Tissue Paper Houses Just Don't Cut It: Addressing Gentrification, Housing Discrimination, and Institutionalized Racism in Portland, Oregon

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Abstract: *The state of Oregon has tried to break away from its dark history of racism, exclusion, and erasure by fronting as an inclusive safe haven. But inclusion is far from the truth. Gentrification and redlining have torn apart communities that were built in spite of the state's racist past. Thousands of Oregonians have subsequently been displaced, like many from past generations. This article looks to historical papers, personal accounts, Census demographics, city development plans, and scholarly research to examine how the attitudes surrounding race have shaped the lives and dynamics of people in Oregon.*

Keywords: Gentrification, redlining, systemic racism, displacement, Portland

Portland, Oregon is commonly known as a haven for young, liberal individuals who want social justice and safe communities for all people. The state of Oregon, however, has a dark history of racism—from being a White-only state to redlining mortgage applications for people of color—and much of that history has contributed to problems that still linger today. Gentrification has swept the United States up in promises of beautiful neighborhoods and hip amenities, attracting affluent people to move into and reshaping inner cities. The process of gentrification happens when an area considered undesirable by upper- and middle-class residents is revamped to accommodate a growing city, which ends up displacing entire neighborhoods of citizens who have resided in those areas for generations. Along with many other places, Portland has failed to address the pitfalls of gentrification—an ongoing issue that is interlaced with the often-denied idea of systemic racism that happens both in the city and nationwide. Portland's history of racism in housing, its contribution to housing discrimination, and its

participation in gentrification has caused a crisis of both housing inequality and modern-day segregation. These actions and obstacles perpetuate systemic racism, operating as a tool of exclusion and erasure of Portland's racial minority communities.

The History of Discrimination in Oregon

Before Oregon officially became a state, the White people living in the territory desired to be surrounded only by others who either looked like them or were useful to them in some way. Robert Bussel and Daniel Tichenor discuss the ways in which many minority and migrant groups were treated very much as "other" by Oregon residents before the territory gained statehood (462). Black people, specifically, were not even allowed to enter Oregon for a period of time; from 1849 to 1859, the government of the territory banned both free and enslaved Black people from Oregon. Bussel and Tichenor explain that this law was put in place out of fear that people of color would develop a "hostility against the white race" (463). Blatant racism was central to the foundation of the state. The only reason other "undesirable" groups were allowed in is because they were deemed useful, often due to the inexpensive and new labor they provided. This distaste towards non-White people continued throughout the years, long beyond the time in which Oregon developed independent statehood in 1859. Oregon started off so deeply racist that it "was the only non-slave state admitted to the union with constitutional provision barring Blacks altogether" (Bussel and Tichenor 463). Oregon's background of severe racism shows how hateful roots took a deep hold in the identity of the state, hate that led to discrimination in the years since Oregon's admission to the Union. Although discrimination often becomes less blatant over time, the ideology is still there, moving through generations both consciously and unconsciously.

Between statehood and World War II, discrimination against non-White people in Oregon was almost as severe as when Oregon was a White-only territory. Black people may have been legally allowed into the state, but they were never made to feel comfortable or at home there. For instance, during World War II, public housing was built to accommodate

shipyard workers who had moved to Portland. During the war, "Portland experienced both a rise in racial conflict and an acute housing shortage when tens of thousands of migrants came to work in the shipyards" (McElderry 139). Stuart McElderry estimates that 15,000 to 20,000 of these migrant workers were Black Americans (139). Even the temporary wartime housing, was too integrated for White Portlanders:

> fear of poor, 'undesirable' migrants contributed to white Portlanders' resistance to public housing during the war… they staged a protest in response to a rumor that the government planned to build a housing project for black shipyard workers in an east side neighborhood. (McElderry 139)

There is a common theme in racist ideology that non-White neighborhoods, especially majority Black neighborhoods, are undesirable additions to the city. The idea of erasure, or concealment, underpins this resistance. In Portland, erasure and concealment were present before the conflict over housing began, but the protests highlighted how this ideology was present in the housing market. Protesters were advocating to segregate Black neighbors to the outskirts of the city: the East Side was too close for comfort.

