

“A Great Inheritance, A Special Destiny:”
Barack Obama's Candidacy and the Performance of Racial History in Portland, Oregon

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On Sunday, May 18, 2008, Barack Obama delivered a speech in front of what was, at the time, his largest audience to date: 75,000 Oregonians crammed shoulder-to-shoulder on the lawn of Portland's Tom McCall Waterfront Park¹ and onto Naito Parkway². Under the bright afternoon sun, hundreds more who could not fit in the park took to the water, anchoring their boats or paddling out in canoes and kayaks across the Willamette River.³ The Willamette divides Portland's gleaming, cosmopolitan West side from the hodgepodge of industrial and residential neighborhoods on the East side. In a city with a little more than half a million residents, nearly one in seven could be found at the rally that day, straining to hear the refrains of “change” and “hope” from the Illinois senator, who would go on to accept the nomination of the Democratic party two months later. The dominant image of this event in Portland, shot by photojournalist Bruce Ely, was quickly distributed to media outlets worldwide. *The Oregonian*, the state's major newspaper, would publish Ely's photo twelve inches high across the front page, both above and below the fold. The headline read “Portland wows Obama” and the photo showed then-Senator Obama on a small, raised platform in the lower left-center of the photograph, engulfed by the upturned faces of tens of thousands wearing some combination of sunglasses, hats, and expressions of elation. Ely's photograph is striking in both scope and detail, such that one can make a startling, important observation almost instantly: damn, there are a lot of white folks in Portland⁴.

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Speaking to an audience of academics and activists at UC Santa Barbara in late November 2008, historian Nikhil Pal Singh suggested that President-elect Obama constructs himself, and is actively constructed, as the first “post-Sixties” national politician. In an earlier essay Singh writes that “one of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of the Obama campaign is its revisionary pedagogy – the way it consciously seeks to define the narrative arc of an alternative 'story of American freedom.’” Singh and others argue that Obama successfully recast himself as an exceptional national political figure that transcends identity politics, while at the same time employing a rhetoric that signifies his candidacy and campaign as the apotheosis of centuries of a Black freedom struggle. The issue of Obama's racial self-construction has been debated in more mainstream media forums as well. David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker*, skillfully demonstrated that Obama first “explicitly inserted himself in the time line of American racial politics” during a multi-generational commemoration of civil rights marches at the Brown Chapel A.M.E. church in Selma, Alabama some few weeks after announcing his candidacy for President. Remnick makes the case that Obama's racial self-construction throughout the campaign (“the thing always present, the thing so rarely named”) is in fact part of an ongoing, long-term impulse of self-discovery and assimilation to blackness, first relayed in Obama's 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father*, penned before his first foray into public

office. Details and metaphors in Obama's text reveal the performative necessity and tension of racial self-construction. In his own words, Obama strove “to *flatten* out the landscape of my heart,” “to *disguise* my feverish mood,” “to *avoid* being mistaken for a sellout,” and “to *reconcile* the world as I'd found it with the circumstances of my birth” [emphases mine]. He writes candidly and vividly of his relationship with Reverend Jeremiah Wright and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Obama ends the memoir in the arms of his paternal family in Kenya, themselves members of the Luo ethnic minority group.

Throughout Obama's campaign, the public heard not just of “Kansas and Kenya,” but of the Black church and Harvard Law, of Hawaii and Indonesia, and of a multiracial, multi-religious core of women (Madelyn [Toot], Ann, Michelle, Maya, Sasha, and Malia) in his life. By narrating himself and a multiracial extended family-- including oft-referenced spiritual kin such as Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Anna Cooper, the Reverend Theodore Parker, and Sam Cooke (“It's been a long time coming...”)-- into the timeline of U.S racial history, Barack Obama's retelling of his life introduces multiple ruptures to our dominant construction of race. This alternative racial narrative is one that might have especially resonated with those 75,000 residents of Portland, Oregon, who largely understand themselves as the inheritors of an alternative, though far from righteous, racial history of their own.

