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Vanport, Oregon

The Long History of an Ephemeral City

Abstract

On Memorial Day 1948, the Columbia River achieved what neither the Portland Housing Authority nor the city government had been able to do, i.e. to end the short history of Vanport, Oregon. Vanport had been created in 1942 as a huge public housing project to accommodate thousands of workers who had flocked to the region to work for the wartime industries, most importantly the Kaiser Shipbuilding Corporation. Erected between the city limits of Portland, Oregon, and the Columbia River on reclaimed bottom lands, Vanport was entirely inundated by a flood in 1948 and never rebuilt. At that time some 18,000 people, down from the wartime peak of 40,000, still lived in Vanport, many of them African Americans.
This paper looks at the history of Vanport and the site where the city once stood from a socio-cultural and *environmental perspective. Thus, it traces the fate of those flood victims who had to settle in Portland's Black neighborhood Albina, it highlights cultural encounters with the legacy of displacement, and it elaborates on the recent surge in memory activism. A particular focus will be directed to the role that the river environment played for the history of Vanport. It will be shown why Vanport was located in a floodplain and how environmental conditions have influenced the construction work and the daily activities of Vanport citizens.*

Keywords: *American history, race, environment, memory, displacement*

1. Introduction

In the early hours of May 30, 1948, the citizens of Vanport, Oregon, found a piece of paper slipped under their doors, reassuring them that the rising water level of the Columbia River did not constitute a problem and that the dikes would hold. Residents would be notified in case an evacuation was necessary. By afternoon of that same day, the entire city was gone—flooded away in less than an hour after one of the control structures that surrounded the city had collapsed and the flood water of the Columbia River had found its way to Vanport (Stroud 1999, 76; Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 78).

In the sparse scholarship on the history of Vanport, this catastrophe is often interpreted as a hydrological freak event hitting a settlement that wasn't supposed to be there in the first place—an accidental but somehow fitting end to the history of an ephemeral city, or simply bad luck

(Abbott 1983, 164-165). However, a closer look at the history of Vanport and its environmental surroundings reveals that the fate of this city was everything but accidental. Moreover, Vanport citizens were pulled and pushed into a location where environmental risk was being accumulated and distributed unevenly. From the perspective of planners, industrialists, and a large majority of Portland's population, Vanport's location made perfect sense. The thousands of newcomers, many of whom were looking for economic opportunities in the Pacific Northwest, could be kept out of Portland proper and yet were living in proximity to the shipyards. The price of this arrangement was the huge amount of environmental risk that Vanport residents were exposed to. "Although Vanport City sat in the midst of the flood plain of the Columbia River, there had never been any real concern for its safety," the Portland Bureau of Planning has pointed out (1993, 76). This paper looks at the intersections of the urban river environment with the social dynamic of a diverse and vital community. Also, it highlights the longue durée of Vanport's history which did not end with the flood of 1948. The afterlife of the city is in fact a remarkable case study of environmental injustice, disaster memory, and the displacement effects of extreme natural events.

2. The "miracle city"

World War II triggered multiple transformations on the American home front. One of the most important and lasting ones certainly was the migration of thousands of people from all parts of the country, but especially from the South, to the centers of wartime production. The rapid expansion of defense industry clusters in places such as San Diego and Richmond, California, Norfolk, Virginia, and Portland, Oregon created all kinds of challenges. Most of these cities were overwhelmed by the problems that came with their quick growth. The rapidly increasing number of inhabitants, both military and civilian, took a heavy toll on utility systems, the service economy, water supplies, and infrastructure. However, housing the newcomers proved to be especially problematic (Mumford 2008; Shragge 1994; Hall 1993).

In Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington, located on the Columbia and Willamette rivers, the three production sites of the Kaiser Shipbuilding Corporation employed up to 140,000 workers (Stroud 1999, 71; Abbott 1980, 12).[1] Altogether, about 160,000 people flocked to Portland and its surroundings during the early 1940s, adding about 50 percent to the population

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[1] Another 23,000 workers were employed in smaller shipbuilding factories (Abbott 1980, 12). Kaiser's other big shipbuilding site was Richmond, California, where ships were being produced in four shipyards. The size of Richmond grew from 23,000 residents before the war to about 100,000 in 1942 (Fortson 2017).

