Social Spaces of Gentrifiation in Northeast Portland, Oregon

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Abstract

Gentrification, a process that involves the replacement of a less affluent group by a wealthier social group in inner city neighborhoods, occurs in cities throughout the world. In America, gentrification typically involves White intrusion into predominantly African American communities. The historically Black neighborhoods of northeast Portland, Oregon are representative of this trend. Our research utilizes cultural landscape and geospatial analysis to examine three categories of social spaces that represent different phases of the gentrification process. The first of these spaces are recently designated bike lanes that aid gentrification by aligning with the city's longstanding 20-minute neighborhood design and attracting a growing segment of young professionals. The second category involves specific business types and public spaces, such as coffee shops and breweries, which have opened to accommodate the desires of these new residents and their creature comfort lifestyles. The third type of space are arenas for public dialogue, like monthly community forums, that facilitate greater cultural understanding among new and old residents and results in what has been described as "antiracist place-making." Analyzing these spaces reveals many ways that the controversial process of gentrification can impact the appearance and atmosphere of neighborhoods affected by it.

Methodology

Framed by Critical Race Theory, this project examines the impact of legal policies on Portland's African American community through historical analysis of laws that created segregated neighborhoods in the city's northeast side.

The use of geospatial technology to capture land use types in the Williams Avenue neighborhood and cultural landscape analysis from field notes and photography to assess the types of residential structures and business types located along these streets in 2012. Addresses and land use type for each building on Williams and Vancouver Avenues were collected in person, transcribed into a Microsoft Excel database, and mapped with the assistance of the geocoding tool in ESRI's ArcMap software program.

In order to gauge the degree of bicycle ridership in the study area, one morning and afternoon census of riders was conducted on Vancouver and Williams Avenues, respectfully. Each census was conducted from a stationary point along the street.

Setting the Scene

Present day social geographies in Portland can be analyzed with Critical Race Theory, which analyzes race and racism from a legal perspective. Portland is the largest predominantly White city in the United States (74% White) and became more White and wealthy between 2000 and 2010 as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos left for orther cities in the metropolitan area (Hannah-Jones, 2011). These changes are intimately tied to a lengthy history of policies enacted by governments and businesses that intentionally or indirectly denied African Americans the ability to own their own home while at the same time preserving White control of space in the city. The Donation Land Claim Act, passed by Congress in 1850, offered free land in Oregon Territory only to Whites and Whites with Native American ancestry (Gibson, 2007). Oregon's Territorial Legislature passed and extended Black exclusion laws in 1844 and 1859 that severely restricted African American settlement within its boundaries until the law was repealed in 1926 (Taylor, 1982). By 1920, the Portland Realty Board outlined the boundary of the city's Black neighborhood along Williams Avenue and forbid agents from selling property in a White neighborhood to non-Whites (McElderry, 2001). In the 1920s, 50,000 members of the Oregon Ku Klux Klan campaigned against land ownership by foreign-born citizens and racial minorities and helped elect Governor Walter M. Pierce, who passed Klan-supported legislation (Horowitz, 1989).

In 1940, 98% of Portland's 305,000 residents were White, and the African American community numbered only 1,931 (Gibson and Jung, 2005). World War II brought significant demographic change to the city, and by the end of the war, industry and the government had attracted 160,000 out-of-state workers to Portland in order to meet their labor needs.The city's African American population swelled to 11,000 during this decade as thousands were employed in the manufacturing sector (Fryer, 2005), but they were not allowed to join labor unions and had a difficult time finding work after the war due to biased hiring practices by employers (Taylor, 1981). The majority of African American laborers and their families resided in Vanport City, a hastily constructed public housing project that opened in 1943 near the shipyards. Home to 40,000 Whites and Blacks, it was the largest housing project in the nation when it opened and included all of the social and commercial services necessary to detract residents from using services elsewhere. When the Columbia River flooded Vanport City in 1948, Black residents were forced into already crowded housing in the segregated Williams Avenue neighborhood (Fryer, 2005). Discriminatory mortgage lending policies and redlining maintained the segregated nature of the city through the 1980s by restricting Black home ownership in the city, and disinvestment by the city resulted in dilapidated infrastructure and lackadaisical social support (Gibson, 2007).

The emergence of a "green culture" and a growing emphasis on environmental sustainability in the early 1970s resulted in the creation of Portland's Urban Growth Boundary in 1977. The boundary was designed to limit urban sprawl, protect farmland, preserve open space, and foster livable cities by increasing population density, providing better public transportation options, and decreasing commuting distances.