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A brief appraisal of Portland's racial history over the last century offers one vision of Barack Obama's implied alternative racial history. Elinor Langer argues in *A Hundred Little Hitlers*⁵ that “the secret of Portland, which continues to be well kept even from most of the people who live there, is that the racial politics and the smallness of the black population are one and the same.” Yet Portland's story of itself must also be defined by its long and unique trajectory of Asian immigration and its uneasy, unjust relationship to Native peoples of the Cascades, both of which predate or at least preempt the subsequent migration of a substantial cohort of Black Americans to Portland⁶. As such one can neither understand the city of Portland nor the significance of Obama's presence in it without understanding the distinct, historical experiences of its Asian and Black residents.

In this paper I begin by outlining the experience of Japanese Americans in Portland through the Second World War. Here, I take up the Black migration to Portland fomented by the War industry, and finally, the interethnic hopes between Japanese and Black Portlanders. This racial history, both typical and alternative, contextualizes the warm reception for Obama's racial self construction in Portland during his political campaign.

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As an early hub for East Asian immigration, Portland had the second-largest U.S. population of Chinese workers by 1880. Portland-area railroad companies and sugar beet farms began actively recruiting first-generation Japanese men (*Issei*) from Hawaii and Japan following the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Although Portland lacked much of the infrastructure of other large coastal cities during this period (including a slow-growing economy and no major university) there were avenues for Japanese business ownership, and thusly, long-term or permanent Japanese American settlement in Portland⁷.

A sizeable Japanese and Chinese business district formed on the West side of the city, while at the same time Japanese farms flourished east of Portland along the Columbia Gorge, in towns such as Hood River, Gresham, and Troutdale. Though resentment of Japanese success was not uncommon at the time, historians like William Toll have documented that “the public in Portland expressed mixed but usually muted feelings about the Japanese.” Rather, Toll suggests that frameworks of racial discrimination, used to make sense of the experiences of Black and Chinese Americans in the U.S., do little to explain the more nuanced and “cultural” nature of hostility faced by Japanese across the American West coast, and in particular, in Portland.

Although the Japanese residents of Portland were able to maintain some degree of economic stability and social cohesion despite the Depression and discriminatory laws around citizenship and land ownership, this community (*Nikkei-jin*) was shattered by forced evacuation. The Japanese of Portland were first sent to a local livestock center and then to several Idaho internment camps in 1942⁸. Returning to Portland in 1945, much like Japanese citizens across the Western seaboard, the *Nikkei-jin* had lost their homes, businesses, and farms. This shameful era of the city’s history is memorialized by the Japanese-American Historical Plaza: a park, poetry center, and outdoor art installation that specifically addresses the internment and sits on land (in Old Town, near the recently gentrified and upscale industrial lofts of the Pearl District) formerly occupied by *Nikkei-jin* since the late 19th Century⁹.

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Beginning in 1857 through 1926, the Oregon state constitution barred slavery at the same time that it excluded blacks from residency altogether; Oregon remains the only state admitted to the Union with such a clause on its books. Early anti-slavery activism in the state is inextricable from its residents’ blatant refusal to live among blacks-- or as Langer writes, “it was ‘selfish policy,’ not ‘moral principle,’ that dictated the outcome of the slavery debate in Oregon.¹⁰” Waldo Roberts, a writer for *Outlook*, reported in 1923 that following the First World War, Portland’s mayor, the state governor and roughly 15,000 other Oregonians (most residing in Portland) were registered members of the Ku Klux Klan. As in other sites of massive 1920s-era unemployment such as York, Pennsylvania and Binghamton, New York, the Portland chapter of the KKK agitated against Catholics, “aliens,” and Blacks.¹¹

The shipyards of industrial contractor Henry J. Kaiser during the Second World War introduced many new workers to Portland, including nearly 25,000 Black Americans. By 1943, Portland had more than ten times the number of Black residents than it had just three years earlier. Rudy Pearson and others have offered historical insight relating to issues of housing discrimination and scarcity for these Black laborers, including the infamous 1943 “Vanport” housing project, a segregated “instant city” built precariously on the Columbia River floodplain. On the eve of May 30, 1948 the Vanport district went from Oregon’s second-most populated city (40,000 residents at its highest point) to a wiped-out, underwater nightmare for its suddenly-homeless residents (forty percent of whom were Black)¹².

