasizing his power and control over both York, whom he intimidates, and the situation. She replaces the Indian children with adult Indians and portrays the adults as afraid, timid, and childlike (in contrast to Clark). She concludes the affair by reducing York to a minstrel-show darky, an image that is counter to the completely human and compelling York that emerges from the journals.

The Sambo tradition remained strong throughout the twentieth century. In 1947, John Bakeless, in *Lewis and Clark: Partners in Discovery*, for example, emphasized York's love of slavery and hatred of freedom: "'Damn this freedom,' he [York] said, 'I have never had a happy day since I got it.'"¹⁶ This quote, which is presented in the book as if it is authentic, is in fact a third-hand creation that Clark supposedly attributed to York in an interview with Washington Irving in 1832. By repeating this quote, Bakeless and many others have attached an authenticity to a sentiment that has no historical foundation.

Another favorite characterization of York in the Sambo tradition refers to his sexual prowess among Indian women. During their stay at the Arikara village in 1805, Clark wrote: "those people are much pleased with my black servent — their women very fond of caressing our men, etc."¹⁷ While it seems clear that Clark was referring here to other expedition members in addition to York, his description would later be used as "evidence" of York's promiscuity, a characterization that follows York across the continent. Bakeless, for example, writes that among the Nez Perce

York enjoyed his customary social success, though Indian children ran to hide at the strange creature's approach . . . Like a good many of the other members of the expedition, York had a temporary Indian "wife". On the return journey, he found that he had become the father of a little Nez Percé Negro. Occasional modern Nez Percés with kinky hair are perhaps descended from this child. A not very trustworthy Nez Percé avers that Lewis himself became enamored of the squaw, Wee-ali-cum.¹⁸

The negative stereotype of the black male Sambo embraced the notion that there was one characteristic that was an exception to his natural pas-



York, by Charles M. Russell (watercolor, 1908), depicts Native Americans' curiosity about York's appearance.

sivity and slothfulness — a preoccupation with sex. Bakeless's passage affirms this assumption. And though Bakeless is willing to acknowledge that York was not alone in his sexual diplomacy among the Indians, an activity that other members of the expedition engaged in, it is important to note that Bakeless dismisses as untrustworthy any suggestion that Meriwether Lewis, for example, had participated in such behavior. In fact, Native American oral tradition and later testimony from U.S. Army men recounting an encounter with a light-haired Nez Perce who claimed that William Clark was his father contradict the idea that the captains were above yielding to the temptations of Native American sexual hospitality.¹⁹ In addition, Bakeless is so comfortable in the security of the Sambo tradition that he reduces York entirely out of the human family and makes him a "strange creature." No portion of the expedition journals supports or implies that characterization; to the contrary, the Nez Perce reaction to York was consistently positive and laudatory.

Finally, Bakeless's treatment of York's alleged Nez Perce offspring is not only offensive but it borders on the scientifically and historically ridiculous. It should be understood that the question of York's fertility is an important one. If he did have a child with an Indian woman, then he may also have had offspring with his slave wife back in the states. While it is unlikely that we will ever know whether York had any children, since his and his wife's fates are masked by the cloud of their slave status, it is a compelling issue and adds another layer of complexity to York the man. Bakeless misses this point entirely and instead favors the specious suggestion that the biological elements of blackness that may appear among modern Nez Perce — that is, “kinky hair” — are traceable to York.

Bakeless's portrayal of York demonstrates how writers in this tradition applied the most minimal methodologies of historical research and analysis when it came to York's role in the expedition. Writers also must have felt that these characterizations would go unchallenged by a reading audience whose expectations were products of the accepted conventional racial “wisdom” of their era. Bakeless was drawing conclusions based on the evidence available at the time; but it is also likely that Bakeless, like many others, was a captive of his racial time and place in American history, unable to escape the limitations of vision and understanding imposed on him by prevailing racial orthodoxies. Whether intentional or not, the practitioners of the Sambo tradition often reached conclusions and assumed positions that approach the incredible.

Albert and Jane Salisbury, for example, wrote in their popular history, *Two Captains West*, published in 1950:

The work and hardship made these young men tougher but it also made them more unruly. About the only members of the party who could be counted on to do as told were Clark's servant York and Lewis's big dog, Scannon.²⁰

The Salisburys deny York any manly toughness, including the masculine attribute of being unruly. Sambos were never tough or unruly, according to the stereotype, only happy, subservient, and passive. York also must suffer the indignity of being coupled with a dog in his behavior.

As late as 1971, in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, edited by John M. Carroll, York's status is again transformed. The book reports incorrectly that Clark gave York his freedom when the expedition returned to St. Louis. It also elevates York's relationship with Clark:

... Captain Clark, in gratitude for the services York rendered him as his manservant, and in recognition of his part in the success of the journey — accidental or not — granted full and total emancipation to his servant and friend upon their return.²¹

It is possible to forgive the error on York's emancipation. The claim had a long history, and conclusive evidence of its inaccuracy only emerged with the discovery in 1988 of some of Clark's letters.²² It is possible to overlook the suggestion that York's contributions may have been accidental. But to transform York's status from slave to friend is remarkable. It should be axiomatic that a slave can never be a master's friend; the conditions are incompatible.

Other treatments of York from the 1970s exhibit the staying power of the main assumptions of the Sambo tradition. In 1978, Archie Satterfield editorialized in *The Lewis and Clark Trail*:

His black skin had been a curiosity all along the river, as it would continue to be throughout the voyage, and obtaining female companionship was never a problem for the slave. Nothing was said in the journals about his relationship with the rest of the crew, but since he was a slave, we must assume he was treated as such.