(Pearson 2001, 161-162; Abbott 1980, 12). War-related migration to the Portland area posed huge challenges for the city and the region. To provide the huge number of newly arrived people with adequate and affordable accommodations was without a doubt the biggest one. The tense situation was exacerbated by the dislike of Portland's elite for public housing projects due to their alleged negative impacts on crime and the value of real estate (Pearson 2001, 162; Maben 1987, 2).

Things came to a head in the summer of 1942 when workers were leaving Portland because they hadn't been able to find a place to stay. The Housing Authority of Portland (HAP), which had been founded as a response to the crisis in 1941, and other local authorities hesitated to take quick action so that the Kaiser Corporation took matters into its own hands. In accordance with the federal *Maritime Commission* Edgar F. Kaiser, son of patriarch industrialist Henry J. Kaiser, purchased land immediately north of Portland's city limits and received federal money for the construction of 10,000 residential units in Vanport City (the original name of the town) (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 29-31; Maben 1987, 7-10; Abbott 1980, 16; 18). "Responsibility for key decisions about public housing," historian Carl Abbott has noted, "passed in little more than a year from the established Planning Commission to a new Portland Housing Authority to an informal alliance of industrialists and federal bureaucrats" (1980, 15). In December 1942, the first workers and their families moved into their apartments (Maben 1987, 18).

The location for the new settlement had been chosen for several reasons. In addition to the convenient fact that the Kaiser Corporation could more or less do as it pleased beyond the city of Portland's jurisdiction, the site was close to the shipyards, it was flat, unused, and already protected against possible floods—or so it seemed in 1941 (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 76-79; Maben 1987, 6-7). Vanport resembled a bathtub—bordered on all four sides by elevated highways, railway fill, and dikes as high as twenty-five feet. Vanport residents later described a rather "uneasy feeling living in a place with no horizons" (Stroud 1999, 71-72). The city was located on a peninsula between the Columbia River in the North and the Columbia Slough in the South—a heavily polluted and brackish stream running parallel to the Columbia River and emptying into the Willamette. The protective structures had been constructed to keep the water of both rivers and the surrounding lakes and marshes away from the pasture and farmlands in-between. The western and eastern dikes doubled up as important transportation arteries, i.e. the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railroad and Denver Avenue, which was part of the highway from Seattle to Los Angeles, respectively (Stroud 1999, 71; Maben 1987, 11).

Construction of the apartments on the 700 acres site started on September 12, 1942. By October, more than 2,000 workers were moving earth, constructing apartments, building roads and

infrastructure (Maben 1987, 11). The notorious wet climate in the Pacific Northwest made a difficult task even more challenging. To make things worse, the winter of 1942/43 turned out to be unusually wet. Total rainfall in November amounted to 14.39 inches. January 21 alone witnessed 15.5 inches of precipitation (Maben 1987, 11-12).

3. Ephemerality and diversity

With the number of inhabitants peaking at about 40,000 just before the end of the war, Vanport had not just become the biggest housing project in the entire United States but also the second biggest city in Oregon. Kaiserville, as Vanport also came to be known, featured 16 playgrounds, 19 miles of paved roads, a water and sewage system, administrative buildings, a library, and its own fire department and hospital (Maben 1987, 18).[2] The very existence of Vanport seemed to be a miracle, not just because of its size and the speed with which it had been created, but also because here, people of various ethnic and social backgrounds seemed to live together remarkably harmoniously. The schools were integrated, there were few racial conflicts and residents had a strong sense of community (Stroud 1999, 73). Viewed from the outside though, this social laboratory also raised a lot of concern, as Heather Fryer has pointed out: "It was rumoured among Portlanders during the war that this motley crew of 'Americans all' led a wildlife in their out-of-the-way enclave on the floodplain: they drank, danced, plotted revolution, and even encouraged whites and blacks to mingle" (2010, 1). Also, there *were* problems in Vanport. In fact, some white residents, many of whom had come from places where segregation was still a daily occurrence, complained about the lack of separation between black and white school children (Carlson 2003, 65). Furthermore, while the schools and nurseries were integrated, residential quarters in Vanport were de facto segregated.

