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The Rainier Valley's Diversity Myth

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The Rainier Valley has a reputation. People know the housing projects are here, they read about the crime in the Seattle Times, and, driving through, they note the visibly deteriorating buildings along the arterials. But counterbalancing its known deficiencies is an asset, as unique and every bit as prized by Seattle-ites as the Arboretum's botanic gardens--the astounding, improbable mix of people living there.

The even split between Asian, Black, and White residents shown by census data suggests a tantalizing harmony between the races in Southeast Seattle. To white, middle-class Seattle, the diversity found in the isolated southern periphery of the city is a model of worldliness and tolerance that even bigger cities would do well to imitate.

Southeast Seattle, the Rainier Valley, and the 98118 zip code refer to roughly the same area, between Interstate 5 and Lake Washington at the southern edge of the city. But it's 98118 that has recently piqued the imaginations of residents, business owners, and local media, because word has gotten out that the U.S. Census Bureau has named it the most diverse zip code in the nation.

That 98118 is the home of prize-winning diversity makes sense. You can see it in the faces of the people huddled together at bus stops or the names of businesses splayed across awnings in Amharic or Vietnamese. For those who call it home, or work there, or have dinner at one of its many unique restaurants, the Census Bureau's supposed judgment confirms the obvious truth of life in 98118.

What is Special about Diversity?

Diversity is one of those ambient virtues that hangs like a fog, without hard, definable edges. People know it when they see it and feel that it is good without knowing exactly why.

If we thought of it in the same way that a scientist thinks of bio-diversity, diversity would indicate that there are a lot of different kinds of people in a given place, and that the numbers of each of those kinds of people would be fairly even. Instead, as illustrated by a recent survey of Seattle neighborhoods by a local magazine that matter-of-factly defined neighborhood diversity by its "percent non-white," diversity is shorthand for the presence of minorities.

In some vague way, we know that society as a whole is improved by diversity. The experience of being thrown together with people of all different backgrounds from all over the country and world is a defining aspect of the college experience. It is also valuable preparation for life: in the workplace, most people will not choose who they will spend their days with. Such encounters with difference shape our sensibilities as citizens.

But in private life there is a relaxation of America's commitment to the civic virtue of diversity. Difference is a barrier to be overcome and a source of stress, from which private life is the traditional escape. We tend to go to church, marry, and live next door to people we consider to be like ourselves. We find safety and comfort among our peers, where we don't have to watch what we say or strain to understand what is being said.

This tendency to stick with one's own is the norm in Seattle as elsewhere, so diversity in the

Rainier Valley is somewhat remarkable. The mixture of race, ethnicity, and languages is a departure from the way the rest of Seattle chooses to live and conduct its business. Like the elementary schooler who raises a thousand dollars for tsunami victims, the rubbing together of diverse shoulders in 98118 is a precocious departure from the imperfect, but accepted, norm.

Among the Champions of Diversity

When asked if her organization had ever declared 98118 the most diverse in the nation, the Census Bureau's Media Specialist, Cecelia Sorci, was emphatic, "It's not true."

"It all started with an article on AOL by a person named G. Willow Wilson, and then took on a life of its own," Sorci explained. "People responded to the story because it was so positive. Around here we think of it almost as an urban myth."

"We don't measure whether one zip code is more diverse than another," she added, "We only collect raw data. We leave it up to others to interpret it." Since the publication of the Bureau's 2000 numbers, however, 98118's claim to the diversity title has come up again and again in the media, in a self-reinforcing cycle.

It is true that G. Willow Wilson's article, **"**America's Most Diverse Zipcode Shows the Way," touched off the latest wave of media interest in the topic, but the myth has circulated for at least a decade now. For Wilson, it is the lack of hostility and even cooperation among the different groups that live in the Rainier Valley that makes the place noteworthy. The lesson to be learned from the 98118 zip code, she says, is that "We don't need to be like each other to like each other." At the root of the comity, she says, is "the feeling of shared pride in a neighborhood," no doubt reflecting her own.

Following her lead, a steady stream of news stories featured local business people from seemingly every corner of the globe, marveled that "If you walk into any of the cafes, you'll hear 10,15 different languages," and congratulated 98118 on its "success."

In part, the myth of 98118's nationally unique diversity is a rejoinder to the popular notion of the area as a dangerous ghetto defined by its government housing projects, street crime and gang violence. It is Exhibit A in the argument that residents and business owners are there by choice and not forced there by necessity.

How Southeast Seattle Became Diverse

Nationally, the demographic split between whites and minorities, which in 2008 stood at 75% white, 12.4% African American, and about 5% Asian, is very similar to that of Seattle. In 2000, whites made up 70% of Seattle's population. Nine percent of residents were black and 13% were Asian or Pacific Islanders.