... Perhaps Clark didn't really consider York to be a slave, since he referred to him as a servant and permitted him to have a personality of sorts in the journals. But York was not a free man, and he was very low in the expedition's pecking order.²³

This must be recognized for what it is, internally contradictory and mean-spirited. The inclusion of the gratuitous sexual reference and the declaration of York's low standing in the pecking order are reminiscent of those accounts written earlier in the century that were unsupported by the evidence of the journals.

In 1979, Eldon G. Chuinard's *Only One Man Died*, while describing the medical aspects of the journey, manages in tone and content to revisit a favorite canard of the Sambo tradition, York's alleged sexual depravity:

That York was not permanently disabled by his frostbite is attested to by the fact that in future years his kinky-haired progeny were traceable among the Indian tribes contacted by the Expedition all the way to the Pacific.²⁴

This sexual swipe at York is suspiciously similar to those mentioned earlier and contains the same inadequacies of historical methodology and insight as the earlier material. And as late as 1989, Ronald K. Fisher, in *West to the Pacific*, maintained that Clark gave freedom to his "friend" York: "...Clark rewarded Ben York, his friend and servant, with his freedom."²⁵ The reiteration of their "friendship" is nearly inexplicable this late in the twentieth century.

The Sambo tradition has even managed to make it into the twenty-first century. In M.R. Montgomery's *Jefferson and the Gun-men: How the West Was Almost Lost*, published in 2000, a familiar pattern can be observed in the presentation of York's role in the expedition. Much as Julia Davis did in

the 1930s, Montgomery describes an event that actually occurred but gives it a new and demeaning connotation. Early in the journey, as the expedition toiled up the Missouri River in June 1804, York was involved in horseplay with other members of the Corps. York's eyes were evidently seriously injured when someone inadvertently threw sand in them. Clark records the incident on June 20, 1804: ". . . York verry near loseing his eyes by one of the men throwing sand at him in fun & recved into his eyes — passed some bad water."²⁶ Montgomery describes the same incident this way:

On June 20, one of the men, never identified, throws a fistful of sand in York's eyes. Clark believes York "is near losing" the eye. Among other attributes, York is the tallest, strongest, most agile man in the entire party. But he learns his place, the eye heals, and that is the end of it.²⁷

Through tone and innuendo, Montgomery has diminished York. What exactly is York's "place," and on what basis has Montgomery introduced the concept of "place"? What part of the journal supports it? How does an unfortunate consequence of something done in "fun," as described by Clark, become proof of York's inferior status within the Corps? There are, of course, no reasonable answers to these questions. York has again become the product of another's projections.

A more thoughtful and extensive treatment of this sand-throwing incident is given by Thomas P. Slaughter in *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness* (2003). Slaughter avoids Montgomery's dismissive tone while suggesting that it would be unrealistic to portray Lewis, Clark, and the other expedition members as "racial liberals for their time." He interprets this incident and a later event when York becomes temporarily lost as evidence that York's "place" in the Corps "was not as an equal." Slaughter theorizes:

Some have read this as evidence that York participated in the "fun" as an equal and was simply injured in some good-natured roughhousing. There is no reason to believe, though, that York was enjoying himself. It seems more likely, given what we know about the state of relations at the time, that York was the butt of a joke rather than an active participant in rough play.²⁸

This assumption, like Montgomery's, is speculation, not fact. Slaughter does offer the qualifier "more likely" to identify it as such. He concludes:

Whether these two stories together reflect a general pattern of distance between York and the other men is unclear, but they do imply York's solitary status rather than the integration asserted by recent idealized accounts.²⁹

Slaughter's measured tone is a vast improvement in York scholarship. The primary reason that discussion about York's status in the Corps is neces-



This mural by Richard Haas, which is on the Oregon Historical Society's building in Portland, depicts York as an important part of the expedition, along with Lewis and Clark and Sacagawea.



Portrait of William Clark (1810) by Charles Willson Peale

sary today is the concerted effort by earlier writers to portray his role as lowly and uniformly insignificant. From Satterfield's declaration that York was very low in the expedition's pecking order to Montgomery's implication that York occupied an inferior "place," some recent scholarship continues to lean heavily on the depiction of York's role as consistent only with the expectations associated with the classic place of slaves in the settled racial society of the states east of the Mississippi River during the time of Lewis and Clark. In reality, York functioned in a unique set of circumstances during the expedition years.

Any interpretation that does

not acknowledge and incorporate that reality will miss the mark. Two streams of evidence support the singularity of his role. On the one hand, specific positive narration in the journals argues for an expanded conceptualization of York's activities. Conversely, the voluminous journal commentary authorized by a diverse collection of expedition members, which addresses the events of the journey from a range of viewpoints over a lengthy period, offers only a sparse selection of incidents under the most loose parameters of interpretation as proof of his marginal status. Under the circumstances, this absence of definitive negative evidence argues the need for a more complex analysis of York's position. It is naive to assert that York enjoyed some hypothetical "equality" with the other expedition members. He was black and a slave and they were white and free at a time in which such distinctions really did matter. Yet, York's status was also mediated by a confluence of unprecedented and unique circumstance. York could be, and was, both slave and significant.