However, while Vanport's rise was indeed in many ways miraculous, it was also a quintessentially Western place. Developments that laid the basis for the post-war economic success of the Western half of the United States such as federal support of the defense industries, the influx of large corporations, hydropower along the major rivers and an increasing number of people migrating to the region, also shaped the history of Vanport. As a government project, Vanport constituted a "inverse utopia," as Heather Fryer has argued, and its inhabitants experienced "the shrill dissonance of living as government wards in a region characterized by its independent spirit" (2010, 9). Also, like many other temporary settlements

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[2] The name Vanport itself derived from the location of the town between the city limits of Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, on the other side of the Columbia River (Carlson 2003, 239).

in the Pacific Northwest, Vanport was a town "that the boss built" (Carlson 2003, 3). As a de facto company town, Vanport could not and did not govern itself, and it had no property taxes since its residents were all renters (Carlson 2003, 239).

The fact that the vast majority of workers had migrated to the region and allegedly had no emotional ties to the city certainly contributed to Vanport's fleeting image (Kahan et al. 2006, 38). This ephemerality, one can argue, was even built into the city's very structure. The new homes in Vanport were exclusively created from ready-made parts by the Prefabrication Engineering Company (PrenCo) which prided itself in being able to produce a two-bedroom house in just thirty minutes (Tint 2012, 128; Maben 1980, 12). However, wartime rationing limited the amount of quality building material so that the structures resembled, according to the memory of a former resident, "crackerbox houses strung together fast and cheap" (Pearson 2001, 167-168). Sewage from broken, secondhand pipes gathered outside the buildings (Maben 1987, 36). In such "instant communities" new tenants could move in "with little more than their clothes." A "one-room apartment came with a fold-out couch, table and chairs, miniature icebox, hot plate, and small oven. [A]ll a worker needed to bring were linens, dishes, and cooking utensils" (Carlson 2003, 34). Landscaping of the site was considered to be redundant by HAP and was only installed because the Kaiser Corporation insisted. Portland landscape architects supervised the planting of 68,000 shrubs and thirty tons of grass seed, some of which had to be brought to Vanport from the Midwest (Maben 1980, 9).

4. Environmental justice in Vanport

African-Americans constituted a small but significant part of the wartime-induced migration towards Portland. Numbers vary but according to historian Rudy Pearson, 23,000 Black Americans moved to the entire region during wartime. They quickly "replaced the Chinese as the largest and most visible minority group in Portland" and turned Vanport into the largest African American community in Oregon (2001, 169-170). At the turn of the century, only 1,100 African Americans had lived in a city that was de facto segregated. Bill Berry of the Portland Urban League described Portland as a "Northern city with a Southern exposure" (Pearson 2001, 174). Thus, it is not surprising that the Black newcomers were not allowed to settle within Portland but were sent to the old and new housing projects in Guilds Lake and Vanport, outside the city and in neighboring Vancouver, Washington. Even though African Americans did not live exclusively in Vanport and never made up more than 30 percent of the population there, the new settlement was referred to by many white Portlanders as a "negro project" (Stroud 1999, 74). White migrants were not highly regarded by the local population either and were

occasionally labeled "Okies"—a pejorative term used in the 1930s for the Dust Bowl migrants from Southern Plains states such as Oklahoma who were moving to California (Fryer 2004, 3; Stroud 1999, 74). Furthermore, many people and politicians in Portland regarded Vanport as a temporary solution to the wartime housing shortage. In other words: they expected people to move back to where they came from after the end of the war, especially African Americans.

