



“LISTENING THROUGH WHITE EARS”: CROSS-RACIAL DIALOGUES AS A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS THE RACIAL EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION

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ABSTRACT: *Every month residents in a gentrifying Portland neighborhood gather for a cross-racial dialogue in which the long-term African American residents explain to the new white, middle-class residents how neighborhood change, and their new neighbors’ “white behaviors” are harmful. Through participant observations at these dialogues for over two years, as well as in-depth interviews, I uncovered how the Restorative Listening Project (RLP) uses dialogue as a strategy for community formation and “antiracist place-making” in Portland’s Northeast neighborhoods. The RLP attempts to mitigate the relational effects of gentrification and construct “antiracist place” by (1) positioning people of color as knowledge producers about the institutional and interpersonal effects of racism in the neighborhood; (2) confronting the tactics of white denial; and (3) promoting consciousness about systemic racism. By doing so, the project promotes antiracist awareness that responds to—perhaps reduces—the racial-relational effects of gentrification. However, it also reveals the limits of consciousness-raising projects in the absence of action that resists structural inequalities.*

Nearly every year, cities such as Portland, Oregon, are heralded as among the best places to live in the United States. They are applauded by policy makers, academics, and popular media for being locations that attract socially responsible business practices and develop environmentally sustainable policy. These cities cultivate reputations as sites that support gay and lesbian identities, an emerging “creative class,” and personal politics relating to vegetarianism, religious freedom, and alternative family formations. Yet, amid the tolerance and diversity in “cool” urban places, a recent study by New Geography found that “progressive cities aren’t red or blue, but another color entirely: white” (Renn, 2009). Portland, for all of its progressive politics, was recently called “America’s ultimate white city,” having an African American population of 6%, which is less than half the national average and a stark contrast to “traditional” (non-progressive) cities in which over a quarter of the cities’ population is Black. While Portland’s African American population may be small, the community is confronted by a host of social problems that are hard to address through “progressive politics” that rarely deal with address racism, or include antiracist activism.

Despite the lack of attention given to racial justice issues in progressive Portland, racial tensions—fueled by institutionalized racism—bubble up in neighborhoods such as Alberta in

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JOURNAL OF URBAN AFFAIRS, Volume 00, Number 0, pages 1–17.

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ISSN: 0735-2166.

DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9906.2011.00572.x

the city's Northeast side.¹ This historically African American neighborhood has been home to several generations of Black families, who had limited access to other regions of the city due to restrictive racial covenants, redlining, and racial segregation (McElderry, 2001). But after several decades of home ownership, the disinvestment of capital in the late 1980s and early 1990s left neighborhoods like this in decay, "bleeding," and very much in need of renewal (Gibson, 2008). The land, considered a valuable commodity by developers in Portland's urban growth regime, has become a contested site in which gentrification is quickly changing the racial and class status of the residents. In what Smith (1996) likens to a "new urban frontier," gentrification mirrors westward expansion, in which the middle class encroaches upon and eventually takes land from the already existing groups, usually members of the lower classes and disproportionately people of color.

Yet residents in these changing Northeast Portland neighborhoods are not standing by idly while the machinery of urban renewal displaces long-term African American residents with newcomers who are higher class and disproportionately more white. In 2008, a cross-racial team of community organizers developed a racial dialogue program in which storytelling is used as a tool to examine the social consequences of gentrification on their individual and community lives. Built upon a "restorative justice" model, Portland's "Restorative Listening Project" (RLP) brings together 20–100 people each month to engage in dialogue about racism and gentrification. Its coordinators, working from the program's mission to "help white people understand the harms of gentrification and racism from those who experience the effects" believe that dialogue deepens community-members' relationships, reduces interpersonal conflict, and can produce a sustainably integrated neighborhood.

At each RLP dialogue, the long-term African American residents of Portland's gentrifying Alberta neighborhood are constructed as experts who use their experience to explain to the audience the meaning and harms of neighborhood "change."² The white participants, most of whom are the new to the neighborhood, learn about institutionalized racism, racial privilege, and oppression, and how their everyday behaviors in the neighborhood fuel what organizers call "relational aggression" (Crick, 1996). Unlike the gentrification taking place in many major U.S. cities, it is not a determined outcome that the remaining long-term African American residents will be fully displaced. Because of mechanisms such as the cap on property tax increases, African American home ownership, and the incubation of Black political organizations in the city, many African American residents remain in Northeast Portland with their new white neighbors. Therefore, how people make "place" together through racial dialogues is an important site for sociological inquiry.

In this study, I contend that the RLP uses dialogue as a strategy for consciousness raising and "antiracist place-making" in Portland's Northeast neighborhoods. Through conversations about race and gentrification, the RLP attempts to mitigate the relational effects of gentrification and construct "antiracist place" by (1) positioning people of color as knowledge producers about the institutional and interpersonal effects of racism in the neighborhood, (2) confronting the tactics of white denial, and (3) promoting consciousness about the racial harms of gentrification. By doing so, the project promotes a shared awareness of racism among the residents that attempts to reduce the racial tensions caused by gentrification in this Portland neighborhood. However, it also reveals the limitations of "consciousness-raising" in the absence of action to address structural inequalities.

ABOUT RLP

The goal of the RLP is to engage in a public discussion about the harms of gentrification, using a "restorative justice" model. To do this, the City of Portland sponsors a monthly gathering in

which longtime African American residents of the changing Northeast Portland neighborhoods share their stories of how gentrification affects them and the maintenance of “community.” The stated mission of the program is to create space for listening, engaging, “and then working to repair the harm and prevent further harm.”

