Rethinking Research: Reading and Writing about the Roots of Gentrification

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The middle-aged African American woman at the UPS store looked at the return address on the package I was shipping. “Mason Street. Isn’t that up off Williams Ave?” And from there we took off, talking about the bike lanes, the demolition of family homes, the proposed tear-down of the church near King Elementary, and the construction of high-rise condominiums that tower over the remains of the African American community: a few small homes tucked in the shadows of upscale restaurants, grocery stores, and condos that have grown like an adult version of Legoland. We remembered Senn’s drive-through dairy and the More-For-Less grocery store. We shook our heads about banks refusing loans to Blacks and real-estate agents’ covenants that controlled the areas of town where Blacks lived. And then we discovered I had taught her daughter at Jefferson about 25 years before. We hugged and when I left she said, “Teach it. Our kids need to know why this happened,” her hands fluttering in the direction of Albina, the place Portland’s African American community once called home.

Jefferson High School, where I taught for most of my 30 years as a public school teacher and now return to as a teaching coach, has always been considered the African American school in the whitest city in the country: Portland, Oregon. And it still is. Black students continue to attend Jefferson, which remains the heart of the displaced Black community. I greet the sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews of my former students. They travel to “Jeff” from the “numbers,” a name students gave the outskirts of Portland where the house numbers move from small digits to large digits—from 21, 213, 2814 to 12534 or 21358—frequently using the address of some older relative, clinging to their home.

In our classrooms, we need to teach students to read and write, but we also need to study our cities and our neighborhoods, especially when they are experiencing upheaval. When we fail to examine systematic racism that uproots their families, students seek and find their own ersatz explanations: African Americans are less skilled business people than Whites, so their businesses failed to thrive. They didn’t take care of their homes, so when the city needed land, the “slum” was a logical place to raze and build. We must arm students with facts to interrupt conversations about how “bad” these neighborhoods or schools were before the Whites came. We need to build frameworks that outline patterns of dispossession, so students can recognize them and work to stop them.

In the gentrification unit described in this article, students read research about the history of their city, gathering notes about the mechanics of dismantling a community through the examination of photographs, primary source documents, newspaper accounts, and a walking tour. As a culminating writing assignment, they translated that research into historical fiction. Students’ writing was more passionate and lively and they worked harder to make sense of difficult reading and on revising their writing because they were studying something that felt both urgent and personal. The examples I describe here focus on Portland, but these dynamics have played out—and are playing out—in cities across the country.
Gentrification Is a Process, Not an Event

Jefferson sits in the epicenter of the largest, fastest gentrification movement in the country, according to Mike Maciag’s recent article in Governing Magazine. As I watched our school neighborhood turn from Black to White, I realized that students needed to understand the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans in Portland. They witnessed the changes and they talked about them, but, like me, they were unfamiliar with the mechanisms that pushed people of color like checkerboard pieces on the White map of Portland. And while reading Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun may help us understand the parallel pain and suffering individual African Americans faced when attempting to buy homes in White neighborhoods, our study of literature doesn’t fully equip us to analyze the systemic legal and economic decisions that underpinned each move.

Every act in the process of dismantling the Jefferson community—from segregation to urban renewal to the current gentrification—appeared inevitable. Yet, when examined closely, these acts rest on a platform of racism, privilege, and decisions made by people in power. As Avel Gordly, community activist and former Oregon State senator, stated, “Gentrification is a process, and not just an event. It is intentional, and it’s planned with specific policies, programs, and development decisions used to accomplish the objective of moving one people out and another people in. Specifically in Portland, it’s resulted in the forced removal of African Americans to the outskirts of the city while middle- and upper-income whites moved in” (qtd. in Fehrenbacher).

Harvesting Research

Instead of a classic research project, where students comb through dusty tomes in libraries or enter the historical society in small groups and search through faded photos and yellowed newspapers, I cultivated the research for them. Authentic research is time consuming. It can take days or weeks to find the right article. I searched both the Oregon Historical Society and Portland State collections, making appointments during their limited hours of operation and donning white gloves as I leafed through files donated by individuals and organizations, looking for the notice pinned to the doors of Albina residents’ homes telling them they had 90 days to vacate their property, examining photographs and meeting notes from the NAACP, attempting to find information about how the African American community fought back. Trying to get 42 students from North Portland to downtown on multiple occasions, while juggling block schedules and spring testing, made the task of “authentic” research I initially envisioned impossible.