When the war and thus Vanport's *raison d'être* came to an end, many inhabitants left the city indeed. The Portland Area Postwar Development Committee (PAPDC), the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) and mayor Earl Riley were quick to demand the demolishment of all public housing facilities in the Portland area and wanted to open them up for private residential and industrial development, thereby turning "a troublesome blighted area [Vanport] into a constructive community asset." Advocates of public housing were vilified as "socialist-minded schemers" (cited in Pearson 2001, 174-175). One reason why city officials did not waste any time to make postwar plans was the fact that they regarded, in the words of an unnamed city official, the "negro problem" as "possibly the most serious aspect of our effort [to industrialize Vanport] […] They [African Americans] will undoubtedly cling to those residences" (cited in Pearson 2001, 175). Already in 1944, Arthur D. McVoy, head of the Portland City Planning Commission, predicted enormous problems for Portland's future due to the wartime housing projects. In a lecture given at a conference of city planners he demanded to "clear up some of the blighted areas." When asked where the displaced people were supposed to live, he replied: "If any of you feels that your city needs some extra population after the war, let us know. I think we can fix you up" (cited in McElderry 1998, 151). In 1946, HAP chairman Chester Moores was dissatisfied that "those people are still here" (cited in Pearson 2001, 175).

However, the housing crunch not only continued after the end of the war; it was in fact accelerated by the great number of homecoming GIs. With the relaxation of residency requirements, settlement in Vanport was no longer depending on a job at the shipyards (Stroud 1999, 72). Moreover, the land on which Vanport stood did not belong to the city of Portland but to the Federal Government which had leased it to the Kaiser corporation and which had a genuine interest in creating and maintaining such projects, at least for the time being (McElderry 2001, 140). Also, many GIs and other Vanport citizens made use of the opportunity to study at the recently founded Vanport Extension Center—a two-year-college that turned out to be the nucleus of today's Portland State University (Dodds 2000).

For African Americans, the obstacles in moving away were much higher than for white residents of Vanport. They were often the first to be sacked after the end of the war since they were not protected by the seniority clauses their white colleagues benefited from. In addition, finding

accommodation in Portland was difficult in the first place but almost impossible for Black people due to the long-established racial patterns of housing segregation. Moving back to the South, where many African Americans came from, was hardly an option either because of the poor economic and social conditions there (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 22; Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 75-76). Thus, instead of being torn down, Vanport continued to exist and the number of inhabitants stabilized at about 18,000 people. Although the share of African American inhabitants increased to about 30 percent, Vanport was still far from being a majority Black settlement (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 34).

Aerial photographs of Vanport create the impression of a regular American suburb. The neatly arranged clusters of identical houses (it was difficult to spot from above that these were multi-family homes and rented out rather than owned), the landscaping and the curved roads in an environment bordered by rivers and lakes on all four sides at first glance looked even more appealing than the Levittowns that were to provide the blueprint for the postwar suburbanization of the United States. On the ground, however, Vanport was plagued by environmental problems. When the peninsula was first utilized for industrial purposes in the second half of the 19th century, the Columbia Slough, which marked the southern boundary of Vanport, was filled with the sewage of various mills, meat processing facilities, and other plants. Attempts to increase the flow of the slough by connecting it to the Columbia River ultimately failed due to the constant siltation of the canal. As early as 1935, there were protests against the pollution in the slough (Stroud 1999, 67-69). Students at the new Vanport Extension Center found themselves in an unlikely spot, as Gordon B. Dodds has pointed out in his history of Portland State University, "assaulted by its air, its geography, and its past."

> [Vanport's citizens'] senses of smell and hearing were tested from all directions. A Swift and Company meat packing plant sent its aromas from the north. Westerly winds carried the din from the whistling locomotives and clattering freight cars of two railroads. To the south lay four unlovely prospects: the turbid waters of the Columbia Slough; more railroad tracks; the odoriferous smokestacks of a carbide factory; and the pervasive effluvium of a 'dead animal processing plant.' On the east lay the peeling, gray buildings remaining from the wartime housing project. (Dodds 2000, 1)

According to Ellen Stroud, the association of the North Portland Peninsula with minority residents since World War II "contributed to a perception of the area as degraded, and therefore as an appropriate place for further degradation" (1999, 69).