After the war was over, the city planned to shut down the public housing, leaving thousands of Black citizens without a place to go. Civil rights groups fought to keep this public housing open, while the anti-Black opposition fought to close it. During this time, civil rights groups were also pushing against the segregation of Portland neighborhoods, like Vanport, Oregon, which was "project" housing for many Black residents. In 1948, before any action was taken, "a dike west of Vanport collapsed… destroy[ing] what one Portlander described as the project's 'tissue-paper homes'… [adding] 18,500 people—including nearly 6,000 African Americans—to the city's homeless population" (McElderry 142). This disaster showed that the housing provided to Black Americans was unreliable in the first place, and because there were no plans to keep it open, the destroyed homes were carelessly built without the safety of the residents in mind. It did not matter to the city if Black residents were forced out and erased—Black residents were not welcome in the first place.

The decades after the war showed no slow-down in housing inequality. This was the time when new urban renewal policies added to the displacement. In 1956, a plan to build the Veteran's Memorial Coliseum was approved, and it was slated for the Albina district, which was an almost entirely Black neighborhood. It was chosen because it was seen as a "slum area in need of renewal" (McElderry 144). Many of the residents in the Albina district ended up voting in favor of the Coliseum, hoping that renewal would provide more adequate places to live because the housing in the district was so poor, but that was not the outcome. Because of the racial biases in the Portland housing markets and persistent racism among White residents, Black residents had little options of where to go when the neighborhood became unaffordable. All of this history comes back to one thing: the effacement of Black communities. In the beginning, Black communities were not permitted. When they were permitted in Oregon, they were unwanted. Years later, we can see similar, if slightly less blatant, trends of hiding or removing Black communities from Portland.

Modern Housing Market Discrimination

Discrimination has continued into today's housing markets, and not just in Oregon. Throughout the United States, institutional discrimination is propagated by the people who help others get homes: realtors, mortgage brokers, landlords, and even bankers who provide loans. Of course, not every one of these people will discriminate against clients or potential residents, but it is important to understand how discrimination can happen, even if only subconsciously. Vincent Roscigno, Diana Karafin, and Griff Tester's report on the issues of racial discrimination in housing today discusses this issue: "Mortgage brokers, for instance, with significant institutional (or position-based) power, can shape exclusion in profound ways" (53). Both conscious and unconscious biases severely hurt minority residents who have historically faced more housing issues than their White counterparts. Subconscious bias can be even harder to eradicate because of the way it manifests. People are often unwilling to address subconscious biases. A person

in a position of institutional authority, acting as a resource to help someone find housing, also has the power to deny or block clients: a bank can deny a loan, or a realtor can block an offer on a home. Lisa Bates points out that the power that a landlord holds in Oregon is even more significant, as they can "evict tenants without cause and with just thirty days' notice to vacate" (24). People with these institutional powers are shaping communities into what they think those communities should look like. On the other hand, person to person discrimination is just as harmful as institutional discrimination: "Residential neighbors, in contrast, who may have status-based power derived from their race, can harass and intimidate black tenants despite a lack of institutionalized exclusionary power" (Roscigno, Karafin, and Tester 53). Roscigno, Karafin, and Tester call these people gatekeepers: they are the ones that hold the key to a community (53). They decide who comes in and who should go, or who should be seen and who should not.

