

# White like them

*Anne Mavor examines racism and classism through the lens of her ancestors*

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Anne Mavor was hoping to collaborate with a Native American artist for her next big project when she had a rude awakening.

She was sitting among a predominantly white audience at Portland State University's Native American Student and Community Center when all of a sudden it felt like the woman on stage was speaking directly to her.

"You need to go back and find your own people and claim your own people," she remembers the woman commanding the crowd.

Mavor is a white woman of Northern European descent, and her project was intended to be an exploration of sacred sites.

She decided in that moment to drop the idea and start over.

"That was appropriation," she said, looking back. She felt she was about to do what white people have been doing to Native Americans for 500 years: use them for her own purposes, she said.

She began to ponder, "What if I turn it around? What would it look like if I claimed my people?"

Mavor lives in Northeast Portland's Cully neighborhood in a cohousing condo community with her husband, Dennis Karas. Now in her mid-60s, she decided to concentrate on creating her social justice-focused artwork full time shortly before being laid off from her job as a graphic designer in 2011. A decision she was able to make, in part, due to her heritage.

Her new project would take three years. To start, she researched her lineage and carefully selected ancestors who participated in different forms of oppression throughout the past two millennia, seeking to discover why they participated in authoritarian acts against others.

Among the relatives she selected were two slave owners in South Carolina – one was her great-great-grandmother. She also selected a Scottish farmer who sat on a jury that convicted two women of witchcraft. She said she wanted to understand why he might

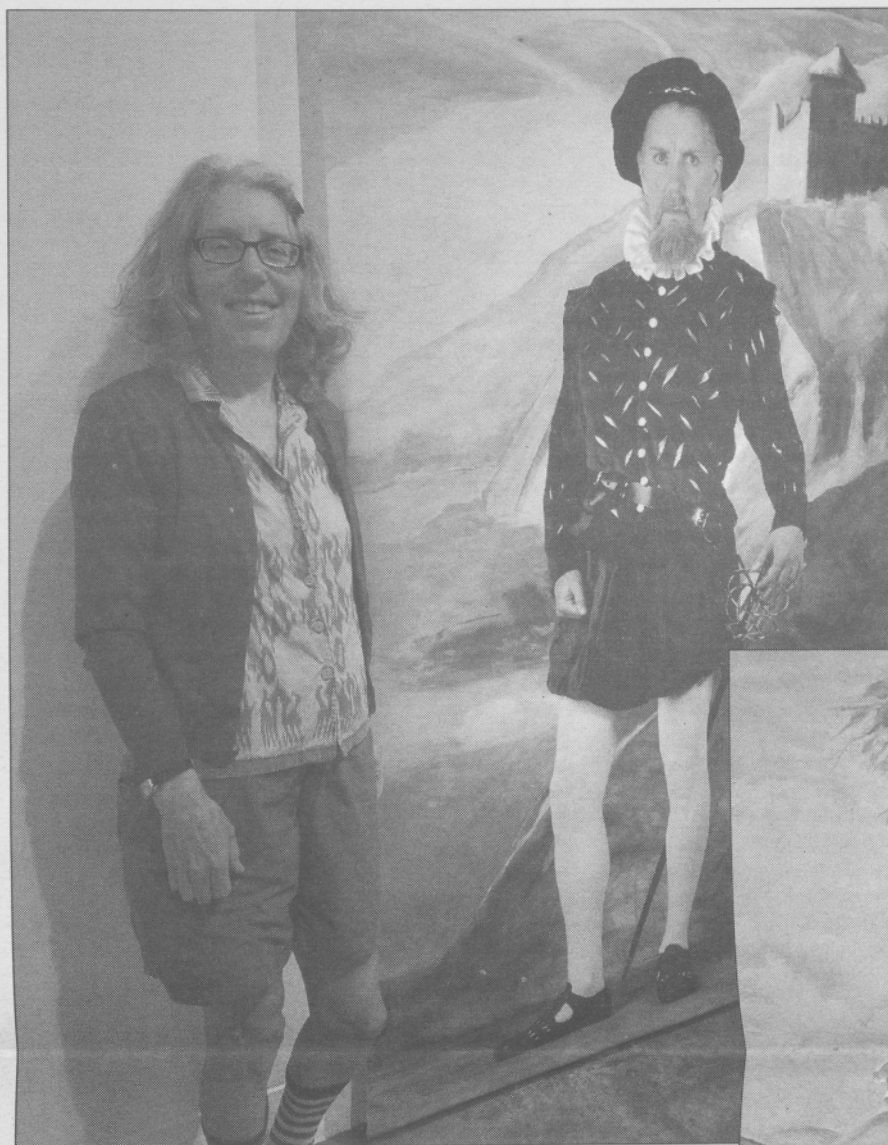


PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Above, Anne Mavor with one of her works as part of her exhibit, "I Am My White Ancestors: Claiming the Legacy of Oppression." At right, Mavor poses as John Salley, one of many characters from her family history.