Beyond this stated goal, one of the organizers shared that they began receiving calls and requests for mediation/conflict resolution in the Alberta area, as the racial changes catalyzed hostility between the new neighbors. “Racial tensions” began bubbling to the surface, and, rather than continuing to address these issues on a case-by-case basis, the organizers (the director of a neighborhood coalition office and a mediator) enlisted another long-standing community leader to set up a dialogue program that could address the racial-relational aggression taking place throughout the neighborhood. The City of Portland eventually became a sponsor for the dialogues. The need for such a dialogue came to a near fever-pitch when the area’s “Last Thursday” events (a monthly gathering of vendors and residents, in what the City calls its “best expression of Art and Diversity”) had become “out of control,” drawing a crowd of over 15,000 people, many of whom engaged in drunken and rowdy behavior (including the burning of a car). So, while the City was shouldering the costs for security and clean-up of this kind of event in Alberta, many African Americans were outraged at the diversion of resources that were not available when they were the majority in that neighborhood. According to Mirk (2008), “‘there [were] questions coming from the community about whether the city has applied its policy in a fair and equitable way, explaining that many neighbors believe that if 10 years ago the neighborhood’s predominantly African American and Latino residents had thrown an un-permitted and boozy block party, the police would have shut it down.’” Moreover, long-term African American residents felt the grind of institutionalized racism as the new cultural institutions in the neighborhood prioritized day care centers for dogs, bicycle repair shops for Portland’s “critical mass” of environmental commuters, and had a bevy of wine bars, coffee shops, and vegan restaurants to cater to the newcomers.

The organizers of RLP sought to develop a dialogue project that would allow these larger-scale issues, as well as the interpersonal feelings of frustration and hostility, to be dealt with in a more collective—albeit not structural—method. They expected that if residents of the neighborhood could come together, and white people could learn to listen to and respect African Americans’ experiences in the community, and their own role in the tensions, that the “relational aggression” taking place because of racism and gentrification could be diminished. They believed that stories, listening, and education could alter the hostility associated with the gentrification of place.

The three lead organizers, an African American woman, an African American man, and a white woman, planned for a year’s worth of dialogues about gentrification and racism to be hosted at different sites, including churches, community centers, and auditoriums. At each gathering, they provide participants with guidelines about how to listen with “cultural humility” and began most RLP sessions with a foundation like this one:

People want community, yet they build fences and walls go up. This has created a grieving, hurt and angry Black community, who see an unfair and unjust distribution of resources, and see their own families being forced out of the neighborhood. The problem is compounded by a largely oblivious white population that comes in, and in their words, takes over. What results is a ‘relational aggression’ and it is easier to talk about our relationships to things than to one another. So, we talk about how the groups have different experiences of bicycles, strollers, dogs, coffee, stores, and bigger things like access to home improvement loans, police surveillance, and losing the local gathering spot.

At each dialogue, the speakers, almost exclusively African American, describe their daily experiences with gentrification, explaining that the racism is manifest through seemingly small,

“everyday” interactions with their new white neighbors. They speak about white people’s lack of manners, such as not picking up dog waste in their yards; of how young white people block the sidewalks with their bicycles and skateboards; of white people’s unwillingness to greet or acknowledge them, or make eye contact; of how white mothers clench their children’s hands more tightly and lock car doors as they pass; and of the way they feel like second-class citizens in their own neighborhoods.

In nearly all cases, they lament about a lack of “community” and the loss of a sense of “place” once their new white neighbors moved in. One African American presenter likened his new Neighborhood Association Meetings to a KKK group meeting, noting, “it’s clear that I am not welcome there.” And the panelists of color articulate that these interactions and feelings take place in a context in which police surveillance has increased, opportunities for home improvement loans for Blacks have decreased, and the new coffee shops, art galleries, and “fancy” grocery stores closed down the Black-owned businesses and gathering places. They conclude, for the largely white audience, that white people come into their neighborhoods and impose their values.

The white people in the audience are usually the very “newcomers” to which the presenters are referring. Some attend the dialogue because they have personally been involved in neighborhood conflicts, and while they say they are there to understand why, some are also there to justify and seek support for their own feelings of victimization by “angry” African Americans. Some are interested in topics such as the history of the neighborhood, current controversies taking place related to “Last Thursdays,” dogs, or policing there, and there are some who see this as an opportunity to engage in racial reconciliation work, via the effects of gentrification. This audience of mostly white people listens to the stories and follows up with questions and dialogue that can help them to better understand the harms of their behaviors in the “changing” neighborhood. Over the course of this research, white people’s reactions ranged from a host of denial strategies and discrediting what the panelists say, to audible gasps, and quiet reflection about their culpability in contributing to racism in their own neighborhood. After all of the presenters conclude their stories, the audience is invited to ask questions, get further clarification, and respond to what they have heard. About half the group goes to another room where small groups called “listening circles” more fully debrief what they have just heard and experienced.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to understand how the RLP uses dialogue to construct “antiracist place” and to respond to the relational effects of gentrification, I attended the monthly sessions from November 2007 through October 2010. During this time, there were 28 formal gatherings, with a half dozen of them focused around special topics in the summer. In addition, I attended RLP-related events, including public hearings regarding the renaming of a street, gatherings regarding police-shootings of unarmed residents of the neighborhoods, potlucks, and a film festival sponsored by the participants. I also interviewed 16 people, four of whom were RLP organizers, and all of whom were participants who attended three or more gatherings. I obtained written consent for all interviews and introduced myself as a researcher at the public gatherings.