Of particular significance to the racial history of Black Portland is a 1946 issue of W.E.B DuBois’ quarterly journal *Phylon: A Review of Race and Culture*, in which Robert W. O’Brien and Lee M. Brooks write that “Although the total number of non-Caucasians in the Pacific Northwest is relatively small, the area assumes an importance beyond its size as one of the few remaining frontiers in race

relations.”¹³ The authors continue with the gladsome observation that social scientific work on the Northwest, beginning in the early 1920s has been “largely, if not completely concerned with relations between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino migrants and the Caucasian majority.” Offering a sort of “Asian rupture” to the dominant black/white racial binary, O’Brien and Brooks theorize that “international aspects of race relations” tend to be more apparent in regions like Portland and Seattle, with their “large numbers of Oriental Americans.”

In the remainder of the article, they report on matters affecting the estimated 25,000 Black residents of Portland, such as segregation in housing (very prevalent due to “unwritten codes” of real estate interests and exacerbated by the return of Japanese Americans from internment camps), post-war employment prospects (“worrying,” especially after the specific exclusion of Black workers from industrial unions), and education (“promising,” with the existence of “culturally integrated” public schools and a limited but passionate number of Black schoolteachers)¹⁴. Most importantly, O’Brien and Brooks reaffirm an “Asian rupture” to the dominant, black/white U.S. racial schema by ending their analysis of the housing market with sympathy for the plight of post-WWII Japanese in the Pacific Northwest: “Other ethnic minorities... face severe housing and employment problems. The returning Japanese and Japanese Americans who were evacuated in 1942 are perhaps the hardest pushed.” The authors end their paper with a fever-dream of utopian and dystopian images of race relations among these Northwest-specific constituencies. These include two White “church ladies” fretting over the return of *Nisei* evacuees, Black church leaders who might open their doors to all who suffer, and young white college students as “new age frontiersmen” who gamely clean, tend, and restore the vacant home of a local Japanese family in advance of their return from internment. The Pacific Northwest, they conclude, has the opportunity to foster something different, “an alternative to riots and disorders—an alternative which can establish a new frontier in race relations and understanding.”

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Those who made up Obama’s coalition of support in Portland, and in particular, those who came out to Waterfront Park, are not entirely removed from the “frontiersmen” O’Brien and Brooks imagined¹⁵. The urbane political pragmatists of Portland benefit from high levels of education and they largely oppose and continue to agitate against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. These are folks who manage to reside comfortably between the (thoroughly modern and thoroughly capitalistic) tensions of technology/environmentalism and urbanity/naturalism. They almost complacently believe in “the great inheritance, the special destiny” of being a Portlander. They also embraced a presidential campaign that skillfully ruptured our dominant constructions of race in the U.S., which might befit a city so intent on honing a public and official civility after failing to take care of its most early Native, Japanese, and Black residents. Portland today exhibits an impulse toward something beyond a multiracial reckoning—the city vibrates with an urge to confront its most horrendous racial past in the hope that it might one day transcend such shameful moments.

Yet housing costs continue to rise for Portland’s renters. Its Black and Latino workers remain largely obstructed from living jobs and incomes due to early, systemic barriers to educational attainment. Despite these structural inequalities, precisely one week before the Obama rally at Waterfront Park, Portland Public Schools approved a new textbook for its eight-grade students beginning September 2009: *Beyond the Oregon Trail: Oregon’s Untold History*. The book, by a local social justice organization

called *Uniting to Understand Racism*, pays special attention Oregon's earliest and most sustained grievances against its own racial minorities and native peoples. Importantly, it encourages students and educators to connect those events to the current state of affairs in their local communities. While Portland is unable to shed much of the structural failures and inequalities that both past and present non-white residents face, the city shows a desire to come to terms with its diverse and multivocal racial history while also looking forward. This ethic, one in which the past is interrogated and laid bare in the service of a more open and just future, is also encapsulated in Barack Obama's narrative retelling of his life.

Writing in *Phylon* in 1946, did O'Brien and Brooks envision a frontier in which a biracial man, who came up on islands and in the "international aspects of race relations," would stand before 75,000 of these "new age frontiersmen" and deliver a campaign speech for the nation's highest office? Having long ago praised Portland's public schools, from their unique vantage point in Atlanta, could they have known that there would be sixty years between the submergence of Vanport and the emergence of an Oregon for President Obama?