5. Flood, displacement and memory

What the political and economic establishment in Portland was not able to achieve—to destroy Vanport—was accomplished by the Columbia River just three years after the end of the war. After weeks of heavy rain, the water levels of both the Columbia and the Willamette rivers had steadily risen. On Memorial Day 1948, the old railroad embankment that also served as a levee was breached and most parts of the city were flooded within about an hour. Only fifteen residents died, a comparatively low death toll probably due to the fact that the flood happened during the day (Stroud 1999, 75; Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 76-79).

While this sudden event marked the end of Vanport as a physical entity (except for a few ruins that can still be seen today), the city's life continued—most importantly in the experiences, memories, and migratory trajectories of those who had to leave overnight. Although the ephemeral nature of Vanport makes it difficult to trace the histories of many of the flood displacees—many flood victims probably went back to their hometowns or looked for work in other urban areas along the West Coast—a large number of African Americans hardly had a choice but to move into the traditionally Black Albina neighborhood in Portland. After the flood, the city government of Portland had denied the flood victims access to most of the many still existing public housing projects in the area and basically left them to their own devices (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 84).

The poor management of the crisis had its roots in the legacy of racism and segregation in the state of Oregon. The settlement of African Americans, Chinese, and other minorities in Oregon was for a long time hampered by an exclusion clause to Oregon's 1857 state constitution that banned these groups from settling in the state, from holding real estate and even from the signing of contracts. Thus, by the turn of the century, Black Americans made up less than one percent of Portland's population. At that time, the black community was centered around Union Station. However, with the Great Migration and the movement of tens of thousands of African Americans mostly from the South to the new urban and industrial centers in the North and the West, Albina in the Northeastern part of town became the new center of gravity for Black life in Portland (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 20). It is important to note, however, that neither in Vanport nor in Albina were African Americans the majority. In the "supposedly black neighborhood" of Albina, "whites still outnumbered nonwhites by a ratio of two to one" (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 36). The migration of many African Americans from Vanport to Albina substantially tightened the segregation of Portland's housing market. While Blacks lived in all of the city's 61 census districts, more than half of them resided in a small area that by and large corresponded with the boundaries of Albina.

In postwar American cities, the increase of African Americans in urban areas corresponded with the "flight" of the white population to the suburbs (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 86). This development triggered a vicious cycle of eroding urban taxes, deteriorating infrastructure, and declining public service (police, fire departments, garbage disposal, schools) which seemed to confirm widely held stereotypes about black neighborhoods. For many city planners and local administrations, such quarters were no longer salvageable. Attempts to revitalize inner city neighborhoods more often than not led to the displacement of the black population once these areas became interesting and popular again to a more affluent and often white clientele (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 103; 109-110). Albina was not spared these developments and experienced various rounds of stigmatization and displacement in conjunction with the economic deterioration and upgrading of the neighborhood, respectively (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 28).

6. Vanport culture and memory

Whereas the social connections between Vanport and Albina have been well demonstrated by now, we hardly know anything about the cultural impact the drowned city has had on the displaced, on those that were already living in the neighborhoods that received the flood refugees, and on Portland in general. This is especially true for the period between about 1950 and the first decade of the 21st century. One of the few cultural artefacts that does give us an impression of how important Vanport was is a huge mural project that was constructed in Albina in 1978 by a group of seven artists, all of them but one People of Color. The purpose of the mural that could be seen on the walls of the Albina Human Resources Centers was to celebrate six hundred years of Black history.[3] Inspired by Mexican trailblazers, most importantly Diego Rivera, and based on the long tradition of African American murals, *Walls of Respect* flourished in many American cities in the postwar decades. These murals explicitly focused on the positive and successful aspects of Black history and culture—issues that were often missing in schoolbooks and public discourse (Coleman 2000).