In order to document my observations, I tape recorded and took notes during the formal part of the listening session and question/response. During each debrief session, I sat with a small group and participated in the discussion. After each gathering, I wrote extensive field notes and transcribed the presentations and interviews. Using grounded theory, I began open coding of my notes, memos, and transcripts. This allowed an initial series of codes to emerge including how people articulated their learning from the dialogues, how expertise about racism was constructed, white reactions to epistemological challenges, and how racial justice and antiracism were raised

as possible realities. I returned to the data for a more focused coding and derived meaningful themes from my field notes that became the basis for my argument.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In seeking to understand how neighbors in a racially diverse community use dialogue to construct “antiracist place” and mitigate the interpersonal, racial effects of gentrification, I offer a theoretical context to construct gentrification as a problem. I then draw upon the relevant literatures of place-making and “racial dialogues” to understand what the RLP illuminates, mitigates, and exacerbates about the racial-relational effects of gentrification in Portland.

Gentrification

Scholarship in the social sciences about gentrification tends to revolve around three major areas: the causes of gentrification, the mechanisms through which it is carried out, and its consequences. Researchers provide the historical backdrop to the contemporary contests over urban space, noting why and how the racially segregated urban centers were constructed in order to become major sites of production and “command points for the organization of the world economy” (Sassen, 2006, p. 35). Following urbanization and suburbanization of the United States,³ by the late 1980s urban growth regimes began turning cities into “organized enterprises devoted to raising the aggregate rent levels through the intensification of land use” (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Many urban theorists today argue that globalization at the end of the century began transforming urban areas into a new “frontier” in which space—literal and symbolic—became a significant site for territorial disputes, racial conflict, and the magnification of social stratification (Harvey, 1993; Smith, 1996).

Gentrification has not just produced structural changes. With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries in these sites, cities have become increasingly governed by a symbolic economy, one that is as much about producing culture for consumption as it is about producing space. As such, “culture has become a more explicit site of conflicts over social differences and urban fears” (Zukin, 1995). The culture of urban neighborhoods has also been reorganized into space that Lloyd (2002) calls “neo-bohemia,” where culture is available to be consumed as a commodity. Shaw (2005) considers this role of cultural consumption and production in Portland’s gentrifying northeast commercial district, and found that residents “participate in the new cultural world” in very different ways. Through interview data, he found that long-time Black residents articulate the neo-bohemian culture as racialized, as a decidedly white cultural space.

Hackworth (2002) contends that today, postrecessionary gentrification is in its “third wave,” characterized by neighborhoods being selected for reinvestment that are outside the city center, corporate developers replacing individual gentrifiers, and antigentrification activism—for a variety of reasons—decreasing, and in some cities almost nonexistent. Portland’s gentrifying northeast provides ample evidence of these third-wave features, and the RLP expands the theory by suggesting how people exercise their agency, develop consciousness, and make “place” in this new context. It also explains some of the reasons why Black residents who had lived in the Alberta neighborhood for at least 10 years (living there before and during gentrification) were the least likely to approve of neighborhood changes (Sullivan, 2007, p. 589).

Because gentrification does not produce uniform results, there continues to be empirical and theoretical debate about the significance of race and class, and their mutual constitution. Prince (2002) articulates the importance of researchers paying careful attention to the ranges of experiences and the class variations within Black life. This is especially important for research

about cities such as Portland, where the rates of homeownership did not necessarily translate into middle-class status (Patillo-McCoy, 2000). As Squires and Kubrin (2005) note, because of uneven development, access to opportunity and elements of the “good life” have been structured by place.

Place-Making

Sociologists understand space as “both the geographical site of action and the social possibility for engaging action” (Gottdiener, 1985, p. 125). As arbiters of social relations, “spaces are perceived, constructed, and managed in the everyday lives of [people]” (McGrellis, 2005, p. 515). Since space is highly contested in cities where gentrification seeks to (further) displace residents, many communities of color, such as Puerto Ricans in Chicago, engage in “place-making” using cultural symbols such as flags, businesses, parades, and street names to maintain and preserve community (Flores-Gonzalez, 2001). Hartigan (1999) traces place-making—politically and racially—in Detroit, as residents formed a Malcolm X Academy to institutionalize their right to space. And the Vietnamese-American community in Orange County engages in strategic “place-making” that enables it to thrive economically and culturally, despite Boston being the more likely site for success because of its spatial segregation, economic development, and cultural authenticity (Aguilar-San Juan, 2005). Because the Vietnamese in Orange County use place as a site for interaction, an anchor for identity, and a symbol of belonging, they have a stronger definition of themselves as a community.

Although place-making can often have positive effects for the marginalized groups who use it for survival, persistence, and/or resistance, when practiced by dominant groups it can also be a method for reproducing and consolidating power. Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) analyze university campuses as sites in which space gets racialized, and argue that “In most societies those with the greater power and resources ordinarily control the use and meaning of important spaces in society” (p. 50).