In Portland, specifically, Black people are still being pushed to the outskirts of the city. Both housing discrimination and gentrification are to blame. In an article about the effects of displacement of Black families, Linda Christensen, a teacher in Portland's public school system, discusses what her students have said on the topic based on personal experience. Christensen works at Jefferson High School, a school that is almost entirely Black in the midst of a White city. The United States Census estimates that Portland is about 77% White, yet Jefferson High School is made up of about 72% students of color, the majority of whom are Black ("Jefferson High School"). This demographic imbalance shows that Portland still faces a sort of modern-day segregation. The solution here is not to necessarily force desegregation. For instance, the students who Christensen teaches have sometimes had to fake addresses to stay at the school because it is where they feel the most comfortable (Christensen 15). The sheer number of Black families that have been displaced contributes to these students' actions of having to fake addresses. Jena Hughes explains this in her article on urban renewal: "from 1990 to 2016, the Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area, which corresponds to a major portion of the Albina area, over 4,000 house-

holds of more than 10,000 African Americans were displaced from the neighborhood" (13). These students and their families can no longer afford the neighborhoods they have lived in for so many years because newcomers have moved in to have better access to the city, which has raised living costs for the whole area. The Black community in Portland is disproportionately affected because historical events placed them in the Albina district, and now the Albina district is the next up-and-coming place to be gentrified, forcing some people from their homes. It is important to be aware of this de facto segregation and question why it has come about and what implications it has had.

How Gentrification Displaces Communities

As we have seen, Oregon has a long history of displacing marginalized people. Gentrification is a newer phenomenon that has all but continued a similar process in a much subtler way. The word "gentrification" stems from the fourteenth century Middle English word gentrie, meaning of high birth or rank ("Gentry"). So to gentrify is to make something more palatable to the higher class. This is why the subject of gentrification can be tricky; it is meant to cater to those with more money. Different people see it as either a revitalization of, or violence against, a community. Proponents of the practice argue that gentrified neighborhoods are up-and-coming, improved from their previous state to be more attractive to outside residents, which raises the value of homes. Yes, urban renewal makes neighborhoods look better, attracting people from all over, which in turn enhances the local economy and real estate market. But there has never been a balance to urban renewal that includes supporting longtime residents, so the rising prices caused by gentrification have forced residents to leave. This makes room for new residents who can afford the raised prices. The influx of new, wealthier residents, in turn, influences the politics of the area. Derek Hyra explains this issue: "Often, however, newcomers take over political institutions and advocate for amenities and services that fit their definition of community improvement. This process of political displacement can be linked with cultural displacement" (171). Since political figures in local gov-

ernments are chosen by the active residents of a particular area, new residents of a gentrified place can often overtake the voices of other residents who have been there longer. Newcomers can prevent necessary legislations from passing in the community.

In his research, Hyra noticed that "political and cultural displacement breeds intense social tensions, limits meaningful social interactions between longtime residents and newcomers, and results in microlevel segregation" (171). Cultural displacement as a concept is just as important as physical displacement when considering all the negative impacts of gentrifying neighborhoods. Displacement is not just about where someone lives, because displacement causes a loss of stability, loss of community, loss of communication, and a loss of power. With this microsegregation there is more than just erasure, there is silencing. By moving into the political atmosphere, newcomers effectively silence longtime residents, even without meaning to. People need to communicate in order to understand what needs to change and what needs to stay the same in their neighborhoods, but this necessary communication is not happening because of the negative social tensions. The issue is that change under a gentrifying context serves newcomers over longtime residents:

> In certain respects changing norms may be positive…
> but do the norms and incoming amenities in gentrifying
> neighborhoods sufficiently cater to the preferences of
> low-income people or do they predominantly represent
> newcomers' tastes and preferences? (Hyra 171)

New policymakers could vote to take out something within a community, for example, a community pool, because they might think it outdated or ugly or attracting the wrong kinds of people, not realizing that the longtime residents of that area value that space as a way to come together. Their established culture is thereby disrupted.

