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Public History is NOW

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Abstract

A walking tour of downtown Portland in August 2021 raises questions for the writer about the purpose of “memory-activism” and its relation to writing-as-activism. Drawing on critiques of urbanist Jane Jacobs and interrogating the concept of “reckoning,” the essay explores ways in which the streetscape and people there can deliver meaning and pose questions about systemic racism and unsheltered existence.

Keywords

public history, history of Portland, Oregon, public culture during COVID-19, walking tours, urban planning, housing policy

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I'm standing on the edge of a group of about thirty people gathered on an overcast Saturday morning, mostly female-presenting people: a couple holding bike helmets and wearing sporty clothing, colorful wool socks underneath sandals designed to ford a mountain stream; a sullen teen black-clad on an educational outing with mom; others I might peg for teachers or social workers. I fit right into this largely white, graying crowd. We've all hauled ourselves downtown to take part in a "memory-activism" walk of the North Park Blocks in Portland. We are here, the organizer's email said, to "immerse [ourselves] in Oregon's silenced histories as told by underrepresented and historically marginalized communities."

I'm with a group of strangers on the corner of Northwest Broadway and Davis because I'm interested in the ways that activism can hyphenate with memory, just as I'm interested in the way writing-as-activism can emerge as an act, a gesture, an incitement. As a teacher and writer, I know the powerful work that both memory and writing can generate for communities and individuals, and I have high hopes for the stories we might hear on this walk and consider how the written word plays a role in a larger project of memory-activism.

When I park my car, I'm struck hard, and not for the first time, by the way that unsheltered people and their dwellings impact the landscape of the city street now. It's August 2021. I circled the blocks for parking, not because there weren't spots, but because I did not want to park in front of a tent, inches from someone sleeping beyond a thin nylon wall in the grey morning. Is it because, as I like to tell myself, I don't want to disturb the sleeping people inside?

For five years I worked with young people experiencing homelessness at a center around the corner from where I am now standing. They talked about getting harassed by the cops, describing the fear they experienced when confronted by cops on horseback, waking up suddenly with hooves right next to their heads. What I understand generally as the public space of the sidewalk is not public at all; the tents require us to reread the space. It was never designed to be truly public, but rather a thruway for citizen-as-consumer, citizen-as-worker, safe only in some colorblind fantasy of "eyes on the street," as urbanist Jane Jacobs described in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*¹. I know that the nature of the city is constituted by exclusion and based on inequality, not disrupted by it, as she infers. Critiques of Jacobs enliven both the use and uselessness of her ideas in thinking about the dynamics of contemporary Portland. Often cited as the ur-text of "new urbanism," *Death and Life* comes at questions of both vitality and decay in the urban space with assumptions about the conditions of racism that, to a contemporary (progressive) reader, seem mired in short-sighted optimism: she believes cities are places where intractable problems are solved rather than left to metastasize. She did not identify the virulent segregation of her own time as the urgent problem that it was.

Jacobs depended on ideas that I understand, because I grew up with Midwestern white parents, born in the 30s, who thought (and taught me) that racism would disappear as white people changed their behavior and educated themselves. In this worldview, there is little, if any,

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961).

accounting for institutional and systemic formations of racism into which we enter at birth and knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate, nor was there the recognition of the active role communities of color play in resisting oppressive systems, and indeed creating alternatives. For Jacobs, Black and brown people remain “discriminated against.” By coming downtown today, I wanted to see if memory-activism offers another way to see systemic oppression as well as systemic change: How could new knowledge play a role in enacting a vision of a more equitable world, if at all?