Limiting the supply of land in Portland, however, increased its value within it. Between 1990 and 2007, average home prices in northeast Portland skyrocketed from $64,200 to $289,000, an increase of 450% (Mildner, 2009). During this time period, the percentage of African Americans in northeast Portland decreased by 23% as neighborhoods within it became gentrified by young, middle-class, White professionals who could afford rising property taxes. Displaced by the perceived successes of the Urban Growth Boundary, African Americans departed for neighboring cities in the metropolitan area (Hannah-Jones, 2011).

The Williams and Vancouver Avenue neighborhood is the remaining vestige of Portland's African American community, but the city government and real estate industry have recently designated this area as suitable for redevelopment. The appearance of the neighborhood is changing rapidly gentrification sets in: new condominiums rise, homes are renovated, community gardens are established, and businesses catering to the tastes of new residents emerge in commercial corridors. Longtime African American residents of the neighborhood abhor the sudden interest by the city after decades of disinvestment (Navas, 2011). Public community forums have become important venues for their voices to be heard by city officials and new residents. These forums are one of three types of social spaces symbolizing the immense changes occurring in the neighborhood that we explore in the next section of this poster.

Map of Study Area

Our area of examination is centered on Williams and Vancouver Avenues in the near northeast side Portland.

Key Social Spaces

We identify three important social spheres that characterize the tensions that exist between longtime African American residents and newcomers to northeast Portland's increasingly gentrified neighborhoods and how gentrification is represented through semiotics and the rhetoric of public dialogue.

- Designated bike lanes -

Recently designated bike lanes aid in gentrification by aligning with the city's longstanding 20-minute neighborhood design and attracting a growing segment of young professionals. Bike lanes represent Portland's green culture as 6% of people in Portland bike to work as their main mode of transportation; this is the highest number of the top 70 cities in the U.S. (Maus, 2011.)

Cyclists have long revered Portland for its bicycle-friendly culture and infrastructure, including the network of bike lanes that the city began planning in the early 1970s. The city is nurturing the cycling industry; there are 125 bike-related businesses from bike rack companies to mass-produced aluminum frames to cycling hats. Nonprofit advocacy groups and websites including bikeportland.org link people into cycling issues and events (Yardley, 2007). Williams and Vancouver Ave are prime examples of the network of bike lanes as traffic flows changed from both ways to one way to accommodate bicyclists.

Bike lanes accommodate gentrification as affluent White professionals are leading the charge of commuters on bikes, just as they were among the first groups to embrace organic food but so far, it's been a white-collar movement (Helliker, 2006.) Bikes are everywhere in Portland, not just in racks and on the streets as cyclists zoom down Williams and Vancouver Ave but in murals. The Community Cycling Center mural at NE Alberta and 17th visually represents the "share the road" lifestyle of Portland. Photos of the Community Cycling Center mural and commuters are below.

Bike racks outside of The Waypost, 3120 Williams Avenue.

Community Cyling Center 1700 NE Alberta St.

Bicycle commuters, 3500 block Williams Avenue.

- Business types and Public spaces -

The second category of social spaces involves specific business types and public spaces, such as coffee shops and gardens, which have opened to accommodate the desires of these new residents and their creature comfort lifestyles. Williams Avenue was once the heart of Portland's Black community, the neighborhood has declined in Black businesses and increased in White ones, both mainstream and bohemian (Sullivan, 2011.)

Residential gentrification, an attempt to restore the depressed urban areas is at play among retail gentrification which influences the goods and services available to residents living in an urban area. Retail shops provide comforts to residents who shop at them since they fit their particular lifestyle needs. Gentrification along Williams and Vancouver Avenues is creating a market for businesses that cater to newcomers as well as creating new cultural spaces. Hopworks, an eco-brewpub that opened in 2011, is an example of such a business, and while it and neighboring stores provide goods and services for newcomers, it caters more to the tastes of new residents than the old.

Hopworks Bike Bar, 3947 Williams Avenue.

Only a few landmark businesses and buildings of the African American community like Tropicana Bar-Be-Cue and Baptist churches remain. Coffee shops and gardens, which have opened to accommodate White and college-educated gentrifiers, are slowly replacing closing African American-owned businesses in the neighborhood (Sullivan, 2007). New businesses are not accommodating to the African American community, as they cater to the interests of cultural goods and services impose on African American lifestyles.

- Arenas for Public dialogue -

The third type of social space are arenas for public dialogue, like monthly community forums, that facilitate greater cultural understanding among new and old residents and results in what has been described as "antiracist place-making." Portland has been described as "the whitest major city in the country having become whiter as its core even as surrounding areas have grown more diverse" (Hannah-Jones, 2011.) Maintaining arenas for public dialogue is necessary for progress to be made.