In these studies, the focus is upon either how dominant groups use space and place-making to exclude marginalized people, or how marginalized people make meaning among themselves to resist displacement, respond to social problems, or engage in ethnic renewal. However, in the unique case of the RLP, two racial groups (African American and white) actively work to change their relationships within space, which “allows the contestation of power imbalances, and the expression of diverse and multiple identities” (Smith & Winchester, 1998, p. 329). They engage in dialogue, despite the color line (and *because* of it), and use their gentrifying neighborhood as an opportunity for place-making rooted in antiracism.

In tracing the history of gentrification studies, Niedt (2006) contends that researchers tend to reduce the urban actors involved into two over-arching groups of people: those who *drive* gentrification (the elite actors such as banks, developers, yuppies, artists, planners, and politicians), and those who *respond* to the process with resistance or quiescence (p. 99). Similarly, Boyd (2008) criticizes the narrow dichotomies that people are framed in, where whites are either gentrifiers or economic elites, and people of color, when they are researched at all, get narrowly constructed as victims of white gentrifiers (p. 751). Such characterizations mark poor people of color as “displaced” (by a middle class that comes from a variety of racial groups), and leaves little room for people of color to have voice and power as long-time residents and home-owners. Similarly, this monolithic construction of whiteness allows only for obliviousness, disregard, and entitlement. The RLP provided a unique opportunity for residents to claim their own agency in defining their relationships with one another and resist their narrow and limiting roles that mutually constituting processes of gentrification and racial stratification place them in.

Place-making also responds to the intersecting axis of race and class, which gentrification reflects and exacerbates. In analyzing gentrification in Chicago, Betancur (2002) argues that “a high convergence between race and low income among minorities made the line between race and class fuzzy, allowing for class struggle to assume the form of race struggle and vice versa” (p. 807). Since many nongentrifiers and African Americans in Portland supported the changes happening in their neighborhoods (Sullivan, 2007), the intersection between race and class complicated strategies for resistance to gentrification. However, since “Black residents who have lived in their neighborhood for at least ten years are least likely to approve of neighborhood changes in Portland” (Sullivan, 2007, p. 589), race-based articulations of place were considered to be the priority around which the neighborhood dialogues would be organized. Davila (2004) confirms this through her study of gentrification in New York, noting that among Latinos being displaced “[d]iscourses of national identity and cultural citizenship are oftentimes the only recourse left with which to demand political rights” (p. 213).

Racial Dialogue

Scholars who examine racial dialogues and racial reconciliation disagree about the extent to which dialogue can itself be healing, or if its value only comes in its ability to produce actions. Critical race theorist Eric Yamamoto (1999) contends that dialogue and reconciliation efforts have become popular methods of solving continuing racial divisions: “Race apologies among groups apparently trying to resolve broken relationships exploded as a worldwide phenomenon in the 1990’s” (p. 51). Some see it as a valuable starting point, providing “a useful entree into struggles over race, identity, and collective memory in the United States” (Parham, 2008, p. 13). Others, such as Miller and Donner (2000), found that when dialogues consider racial identity development, the dynamics of intergroup conflict can be effective tools for shifting people’s identity enough that they have a willingness to engage in action. Wilson (2004) contends that the goal of dialogue is the construction of interracial interests; “the question is not whether rhetoric creates difference, but whether the same rhetoric can construct a set of interests that acknowledges difference and then motivates us to realign differences so that one community does not enjoy eternal privilege at the expense of another” (p. 368).

But McPhail (2004) questions whether or not this is possible, noting that “European and African Americans cannot, when it comes to race, communicate in ways that achieve the major attitudinal dimensions of dialogue: authenticity, inclusion, confirmation and present-ness” (p. 210). While Gordon and Crenshaw (2004) argue that racial apologies contribute to both racism and antiracism, since they break and maintain rhetorical silence about white privilege, they conclude that if the dialogue does not advocate real material change in white privilege, they will be limited in their ability to contribute to antiracist progress (p. 263). Public apologies are valuable, only when members of dominant groups “shift away from an emphasis on self defense toward the theme of atoning for past sins” (Koesten & Rowland, 2004, p. 68). They argue that cross-racial dialogue only succeeds when people take responsibility, instead of denying, displacing, or justifying actions (p. 69).

Even more fervent critics, such as Steinberg (2007) argue that “race relations” approaches focus on “getting along” while obfuscating the system of racial domination and exploitation based upon violence. He claims that their emphasis is directed “not at improving conditions for [B]lacks, but at reforming attitudes among whites. Liberation for [B]lacks would have to wait for whites to undergo a therapeutic transformation” (p. 57). White participants in racial dialogues have a very difficult time undergoing such a transformation, in part because of what Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick (2006) refer to as the development of a “white habitus.”

This distinct social-psychological experience limits “whites’ chances of developing meaningful relationships with people of color” (p. 229). From this perspective, racial dialogues are up against a mountain of challenges, including the ongoing racial and economic exploitation that continues even while the dialogues are taking place, whites’ socialization into an “epistemology of ignorance” (Mills, 1997) that promotes denial and defensiveness, and the real possibility that the dialogues themselves can become another source of victimization for the Black participants if they are not conducted effectively. These realities, all animated in Portland’s gentrifying Alberta neighborhood, allowed me to test the value of racial dialogues and the possibility for antiracist place-making.

