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Living and Working in a White Homeland: A Challenge to be Heard and Recognized

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### **Opinion**

**Living and Working in a White Homeland**

A challenge to be heard and recognized

**By Ethan Johnson**

I moved to Portland in 2005 to start my job as an assistant professor in the Black Studies Department at Portland State University. I had never been to the city previously, but had visited the Salem area as a teenager because I had relatives living there. When I got to PSU, Darrell Millner, the senior faculty in the department gave me a book called Peculiar Paradise, which I read from beginning to end immediately. It helped me develop a beginning picture of the state. My primary reason for moving to Portland was that I was relatively close to my family in Oakland, Calif. I also liked that there were many outdoor activities that you could do in and around the city. I grew up backpacking, skiing and going to the beach. Lastly I liked the idea of being a part of a Black Studies Department. My academic work was focused on the educational experiences of Black people in Oakland and Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Esmeraldas is a province where Black people make up the largest proportion of the population and was where I conducted my dissertation research.

The thing that stuck me the most upon moving here was the small number of Black people compared to where I was from. I tell my students that I had a Black dentist in Oakland. I would bet that there are not more than five black dentists in the Portland Metro area. What I have also noticed is that there are even a smaller percentage of middle class Black people in Portland compared to Oakland and the Bay Area. I would explain this as primarily due to Black people’s lack of access to public sector employment, such as working in city, county, state and federal jobs that are stable and offer middle class wages. In other large urban areas across the country, Black people have been able to gain access to these institutions in ways they have not in Portland.

Numbers matter. As a result of Oregon being the only state in the Union to have in its original constitution include an exclusion law barring Black people from living in the state, few Black people saw Portland as a viable option to migrate to. As pushout, incarceration and homicide are forms of exclusion, we can say Portland continues to legally exclude Black people as citizens of the state. If you do not graduate high school, are incarcerated or murdered the obstacles for you to participate as a citizen are at best curtailed and at worst eliminated. This does not necessarily mean Black people are worse off in Portland compared to other parts of the country, however, there are indications that Black people here do experience forms of inequality that set Portland and Oregon apart from the nation as a whole. A recent article demonstrated, for example, that Oregon has the only state that has an animal civil rights attorney.

Ethan Johnson is chair and associate professor of the Black Studies Department at Portland State University.