The main concern that Slaughter's discussion of York raises is cautionary in nature. Contemporary writers must be careful not to carry forward evidence and conclusions that rely on tenuous sources from earlier eras of

York “scholarship.” Slaughter, for example, describes an incident that allegedly took place on the outbound journey, when a group of Nez Perce teenagers assaulted York to investigate the source of his dark color:

A group of about ten teenage boys decided to resolve the mystery of the blackened man for themselves. When they caught York alone, they pinned him to the ground and tried to rub the black off with coarse sand. When they discovered that the black was skin deep, as blood oozed from a spot rubbed raw, they ran from their victim in even greater fear. York’s blackness was, to the Nez Perce, no joke.³⁰

Slaughter’s source for this incident is Zoa L. Swayne’s *Do Them No Harm: Lewis and Clark among the Nez Perce*, originally published in 1990. Swayne looks at the Lewis and Clark adventure from the viewpoint of the Native peoples they encountered, a viewpoint long overlooked in the traditions of Lewis and Clark scholarship. It is timely and appropriate for this perspective to be included in the bicentennial reexamination of the expedition, but researchers cannot simply incorporate nontraditional sources such as Native American oral traditions without applying to them appropriate methodologies and safeguards of research and writing in order to guarantee a solid foundation for the new insights such material may offer. In the preface, Swayne describes the sources upon which the book is based:

It has been my privilege to have heard some of these stories from the lips of the Nez Percés. A few came from the pioneer, Walter Sewell, who had heard them from Charlie Adams, grandson of Chief Twisted Hair. Some came from newspaper articles that recorded stories written years ago by pioneers who had heard them directly from the Nez Percés. Some came from the manuscripts of Pauline Evans, co-owner of the Sacajewea Museum at Spalding, Idaho (about 1940–1948). When buying artifacts from the Nez Percés, she wrote down the accounts they told her concerning their heirlooms they were selling.³¹

Such sources carry the common problems of accuracy and authenticity always associated with information preserved through oral tradition. In addition, Swayne’s account involves the potentially compromising interposition of “pioneer” interpretation of the material. Swayne cites the specific incident of the Nez Perce assault on York in this manner: “Scrubbing York. Informants: Charlie Adams and Walter Sewell.”³² Can such material be taken at face value, as Slaughter does? Walter Sewell, presumably Caucasian, is one of Swayne’s “pioneer” sources from the early twentieth century. Charlie Adams is Nez Perce but two generations removed from the event. Material based in such oral traditions can be rich and rewarding, but it must not be incorporated into modern scholarship without cautionary language as to its source and pedigree.

In his discussion of York, Slaughter, using Swayne as his source, also includes material enclosed in quotation marks, suggesting direct descent from specific but unnamed individuals who described York in terms disturbingly similar to images from the black-faced minstrel traditions of the nineteenth century: “. . . look at his eyes! He rolls them around! Much white shows like in eyes of [a] mean horse.”³³ Perhaps these were the words used by some Nez Perces in 1805 to describe this newly arrived stranger. Perhaps the Nez Perce teenagers did rub York bloody. Yet, the assault was not recorded by any of the numerous journal writers of the expedition, an omission that would approach the incredible, given the small size and tight-knit nature of the group. More importantly, when such material is imbedded in the otherwise meticulous research and thoughtful analysis of a contemporary writer such as Slaughter, it will acquire by association an authenticity that is unwarranted given the particularly vulnerable journey it took to the twenty-first century. Embedded in Slaughter’s work, it will influence current interpretations of York by scholars and other researchers. Through citation and repetition, such material may be accepted as reliable in future York scholarship, quoted and cited by the next generation of historians.

In stark contrast to the Sambo tradition is York as superhero. This tradition cannot rival the Sambo tradition in terms of longevity, but it does compete with that approach in its violations of credible historical research. As in the Sambo tradition, the superhero approach rose out of the racial needs and requirements of the larger society. In the 1950s and 1960s, as the nation struggled to redefine and recast the status and role of blacks in the Civil Rights era, some writers sought to provide role models and inspiration to a black population long denied them by a hostile white society. The superhero interpretation was intended to help create a more positive self-image and identity for blacks, which would then facilitate black achievement in education, business, politics, and other professions. York and his story were ideally suited for such a purpose. Here was a black man who had participated in one of the nation’s greatest symbolic accomplishments. Here was a slave who had helped conquer the West. Two examples from this tradition can serve to reveal the dangers of writing history with a preconceived social purpose.

In 1992, the state of Oregon commemorated the 150-year anniversary of the first year of travel along the Oregon Trail. It was a lively and wide-ranging celebration that sought to recognize and acknowledge the full

range of groups and individuals who had been involved in that history. An article in the *Oregonian* titled “Original Pioneers Predate Oregon Trail” was devoted to important individuals who had come to Oregon before 1842. The article described the Kanakas who came to the Pacific Northwest from Hawaii in 1810, various fur traders and missionaries, and York:

Another yarn features York, the 6-foot-2-inch, French-speaking slave of William Clark, the explorer, who joined Meriwether Lewis on the 3,555 mile round-trip expedition to the mouth of the Columbia in 1804–1806.