Instead I curated the information and found significant and diverse pieces that unearthed the story of the displacement of African Americans in Portland. Student research entailed reading these documents, discussing them, making sense of the story behind photos of African Americans lugging trunks up Denver Avenue or carrying signs outside of Legacy Emanuel Hospital stating, “Emmanuel Hospital has no respect for Black People” and “Stop the Destruction.” They read the pieces that Verdell Rutherford, the NAACP secretary, clipped and filed along with meeting notes and flyers for events that ended up at Portland State Library. Students mined the pieces that I gathered for their poetry, fiction, and essays in the same way that I mined the files from the Oregon Historical Society and Portland State.

While digging through these archives, I discovered Karen Gibson’s article “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940–2000,” as well as newspaper archives from the 1920s through 2015. This research details the history and the policies that intentionally constructed and intensified economic inequities, such as the following:

- The arrival of African Americans from the South during World War II to build ships in the Kaiser shipyard
- The “redlining” of the housing market, wherein real-estate agents drew red lines delineating areas where people of color could and could not live
- The building of Vanport (on a flood plain) to house African American workers when a hostile city refused to sell or rent them homes
- The use of eminent domain, a law that gives local or national government the right to condemn and take private property for the “greater good” of the community
- The lending laws that gave banks the legal right to refuse loans to Blacks

All of this information was supported by a wealth of primary documents, but if my students and I were to be able to finish the unit within a marking period, I needed to create a narrative arc out of the volumes of materials.

**Igniting Student Interest**

We started the unit with a “mixer.” This strategy stimulates student interest and builds background knowledge prior to leaping into a new unit. The mixer included 18 roles that introduced students to the historical and contemporary figures who peopled this history. Armed with key information about the individuals they were assigned to portray, students learned about practices such as redlining and eminent domain—policies that promoted segregation and dispossession—but they also learned about how those terms affected the people whose lives they represented during the mixer. As students assumed the roles and walked about meeting other historical characters, they began collecting knowledge about three periods of this history: Vanport flood and redlining, Urban Renewal and the bulldozing of Albina homes and businesses, and contemporary gentrification.

The role of Dr. Denorval Unthank, for example, helped students understand the vicious racism that Blacks endured in Portland’s segregated past, but also the myriad ways that Blacks refused to accept the place this White city outlined for them. Like the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Dr. Unthank moved into a White neighborhood, where hostile neighbors first offered him money to move away, and when he refused, they broke his windows and threatened violence. Students also learned about how real-estate agents could refuse to sell homes to African Americans because their presence would lower property values. Thelma Glover’s role put the law of eminent domain into a character’s mouth. Her character reveals the engine of segregation more effectively than a dry definition. Later in the unit, Mrs. Glover is featured in an *Oregon Live* photo, which shows her holding an apology that Legacy Emmanuel Hospital issued to area residents for bulldozing their homes 50 years earlier.

After the mixer ended, I asked students to write what they learned about the history of our neighborhood, including relevant terms as well as people’s names and stories. We also asked, “Whose story moved you? What questions are you left with? What else do you want to know?”

In this mixer, students often know the characters and occasionally are related. The first time we tried out the mixer, a student noted that his grandmother used to tell them to only call Beacon Taxi, but he didn’t realize that it was Portland’s first Black-owned taxi, established by Willie Mae Hart. They wanted to know more about real-estate covenants and redlines. Dr. Unthank intrigued students because many of them attend an after-school and summer program located at Unthank Park.

Using the information from the mixer, students next discussed terms they had learned through their roles. Redlining and exclusionary acts are clearly racist practices, prohibiting African Americans from purchasing homes or living in areas with Whites. And, honestly, we were all
struck silent by the Portland Real Estate Covenant, dated 1948:

Race: No property shall be sold, leased, or subleased to Japanese, Chinese, Negroes, or Orientals, whether born in the United States of America or elsewhere, provided, however, that this shall not prevent their occupancy as domestic servants while employed by an owner or tenant.