FINDINGS

The RLP uses dialogue to mitigate the relational effects of gentrification and works as a strategy for “antiracist place-making” in Portland’s Alberta neighborhood by (1) positioning people of color as knowledge producers about the institutional and interpersonal effects of racism in the neighborhood, (2) confronting the tactics of white denial, and (3) promoting antiracist consciousness about the harms of gentrification. By doing so, the project promotes a shared awareness of racism among the residents that attempts to reduce the daily racial effects of gentrification. However, it also reveals the limitations of “consciousness-raising” in the absence of action to address structural inequalities.

“I’m Not Free Anywhere from Experiencing Your Racism”: Producing Knowledge about Institutional and Interpersonal Racism

At each RLP dialogue, coordinators introduced the panel of African American presenters by asserting their authority about racism and gentrification, as well as their experience as members of Portland’s “Black community.” They framed the presenters as experts, as people who had significant information about a subject (gentrification) but whose knowledge did not seem to matter to journalists, academics, or urban planners. As one of the presenters explained to the audience, “imagine not being able to share what has been developing in you over a lifetime . . . that you felt yourself getting wrapped tighter and tighter, but there was never an opportunity to share what you know, or no one else wanted to experience or valued the insightfulness you have about your own neighborhood.”

While the RLP gatherings were publicly framed as a program to develop and deepen white consciousness, they were equally about providing African American community leaders with an audience, a place to share their wisdom and legitimacy as knowledge producers who drew connections between the racial structure and the lived realities in their neighborhoods. One of the RLP’s founders shared during an interview and during several of the dialogues that his motivation to do the project was, in part, due to the reality that “nowhere else is it possible or safe for people of color to have the authority to say these things to whites . . . to describe how we deal with—people who don’t look like us.”

African Americans produced knowledge through the RLP by linking their personal histories, and the story of their changing neighborhoods, to the macro processes of economic and social dislocation. They articulated the erosion of jobs in a postindustrial economy, the defunding of public education, the decay of infrastructure in their community, and the institutionalization of racism since the end of legal segregation. They named the structural realities of racism in the United States as a “given,” but linked it to the more personal—and painful—outcomes experienced directly in their neighborhood during the past 10 years. One African American

presenter, responding to the question about what has been most upsetting to her, explained to the majority-white audience:

You know, I always knew white folks got things you didn't deserve, and better treatment than we do. But when you were miles away from me, I only had to see your privileges at the job, on the news, or out in public. I knew you were living well because of racism, but it was something I just knew and did not see in my personal life. But once you moved into the neighborhood, *our* neighborhood, I get it shoved right in my face, right under my nose. Now I have to see it all day at work, and on nights and weekends at home. Now I'm not free anywhere from experiencing your racism.

Another presenter recounted her frustration of never having seen a taxi in her neighborhood, in over 40 years, explaining that “since white people live on the block now, taxis will come all the time.”

Each RLP dialogue empowered the long-time African American residents to voice their experience-based knowledge about how the neighborhood's white newcomers harbored racist attitudes, and how their actions harmed the Black residents of the community. Their stories about Black-owned businesses closing, formal and informal surveillance systems taking hold, and unequal access to institutions were used to give form and function to the white entitlement and microaggressions they experienced interpersonally each day. At times, their knowledge came in the form of lists about how white people in the neighborhood behaved. One theme that emerged in the data was that “white people lack manners,” which became most evident in their disrespectful treatment of their African American neighbors. Residents 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).

White “lack of manners” often reflected a sense of entitlement. For example, when white neighbors had porch parties that became extremely loud, according to their African American neighbors, they appeared to have no concern that they could be disturbing the neighborhood. “At my house,” the speaker said, “we have to be real careful about our noise level because we know that the second it gets too loud, they'll call the police on us. It didn't even occur to them that the police would be called on their noise.” One speaker, that same evening, said that she was less upset by white entitlement, and more hurt that the “loud laughter[from white neighbors] was as if to say ‘look how much fun we're having and you're not invited.’”

During the two years of dialogues, African American knowledge producers also exposed what they considered to be strange or offensive features of white culture. For example, one presenter, when discussing how the new white people on her block behave, looked at the Black facilitator and asked “can you believe they put their children on leashes?” And while these behaviors are also distinctly classed, speakers connected them only to race (specifically whiteness), as they criticized white people for breast-feeding in public, “importing their friends for parties,” not eating meat or white bread, and “being more tolerant of gay people than Black people.”⁴ As African Americans told their stories, they were not always received with open ears, as white audience members often ran the spectrum from denial to meaningful learning.

“They Treat Their Dogs Better than They Treat Us”: Confronting White Denial

Some dialogue topics about racism were difficult to deny, especially the systematic and empirical realities of gentrification's effects: the closing of Black-owned businesses, the

availability of home-improvement loans when white residents move in, or the lack of police presence when white youth party with alcohol in the streets. But when the presenters asked the white audience to deeply “listen” about the harms of their specific personal behaviors, there was often less eagerness to accept, and more evidence of difficulty in internalizing the assertions.

While many topics at the dialogues elicited reactions from white audience members, few were as pronounced as those responding to African American claims about white people and dogs. Dogs were one of the most common topics at the dialogues, ranging from assertions that white people get dogs as a form of intimidation or to provide security against their Black neighbors, to complaints about white people’s refusal to obey leash laws and pick up their dogs’ waste. In fact, after the topics came up several sessions in a row, organizers decided to devote three sessions to addressing “race and dogs.” One presenter enumerated several of the ways her white neighbors use dog waste as a “colonial weapon” on her block, while another recounted a specific incident in which white entitlement and denial worked to make her feel like an outsider in her own community. In her own words:

Since they came in, their dogs are shitting all over the place in the park, and my kids play in that park. And the two times I have addressed this, they respond with hostility and just think I’m the angry Black woman. One even asked me “why are you so combative about it?” Apparently the rules, both leashes and picking up your dog’s shit, don’t apply to white people.