York not only went along on the expedition but also translated between Lewis and Clark and the expedition guide, Charbonneau, who spoke no English.³⁴

In this account, York acquired a suitably impressive height, even though none is mentioned in the journals. More remarkably, he has learned to speak French. Furthermore, his ability to speak French plays a crucial role in the complex communication dynamics of the Corps. Under the circumstances, it is reasonable to inquire: Just where did York learn to speak French? Clark, who enjoyed all the privileges and opportunities available to a prominent Virginia and Kentucky white slaveholding family, had not learned French. Old York, York’s father, and Rose, his mother, were long-time slaves of Clark’s father, and neither of them is known to have spoken French. The educational and travel opportunities for a slave in York’s time and place were not extensive, and there is no record or suggestion that he spent any time prior to the expedition in a French-speaking location. York may have spoken French, but it is highly unlikely. No author has offered documentation to support the claim, yet it has become a staple in the superhero tradition of York scholarship. Robert Betts’s *In Search of York*, published in 1985, remains the most extensive and useful examination of the York story, and he suggests an answer for the origins of York’s French-speaking and interpreting skills.³⁵

The west that Lewis and Clark entered in 1804 was far from a desolate, unpopulated place. In addition to the large Native population, not yet decimated by Caucasian pandemic diseases, there were traders, trappers, travelers, and adventurers from numerous European and American cultures. In settled Native villages such as the Mandan on the upper Missouri, the population was quite cosmopolitan and communication often flowed through several languages and back again. Such was the case in the spring of 1805 when Lewis and Clark hired Toussaint Charbonneau as a guide and interpreter. Charbonneau spoke French and some Indian languages; Lewis and Clark only spoke English. On March 17, Clark described the successful conclusion of the negotiations:

. . . Mr Chabonah Sent a french man of our party that he was Sorry for the foolissh part he had acted and if we pleased he would accompany us agreeably to the terms we had perposed and doe every thing we wished him to doe &c. &c. he had requested me Some , <time>. thro our French inturpeter two days ago to excuse his Simplicity and take him into the cirvise, after he had taken his things across the River we called him in and Spoke to him on the Subject, he agreed to our terms and we agreed that he might go on with us &c &c. but few Indians here to day; the river rising a little and Severall places open.³⁶

Betts points out that Lewis and Clark were not the only whites in the Mandan village that spring. Charles McKenzie, a Canadian trader, was also there. McKenzie evidently witnessed some of the negotiations with Charbonneau through an interpreter whom he later described as “ a mulatto who spoke bad French and worse English.”³⁷

Who was this man? Possibilities abound, given the racially mixed realities of the Missouri River basin at the time. He may have been one of the boatmen who had come upriver with the expedition but did not make the entire trip. McKenzie could have mistaken another member of the overland party for a mulatto. The interpreter could have been a runaway slave living with the Indians or a mixed-race vagabond from Canada or New Orleans. Whoever he was, he almost certainly was not York. We know that York was no mulatto, and it is unreasonable to conclude that York would be described as speaking worse English than French. Yet, Betts points out that even well-known scholars had jumped on the York-as-French-speaker bandwagon.³⁸

It has been only recently that western scholarship has acknowledged the presence of blacks in the story of western development. Before then, York was the lone documented exception. Because of that, many have concluded, against logic and reason and without documentation, that the mention of any dark-skinned non-Indian *must* be York simply because he is the only black known to be in the West at the time. And what is to be done with the claim that York could speak not only French but also “several Indian dialects,” as K.D. Curtis does in a 1962 article entitled “York, the Slave Explorer” or who declare, as Phillip Drotning does in *An American Traveler’s Guide to Black History*, that York could also speak “fluent Sioux”?³⁹

Like the Sambo tradition, the York-as-superhero tradition appeared in writing about the expedition to the verge of the twenty-first century. In 1997, Elizabeth Van Steenwyk released *My Name Is York*, an attempt to introduce York to children as an important actor in American history. The book has an admirable goal but is tarnished by its presentation of one important incident. On June 29, 1805, William Clark nearly lost his life in

a flash flood, which he escaped by scrambling up the side of a ravine barely ahead of the swirling waters of the flood. Van Steenwyk describes that narrow escape in this way:

Suddenly the sky darkens. Angry clouds release a torrent. I find shelter beneath a chalky overhang and then I remember: Captain Clark and the others have not returned.

I run to the cliff's edge and see their desperate struggle as water rises in the ravine. Sacagawea hands her small son to me. Then I reach out to her and Charbonneau. But where is Captain Clark?

Now he struggles upward too, before I reach out to pull him to safety. When he can speak, he tells me that his compass is lost. Later, he finds it and I wonder: Will that compass one day point my way to freedom?⁴⁰

The passage is accompanied by a beautiful illustration of York reaching out to pull Clark to safety. In fact, no such thing happened. Instead, we learn from Clark's report of the incident that while York had been with the small party on the plains that day, along with Sacagawea, Charbonneau, and their child, he was in another location when the flash flood hit. Clark reports: "...we at length retched the top of the hill Safe where I found my Servant in Serch of us greatly agitated, for our wellfar-." ⁴¹ Lewis gives additional information:

... they fortunately arrived on the plain safe, where they found the black man, York, in surch of them; york had separated from them a little while before the storm, in pursuit of some buffaloe and had not seen them enter the rivene; when this gust came on he returned in surch of them & not being able to find them for some time was much allarmed . . .⁴²

Van Steenwyk's book is otherwise charming, full of wonderful illustrations and appealing stories. But this misrepresentation, whether by error or intention, contributes to the diminishment of the real York, whose contributions to the expedition need no embellishment to be inspiring.

Thankfully, a new tradition of scholarship about York is taking root, a tradition based on solid historical methodologies. Among the most useful is *In Search of York* by Robert B. Betts, first published in 1985 and still the only book-length treatment of York's life. In 2002, James J. Holmberg edited *Dear Brother: Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark*, a collection of letters from William Clark to his brother Jonathan. This collection includes the letters, undiscovered until 1988, that reveal details of the relationship between Clark and York after they returned to St. Louis in 1806. The Sambo tradition cannot survive the revelations in Holmberg's volume. With the wider audience the bicentennial will provide for these ad-



mirable works of history — and hopefully others like them yet to come — it may prove impossible for future York scholarship to become mired in the old Sambo or superhero ruts.