The group stands across from the old Customs building, which was vacated by its tenants ostensibly because, since summer 2020, downtown Portland has been boarded up (after being smashed in), and most blocks have at least one tent settlement now. In the North Park Blocks, it’s tents all the way down. The pandemic gutted most economically productive activities of the central city, where in the before-times, 5% of the state’s population worked. Now commercial vacancy hovers at 20%. Although nightly protests have waned, the residual vandalism of broken windows and graffiti is visible everywhere. Most businesses are still boarded up, mixed-use sliding into no-use. Marches for racial justice have been replaced with skirmishes between men at the fringes of ideologies, who agree only in their rigidity of opposing positions and desire to beat the shit out of each other. The fact that one end of this ideological spectrum is vigorously, and vocally white supremacist impacts unhoused people. The most recent (2019) point-in-time report made by Multnomah County measures Black Oregonians making up just over 16% of the county’s houseless numbers, more than double the percentage of the Black population county-wide (7.2%)².

People of color are more likely to sleep outside without a tent and are much less likely to access institutional shelter resources. In a Summer 2021 survey of 380 unsheltered people by the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative at Portland State University (in partnership with the Joint Office of Homeless Services and *Street Roots*), nearly 40% of those surveyed identified as people of color, with the highest representation among Black and Native Americans³.

The walking tour is part of the *Memory and Public Space UnConference*⁴, put on by a coalition of arts and activist organizations, including the Portland Art Museum, the Vanport Mosaic, and the Design as Protest collective, who have filled vacant storefront windows with history displays that “celebrate communities’ strength and inspire us to join in solidarity and action.” As I pay for my parking, I am totally ready to be inspired into solitary and action, especially since the act of coming downtown to join with strangers in pursuit of such goals feels appealing after months of confinement. I envisioned a guided overview of the exhibit in the various windows, a sense of the

² Regional Research Institute of Human Services at Portland State University, “2019 Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Portland/Gresham/Multnomah County, Oregon,” Point-in-Time Counts, Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services, 2019, https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2019%20PIT%20Report_FINAL.pdf.

³ Marisa Zapata, “Memorandum: Local Implementation Plan Unsheltered Survey Results,” Survey on Needs of People Living Unsheltered, Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, 2021, <https://www.pdx.edu/homelessness/sites/g/files/znlchr1791/files/2021-06/2020%20LIP%20Survey%20findings%20-%20CLEAN%20COPY.doc.pdf>.

⁴ See <https://portlandartmuseum.org/learn/educators/memory-and-public-space/>.

context for the project. I wanted to learn from stories of displacement, possibly enter conversations of solidarity with people who were learning about the relationship between the systemic injustices of the past, and how to find a way into contemporary experiences of resistance and change, to ally with alternatives. Instead, I find myself standing in front of a set of posters, listening to a lecture as a disheveled young white man, grey pants sagging deeply on his rear, teeters by us on his meth-addled high half-toes, yelling and lunging erratically in and out of the street. Cars are slowing down and honking at him. He looks taut, like he's about to punch something. He is wearing a bright white V-neck sweater with an insignia from Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club on the breast.

The head of the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, the speaker for the event, adjusts the portable PA system hanging crossbody at his hip and the shrill feedback screams out, provoking the young man to move towards us and then away, yelling in an incomprehensible plea, "Aw yeah? Aw yeah?" His feet are half in his shoes, and when he comes to rest on his heels, they smash the back into permanent slippers. Everyone in the group is studiously focused away from the man, trying not to hear him. Our speaker does not stop his lecture.

I am not sure what I was expecting from this "memory walk." Something new, something I hadn't heard or read before? But this talk, this lecture in front of static images behind glass, isn't connecting with what I see in front of me, is not connecting the people gathered to each other, nor enfranchising anyone on the street.

