



May 29, 2008

PORTLAND JOURNAL

Racial Shift in a Progressive City Spurs Talks

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

Correction Appended

PORTLAND, Ore. — Not every neighborhood in this city is one of those Northwest destinations where passion for espresso, the environment and plenty of exercise define the cultural common ground. A few places are still described as frontiers, where pioneers move because prices are relatively reasonable, the location is convenient and, they say, they “want the diversity.”

Yet one person’s frontier, it turns out, is often another’s front porch. It has been true across the country: gentrification, which increases housing prices and tension, sometimes has racial overtones and can seem like a dirty word. Now Portland is encouraging black and white residents to talk about it, but even here in Sincere City, the conversation has been difficult.

“I’ve been really upset by what I perceive to be Portland’s blind spot in its progressivism,” said Khaela Maricich, a local artist and musician. “They think they live in the best city in the country, but it’s all about saving the environment and things like that. It’s not really about social issues. It’s upper-middle-class progressivism, really.”

Ms. Maricich, 33, who is white, spoke after attending this month’s meeting of Portland’s Restorative Listening Project.

The goal of the project, which is sponsored by the city’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement, is to have white people better understand the effect gentrification can have on the city’s longtime black and other-minority neighborhoods by having minority residents tell what it is like to be on the receiving end.

Once armed with a broader perspective, said Judith Mowry, the project’s leader, whites should “make the commitment that the harm stops with us.” That might mean that whites appeal to the city to help black businesses or complain to companies that put fliers on the doors of black property owners encouraging them to sell.

Yet what has been clear from the meetings this month and last is that talking about the impact of gentrification is easier than finding ways to reduce it. For some minority residents, the notion that white Portland now says it feels their pain is cold comfort.

“That’s been our history,” Norma Trimble, who is Native American, said during the question-and-answer session this month. “They take all you’ve got. They take your land. Now they want your stories.”

Oregon has always had a complicated relationship with race. When Oregon became a state in 1859, its Constitution specifically prevented blacks from becoming residents, a law that remained on the books for more than 60 years.

Today, Oregon is just 2 percent black, and Portland is about 7 percent black. On May 18, an estimated 75,000 people turned out to hear Senator [Barack Obama](#) at a rally, and most were white. For some, that was evidence that Portland's liberal mind-set transcends race. For others, it just meant Portland prefers its diversity in fresh packaging.

Portland's black population grew significantly during World War II, when blacks surged in to work the shipyards. At the time, real estate restrictions largely confined black families to a neighborhood called Vanport. But when the Columbia River flooded 60 years ago, the residents of Vanport were dispersed, and many blacks moved to the city's Northeast neighborhood. Freeway construction later leveled other black areas. A new hospital took out still more. Now, in the name of economic development, Portland has been improving streets, sidewalks and transportation and offered grants and loans in minority neighborhoods. While the improvements are welcome, many blacks said in interviews that they do not seem designed for them, but more to raise housing prices and lure in newcomers. Blacks who have lived in the Northeast most of their lives say they no longer recognize their old neighborhood, much less feel comfortable there.

On [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Avenue in Northeast, white cyclists in sleek helmets pedal past groups of young black men whose faces are hidden beneath hoodies. Buses rumble by, too, the only transportation alternative for some residents, not just a green alternative.

"It's not drug infested, but then you say, 'Well, what happened to all the black people that were in this area?'" said Margaret Solomon, 84, who is black and has lived in the neighborhood for more than 40 years. "You don't see any."

It is a white world now, Ms. Solomon said: "They're sitting around with their bikes and out on the sidewalks and all that. It's rough to imagine."

Though the black population has declined in some black areas, including Northeast, it has increased somewhat in the city as a whole. Some blacks have left Northeast by choice, moving to other neighborhoods or the suburbs, and some bought and sold property in the area to their advantage. Neighborhoods change for many reasons, and Northeast was white before the Vanport flood. Still, many black residents said they felt they were not the preferred demographic.

Floyd Booker, who spoke during the April meeting of the Restorative Listening Project, was one of several black residents who told of being unable to get bank loans or city grants even as whites, in their view, seemed to have no trouble. Mr. Booker's business, Courtesy Janitorial Service, is one of the few black-owned businesses left on Alberta Street, now a collage of trendy shops and strollers more likely being pushed by white mothers.

"Where's this meeting going?" Mr. Booker, 85, said in an interview days later. "No place. People get there and vent their frustrations, but who hears it?"

Several blacks echoed that concern in interviews after the meetings, while many whites — and the

audiences were overwhelmingly white — said the meetings had been invaluable in helping them see another point of view. Whites often nodded sympathetically, even gasping at times, as they heard blacks tell stories of discrimination and of feeling betrayed by the city in its quest for economic development.

Ms. Mowry, the project's leader, describes it as being rooted in restorative justice, similar to the type applied in the truth and reconciliation commission after the end of apartheid in South Africa.

The meetings have had awkward and tense moments, too. Last month, Joan Laufer, who is white and who moved into a house in Northeast in 2006, stood up to express gratitude to a black minister for describing how hard it was for blacks to get home improvement loans and for addressing some sensitive stereotypes.

"I've learned two things about all you guys already — why the houses aren't fixed up and why you guys are riding around in all these big flashy cars," Ms. Laufer, 55, a nurse practitioner, said.

At one point, she also asked blacks what she should call them — blacks or African-Americans.

An older black woman in the front replied, "People."

Another black woman, toward the back, said, "Donna."

Ms. Laufer offended some, but she said in an interview a few days later that she had meant well, that she felt enlightened by what she heard at the meeting and hoped to be able to discuss her feelings about race honestly with blacks. Unlike some other whites new to the area, she was not aware of the city's history when she moved there. The price was right, that is all, and Mrs. Laufer loved the front porch.

"I've chewed on that meeting like I've never chewed on a church sermon or anything my entire life," she said. "I just want to be in a nice neighborhood, and so do all these other people."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 30, 2008

Two picture captions on Thursday with an article about efforts in Portland, Ore., to encourage black and white residents to talk about gentrification misstated, in some editions, the name of a street there that was once predominantly black. As the article correctly noted, it is Alberta Street, not Albert.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)