Writers of the Lewis and Clark story, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not rely solely on the journals to frame and shape their interpretations. Other, less formal sources included interviews that Clark did with Nicolas Biddle, an early journal editor, or Washington Irving, a popular writer in the 1830s. Other tales of the expedition are based on oral tradition within the Clark family and writings of the “he said” type by descendents and relatives of Clark, including letters, diaries, and biographies of other family members. As previously discussed, the oral traditions of Native Americans contain potentially valuable information about the expedition. None of these sources has the power and legitimacy of the journals themselves, nor can they be considered of comparable reliability. Of all the members of the Corps, York has been most victimized by this secondary and often questionable material. But it is the York of the journals who is of most interest and value as historians attempt to understand who he was as a man and as a member of the Corps.

Yet, even with the journals, some cautions and qualifiers are necessary. The journey taken by the journals from their origins in the field notes and in-progress rewrites of the original authors down through the permutations of the various subsequent editorial and publication processes can seem to rival the challenges and obstacles of the journey on which they are based. It must also be remembered that the authors of the journal were white males whose perspectives and orientations were the products of eighteenth-century America. In matters of race, gender, and culture, then, it is to be expected that their writings can sometimes reflect the conventions and

Although there is some debate about which guns were actually used by members of the expedition, this U.S. Model 1795 musket is a type available at the time. It is clear from the expedition journals that York hunted for meat during the journey and that he carried a gun.

limitations of their time. It is also important to understand that there are different kinds of “testimony” in the journals. There are the objective “observations” and descriptions that are generally accurate and reliable — for example, what was eaten on a particular day. That kind of testimony tells us, for example, that York was a hunter during the expedition. On July 20, 1806, Clark wrote: “. . .Shields killed a Deer & Buffalow & Shannon a faun and a Buffalow & York an Elk . . .”⁴³ Occasionally, however, Lewis or Clark described what other people, such as the Indians, were thinking, giving us testimony that is less reliable and more apt to reflect the writer’s viewpoints, perspectives, and prejudices. Over the years, many writers have failed to distinguish between these types of testimony in the journals. York especially has suffered the consequences.

The best example of how York’s popular image was contorted by this process is seen in the York-as-monster interpretation. A crucial point in the expedition occurred in August 1805 when Meriwether Lewis encountered a group of Shoshone Indians and attempted to acquire horses for the expedition’s journey across the Rocky Mountains. Lewis had traveled in advance of the main body for this purpose, but when he made contact with the Shoshone there was a very real possibility that they would leave before the rest of the expedition arrived and that no horse trading would occur. This would have meant almost certain failure for the expedition. Lewis described that critical juncture in this way:

. . . I slept but little as might be well expected, my mind dwelling on the state of the expedition which I have ever held in equal estimation with my own existence, and the fait of which appeared at this moment to depend in a great measure upon the caprice of a few savages who are ever as fickle as the wind. I had mentioned to the chief several times that we had with us a woman of his nation who had been taken prisoner by the Minnetares, and that by means of her I hoped to explain myself more fully than I could do by signs. some of the party had also told the Indians that we had a man with us who was black and had short curling hair, this had excited their curiossity very much. and they seemed quite as anxious to see this monster as they wer the merchandize which we had to barter for their horses.⁴⁴

As far as we know, the Indians had not called York a monster, and it is reasonable to presume that Lewis’s comment is a reflection of the racial attitudes that prevailed in American culture at the time. Clark, in contrast to Lewis, describing the same Indians and their first impressions of York, was more straightforward. On August 17, he wrote: “. . .every thing appeared to asstonish those people. the appearance of the men, their arms, the Canoes, the Clothing my black Servent & the Segassity of Capt Lewis’s

Dog.”⁴⁵ Clark refrained from describing what the Indians were thinking and recorded instead what their reaction appeared to be — a very different kind of declaration than the one Lewis provided. Nevertheless, once York’s name had been associated with the image of a monster, writers often felt free to characterize his entire expedition career in that way. Once the reader is aware of the need to make distinctions between the types of testimony like this in the journals, the journals become the best and most reliable source to construct a useful picture of who York was and what he did on the expedition.

The information about York’s life prior to the expedition is sparse, but we still know more about him than is typically known about most slaves. We know, for example, that his father, Old York, and his mother, Rose, were both slaves of William Clark’s father. The Clark family had moved from Virginia to frontier Kentucky in about 1784 when William was fourteen years old, taking with them approximately twelve slaves, York among them. York had grown up with William, serving as his “companion” and later “manservant,” as was often the custom in the South. William Clark legally inherited York when his father, John Clark, died in 1799. By that time, William had other slaves as well, approximately eighteen in number, but none were as closely associated with their master as York was.⁴⁶

The decision to include York in the expedition was neither frivolous nor coincidental. By the time they assumed the leadership of the Corps, both Lewis and Clark were tested and experienced in the demands of frontier military campaigns, and they knew exactly what kind of men were necessary to achieve the goals before them. In May 1804, the practical Clark described just what they were looking for: “robust (Young Back Woodsmen of character) helthy hardy young men, recommended.”⁴⁷ Lewis and Clark rejected many “gentlemen” applicants to the expedition and were very selective in whom they plucked from the ranks of the frontier army. There was no room in the Corps for someone who could not pull his own weight and more. From his long acquaintance with York and with a full understanding of what would be required of each member of the expedition, Clark chose to include York in this exclusive party. Subsequent events would show that the realistic and practical Clark was not mistaken in this decision.

