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CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers
April 2009. Vol. 13, No. 2.

Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy
Arts & Administration Program, University of
Oregon ISSN 1541-938X

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Community, Culture, and Constituting a Usable Past in Eugene, OR

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In the winter of 2008, as the spring term at UO began, I considered the 'state of the city' address Mayor Kitty Piercy had delivered the night before. In this wide-ranging speech navigating the ups and downs the city of Eugene witnessed in the preceding year, Mayor Piercy reaffirmed her standing commitment to pursuing equal rights and instigating respect of diversity for all of the area's residents. Specifically referencing a rash of hate-fueled incidents, she stated:

Differences of opinion about immigration issues can fuel bigotry and hatred; we need to remind ourselves that our community and our nation were built by indigenous peoples and immigrants, and that all human beings deserve respect.

The social justice triumphs and defeats of this last year have increased my resolve to continue working on becoming an official Human Rights City, one that embraces human rights in every decision we make. If there's any place in America that can do this, it is certainly here. (p. 4)

Mayor Piercy's optimistic commitment threw into relief a conversation I had only days before with Ms. Lyllye Parker, a counselor in the Office of Multicultural Academic Support at UO and a lifelong resident of Eugene. In our meeting, Ms. Parker briefly outlined her family history for me, a history couched in racial tensions and entrenched bigotry that defined broad swaths of the social landscape in the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century. Her parents had moved to Oregon from Louisiana in the mid-1940s, arriving as an African-American family in an overwhelmingly Anglo-dominant place. Our short meeting did not allow for a full

biographical narrative, but her story led me to think about the ways in which a more thorough grasp of this city's past might serve the goals of its future.

Since moving to Eugene in 2005, I had heard only brief and vague mention of an "historic" African American neighborhood/community. That no one could tell me much about this cultural history was not surprising given the ways in which institutional prejudice often dictates what we know about a place via the "official" and written record. Ms. Parker's stories pushed me to want to know more, but also to think about the ways "knowing more" could do something, could be part of the civic engagement that Mayor Piercy championed in her state of the city speech. My personal interest in the issue overlapped with my position as a University of Oregon faculty member, and my goals as a folklorist vested in public sector work aligned with the need for public acknowledgement/telling/grasp of this "hidden" history that Ms. Parker had only begun to tell me part of—I wanted to know more as a citizen and scholar, but also wanted to foreground the process of knowing more, the cultural work that comprised field-based research in the public interest.

During the fall term of 2008, I was able to teach a course through the Arts and Administration program at the University of Oregon that was, ostensibly, dedicated to gathering an oral history of the African American community that called the Alton Baker Park area of Eugene home circa the mid-1940s. I had a part-time appointment in the Arts and Administration program, so the course was part of my teaching load. I structured it so as to mesh with the program's mission of educating "cultural sector leaders and participants to make a difference in communities," as I wanted students taking the course to engage in hand-on collaborative work related to cultural heritage and community: planning and conducting fieldwork; navigating divergent interests among and between community groups; and satisfying expectations of multiple constituencies for a project. The course, then, would serve as a somewhat controlled environment within which students could actively participate in the kinds of negotiations and practices circumscribed by cultural politics that they would likely encounter in cultural sector positions they might take upon graduation.

The Alton Baker park area we initially focused on was one that Ms. Parker's parents had lived in, a community established beyond city limits of 1940s Eugene, and therefore beyond the legal and social prejudice against their possession of what today we would call "human rights." This community was subsequently displaced, in part due to the expansion of the Ferry Street bridge (at least according to the common/official story), with many of the families ultimately relocating in the West 11th Street area of Eugene and a portion of Glenwood then known as "Skunk Hollow." Ms. Parker grew up in the West 11th area, a neighborhood outside of city limits (yet again) but one in which her parents and other African American families were able to buy property and establish a community (yet again).

Offering students at the graduate and undergraduate level opportunities to document a community central to the story of Eugene, yet generally left out of

public and official historiography, the course largely comprised collaborative design and implementation of an oral history project. This was an ambitious undertaking for a ten-week course—as I'll discuss more below—but I hoped the class would be able to gather existing historical sources (from archives, libraries, news media outlets), map what sort of research had already been done (I had heard rumors of 'oral history' projects from years prior), and conduct interviews with as many community members as possible. With assistance from Ms. Parker, I had made initial contacts during the preceding summer in order to find out if people were interested and available to participate, as well as to engage in some preliminary discussion contextualizing the project. Given the potentially painful or invasive memories associated with such charged issues as racism and bigotry, I wanted to avoid any perceptions that this project simply emerged as an "interesting" idea in a UO class. The social gravity of the subject called for careful and rigorous preparation at every step.

The course, while ambitious on its own, formed part of a broader effort spanning the University of Oregon and City of Eugene (as institutions), as well as the communities that comprise and surround those institutions. Seeking to diversify their holdings and more fully embrace a role as stewards of community and cultural heritage, the UO Libraries Special Collections and University Archives department enthusiastically agreed to catalog and house oral history materials generated through the course. The unit also arranged a year-long graduate student research fellow position associated with the oral history of African American experience in Eugene, and this student has been instrumental in gathering and processing materials.

Additionally, as indicated above, I wanted the work done in the course to engage the City of Eugene's commitment to "sustainable community" and "human rights." Fundamentally, I wanted the history collated through fieldwork done by students to serve as a "usable past," a looking back that contributed to the active creation of a present and future for Eugene as a community of diverse peoples and interests. The concept of a usable past has many facets and derivations, but I approached it through a quote I ran across on the website for a 2001 Carnegie Council conference:

The modern idea of a usable past reflects a desire to make sense of national experiences in ways that unify rather than separate us. The search for a usable past aims at creating a better world by incorporating achievements as well as regrets, pride as well as disappointment, into our historical accounts. In the right hands the usable past can be an expression of communal aspiration. (Carnegie Council, 2001)

Speaking to the question of reasons for wanting to understand the past from a range of perspectives—in lieu of a single dominant narrative—the notion of a 'usable past' presented interesting possibilities in terms of the objectives of the class/project. As such, many questions emerged around the idea of a "usable

past"—in what ways might an oral history of the Ferry Street Bridge community lead to a “usable past”? What’s at stake? For whom? Who will the past be “usable” for? Finally, what currently constitutes “community”—African American or otherwise—in Eugene?

Big questions for a ten week course. The project outgrew the course as a container, in ways that emphasized the temporal dimension of collaborative cultural work—things take time, to say the least. While critically engaging issues of citizenship, disenfranchisement, racism, and local migration patterns in the classroom, students worked with community members only during short interview sessions. Anecdotal reporting indicated they took much away from these experiences, and hungered for more time to do more work. Feedback from community members interviewed for the project indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity and appreciated the effort. As a group we were able to interview a good number of individuals, but our list grew longer as the weeks wore on—indicating the expansive scope of community, history, and usability. While this project initially focused on the African American community established during the late 1940s in what is today Alton Baker Park, research and interviews traced the history of social inequity beyond that singular cultural-geographic moment. As such, this history remains untold—yet far from unremembered by many long time residents of Eugene and Springfield—and is still experienced in a range of ways. The process of attempting to pull together an oral history about a community only adumbrated the work that needs to be done in order to establish a usable past connecting many communities. And although the course served as fertile ground for incubating ideas and questions, the work that remains to be done to push this project toward completion ideally will be undertaken by all those who stand to benefit the most from it: the various communities constituting the City of Eugene, past and present, who seek and deserve those ineffable things we call “human rights.”

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