Through observations at the small group debriefing sessions (though there were also some outbursts during the large group), I witnessed the variety of strategies white participants used to prove they were not implicated in the presenter’s charges of interpersonal racism. While the methods of denial were evident at nearly every RLP session, they were most easily identifiable through the dialogues about “race and dogs.” Although the project was established to teach whites about the harms they are causing, white methods of listening seemed to prevent these lessons from breaking through.

This conversation took place at the small group debriefing conversation that follows the listening session, and is reflective of the common white denial thread in my data. It reveals the “blinders” that new white residents had to understanding how behaviors are racialized and experienced as oppressive by the long-time African American residents who remain in the neighborhood. This excerpt from my field notes comes from the debriefing discussion after the presentations, between a white and Black woman:

Black Woman (BW): “[Do] you understand how that looks and feels to those of us who’ve been in the neighborhood for years and decades. You come into a black neighborhood and the first thing you do is to get a guard dog.” White Woman (WW): “It’s not a guard dog, he’s a member of our family.” (BW): “That’s the problem. We see you treating your dogs better than you treat us, our kids, our elders. You talk to your dogs like they’ve done something to deserve respectful treatment and then you pass me on the street and you can’t look me in the eye, or say hello.” (WW): “Have I ever done that to you?” (BW): “No, not personally. I’m saying that this is what white people in general do.” (WW): “But have *I* ever not said hello to *you*?”

The conversation stopped there, with the white woman having “proved” her exemption from racism, and the African American woman silenced. Very often, white listeners could be satisfied that if they had not personally participated in the action described by panelists and other African American participants, then they were excused from being implicated in a system that creates relational aggression.

In some instances, white participants used personal experiences and “exemptions” to diminish the overall claims of the African American panelists and participants. One white listener said during our debrief: “I just don’t have enough information to know if what they were saying was true. How do I know if the City awarded more contracts to white companies, or if the shops are giving worse service to Black customers?” A young white woman pointed out: “That’s what we’re supposed to be here for. This *is* our chance to get the information.” The first speaker then changed what he was asking for from “information” to “facts,” and an African American resident spent the next five minutes explaining how what we heard in the session was “fact” and why the facts about racism are not likely to appear in *The Oregonian* [Portland’s newspaper].

Another common strategy used to deny racism was for white participants to position themselves as victims within the dialogue. Some claimed they were so quiet during the presentations because “there is not really permission to react freely.” When I asked what a “free” reaction would look like, one white participant said “it would mean I had the freedom to say that what we just heard was bullshit.” As I began asking him what specifically was “bullshit” about what the African American panelists had just said, another white member in the dialogue group agreed and responded for him: “the police officers that patrol our block are there to protect us, not intimidate and monitor the citizens. But . . . the panel doesn’t realize that and seems very heavy-handed in what they think. There is another view of the police, and I don’t feel comfortable saying that during the session.”

This theme, of white people perceiving themselves as not having their due time, space, and perspective, emerged a minimum of three times during every RLP debriefing. It did not always take such an obvious form, and could also be seen in white participants’ invocation of the reason they had skipped several sessions (“I was so turned off by May’s discussion”), their decision to come to the small group debrief afterwards (“it was important to me that the other side be heard”) or body language (arms folded and shaking head in disagreement during the formal presentation). For many white participants in the listening session, the listening—not debating—format felt uncomfortable at best, discriminatory at worst.

The program was designed to enable African Americans to present “the Black perspective on gentrification,” a worldview that gets very little attention in city planning, newspaper headlines, or political voice in the gentrification process itself. But not all white participants seemed to understand or share the value for listening. They heard through their own racialization, which had taught them to deny or minimize racism, and go so far as to perceive their whiteness as what O’Brien (2000) calls a “liability.” They listened through what one presenter called “white ears . . . the kind of listening that starts from the assumption that what we say is either not true or doesn’t apply to you.” I observed her patiently asking white people in our debriefing session to “open yourselves up to our reality . . . and to stop listening through white ears.” For those white participants who were indeed willing to listen differently, listen in ways that challenged their socialization, antiracist dialogue and consciousness with African Americans became a meaningful experience.

“I Want to Be Less Damaging”: Cultivating Antiracist Consciousness

As African Americans produced knowledge about whiteness, and many white people struggled to listen to and accept this expertise, the majority of people who participated in the RLP dialogues consistently learned about gentrification and, perhaps more importantly, they began developing or deepening their awareness of racism. Although white people and people of color characterized this antiracist consciousness differently, my data provided evidence of people becoming more deeply aware of racism, having strong feelings during and after the dialogues, and experiencing some healing from the effects of racism.

African Americans, both in the formal presentations and the debriefing sessions, expressed surprise and excitement that so many white people would attend to hear their stories. One older woman began her talk by saying that given what she had seen of white people over the decades, she could not have imagined any white person thinking they had something to learn from her. On evenings when over 100 people attended the dialogue, the size of the audience opened opportunities for the speakers to react to their own feelings of being powerful: “it is healing for us to acknowledge the pain. It’s not important whether or not the white people listen or accept what we say. It is important that we tell these stories for our own healing, instead of holding this stuff inside our whole lives, with no outlet, causing all kinds of mental and physical anguish.” An older woman explained to the room that “racial healing with white people is pretty low on our priority scale,” adding that it’s the thing most whites assume people of color want to do. As she gave a litany of the social problems affecting Portland’s Black population, she noted that “I initially thought coming here to heal with or hear you [white people] would be a waste of my time.”