In 2008, a multi-racial team of community organizers developed a racial dialogue program using storytelling as a tool to examine social consequences of gentrification. The program mission is to "help white people understand the harms of gentrification and racism from those who experience the effects" (Drew, 2011.) These racial dialogues are the reaction to years of disinvestment by the city of Portland. Longtime residents of the Williams Avenue neighborhood are upset that the city is only interested in the Black community when White individuals begin moving in.

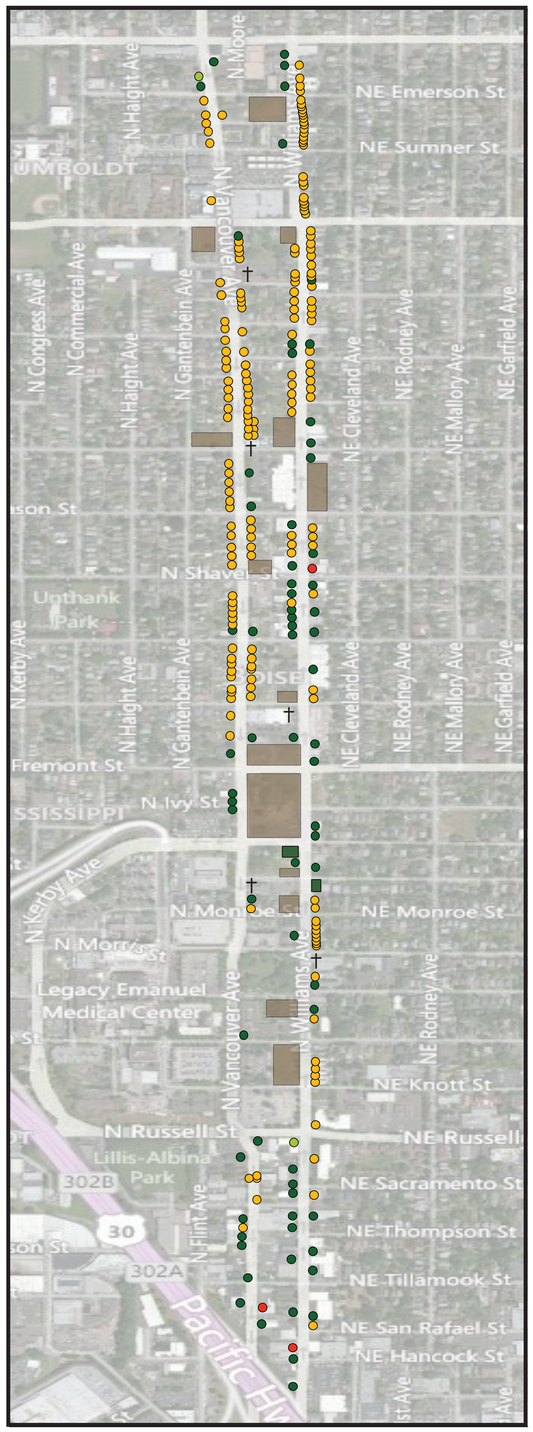
One resident recounted experiences with their new neighbors in which white people did not make eye contact, were unwilling to say hello when passing on the sidewalk, and did not introduce themselves to anyone who was Black. One panelist recounted watching her new white neighbor go "white-door-to-white-door" and skipping the Black homes for introductions (Drew, 2011).

To combat this, new white neighbors need to act as social preservationists, like environmentalists seek to preserve the natural environment. Social preservationists work to preserve the space they have entered by combining the ideology of social preservation—a set of values that demand the presence of original residents. They engage in efforts to prevent the displacement of them in their area, despite acknowledging the disruption caused by their own in-migration (Brown-Sacraino, 2004.)

Gentrification has pushed nearly 10,000 people of color from the city core in the past decade. Community leaders say that Portland officials did not do enough to protect diversity and instead assisted gentrification. What the city did -- and didn't do -- holds lessons as city leaders seek to expand urban renewal farther into North and Northeast Portland and shape the next 25-year Portland Plan. (Hannah-Jones, 2011.)

Cultural Landscape Analysis of Williams & Vancouver Avenues

Interpreting the physical manifestations of culture in space, as well as the meanings associated to them, is central to the study of cultural geography. In March 2012, land use types along Williams and Vancouver Avenues were documented by street address and mapped in ESRI ArcMap. Photos were also taken to provide a visual inventory of this neighborhood as it experiences a high level of residential and commercial change. Below are a selected number of photos taken along Vancouver and Williams Avenues. New condominiums sit among century-old single family homes, vestiges of the African American community are seen in churches and a few remaining businesses while new businesses are frequented by White, young, bike riding residentsof the neighborhood.



- Vancouver Ave. -

Vancouver Avenue bike and vehicle traffic is one-way southbound and has more residential properties north of the Legacy Medical Center, than Williams Avenue.