While York is often identified in the journals as Clark’s servant, the very first reference to him confirms that he was not along as a comfort or luxury to Clark. As the expedition was being organized at Camp Dubois near St. Louis in the winter of 1803, Clark wrote:

a Cloudy day one of my party Killed 7 Turkeys last night at roost- Continue working at the huts- The Ice run, This day is moderate, two men Willard & Corpl. Roberson Came home today at about 11 oClock, Corpl White house & York Comce [commenced] sawing with the whip Saws- nothing material-⁴⁸

Along with the other men, York was expected to work and work hard at all the labors required for the expedition's success.

The journals provide the few clues about York's physical appearance, and no painting was ever made of him during his lifetime. So, we will never know what he actually looked like. The journals do offer several references to York's physical appearance and qualities. He was reportedly dark in color and large in size, with an uncommon agility. At Fort Mandan, on New Year's Day 1805, Clark wrote:

... The Day was ushered in by the Discharge of two Cannon, we Suffered 16 men with their musick to visit the 1st Village for the purpose of Dancing, ... about 11 oClock I with an inturpeter & two men walked up to the Village ... I found them much pleased at the Dancing of our men I ordered my black Servent to Dance which amused the Croud verry much, and Some what astonished them, that So large a man Should be active &cc. &⁴⁹

Writers from the Sambo tradition have used this passage to support the image of York as the "dancing darcy," whose major contribution to the expedition was as an entertainer. In fact, most members of the expedition enjoyed dancing, not just York. It was a major form of entertainment and diversion, and it also could play a role in diplomacy and the social interactions between the members of the Corps and the Native populations they encountered.

Writers have also used this passage to justify the image of York as a Herculean figure, a characterization useful to writers in the Sambo tradition, who wished to transform York into a black buck, and writers in the superhero tradition who wanted him to be Olympian athlete. While York was probably a large man, he was less than Herculean. In the early months of the journey, for example, Clark wrote: "... we returned to the boat at Sunset, my Servent nearly exosted with heat thirst and fatigue, he being fat and un accustomed to walk as fast as I went was the Cause—" ⁵⁰ Over the course of the expedition, hard work and an often meager diet undoubtedly reduced York's extra weight, but the image of York as Colossus is unquestionably an exaggeration.

Still, York was strong enough to carry a deer on his back, as Clark recorded on August 24, 1804, and he proved himself to be a successful

hunter. This not only means that York was armed, but it is clear that his role on the expedition was not as a typical plantation slave. This raises intriguing questions about the psychological journey taken by York as the Corps pursued its physical journey across the continent. He was fully armed, was able to move about freely, and often was respected and admired by people they met along the way. How did York reconcile his experience as a member of the Corps with his life as a slave in the settled society east of the Mississippi?⁵¹

By the second year of the journey, on the return trip in 1806, the expedition was relying on York to act as a trader with the Indians. By that time, nearly all of the Corps' resources had been exhausted, and they literally faced starvation at some points. On Monday, June 20, as the group was leaving the Nez Perce to travel up the Snake and Clearwater rivers, Lewis wrote:

. . . McNeal and York were sent on a trading voyage over the river this morning, having exhausted all our merchandize we are obliged to have recourse to every subterfuge in order to prepare in the most ample manner in our power to meet that wretched portion of our journey, the Rocky Mountain. . . . Our traders McNeal and York were furnished with the buttons which Capt. C. and myself cut off our coats, some eye water and Basilicon which we made for that purpose and some Phials and small tin boxes which I had brought out with Phosphorus. in the evening they returned with about 3 bushels of roots and some bread having made a successfull voyage, not much less pleasing to us than the return of a good cargo to an East India Merchant.—⁵²

Clearly, York had attained a position of trust and acceptance within the Corps.

York also contributed by tending the sick, as when Sergeant Floyd was dying in August 1805: “. . . Sergt. Floyd was taken violently bad with the Beliose Cholick and is dangerously ill, . . . every man is attentive to him {York prilly} [York principally?]” He was also involved in contributing to the collection of scientific information. On July 14, 1806, for example, Clark reported that he “Saw a Tobacco worm shown me by *York*.” He documented some animals, as Lewis reported on April 7, 1806: “A bird of a scarlet colour as large as common pheasant with a long tail has returned, one of them was seen today near the fort by Capt. Clark’s black man, I could not obtain a view of it myself.”⁵³

York was also selected to be part of the small parties that detached from the main group from time to time to handle important tasks. In August 1804, for example, he was “selected” to be a member of a small group led by both Clark and Lewis to investigate a mysterious “mound”:



In November 1805, Lewis and Clark asked all members of the Corps, including York and Sacagawea, to help decide where to spend the winter. The decision was to build a fort near present-day Fort Clatsop, shown here as reconstructed by the National Park Service.

... a Cloudy morning Capt Lewis & my Self Concluded to go and See the Mound which was viewed with Such turrow by all the different Nation in this quarter, we Selected Shields J. Fields, W Bratten, Sergt. Ordway, J Colter, Can, {& York} and Corp Worbington & Frasure, also G. Drewyer and droped down to the mouth of White Stone River where we left the Perogue with two men and at 200 yards we assended a riseing ground of about Sixty feet, from the top of this High land the Countrey is leavel & open as far as Can be Seen, except Some few rises at a Great Distance, and the *Mound* which the Indians Call Mountain of *little people* or Spirits . . .⁵⁴

A year later, on July 18, 1805, Sergeant Ordway comments in his journal: “. . . Capt. Clark his Servant and 2 other men Set out to go 1 or 2 days march a head to make discoveries . . .”⁵⁵ And on the return trip, York was one of only a few Corps members to explore the Willamette River and to visit the future site of Portland, Oregon. Throughout the expedition, both captains consistently included York in important assignments.