Although most African Americans attended the dialogues to teach white people about the harms of gentrification, many also expressed having learned new things, made connections between their own family’s history and larger social patterns, and “gotten smarter about understanding how racism operates.” As one younger woman put it, “I came here to be a part of waking up white people, and it turns out that I had some waking up to do myself.”

For white people, the RLP’s value came in developing a new or deepened consciousness, articulating themselves as recipients of racial privilege, conceiving themselves as racial group members with a history, and learning to recognize the impact—not only the intent—of their behaviors. Conversations between white people often illuminated the difficulty with understanding how they may not be the *cause* of many of the harms African American people face, but that they often remain participants in and beneficiaries of those harms. Without explicitly referring to “white privilege,” white people recognized that they took for granted grocery stores, cab service, and police protection and thought these were “standard in every neighborhood.”

After hearing disturbing histories about closing out Black businesses and shutting down Black cultural and community centers, white audience members often landed on questions about their own ignorance: “how were we to know?” or, “I don’t know how we are supposed to know that, and I don’t mean that in a rude way. When we got our house, the store was there. Am I supposed to do a history project on that block or the whole neighborhood before buying a house?” An African American man in our dialogue group asked her if she had done research on the schools in the neighborhood and she shook her head yes. “Then why wouldn’t you want or need to know anything about who and what else came before you?” White listeners often responded with an acknowledgment of the need to see themselves and their new neighborhoods, which were quite old to others, in a context of historical memory.

Many white people who had managed not to “listen with white ears” and who heard the damaging effects of their behaviors, asked African Americans during the dialogues what they could do, and the white women were often concerned about what they could do to reduce the anger directed at them. One response, which came up frequently in different dialogues, explained that the feelings were paradoxically personal, and not at all personal. As one speaker said, “It’s about seeing you walk around without any weight on your shoulders. This neighborhood used to be ours, the one place I could go to escape the problems of being Black every day. And now when I come home, I am ignored by white adults and harassed by white kids, and I am made to feel like an outsider on my own block.” She was asked if saying “hello” would help, and responded in kind “that would be a good place to start.”

Several of the white participants that I interviewed reflected upon one of the RLP’s purpose questions: “Is this who we wish to be?” and noted their embarrassment and guilt about behaving

in ways that contributed to the harm of people of color. One shared that the project profoundly shaped her thinking about race because she realized that she would never even know how many ways her behaviors have been affected by race, but that the dialogues made her realize they all were. “I don’t think I can get rid of it all, all of my racism, that is. But for the time being, I just want to be less damaging.”

DISCUSSION

The RLP illuminates the value of—and challenges associated with—using dialogue and place-making to respond to the racial effects of gentrification. This research does not resolve the question about the value of racial dialogues. Rather, it complicates it by suggesting that dialogue can be useful for addressing the relational effects of urban social problems, but that without action that interrupts the sources and mechanisms of those problems the value is short-lived. As Gordon and Crenshaw (2004) contend, dialogue that does not advocate real material change in white privilege will be limited in its ability to contribute to antiracist progress (p. 263).

To begin with, these data demonstrate the value of African Americans claiming their agency and asserting their expertise about racism, allowing many whites to develop a new or deepened consciousness about the effects of their everyday behaviors. By creating a public forum in which people engage in meaningful cross-racial dialogue about community life, the RLP gives visibility and voice to racism and gentrification, phenomena that are maintained through their invisibility and institutionalized mechanisms. While the Northeast neighborhoods of Portland are in the process of undergoing dramatic institutional and cultural change, how the people treat each other is not already determined.

This RLP dialogue project reveals one way race can be used as a strategy for place-making, particularly since “Latino and Black neighborhoods have been bastions of larger race-based struggles for opportunity” (Betancur 2011, p. 386). Not only is place a site for racial struggles, race also becomes an ideological “site” to organize people in struggles over place. Although the African American community in Portland does not have significant political or economic power, what it does have is deeply-held values around community, historical memory, and pride regarding its resilience to persist, despite patterns of displacement. Although race was not strategically selected by the RLP organizers as a method to galvanize the people affected by gentrification, it was certainly the lens through which African American community members and RLP organizers framed their experience. Because race-based dialogues do not concede to an insistence upon (color)blindness to race, and because they tap into existing anchors of place-rooted identity, framing gentrification through an explicitly racialized lens is indeed a strategy to resist gentrification. In fact, as Betancur (2002) discovered in the gentrification struggles in Chicago, “race-based resistance delayed and may manage to prevent gentrification from entering selected sections of the community” (p. 784).

While many urban theorists assume a deterministic future of the city as “little more than an assemblage of fortified spaces colonized by global capital and affluent residents and visitors” (Judd, 2003:24), not all residents in Portland neighborhoods concede to this. Instead they gather to expose what Zukin (1991) calls the “landscapes of power.” People of color name power, as it expressed in local, national, and (sometimes even) global levels, but most importantly name what everyday white “relational power” looks like in their neighborhoods. This research attests to a role African Americans play in gentrification, not merely as the urban poor who are victims—nor as only the “black gentrifiers” who seek to keep the neighborhood out of the hands of the white political elite (Boyd, 2008). Through the RLP, they become survivors of systematic displacement (for the time being) and knowledge producers who claim their expertise about racism and gentrification in public. Although they may not be able to keep their neighborhoods, they are

keeping and telling their (his)story. Through this use of cultural memory, African Americans are producing knowledge in order to maintain their position as “a watchful people, . . . a people of long memory” (Fabre & O’Meally, 1994).