A white person walks by with a cat on a leash, no shoes, just slippers, smoking. The speaker lectures on: *Residents of Vanport, many Black and all poor, had a couple hours to gather what they could carry and leave before the Columbia River inundated and destroyed their homes in 1948.*

A Black woman walks by carrying a plastic garbage bag in one hand. Inside are the kind of blankets you use when you move furniture, thin and quilted. In the other hand she carries two dingy plastic Whole Foods shopping totes crammed with papers, stuffed animals, a radio, a pillow. She's wearing only slippers. *The racist practice of redlining forced many Black Portlanders into crowded and squalid conditions in Albina, then the neighborhood was reclaimed by the state to build I-5 and a hospital, leaving the neighborhood decimated.*

Across the street, a white woman wearing a poly-fill comforter around her shoulders and a pink turban/towel on her head picks at the ground with a long stick, as if she is looking for something precious, muttering, wearing rags around her shoes. *If you check your deed, you might find that there are still racially exclusive covenants on there,* the speaker says.

A Black man with an enormous boombox walks by, wearing slippers, and our speaker must stop talking because no one can hear him over the song:

*All my brags turn to facts, all my hundreds turn to racks
All my ladies turn to snacks
SUVs black on black⁵*

This dissonance – lecture, music, lecture, yelling, lecture – gets me thinking about the possibility of sharing and enjoying public space. I’m listening to our speaker talk about Oregon’s white supremacist past, but what I’m thinking about is people who say “Portland used to be such a nice place, but now look at it.” I’m thinking about that nostalgia of a functional city – but there has never been a time when the city actually worked for everyone.

The dissonance and the lecture cause my mind to wander. What is “memory-activism” anyway? Is it a new understanding of the past that could maybe present a new perception of the present? Possibly activate a shared vision of a more equitable world? How would this idea function if I were to think of my own experiences? Can “memory-activism” work with one’s own memories? Or is it always a communal activity? And what of writing? Can writing-as-activism happen if no one reads what you have written?

As I listen to this lecture, I understand that this history must be learned, but it can be learned in many ways, and I’m not convinced passive listening about the legacy of violence and oppression creates or leads to “memory-activism.” This history must be reckoned with, must be part of an ongoing reckoning, and as I consider this event, I begin to think about what forms of gathering, of being together, might lead to this type of ongoing reckoning, to activism. I began creating a writing exercise (I am a teacher), a list of metrics by which a person might assess their comfort level with the changes Portland is currently experiencing. In this exercise, you could ask yourself, and maybe even write your answers. Describe a time when:

- You could walk downtown without getting harassed.
- You could easily access the spaces you wanted to access.
- You weren’t afraid of physical violence, including from cops.
- You generally knew what to expect from strangers downtown.
- You could enjoy the culture of the city, see the landscape of culture in front of you.
- You could see yourself and your interests reflected there.
- You had a sense of being in general agreement with the people running the parks.
- You could take your kids to play and explore downtown without fearing for their exposure to potentially confusing events and situations (mental illness, drug use, unsheltered people).

If I were leading this memory walk, I’d ask the group: Where do these descriptions, these memories take you as you travel the streets of Portland in your mind? Into different times, spaces, bodies? How does the new information about others’ experiences impact the way you understand our shared city?

⁵ Jack Harlow & Pooh Shiesty, “SUVs (Black on Black),” 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98JGfgnXE1E>.

Over the past two years, “reckoning” has emerged as a rhetorical position that has been used by both the right and the left to characterize political events and outcomes. It means coming into conversation with, or encountering something. Reckoning means both tallying up or estimating the bill, and, in a slightly more ominous and archaic sense, a time when your actions will be judged and potentially punished. As a familiar trope in alt-right evaluations of what America has coming, “reckoning” is used to describe the racial justice activism following the murder of George Floyd: America had a “reckoning” with race. This fantasy places the idea of achieving racial justice *and* the second coming of Christ/white nationalist takeover of the United States as endpoints and discrete goals – in this mirage, everyone wants a reckoning, just different kinds.