The journals offer other types of evidence to demonstrate York’s status as a respected member of the Corps. One remarkable example occurred after the group had reached the Pacific Ocean in November 1805 and had to decide where they would wait out the winter. Because the Corps was a military company, it might be expected that the commanding officers

would simply hand down such an important decision. But Lewis and Clark asked each member of the expedition, including Sacagawea and York, to cast their vote on where they should camp.⁵⁶ The inclusion of a black slave and a woman in the vote stands as a testament to their acceptance and the appreciation shown them by other members of the group. York's contributions are also acknowledged in the creek and islands that Clark named for him along the way.⁵⁷

Such acknowledgments were certainly appropriate. York made critical contributions to the expedition's success, and perhaps none was more important than the unplanned and unexpected role he played in the diplomatic relations with the Native people the expedition encountered. Time and again, the expedition journals comment on the Indians' reactions to York. His presence sometimes served to break the ice between local residents and the group of strangers from the east. At the Arikara village in October 1804, for example, Clark observed that the Indians were "astonished" by York, ostensibly because "this nation never saw a black man before." Eleven days farther upriver, Clark commented favorably on York's effect on residents of a Mandan village: "they appeared delighted with the Steel Mill which we were obliged to use, also with my black servant, . . ." Two days later, Clark wrote that the Mandans viewed York as "great medison." Farther west, when the expedition established contact with the Shoshone, Lewis declared: ". . . the back [*sic*] man York and the segacity of my dog were equally objects of admiration."⁵⁸

It is also true that York's appearance brought with it an element of chance and risk. The Native cultures encountered by the Corps were distinguished by their diversity and the range of their cultural traditions and norms. Among the Flathead Indians, for example, York's color created the potential for danger. Within Salish culture, warriors often painted their faces black as an indication of war, and oral tradition maintains that when a chief named Three Eagles saw York he assumed that the Corps was a hostile war party. Three Eagles eventually judged that the strangers were friendly and they were welcomed warmly by the tribe, but in this instance York's appearance had held the potential for trouble.⁵⁹

When the expedition returned to St. Louis in the fall of 1806, York descended precipitously from his position as a member of the Corps of Discovery into the depths of chattel slavery. The other members of the Corps were richly rewarded. The enlisted men received generous grants of western land as well as back pay and bonuses, the captains were paid and received

both public honor and appointments to high office. All but York enjoyed the trappings and attentions of celebrity. For years, historians maintained that he did receive his freedom from Clark at the conclusion of the expedition in compensation for his services on the journey. David Holloway, for example, in *Lewis and Clark and the Crossing of North America*, published in 1974, was still basing his interpretation on Washington Irving's interview with Clark: "His [Clark's] slave York was granted his freedom on the expedition's arrival back and became a well-known figure in St. Louis . . ." ⁶⁰ In fact, York remained a slave until about 1816. During that time, he grew increasingly restive and unmanageable, and Clark felt compelled to resort to the standard arsenal of slave-master techniques to control his property, including beating, incarceration, and hiring York out to a severe master to break his spirit.

The details of this post-expedition struggle between a master and his slave emerged in the fall of 1988 with the discovery of Clark family papers, among which was a bundle of letters written between 1806 and 1811. ⁶¹ On November 9, 1808, for example, Clark wrote his brother Jonathan Clark that he would

send York . . . and promit him to Stay a few weeks with his wife. he wishes to Stay there altogether and hire himself which I have refused. he prefers being Sold to return[ing] here. he is Serviceable to me at this place, and I am determined not to Sell him, to gratify him, . . . if any attempt is made by York to run off, or refuse to provorm his duty as a Slave, I wish him Sent to New Orleans and Sold, or hired out to Some Severe Master untill he thinks better of Such Conduct . . . ⁶²

Writing again on December 10, 1808, Clark concedes that much of the hostility between him and York arose from difficulty over York's wife: ". . . he could if he would be of Service to me and Save me money, but I do not expect much from him as long as he has a wife in Kenty." In the same letter, Clark also reveals that at least some of York's dissatisfaction grew from his resentment that his services to the Corps had not been properly rewarded: "I did wish to do well by him. but as he has got Such a notion about freedom and his emence Services, that I do not expect he will be of much Service to me again. I do not think with him, that his Services has been So great or my Situation would promit me to liberate him . . ." ⁶³

This conflict with York was so troubling to Clark that he called on Meriwether Lewis for advice. Clark reported to his brother:

I do not . . . ceare for Yorks being in this Country. I have got a little displeasd with him and intended to have punished him but Govr. Lewis has insisted on my only hiring him out in Kentucky which perhaps will be best, – This I leave entirely to you, perhaps

if he has a Severe Master a While he may do Some Service, I do not wish him again in this Country untill he applies himself to Come and give over that wife of his- . . .⁶⁴

By May of 1809 the situation had deteriorated to the point that Clark resorted to beating York: “. . .he is here but of verry little service to me, insolent and sulky, I gave him a Severe trouncing the other Day and he has much mended[?] Sence . . .” By July, Clark found it necessary to have York incarcerated: “. . .taken York out of the Caleboos and he has for two or three weeks been the finest Negrow I ever had.” In August, Clark’s frustration and anger had pushed him to conclude that York must be hired out or sold away: “I have become displeased with him and Shall hire or Sell him, on the 5 of next month I [shall] Set him off in a boat to Wheeling as a hand, on his return to the falls I wished much to hire him or Sell him- I cant sell Negrows here for money-”⁶⁵