Two of the six panels, "Vanport: the Promise" and "Vanport: the Flood," were dedicated to the history of the drowned city and its inhabitants. In an interview with the curator Robin. J. Dunitz (2010, 489), muralist Isaka Shamsud-Din, who had come to Vanport from Texas with his family and thirteen siblings in 1947 and had "lost everything, but a little white radio," reflected on his motivations for the creation of the Vanport panels, the only murals with a local theme:

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[3] The chronology of the murals started with the slave trade in Africa.

> *Vanport: the Promise* was to highlight the beginnings for most of us of the Oregon experience.
> There were black folks here before, but in very small numbers. I wanted to commemorate
> and give some kind of honor to the Native American people and culture that all of this is built
> upon. So they appear. And the migration of people traveling, coming from the South mostly,
> black folks for work, the shipyards, the profiles of the ships at the top. [...]
> And then the second one [The Flood]. I had to do something about the Flood that was more
> of an action thing. To show the terror. (2010, 496)

When the panels began to decompose after about five years, the artists had to take them down at their own expense. Despite the short time span during which they were on display, the murals seem to have made a lasting impression, as a statement by one of the seven artists, Henry Frison, indicates: "People loved them. They talked about those murals for years. I think the community really liked that it was our history and it was right in the 'hood" (2010, 506). The Vanport murals have found a new home at the Portland State University campus which is a perfect fit given that institution's origins in the temporary settlement.

7. The renaissance of Vanport

So, while the memory of Vanport was being kept alive in Albina (a topic that warrants further research), it certainly did not play a huge role in Portland and its surroundings—with the exception of a few commemorative events, most of them happening at anniversaries of the city's drowning. Over the last ten years, however, memorial practices and activities have significantly picked up steam. The drowned city has resurfaced.

The most visible group of memory activists is Vanport Mosaic which was founded in 2016 and describes itself as an "organization focused on using history to foster activism" (Morrison 2019). *Vanport Mosaic* has organized music festivals, theater plays, exhibitions, neighborhood tours and an annual reunion of Vanport survivors. It has launched its own oral history program (together with Portland State University) and in general has made Vanport visible again in the public space of Portland. It is the goal of the Portland group "to honor, present, and preserve the silenced histories that surround us in order to understand our present, and create a future where we all belong." *Vanport Mosaic's* annual festival in 2021 drew more than two hundred artists, scholars, activists, and media people. The purpose of these activities, according to Vanport Mosaic (2021), is not just to reconstruct the hidden history of Vanport, but also "to reclaim and rebuild a civic identity rooted in equality, diversity, justice, dignity, and truth."

Against the backdrop of this surge in interest, two of the most puzzling questions in the history of Vanport's aftermath are: Why has Vanport been rediscovered after its history had, with a few notable exceptions, by and large been forgotten for several decades and why did the Vanport

renaissance happen in the early 21st century? I argue that there are three main reasons for this renaissance of Vanport in the second decade of the 21st century: first, a re-evaluation of the "naturalness" of natural catastrophes combined with an increasing focus on issues of environmental justice; second, climate change and the debate about environmentally induced migration and displacement; finally, increasing gentrification in traditionally Black neighborhoods of American cities.

The shift in the interpretation of natural disasters from Acts of God, i.e. events that were allegedly caused by forces outside of society, whether they are divine intervention or powerful natural forces, to socially constructed events, has its roots in the 1970s with some precursors dating back to the 19th century. Before that paradigm shift, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, floods, etc., had been regarded primarily as exogenous to society, happening for seemingly random reasons and without any discernable logic. By employing concepts such as vulnerability, resilience, risk, and uncertainty, scholars from various disciplines have shown how intimately natural hazards and catastrophes are connected to the workings of society and how environmental injustice is being distributed along lines of class, race, gender, (dis)ability, etc. (Knowles 2011, 230-239).

With regard to environmental justice and the construction of natural disasters, the importance of hurricane Katrina can hardly be exaggerated. The 2005 storm has clearly shown—broadcast live not just to Americans but in fact across the world—the devastating connection between race, the construction of vulnerability, the exposure to hazard, and the tremendous and often deadly consequences. It has also triggered attention for the racial dimensions of natural catastrophes of the past—both iconic ones such as the 1900 Galveston hurricane and not so well-known events like the Vanport flood. In the literature on Vanport, various articles explicitly mention Katrina as an "inspiration" to take a closer look at environmental injustice in the historical Oregon case (Morrill 2016; Cosens 2012, 243; Rivera and Miller 2007; Kahan et al. 2006).