It’s so satisfying to think that these problems might be solved and then everything would be fixed. But things keep getting added to the bill; different parts are paid off incrementally; the reckoning will never stop. If you are faced with something like “a city's reckoning,” the complexity demands disorder and the will of the people who live there: you are handed the bill by living here but you often can’t make out what’s written. You have to *learn* (memory-activism?) in order to reckon. Learning takes time, and learning what is to be reckoned will be ongoing, as will any reckoning itself – it is more a mindset than an event, an ongoing inquiry. I am invested in this reckoning, and it must involve learning. I have the time and privilege to do so.

Back on the street, the posters in front of us tell the stories of resistance and discrimination through the history of Oregon. This “museum without walls” is made up of art installations and historical descriptions of redlining, of exclusion and depersonalization, of land being taken over and over, of bodies devalued and humanity denied, of people fighting for their basic dignity and access to the wealth, and the wealth of the promise. In one window, the artists Cleo Davis and Kayin Talton-Davis recast the term “gentrification” as “Blightxploitation” – a clearer rendering, in their view, of the Black experience in Portland, drawing the line of policies and social norms from enslavement to dispossession. *You blighted us* – a moment of language doing activist work, uncovering the intention by activating the verb, plumbing its transitivity.

In the window of the Jewish Museum of Oregon, colorful posters labeled *Persist*, *Protest*, and *Create* are contrasted with posters labeled *Exclude*, *Dehumanize*, and *Segregate* in a symmetry that suggests a balanced or unbiased presentation of fact, a way out of the “discriminated against” reduction. Each poster bears/bares historical examples ranging from the sterilization of “sexual deviants” (*Dehumanize*) to the American Indian Movement’s occupation of the Bonneville Power Administration (*Protest*), along with examples of redlining, stereotypes, media activism, laws and legal challenges, theft and labor organizing – all manner of horrible and beautiful moments, submerged history revealed as I believe it should be. The posters combine text and photos of archival artifacts – photos, maps, legal documents, newspaper clippings, with accompanying descriptive text. As I study them, I appreciate the way that the text complicates the racial politics of the history of Oregon and creates connections between struggles, revealing the nuance necessary for understanding the moment in which we find ourselves.

I begin to feel a rise of anxiety in my chest because the walking tour is not going anywhere. I'm not sure if it is part of the calculus for the walking tour to remain in one place. My antsy-ness builds as the speaker describes the differences between the myths and realities of Critical Race Theory, his PA squeaking and squawking. A good strong waft of pot seeps under my mask as a tall white man smoking a spliff that looks rolled fat with a dollar bill saunters past and growls at us, "Y'all have a good day, now." The group moves a little more closely together. *It's a legal theory, that's it*, our speaker drones on.

A police car drives by and a young member of our group (white) whips around and shoots her raised middle fingers in the air as the car passes.

"Fuck you pigs, you're the problem!" she yells, as if to the assembled, none of whom are looking at her, everyone earnestly holding their gazes forward to ignore her outburst. She turns back around and keeps listening to the lecture like nothing happened, like she had not just performed a loud and satisfying signal of her virtue and her opinion on things, her activism. The side of the building across from us is spray-painted with "ACAB" (All Cops Are Bastards).

Do we need to know everything about Critical Race Theory and Vanport to say we have a housing crisis, and it disproportionately affects Black and brown Portlanders? That our city was built on this crisis, formed through it, and formed through both solid and spindly bridges of community people constructed in the process – across difference but more often in alliance of interest. In this little group on the sidewalk, we have an elusive and rare moment to connect with other people, to start building those bridges. It isn't in the museum, or the classroom; I am, we are, surrounded by the concrete manifestation of what the history and theory were supposedly talking about and so it feels unseemly not to include it — these people here, self-determined memory activists together with everyone on the street.

I peel off from the tour, and I must cross the street a couple of times to avoid walking through the rooms that have formed, private spaces on the public street – order from disorder? Or its opposite? I also have to cross to avoid the guy in the white V-neck who is looking even more erratic than before, yelling, and who I just can't tell where or how he is going to move, and he's swearing loudly, trying to look people in the eye, looking me in the eye.