In the decades since 1960, when 92% of Seattle's residents were white, the proportion of minorities has increased steadily, and accelerated in recent years. A report published by the City of Seattle in 2006 found that "the number of foreign-born people in Seattle grew at a rate of five times the city's overall population growth." If we find in the 2010 census numbers that this trend has continued, a fifth of Seattle's population was born someplace else. ("Seattle Area Becoming Much More International", Murakami/Cohen, Seattle PI, 3/19/08)

That Seattle and its suburbs are getting more diverse is a bland fact that a trip to the mall will bear out, but to a significant degree, the races live apart and parents send their children to different schools. A 2005 study showed that, though housing segregation has decreased markedly over the decades, almost half of Seattle's people of color still live in the Central Area and the Rainier Valley.

In 2000, 70.1% of Seattle residents were white, yet they accounted for only 40% of the students in Seattle Public Schools (US Census Bureau, Census 2000) (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 25, 2005). And while enrollment in Seattle public schools dropped from 85,000 to 45,000, non-white enrollment nearly tripled to 58% (Shaw, "The Resegregation of Seattle Schools," Seattle Times, 6/1/08)

The Making of a Special Racial Balance

At the heart of the most diverse zip code myth is the even split between White, Asian, and African-American populations captured in the 2000 census. In the census tracts that made up southeast Seattle, 27% of residents were white, 23% black, and 39% Asian or Pacific Islander. In the Rainier Valley, no group has a numerical advantage, creating a balance that is impossible in the rest of the city. In a majority white city where historic patterns of segregation persist, Seattle takes special pride in the area where the racial mold is broken.

But history belies the myth of the Rainier Valley as Seattle's "It's A Small World" attraction. It reveals southeast Seattle as a place of struggle, opportunity, and failed social experiments, a place people flee to and escape from. At one time or another, it has been pretty much everything except a stable, exemplary model of diversity.

The decisive period in southeast Seattle's demographic history came in the Sixties, when the black population of southeast Seattle jumped dramatically from 2,584 to 10,173, accounting for 14% of the area's population by 1970.

In 1940, southeast Seattle was home to 237 black residents, or just 6% of city's total black population. Whites were the vast majority in the neighborhood, making up 97% of the all residents, and over the next two decades, almost 25,000 more white residents made their home in southeast Seattle.

While the black presence increased slowly but steadily over the same period, the black percentage of the total population never exceeded 4%. Native Americans, Asians, and other groups not captured under the white and black categories made up 9% of the population in 1960.

The great movement of black Seattle-ites into the Rainier Valley was due to a complex combination of factors -- chief among them, the elimination of thousands of units of affordable housing in the Central Area in the name of "urban renewal", formal and informal restrictions on black homeownership in particular areas, and a building boom in southeast Seattle that produced many hundreds of units of multi-family housing.

The passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which established classification of immigrants by national origin rather than ethnicity, resulted in a dramatic increase in immigration to Seattle, particularly from Asia. This was reflected in southeast Seattle's Asian population in the Sixties, which was composed primarily of ethnically Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino people.

Between 1960 and 1970, the number of Asians and Pacific Islanders nearly doubled to 11,482, or 17% of area's total population.

In 1970, black and Asian populations were concentrated in the extreme north of the Rainier Valley on opposite sides of Rainier Avenue, in the area contiguous with what were considered their ethnic enclaves; the International District on the west and the Central Area to the north. One study called the ensuing southward movement "integration by overspill." As Seattle's overall black and Asian population increased, the author explained:

> the direction of expansion for both communities has been south, blocked as they have been on the north (that is, north of Madison Street) by affluent housing, the Ship Canal, and the University of Washington; on the west by Interstate 5; and on the east by the gold coast strip of upscale homes and Lake Washington. (Ethnic Diversity in SE Seattle, 201)

But integration was not merely the result of some new residents finding a home in the neighborhoods of southeast Seattle, but also of many others fleeing them. Between 1960 and 1970, southeast Seattle lost 11,962, or 20%, of its white residents. The Boeing recession of 1970 and the 1978 Seattle Public Schools busing program prompted middle class residents of all races to look to the suburbs for jobs and schools. From 1970 to 2000, southeast Seattle's white population declined by another 27,767, or 65%.

From 1970 to 1980, the black population of Rainier Valley doubled to 20,000, making up 29% of the total, and from that time the number leveled off and started to decline, dropping to 27% of the total by the time of the 2000 census.

Between 1970 and 2000, southeast Seattle's Asian population almost tripled to 31,348. Through the Seventies, ethnically Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino predominated. Starting in 1975**,** with the withdrawal of US troops from Saigon, Southeast Asians originating from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos gained in numbers and now make up the majority of the Asian population. Pacific Islanders began to arrive in the 1960s, and have established significant numbers in several neighborhoods.

The most recent wave of immigration -- from the Horn of Africa--is not registered in the 2000 census, as they are identified only in the "African American" category.

Far from the stable racial balance it appears on first glance, Southeast Seattle's 2000 census numbers represent one moment in a fluid, restless place.

Together, Living Apart

However unstable and fraught with history, the balance between the different groups in the Rainier Valley is unique in Seattle. East African and Vietnamese immigrants, young white couples with their starter homes, remnants of the old Italian presence in the area once known as Garlic Gulch, and second- and third-generation black homeowners are all here, living next to one another and walking the same streets.