While African American residents are grieving the loss of their neighborhood and community, and angry about white people’s behaviors, many white participants are moving out of denial, and have begun feeling anger about inequitable arrangements. They are even experiencing sadness about how the race construct has socialized them to behave. White people are asked to consider experiences, narratives, and feelings that racism often keeps them insulated from learning. Given that “the white habitus creates a space in which whites’ extreme isolation is normalized, whites do not experience troubling doubts or second thoughts as to their lack of interaction with blacks. This affords whites the luxury of nonreflexivity” (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006, p. 249). Yet, the whites in this project voluntarily elected to displace their comfort, be “troubled” by the stories of the presenters, and be challenged to engage in critical self-reflection.

This research asserts that one of the most complicated—yet necessary—approaches for developing antiracist white consciousness is to name the mechanisms in place that prevent white people from deeply listening and often keep them willfully ignorant. This demonstrates what Charles Mills (1997) refers to as part of the “racial contract” that prescribes for white people an “epistemology of ignorance . . . producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (p. 18). Thus, the problem of whiteness prevents white people from understanding the problem of whiteness. Dialogues about gentrification and racism such as the RLP demonstrate that when confronted with personal and painful stories that implicate their own participation in racism, many white people find other ways to distance themselves from encountering feelings about they have just heard. They listen through “white ears,” they hear in ways that deny, minimize, or explain away people of color’s realities. Whites are less practiced at how to listen deeply, and how to react to the emotions and discomfort evident in what is being heard. But dialogue models such as the RLP that link listening with feeling, and challenging people to listen in new ways, can enable white people to develop a consciousness about whiteness and antiracism.

Although listening is of great importance for white people to develop antiracist identities, listening without taking responsibility can also force people of color to bleed and parade their pain for white people. Markovitz (2011) criticizes such constructions of “racial spectacle” as a way to shore up racist stereotypes. And in this arrangement, as long as the white audience members do not have to take responsibility for their own behaviors and feelings, an opportunity for antiracist consciousness can quickly become racial spectacle. When the power dynamics in the dialogues mirror familiar social patterns in which oppressed people must explain to their oppressors the very conditions of their oppression, white people become limited in their ability to clearly see themselves and thus become what Wise (2005) calls “collaborators” with the system of racism.

Utilizing story-telling and listening as a method to create dialogue and begin to develop relationships is an important first stage in antiracist place-making. As one of the RLP organizers articulates, “listening, especially in this day and age, is a radical act.” What could be even more radical is if the dialogues transition into a new phase of place-making, one in which the structural issues of economic stability, housing affordability, and improvements without displacement are addressed in action (Betancur 2002, p. 802). Although consciousness projects can have value in terms of personal transformation and behavioral change, they are limited if they do not actually attempt to interrupt the mechanisms of social inequality. If Gresson’s claim is true, that “healing means solving the problems that led to the breakdown in relations” (2004, p. 108), then this project falls short of its full potential to provide healing. If white residents are now picking up their dog’s waste, and not calling the police on their African American neighbors when they have

a party on their front porch, this does not mean that the ongoing economic and racial oppression of gentrification has ceased. Because they have not addressed the actual problems that led to the relational aggression in the first place, this will likely be an ongoing battle in which white residents are just “waiting it out” and African American residents must continue to assert their right to place.

While the ideal of community tends to “privilege unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, [and] sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others” (Young, 1986, p. 430), the RLP takes the politics of difference head-on, asserting that the neighborhood is precisely a site for naming the barriers that prevent unity, dialogue, and civility. Understanding the dialogues of the RLP, urban planners and scholars can begin attending to the possibilities that emerge when African American and white people decide to actively engage in working together on and in their neighborhoods, rather than simply “waiting out” the transition period. As African Americans lay claim to the value of their knowledge about structural processes and community histories, as well as gain the courage to tell their new white neighbors about the harms they experience at their hands, and when white people begin to speak about and transgress their own roles, new futures for consciousness projects and “place” can be crafted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable direction, as well as Judith Mowery, Rachel Luft, Nacho Cordova, and Kristen Crepezzi who offered substantive feedback on previous drafts.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The historically black name for this neighborhood is Albina and it was not referred to as Alberta until Alberta St. itself was gentrified. See Stroud (1999) or Gibson (2008) for brief histories.
- 2 The body of literature about gentrification has become more attentive to the comparative experiences of different communities of color, with regard to gentrification; it is far more complicated than only involving African Americans and white people. Although the RLP organizers worked with intentionality to use a coalitional language of “people of color,” and to frequently illuminate similarities and complex differences in racial formations, the project is designed around African American and white relations.
- 3 For histories of this urbanization and suburbanization as both a structural and cultural process, see Jackson (1987) and Avila (2006).
- 4 Progressive politics in Portland, like in many cities, fails to coalesce social justice struggles around the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Instead, African Americans and mostly non-Black Queer people in Portland are in competition for space, safety, and resources.

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