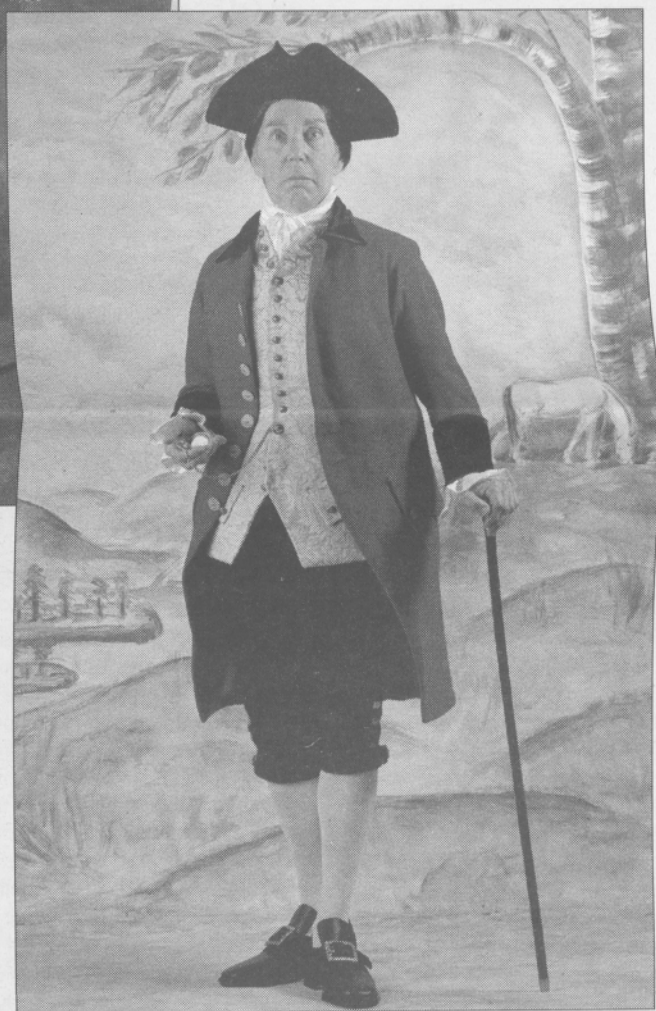


PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNE MAVOR

choose to send two women in his community to their deaths.

While they exercised their power over others, many of her ancestors were facing their own oppression at the same time. Sibylla D'Anjou, for example, had to trade a religious relic for her freedom, however she did so after willfully participating in a crusade that colonized Jerusalem.

Mavor pieced together information she gleaned from documents on Ancestry.com, poured over photos and letters from her family's early American history, and studied the customs, common beliefs and historical events taking place around each person she selected – she wanted to illustrate how each person's environment may have affected his or her worldview.

The resulting art installation, "I Am My White Ancestors: Claiming the Legacy of Oppression," serves as a thought-provoking tour through her ancestors' perpetuation of slavery, genocide and persecution.

Thirteen photographic self-portraits depict Mavor as she embodies different characters in her family's history, and then finally as herself in her art studio.

In each image she's outfitted in a period costume she's designed complete with professional hair and makeup. Accompanying each panel is an imagined

autobiographical audio diary entry that serves as a glimpse into each person's perspective on the oppressions they were both perpetuating and subjected to themselves.

The exhibit is open and free to the public at the Alexander Gallery inside the Niedmeyer Center now through October 28 on weekdays. Bring your smartphone and ear buds to listen to the audio diaries on Mavor's website: [annemavor.com/audio-diaries](http://annemavor.com/audio-diaries).

She will also host two evening receptions on Oct. 25 and 28, where she will discuss what she's learned about oppression, both from the creation of her exhibit and from 20 years of re-evaluation counseling practices that she said have helped her to recognize her own experiences with oppression.

Mavor's exhibit begs the question: Can Americans of European descent have an honest conversation about the racism and oppression without first acknowledging the racism and oppression perpetuated by their own bloodline?

## IF YOU GO

**I Am My White Ancestors**  
An installation by Anne Mavor  
Now through Oct. 28  
Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Alexander Gallery inside the  
Niedmeyer Center  
Clackamas Community College  
19600 Molalla Ave.  
Oregon City  
Join Anne Mavor at the exhibit:  
Evening Reception Thursday,  
Oct. 13 at 6:30 p.m.  
Gallery Talk Tuesday, Oct. 25 at  
7 p.m.  
Bring your smartphone and ear buds  
to listen to the audio diaries at  
[annemavor.com/audio-diaries](http://annemavor.com/audio-diaries)

"What I'm trying to do is model what it looks like to learn about it, explore it, acknowledge it and accept responsibility," she said. "I think it's a process to become reconciled. In a way, I don't want to become reconciled, I want to be outraged and grief stricken at what happened."

She explained that Caucasians are often raised thinking of their race as the default setting, almost like a non-identity.

"But it's not the default. It's an identity, with a lot of stuff that came along with it, so it's important to identify it, describe it and understand it," she said, "on the way to giving it up."

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