

Portland State University

**PDXScholar**

---

Black Studies Faculty Publications and  
Presentations

Black Studies

---

3-2020

# How Oregon's Racist History Can Sharpen Our Sense of Justice Right Now

Walidah Imarisha

*Portland State University, walidah@pdx.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/black\\_studies\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/black_studies_fac)



Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

## Citation Details

"How Oregon's Racist History Can Sharpen our Sense of Justice Right Now." *Portland Monthly Magazine*, March 2020.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Black Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

Essay

# The Long View

HOW OREGON'S RACIST HISTORY CAN SHARPEN OUR **SENSE OF JUSTICE** RIGHT NOW BY WALIDAH IMARISHA

**N**AME A SMALL TOWN in Oregon. I have most likely been there, talking about race.

For the past eight years, starting as part of Oregon Humanities' Conversation Project, I've stood in front of thousands of attendees in packed libraries, community centers, senior homes, college campuses, and prisons.

I've seen it all: multiple people arguing the Ku Klux Klan was and remains a "civic organization," chiding me for focusing solely on the "negatives" while adamantly denying they support racism or are themselves racist. I've received death threats and seen physical disruptions from white supremacists in Oregon towns large and small. And in my travels, I've used history as an organizing catalyst, and worked with social justice groups for positive change, from city hall resolutions to curriculum overhauls to ballot measures.

Who am I? I moved to Springfield, Oregon, as a teen after growing up on military bases overseas. I was lucky enough to hear Portland State University's Darrell Millner lecture on Oregon Black history while I was still in high school. He changed the course of my life, influencing me to attend PSU's Black Studies Department, and served as a mentor for my own historical work.

Oregon—and Portland especially—is more than happy to cloak itself in the language of progressivism, while allowing racist systems to flourish, visible everywhere from gentrification and policing to health care access and graduation rates. Many liberal white folks I know want to draw a bright line between the time before and after Donald Trump's election—as if he invented these inequities. Doing so allows white people to be comfortable while denying that continuous historical brutality has crossed freely over the red and blue lines on the map.

But this reality has historical roots. Oregon was founded on the notion of creating a racist white utopia and on the removal, exploitation, or exclusion of all people of color. In 1844, 15 years before statehood, the Oregon Territory passed the region's first Black exclusion

**The fact that Black communities exist here *at all* is incredible: we were never supposed to take root.**



## Snapshots from the Unseen

Little-known moments from the history of Oregon's Black community

### 1867

The children of Salem resident William P. Johnson are turned away from public school. Johnson and the rest of the Black community of Salem collect \$427.50 to open their own school, and later, the district agrees to fund Little Central School for Salem's 16 Black school-age kids.

### 1880s

The first transcontinental railroad opens, bringing an influx of Black people to Oregon. Railroad workers set down roots in Portland, then considered to be the most segregated city north of the Mason-Dixon Line, opening the door for new generations.

### 1902

Alonzo Tucker, a Black man, is arrested (and then released from jail), charged with raping a white woman in Coos Bay. He is shot twice and then lynched, hanged from a bridge by a mob of 200 armed white men. The *Oregon Journal* describes it as a "quiet and orderly" pro-

cess and says Tucker got the death "he so thoroughly deserved."



### 1921

The Ku Klux Klan establishes an Oregon chapter, believed to have the highest per-capita membership in the country. The group influences city and state policy through officials like the governor, the mayor of Portland, the Portland Police chief, and the Multnomah County sheriff.

### 1923

Around 60 Black residents settle in Maxville, a town run by the Bower-Hicks Lumber Company in Wallowa County. Today, the Maxville Heritage Interpretative Center tells the story of multicultural logging communities in the Northwest.

### 1988

Ethiopian student and father Mulugeta Seraw is killed in Portland by three skinheads affiliated with the White Aryan Resistance. Two years later, 1,500 people rally in his memory along the South Park Blocks.



law, criminalizing the very presence of Black people in the Pacific Northwest. (The legal punishment for defying the law and daring to settle here? Public whippings of up to 39 lashes every six months until they left.) More recently, it was only 35 years ago that a Portland police officer choked “Good Samaritan” Lloyd Stevenson to death after Stevenson, who was Black, thwarted a robbery. And there are countless other examples before and since. The rallying cry #BlackLivesMatter has been relevant for so long. And institutional racism demands to be met with real institutional change.

But when I think of this history, it’s not the forces of oppression I center. Instead, I focus on the radical visioning of communities of color who were able to dream themselves into futures barred to them.

There’s a historical through-line here, too, from logging families in the multiracial, multiethnic community of Maxville in the 1920s in Eastern Oregon to current organizing by groups like the Portland African American Leadership Forum over the “right of return” for communities displaced by gentrification and discriminatory housing practices. The fact that Black communities exist here *at all* is incredible: we were never supposed to take root. That we did is due entirely to resistance, vision, and sheer force of will—and our ongoing commitment to care for each other in a place trying to destroy us.

Doing this work around the state has taught me that when you take the historical long view, the concept of justice becomes much simpler. The idea of “civil” discussions that give the same weight to all sides fades away. There are, in fact, really only two sides to history—the right side and the wrong side. We need to take the long view when thinking about our actions, and our work. What will be written of our actions (or our inactions) in 100 years? How will the future judge us?

*Walidah Imarisha teaches in the Pacific Northwest College of Art’s MFA in Creative Writing program. She is currently working on an Oregon Black history book, forthcoming from AK Press, and speaks regularly on the topic around the state.* 📖

M  
Maloy's Jewelry



## Big Ice

M-F 10am to 5:30pm  
Sat 11am to 5pm  
717 SW 10th Ave  
Portland, OR 97205  
503.223.4720  
www.maloys.com

Maloy's offers a fabulous selection of antique and estate jewelry and fine custom jewelry, as well as repair and restoration services. We also buy.



## ADVENTURE AWAITS YMCA CAMP COLLINS

Our Overnight Camps, Teen Camps and Day Camps provide youth the opportunity to build confidence, make new friends and empower young people to reach their full potential. Sign your camper up and use PDX Monthly to receive \$25 off. Give your camper the best summer ever.

Still curious? Come visit YMCA Camp Collins at one of our three Open Houses, Apr. 19, May 17 and June 7, 2 PM–4 PM.

[ymcacw.org/pdx-camps](http://ymcacw.org/pdx-camps)