We asked students to write about the laws and events that shaped where African Americans could live because it’s crucial that they understand how much the lack of housing affected—and continues to affect—African Americans in Portland. Textbooks and mainstream media usually present segregation as a Southern phenomenon. So it’s a revelation when students encounter this hateful language as a product of their own Northwest.

Using Archives to Construct Knowledge

Student questions helped drive the next phase of our research. Because I wanted students actively engaged in examining and questioning photographs and documents from each era, we arranged the materials to make the history more accessible.

In the Vanport section of the unit, for example, students worked in small groups. Each group received a series of photographs that illustrate scenes prior to the 1948 Memorial Day flood, such as ships being built, Black women working in the hull of a ship, an interracial group of kids playing with a homemade go-cart and holding hands at the first integrated school in Oregon, and the inside of a kitchen at one of the hastily constructed houses. Also included are photos from the flood, which left 18,000 people homeless: images of cars underwater, men roped together carrying children, families walking up the hill from the flooded city, hoisting suitcases and trunks on their shoulders. An additional artifact is a telegram from a husband asking for information about his wife, Mieko Sujimoto Ikada, a resident of Vanport, because no one in her family had heard from her since before the flood. Each folder included instructions:

1. Examine the photos in the folder to tell the story of Vanport. What do you notice about life in the community? Include your observations about work, play, interests. What do you notice about race? Who works where? What about schools? Who is in the photos? What does that tell you? What happened to the community? Also, keep track of your questions.

2. As a group, write a brief history of Vanport. Attach a list of questions where your information runs out.

3. Read the Oregon Historical Quarterly article, “Vanport Flood and Racial Change in Portland.” You may decide to read this out loud or on your own. Keep track through marginal notes of what your group got “right” about the story. Also, keep track through marginal notes and highlighting where your questions were answered.

Urban Renewal

The push-out of African Americans during the Urban Renewal phase of gentrification in Portland and elsewhere is subtle and requires a more nuanced understanding of what housing scholar and
advocate Charles Abrams in Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing calls “mechanisms of segregation” (10). Abrams describes “economic compulsions” such as refusal to make mortgage loans, Realtors’ codes of ethics, and restrictive covenants. Then he describes the “[l]egalized compulsions that use the powers of government to control the movements of minorities such as condemnation powers, urban renewal, and slum clearance” (10).

Students examined photographs of so-called blighted homes that were removed to make way for “urban renewal” and read newspaper accounts of the removal. Once they were saturated in the history, we took them on a walking field trip of the area surrounding Jefferson. Armed with “before” photographs and notepads, we headed into the neighborhood with Tom McKenna, a friend and colleague, who has studied the area for years. We encouraged students to take notes along the way, explaining, “We will write a poem at the end of the field trip, so capture images, stories, names of buildings and people. As Isabel Allende said, ‘Write what should not be forgotten.’” We wound through the area, looking at the photograph of Citizens Café, the cupola that once topped Citizens and now sits on a gazebo in Dawson Park. From the shuttered Harriet Tubman Middle School, we gazed at the tangled fingers of freeways, one dramatically ending mid-air, the school district office, and down the Willamette to the Coliseum, and imagined the 400 homes and the people who lived in them before they were pushed aside for the alleged “greater good” of the city.

Writing Historical Fiction

As a culminating writing project for the unit, students wrote historical fiction about gentrification. I was wary when I started teaching this genre, but students convinced me not only that they were ready to write, but that it was also a great way to use the research we had been swimming in. I interviewed some of my former students about writing historical fiction during his junior year, said, “It was hands down the funnest [sic] assignment I’ve done in all four years of my high school career. I didn’t want to stop writing. I had five pages . . . I had so much to say. It was such a fun thing because you got to take real historical facts and twist them to your imagination.”

Originally, we read August Wilson’s play Jitney as the literary component to the unit. Now, we read This Side of Home, a wonderful novel by Renée Watson, a Jefferson graduate, about the gentrification of Portland. Watson’s book portrays the loss of neighborhood through the experiences of several characters, including twin teenagers Maya and Nikki, who both witness the changes, but who react differently. I used the novel to teach how to write historical fiction using the beauty and tragedy of
neighborhood stories. For example, in one scene, Essence tells her long-time best friend that she’s moving because the landlord is selling her house:

“I can’t believe I have to move. I hate our landlord,” she says. “I really hate him. He kept telling us he was going to redo the basement. Every year he had some plan, telling us he could make it a rec room, a study, an exercise space, but it’s still just a creepy dungeon,” Essence says. “And then he has the nerve to start fixing things—right in our faces—a new bathroom with a jetted tub and marbled shower.” Essence fills a suitcase with the clothes that are hanging in her closet. “And he goes and tells us it ain’t for us. Like we ain’t good enough to live in a place like this. Can you believe that? He’s going to fix it all up, and we can’t stay.” She inhales a gulp of air. “He knew he was going to sell the house. He knew it. And he knew we wouldn’t be able to afford it!” (20)

Because many students have experienced their own families’ or their friends’ families’ exodus out of the neighborhood, Watson’s novel both validates their experiences and teaches them how to take the stories of our lives and turn them into fiction.

To move students into their writing, I asked them to brainstorm settings for their stories. Because I launched the fiction writing after our walking tour, students have names of buildings, parks, and streets: Citizen’s Café, the Cotton Club, Dawson Park, the NAACP office. Then I said, “Make a list of your characters. You don’t have to use historical characters, but you can. Think back to how Renée Watson used Mr. Washington in her story.” Once students generated a list of characters, I asked them, “What’s the conflict? Which pieces of history that we studied will you use? Vanport? Redlining? Eminent domain? Contemporary housing? Push out of businesses?” We discussed several options in class, referring back to Watson’s book and the history we studied. We posted photos on the walls for students to refer to as they wrote.

In his historical fiction, Xavier created a character who dined with his son at Citizen’s Café, joking with the cook, but also launching a conversation about the 90-day eviction notice he found on his front door. Chanelle created two high school characters, Latrice and Yolanda, who painted posters for a demonstration in Mrs. Leo Warren’s basement. Mrs. Warren created the Emanuel Displaced Person’s Association in 1970 to force the city to pay both renters and homeowners a fair price for the homes. In this scene, Mrs. Warren helps the students understand why they are making the posters:

“Honey, do you know why we are going on strike? Why I am slaving away shaking up five pounds of catfish in cornmeal and cracking my back, bent over, cutting up every vegetable in this house for our neighbors?”

All of the children had heard this speech from Miss Warren plenty of times, but they wouldn’t dare interrupt her. They understood that her passion was the edification of Blacks in Portland and listened quietly.

“The white folks in the government have run us down. They started with outlining a map of Portland saying where Blacks and whites could live. And they penned us to this small Albina area, forbidding us to ever venture outside of the line. That’s what redlining is. But confining us to this packed place wasn’t enough for them, so they killed hundreds of trees just to send all of us Blacks living in this area a letter saying that we have ninety days to get the hell out of our houses. And the worst part of it is that we are all only given $15,000 to purchase a new home. $15,000?! Honestly!”

Chanelle’s story celebrates Mrs. Warren’s refusal to be wrenched away from her home, her refusal to go silently in the face of the racist policies the city government imposed on her community.

“Our kids need to know why this happened.” That was my charge as I began this unit. But the instruction from my UPS acquaintance is a message to all teachers. Our students’ cities are being transformed with blinding speed. The vast inequality between haves and have-nots is growing wider and more visible—a constructed reality that has material consequences for all of us, but most especially our youth as we witness in the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore. Students need a curriculum that counters potential stereotypes about why neighborhoods are changing. Through these studies and conversations, we can create authentic, local lessons that dismantle the racist explanations that claim the “improvements” in the neighborhood are brought by Whites, who make our communities and schools better through their presence and whose entrepreneurial skills created neighborhood revival in places like Mississippi and Alberta Streets in Portland or the Ballard district of Seattle or the Mission district of San Francisco. As
teachers, we have an obligation to create opportuni-
ties for our students to use our classrooms to work
toward justice by combating the injustices of the past
and present in the hope of a better future.

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Metrical Considerations

Heaney exemplifies the Old English, 
Finds his métier in the mother tongue 
In the once upon a time of rhymes
He had to, he said, perform this feat  
To save himself from America’s
To save all others from the fen,
By those false prophets of poetics
Violating the voice right
The word-warrior need not worry  
Expertise to extract the beauty
What we lack in schema formality
To capture your Anglo-Saxon,
And make them ours.
New Englander’s shock
A thing or two

—Melanie Swetz
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