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[1](#) McCall Waterfront Park is named after Tom McCall (1913-1983), who served as the thirtieth Governor of Oregon from 1967-1975. A popular journalist and member of the state's Republican party, McCall founded many of Oregon's most cutting-edge environmental programs and protections.

[2](#) Naito Parkway (West First Avenue) is a major thoroughfare renamed in 1996 for one of Portland's oldest and most prominent families. The Naito family established their first Portland business upon migration from Japan in 1921. Today, three generations of Naitos have been involved in corporate real estate development, historical preservation, and various civic organizations in Portland.

[3](#) The Willamette (Will'met) river was named almost 8,000 years ago by the Clackamas and Kalapuya peoples of the Lower Columbia Chinook.

[4](#) According to the 2000 Census, over 76% of Portland's 529,121 residents self-identify as "white," with the remainder made up of nearly equal proportions of Hispanic/Latino (6.8%), Black (6.6%), Asian (6.3%), and Multiracial/Other (4.2%) residents. The 2000 Census also indicates nearly 55,000 American Indian residents in the greater Portland area, the ninth largest Native population in the U.S.

[5](#) Langer's *A Hundred Little Hitlers* is an account of the murder of Mulugeta Seraw, a twenty seven year-old Ethiopian father and student residing in Portland. Seraw was beaten to death on November 12, 1988 by three skinheads in front of his own apartment in the Southeast quadrant of the city. Thousands across Portland turned out for rallies and in 1990, a jury awarded Seraw's family a landmark \$12.5 million in damages (including deeds to homes, bank accounts, and other assets belonging to skinhead leadership) in a wrongful death civil case brought against the White Aryan Resistance (WAR).

[6](#) For the purposes of this paper, I will limit my appraisal to the histories of Japanese and Black Americans in Portland, with reference to other communities as appropriate.

[7](#) In his work on Asian communities in Portland, William Toll notes that between 1908 and 1919, nearly 40% of Japanese emigrants to the U.S. were women joining their husbands, contributing to the phenomenon of permanent Japanese American settlement in Portland.

[8](#) At the Expo Center Tri-Met (bus) station, on the site of the former livestock center, several noted Japanese American artists have permanent art installations incorporating "internee ID tags," among other historical objects from the era.

[9](#) In 2008, Oregon named as its Poet Laureate Lawson Inada, a third-generation Japanese American who was one of the youngest children imprisoned in the internment camps of the 1940s. Inada has been active in the making of the Japanese American Historical Plaza.

[10](#) In fact, as historians of the Black Pacific Northwest like Quintard Taylor remind us, Jim Crow-inspired laws concerning black suffrage and citizenship were only explicitly renounced by the state legislature in 1959.

[11](#) Sometimes, as Cedric Robinson reminds us, "class animosity and anti-Semitism supersede Negrophobia."

[12](#) Artwork at the Delta Park/Vanport MAX (light rail) station in North Portland commemorates the 1948 Vanport Flood and incorporates bronzed artifacts found on the construction site. The neighborhood remains a thriving center of Black life in Portland.

[13](#) According to the City of Portland Bureau of Planning, a 1913 visit from DuBois himself helped to establish an active branch of the NAACP in the area.

[14](#) O'Brien and Brooks also report that the majority of Black Portlanders hail from "the Western tier of Southern states," who bring with them a distinctly different racial history than, for example, the Asian residents of Portland whose migration predates theirs.

[15](#) According to a 2003 report by the Brookings Institute, Portland has been a magnet for young, mobile "domestic migrants" across two decades of increasing specialization in higher-paying service and technology industry professions. At the same time, a May 2008 report from the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon suggests that Portland is a leading destination for refugees to the U.S. and is the number one destination for those from Russia and the Ukraine. In raw numbers, refugees from Africa and the Middle East have been among the most numerous in recent years. Among immigrants, seventy and eighty percent of Latino adult immigrants in Oregon have arrived since 1990. In short, according to the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon the current demographics of Portland have "drastically changed" across two decades of strong immigrant and refugee arrival.