For Portland, gentrification has been met with praise by those who are happy with the hip neighborhoods, new apartment buildings, grocery stores, and other amenities that might not have existed in the area beforehand. Some political figures argue in support of gentrification: "elected leaders who favor Portland as a hip, sustainable urban mecca are favorable to

neighborhood changes" (Bates 24). Such political figures see gentrification "as a triumph of the reputation for livability" (Bates 23). There can indeed be benefits of revitalizing an area; it can attract newcomers and create a better local economy for a specific subset of people. Before it is done, however, it is important to consider implications of the rising costs of living:

> This public investment, occurring after a long history of redlining and exclusion, has disproportionately benefited newcomers to the neighborhoods and harmed long-time residents by failing to incorporate sufficient affordable housing and opportunity for inclusion in economic growth. Portland's African American community has experienced the most severe displacement. (Bates 23)

Because newcomers are the main beneficiaries of gentrification, it is often seen as a violent act against a community as it tears it apart. Real people have been negatively impacted. Displacement is not a good experience for anyone, since they lose their sense of structure and community. Systemic racism due to historical and modern housing practices is the most important conversation to have, since Portland's Black community is disproportionately affected, as Bates points out. Even though the concept is still denied, Portland's timeline from before statehood to today provides plenty of evidence to suggest systemic racism still exists. The topic can be uncomfortable to face, but there are people who are much more uncomfortable as they are being forced to leave their homes because of systems and ideologies that were put in place long ago.

Paths to Reconciliation

Affordable housing is often an option to counteract effects of displacement and gentrification. But there is an inherent issue with using affordable housing as a counterbalance because the implication is that displacement is fine as long as ex-residents have another place to go. The first thing to remember is that affordable housing does not always equal reliable housing because, as was seen with the tissue paper homes of World War II, it is often substandard. Even if housing happens to be secure, there are still issues with this option. Communities are built in

neighborhoods. Those communities end up being torn apart, even if residents are placed in secure and permanent housing that they are able to afford. Neighbors will never be neighbors again, which means that people end up losing ties and support systems that help people in a community prosper. Because displacement has already happened on a large scale in Portland, sufficient affordable housing might be a suitable option, if it is accompanied by attempts at reconciliation with displaced people.

Portland does have a policy that attempts to acknowledge the need for reconciliation: the "Right to Return" Preference Policy. This legislation is aimed towards people who were displaced from the neighborhoods that they and their families grew up in due to urban renewal. The policy gives "priority placement to applicants who were displaced, at risk of displacement, or who are descendants of households that were displaced due to urban renewal in North and Northeast Portland" ("N/NE Neighborhood Housing"). The goal of "Right to Return" is to give displaced residents preference in spots for affordable rental housing and home purchases. Whether or not displaced people end up back in their community is the real question. The policy uses the term "return," which implies a return to their original communities, but the process is not quite that. The Portland Housing Bureau develops affordable housing to rent, provides opportunities to own homes, and provides other assistance for first-time buyers ("N/NE Neighborhood Housing"). The system is based upon preference points, which are given if a resident's current or previous address is in a specified area. Anyone in the area can fill out an application online or at a designated area in person and, based on the number of points they are assigned, will be given assistance in finding housing.

The policy does not directly address the fact that minority citizens are still facing disproportionate rates of displacement compared to their White counterparts, as Hughes has demonstrated. It is like putting a band aid on a gaping wound. This all comes back to erasure, except the residents are still in the city, just out of sight and therefore out of mind. More than anything else, conversations, acknowledgement, and actions towards reconciliation are the most effective ways of healing commu-

nities that have been broken because of systemic racism that has been active throughout history. The reality is that displacement has already happened, and the history of Oregon and the United States as a whole, still has consequences for marginalized communities today. Acknowledging these facts and working to change the attitude towards what some think makes a "good" community takes time and work, but it is a way to stop the erasure and silencing of marginalized people. In the meantime, however, displaced people still need places to go.

The Pursuit to More Housing

If affordable housing is an option that the city pursues on a greater scale, there are plenty of considerations to address. Building on stable land, near jobs (public transportation included), and close to schools allows people to access their work and education, without having to worry about how to get where they need to be. Affordable housing can be difficult to erect because "real estate development interests are a strong political force in cities," and that political interest has been used to the advantage of real estate developers to resist affordable housing in gentrifying areas (Bates 24). Again, the idea of political displacement arises. People in political positions of power often advocate for their own interests, so new residents may not care about what longtime residents have to say.