A 1996 study, "Ethnic Diversity in Southeast Seattle", identified it as one of six uniquely diverse areas in the nation. Focusing on integration at the most local level using the 1990 census data, it found that about 70% of blocks (the smallest unit available for census data) contained at least 20% of all three major racial categories--African-American, Asian and Pacific Islander, and

white.

In addition, the study found that “the percentage of block groups in which Black income exceeds White income is about the same as the percentage in which White income exceeds Black income,” suggesting a greater income equity in southeast Seattle than in other parts of the city.

Even with this high degree of integration, there is ample evidence of like people clustering together. For example, in the 2000 census it is striking that though there were even amounts of Asians and Pacific Islanders on either side of Martin Luther King Jr Way, the north-south axis separating southeast Seattle’s census tracts, for the area’s black and white population, the street appears to be a significant border. Seventy percent of white residents and 68% of black residents lived east of MLK.

Of the thirteen census tracts that make up southeast Seattle, 35% of Rainier Valley’s white residents could be found in the three northeastern-most census tracts along the shore of Lake Washington. Thirty-three percent of southeast Seattle’s African American population lived in the three southern-most census tracts. Twenty-nine percent of the Asian population could be found in two census tracts west of MLK on either side of Graham Street running up Beacon Hill.

This is the area where, according to Julie Pham, editor of the local Ngoui Viet magazine, many Vietnamese business owners had hoped to create a "Little Saigon" neighborhood, where "you wouldn't know you are not in Vietnam." The announcement that the same area would be the location of a station along the new light rail line, which would inevitably draw new people and residential development to the neighborhood, was not greeted with enthusiasm.

There are other signs that the lives of the various populations, though lived in proximity, fail to intersect as they might in more homogeneous neighborhoods. Places of worship, of which there are many in the Rainier Valley, are most often organized along racial and ethnic lines: Chinese, African-American, and Hispanic churches dot the landscape, along with synagogues, mosques, and Buddhist temples.

As a general rule, increased diversity weakens support for the common good. Though some organizations like the Southeast District Council have made a concerted effort to incorporate groups from the whole breadth of the Rainier Valley’s diverse population, like people come together in community organizations. Politically, the population of Southeast Seattle doesn’t represent one (or two, or even three) coherent voting blocks.

A 2008 Seattle Times article entitled “The Resegregation of Seattle Schools,” cited southeast Seattle as a prime piece of evidence, reporting that 72% of all public school students and 93% of public elementary school students in the area are children of color. *(Shaw, “The Resegregation of Seattle Schools,” Seattle Times, 6/1/08)*

A 2005 study of the demographic distribution at elementary schools in the southeast quadrant showed only one or two of them with a racial balance resembling that of the surrounding area. The others tilted dramatically toward one racial/ethnic group, or balanced two to the relative exclusion of others. For example, 58% of white students attending public school could be found in just three of the seventeen schools of the southeast quadrant.

Hope for the Restless City

To say it is a myth that 98118 is the most diverse zip code in the United States is not to say it isn't true. It might be that for a moment in the year 2000, in comparison to all the other boundaries the U.S. Postal Service has drawn up to expedite the delivery of mail, 98118 had a uniquely balanced proportion of Asian, black, and white people. It is a myth because the story it tells about the people who live there oversimplifies an ambiguous history and assumes a harmony more aspirational than real.

More than a racial utopia, the preponderance of people of color in a little slice of the city's southern extreme can be seen as a testament to the lack of diversity in the rest of the Seattle. Narrow the focus to particular neighborhoods within the Rainier Valley and the diversity gets less impressive -- in 2000, 53% of the Mount Baker neighborhood was white and 57% of those living in the area's NewHolly housing project were Asian and Pacific Islanders. When the results of the 2010 census are published, we may find that the racial balance suggested a decade ago is long gone.

"Welcome to the most diverse zip code in the United States" -- I saw it chalked on the menu board of a business on the day of the Rainier Valley Heritage Parade. Viewed from a certain angle, the title southeast Seattle has conferred on itself is the consolation prize for an area widely thought of as the city's ghetto, whose future is uniquely uncertain.

As one study put it, "for middle-income groups, racial or economic diversity is often a flag for neighborhood decline and decreasing housing values. For lower income groups, diversity is often a flag for gentrification, inevitably leading to displacement." (Chapter 1: Neighborhood Racial and Ethnic Diversity in U.S. Cities, Nyden, Lukehart, Maly, Peterman)

Diversity in the Rainier Valley means a permanent churn of residents. East African immigrant families now living at Rainier Vista will find some success and move on to Kent or, lacking it, will pull up roots and chase after opportunity in Minneapolis. If the new six-story Station at Othello complex, located across the street from the would-be Little Saigon, is a success, hundreds of new middle class residents will make their home there – and many will probably be white.

It is easy to see the recent interest in the Rainier Valley's diversity as a throw-away human interest story, or a pious liberal gesture. But underlying the intense pride and admiration the myth of 98118's prize-winning diversity arouses, there is a hope for a city that resembles less and less the white, middle-class Seattle of the past and a wish to embrace the uncertain future of a nation that the Census Bureau predicted will be majority "minority" by 2042.

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