Biking distance sign, 5200 block.

Renovated bungalow, 4400 block.

Livingscape Garden Center, 3920 Vancouver Avenue.

New condominiums, 4000 block.

Biker, brownfield, and condominiums under construction, 3300 block.

The Grillery Food Stand, 3400 block.

New apartment building, 4400 block.

Hostess Retail Outlet, 3200 block.

Quesabrosa Food Stand tacos, 3400 block.

Map Legend

- Commercial
- Non-Profit
- Residential
- Warehouse
- Church
- Community Garden
- Brownfield (vacant land prime for redevelopment)

N W E S

0 .5 mi

0 .5 km

- Williams Ave. -

Williams Avenue bike and vehicular traffic flows one-way northbound and is home to a higher number of commercial zones than Vancouver Avenue.

$250,000 condominiums, 4800 block.

Sidewalk graffitti, 5200 block.

Lodekka Dress Shop, 3900 block.

Urban League of Portland, 2500 block. Williams Avenue

Going Street Market, 4601 Williams Avenue.

Bluehouse Greenhouse Farm Community Garden, 3200 block.

Bike City, USA

With an increasingly permanent network of lanes and legal access to office buildings around major biking cities, Portland has been noted as being in the top three comprised of New York City, Portland, Oregon and Madison, Wisconsin (Goodman, 2010.) A proper bike count of major bike ways on Williams and Vancouver Avenues was conducted to determine the true scale of this network.

Biking is entrenched as a mode of transportation to and from work and social lives of people living in Portland. Dr. Zeitler conducted a biker count along Williams and Vancouver Avenues during a recent say in Portland. Between the hours of 4 and 5:30pm on a partly sunny afternoon that experienced, scattered light showers, 202 bikers headed north on Williams Avenue. Out of the 202 bicyclist that zipped by, 61% were male and 39% were female. Only 2 were of African American descent.
The same biker count was conducted the next morning between the hours of 7:45 and 8:45am on Vancouver Avenue. The temperature was 49 degrees and an overcast sky delivered steady drizzle with light winds. Out of the 71 bikers that zipped by, 71% were male while 29% were female. Only one of the bikers was of African American descent.

The United States Department of Transportation recently described bicycles and pedestrians as "equals" to trains, planes and automobiles and encouraging further development of cycling infrastructure at the state and federal level through the United States (Goodman, 2010.) This level of institutional support is yet another example of legislation that negatively affects Portland's African American community and supports a largely White lifestyle.

African Dinner sign at Immaculate Heart Catholic Church, 2900 block. Williams Avenue

Raised streetside gardens, 2800 block Williams Avenue.

AME Zion Baptist Church, 4304 Vancouver Avenue.

Concluding Remarks

Gentrification is an effort to restore depressed urban communities by seizing land and property, destroying inadequate properties, and replacing them with new homes, schools, and restaurants. This has had a destructive consequence for the northeast Portland's Black community. The map to the right shows vacant land prime for redevelopment with the ultimate goal for businesses and middle class residents to relocate these areas to increase the property value and economically revitalize the neighborhood.

Williams Avenue has more commercial places as compared to Vancouver Avenue. The Urban League of Portland and Zion Baptist Church remain amidst renovated apartment buildings and retail venues that attract young white urban professionals. The vacant land prime for development is scattered along the two streets, and the majority of the vacant land is surrounded by commercial buildings. This provides incentives developers to continue to build retail venues on these sites. Vancouver Avenue has more residential places as compared to Williams Avenue. While the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs is located on Vancouver, it is squeezed in-between newly renovated bungalows and sustainable initiative business that promote alternative living through beekeeping and urban chickens.

The Williams Avenue neighborhood is a landscape of social power that reflects how laws and policies of the past 170 years have benefitted Whites and maintained a lower standard of living for people of color. The city's urban growth boundary and green culture have created the perfect environment for gentrification to occur. Consider that the map to the left is filled with single family dwellings that have increased in value triple fold since 1970. As a result, thousands of longtime residents of northeast Portland have been priced out of their neighborhoods and into the city limits and neighboring suburbs. This, we argue, is the true cost of gentrification in Portland.

Future Research

Analysis of these social spaces reveals many ways that the controversial process of gentrification can impact the appearance and atmosphere of neighborhoods affected by it, but more work is needed to understand the loss of community this neighborhood has experienced. In August 2012 we intend to travel to Portland and conduct semi-structured interviews with Black, White, recent, and longtime residents of Williams and Vancouver Avenue neighborhoods to document feelings toward the emergence of gentrified spaces in this area of the city. We will also complete a temporal geospatial analysis of demographic and socio-economic variables to measure the degree of change that has occurred here over the past 22 years.

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