Suggesting that policy has prevented affordable housing is not far-fetched by any means. Zoning policies in Portland were, for a long time, on the edge of violating the Fair Housing Amendments Act (FHAA), which prohibits policies that discriminate against minority communities. Jennifer Logan discusses how particular policies, which were enacted in 1999, prohibited "jurisdictions within the state from using mandatory IZ [inclusionary zoning] to achieve affordable housing goals" (214). Prohibition of mandatory inclusionary zoning is problematic on its own because the purpose of this type of zoning is to include all residents in the growth of a city. Lack of inclusionary zoning led to actively exclusionary zoning, exclusionary to those who have been historically left out, meaning exclusionary to marginalized communities. In February

2017, the statute against affordable housing was changed , but for eighteen years, affordable housing was put on the back-burner in Portland, all while the city was gentrified (Bates 24). The damage has been done, and because getting wealthy residents to move from an area that they helped gentrify in the first place is extremely difficult, there is no way to undo it.

In Oregon, the history of racism has helped solidify the "link between race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the Metro Region" (Logan 216), which provides further evidence that systemic racism is still an issue today. Policy is a direct systemic structure, so if policy ends up hurting one group more than another, there is a systemic oppression in place. The reason why this affects racial minorities so severely is because the current policy stems from systems that were created before Oregon was even a state, when the territory did not allow Black people in and when Oregon was more overt about its intention to conceal racial minorities from White communities. Later on, when White Portlanders protested public housing during World War II, they branded public housing, filled with mostly Black migrant workers, undesirable. To this day, public and affordable housing is perceived as undesirable to so many who feel it will give their neighborhood a bad look. But because of de facto segregation, gentrification and displacement, the people who end up in affordable housing are in groups that have been historically hated and oppressed. The result is a vicious cycle of seeing mostly non-White neighborhoods as the undesirable ones.

Displacement is often tied in with segregation. It forces residents out to the fringe areas of Portland, and because much of the displacement has disproportionately affected minority residents, neighborhoods end being densely populated by one group of people:

> Minorities forced out of the center city by high income and rent prices have disproportionately moved to the outer Eastern edges of the city, which lack amenities like sidewalks and adequate transportation. The result is not a mere "perpetuation" of existing segregation at a constant rate; rather, segregation in these Portland neighborhoods actually increases. (Logan 225)

The result echoed the days when people of color could not live in certain neighborhoods, whether it be due to legal aspects or intimidation factors employed to scare "undesirable" people away. Although explicitly discriminatory laws like the South's Jim Crow Laws are no longer enforced, the housing market has forced minorities to live in areas that lack access to all the city center's privileges like jobs and public transportation, creating modern-day, easy-to-ignore segregation.

Conclusion

Racism against non-White communities needs to be addressed in order to combat the negative effects of gentrification; neighborhoods need not be deemed "good" or "bad" based on the majority race that lives there. Gentrification is a result of discriminatory historical attitudes, influencing policy to appeal to those who have always been in power and, therefore, systemic. It is a practice that mainly discriminates against already marginalized communities. Because of Portland's reputation as a hip, progressive city, it ends up being easier to ignore or gloss over the issues that stem from the state's deeply racist past. Understanding the history of exclusion, the wartime projects, and the constant discrimination in Oregon's housing market is eye opening, revealing how the state contributed to the displacement of people who have lived in the city for many years. Significant trauma, lasting from generation to generation, has been inflicted upon racial minorities, especially Black Americans. Understanding how our society and policy still perpetuates that trauma today is the first step in stopping these discriminatory practices and moving toward reconciliation for centuries of horrific treatment.

Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Daniel Dooghan's AWR 201 class.

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