This declaration is the last mention of York in this series of letters, but it is possible to piece together subsequent events in York’s life from other sources. In a May 1811 letter to William Clark in St. Louis, Clark’s nephew, John O’Fallon, reported that York had been hired out to a severe master in Louisville and was very repentant. By this time, Clark and York had been physically separated for approximately two years, although York was still Clark’s chattel slave. O’Fallon also reported that the man who owned York’s wife was moving her from the Louisville area to Natchez, Mississippi. As late as November 1815, York was still in Louisville and still a slave of William Clark, working for John Hite Clark as a wagon driver.⁶⁶

Clearly the availability of this long-lost information requires a revision of the image of William Clark that has long been enshrined in the Lewis and Clark story. Clark was a product of the racial attitudes and practices of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. While it is manifestly unfair to judge Clark by the norms and standards of modern life, we should not ignore the dynamics of his relationship with York. To do so is to perpetuate a style of mythmaking that has long plagued the way American history is studied and taught. A sanitized version of Clark’s behavior toward York serves no student of history or devotee of honesty.

In the early 1800s, slaves were rarely the subject of purposeful biography, and it is remarkably good fortune there is as much information as is now available about York. Still, the gaps and missing information, the things that will never be known about York and his relationship to the other individuals and events of his time, are tantalizing. For example, Where did York sleep in the winter quarters on the Oregon coast? Did York use the same cooking and eating utensils as the others on the expedition?

When white members of the Corps were punished by having to run the gauntlet, did York participate? What became of York's wife? Did York and his wife have children? Perhaps a future windfall of lost letters will provide answers to some of these questions, but it is likely that we will never know.

That uncertainty also surrounds the circumstances of York's life after 1816. There are two versions of what happened to York after Clark finally set him free. One story grew out of Clark's 1830s interview with Washington Irving. In his account of that interview, Irving recorded the following:

His slaves — set them free — one he placed at a ferry — another on a farm, giving him land, horses, & c. — a third he gave a large waggon & team of 6 horses to ply between Nashville and Richmond. They all repented & wanted to come back.

The waggoner was York, the hero of the Missouri expedition & adviser of the Indians. He could not get up early enough in the mornng — his horses were ill kept — two died — the others grew poor. He sold them, was cheated-entered into service-fared ill. [“]Damn this freedom, [”] said York, [“]I have never had a happy day since I got it. [”] He determined to go back to his old master — set off for St Louis, but was taken with the cholera in Tennessee & died. Some of the traders think they have met traces of York's crowd, on the Missouri.⁶⁷

This passage proclaims York's incompetence and his hatred of freedom and alludes to York's supposed promiscuity among Native women, two elements in his Samboization. There is no independent documentation that supports Clark's story of what happened to York, and it is easy to see how this version of events served to validate Clark's post-expedition treatment of York.

The other version of York's later life is from a mountain man, Zenas Leonard, who describes an encounter he had with a black man in a Crow Indian village in the 1830s:

In this village we found a Negro man, who informed us that he first came to this country with Lewis and Clark . . . with whom he also returned to the state of Missouri, and in a few years returned again with a Mr. Mackinney, a trader on the Missouri river, and has remained here ever since — which is about ten or twelve years. He had acquired a correct knowledge of their manner of living, and speaks their language fluently. He has rose to be quite a considerable character, or chief, in their village; at least he assumes all the dignities of a chief, for he has four wives with whom he lives alternately. This is the custom of many of the chiefs.⁶⁸

There appears to be no doubt that Leonard had such an encounter. The question is whether or not the “Negro man” was York. As in the Clark–Irving version of events, there is no independent documentation supporting Leonard's account. Furthermore, there were several prominent Afri-

can Americans among the mountain men in the West during the 1830s, and some had well-documented ties to the Crow Nation. It is also true that mountain men were a notoriously flamboyant lot who savored the grand tale and the big lie as a form of entertainment. The “Negro man” might have been York, but he also might have been Jim Beckwourth or another, unnamed contemporary having a grand pull on Leonard’s leg. In his 1856 autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth as Told to Thomas D. Bonner*, Beckwourth describes his adventures with the Crows and includes a story nearly identical to the one Leonard attributes to this “Negro man.”⁶⁹ In this case, perhaps it is preferable that the real answer is veiled in the smoke of those long-ago western campfires. It allows us the chance to grant to York in his last years a measure of the prestige, peace, and fulfillment that the racial realities of his day and the legacy of two hundred years of faulty scholarship have denied him.

Notes

1. James P. Ronda, “Why Lewis and Clark Matter,” *Smithsonian* (August 2000): 99.
2. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alvar, *Cabeza De Vaca’s Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*, trans. Cyclone Covey (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1961).
3. Barry Gough, *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).
4. John Scofield, *Hail, Columbia!: Robert Gray, John Kendrick, and the Pacific Fur Trade* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993).
5. Merriwether Lewis mentions in his entry for July 26, 1806, a mysterious white man living among the Crow Indian nation. See Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986–97), 8:131.
6. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Adventures in the Unknown Interior*.
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As the Corps of Discovery proceeds on its mission of exploration York evolves into a valuable and trusted member of the corps. A transformation takes place in the status of York. The journals indicate an individual given assignments, responsibilities, and freedoms not normally associated with a slave, but to those accorded to an equal within the ranks of the corps. York's size and blackness brought both benefit and trouble to the expedition. Among the Great Plains Indians, especially the Arikaras, Mandans, and the Hidatsas, York was a curiosity, fascinating and at times frightening, possessing