Secondly, the ongoing climate crisis and its consequences with regard to environmentally induced migration and displacement has also spurred an increased attentiveness for the historical dimension of such processes—both in terms of the historical origins of current processes of displacement *and* historical events that are not related to the current crisis (Lübken 2019; 2012). The 1927 Mississippi flood, for example, has led many African Americans to leave the Jim Crow South. It has also established patterns of migration that have been reactivated during the displacement after hurricane Katrina (Mizelle 2014). It is interesting from this perspective that Portland artist Henk Pander has entitled one of his paintings that deals with

the Vanport flood "Climate Refugees," although climate (change) clearly played no role in the causation of this disaster (Narrative Painting 2020).

And finally, gentrification has contributed to the rediscovery of Vanport. Recently, Albina and other traditionally Black neighborhoods in American cities like Over the Rhine in Cincinnati and Anacostia and the U Street corridor in Washington, DC, have faced a wave of gentrification that has significantly transformed the social composition of those areas. Priced out by more affluent and often white newcomers, many African American inhabitants of Albina were forced to leave—a process that has been experienced by many as a second displacement (Christensen 2015). Remembering the history of Vanport against this backdrop also serves to contextualize more recent waves of displacement of African Americans from Albina—as a result of the construction of highways, sports arenas, the expansion of huge building complexes like the Emanuel Hospital (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 18), and, more recently, in the form of eco-gentrification as became apparent in new organic supermarkets and bike lanes (Hoffmann 2016; Ause 2016; Gibson 2007). In the Eliot neighborhood alone, a part of Albina with a large share of Vanport survivors, more than 3,000 people were displaced by such projects between 1960 and 1970 (Burke and Jeffries 2016, 45; Portland Bureau of Planning 1993, 103; 109). Roslyn Hill, a designer who had been living in Albina for a long time, summarized the personal dimension of these developments in 2003 as follows:

> I was born in Vanport, which no longer exists. I lived in a house on Vancouver Avenue that no longer exists. I moved into a house that was torn down to build Memorial Coliseum. I went to a Catholic day care on the corner of Graham and Williams that no longer exists. The first grade school I attended, where Lloyd Center is now, no longer exists […] what if you wanted to take your children or grandchildren around to show where you grew up, and you had nothing to show? [...] when there is no evidence of your past, what this says to you, to your family and your community, is that you have no value. You've been removed, not only physically and mentally, but culturally. (cited in Ause 2016, 2)

8. The site of Vanport

While Vanport was being remembered in Albina and other parts of Portland, the legacy of the city at the very site where it once stood was basically forgotten. The first post-flood utilization of the place happened eleven years after the event, when from June to September 1959, it became the site of the Oregon Centennial Exposition and International Trade Fair. Visitors of the fair could marvel at the exhibits of more than two hundred companies, government agencies, and other organizations, watch the water ballet of the *International Water Follies* or take a train to *Adventureland* and enjoy themselves in a Bavarian beer garden. However, nothing reminded them of the fact that merely a decade ago, up to 40,000 people used to live exactly there (Kludas

2020; Curran 2009). One of the reasons why it was so easy to forget about Vanport's history was the fact that there were hardly any physical traces left. One exception, though, was one of the water towers that still could be seen in 1959 and that acted as a memento mori—at least for those who knew about the city's fate. In 2009, fifty years after the exposition, on the website "Lost Oregon," "Mark" mentioned:

> I was 5 1/2 yrs old when we went—I remember being impressed by […] the big wooden tower(s) that had once held the water tanks for Vanport seemed very sinister [sic] (maybe because they were associated with the flood—I may have erroneously thought the flood waters had washed the tanks away!). (Chilson 2009)

The brochure to advertise the Exposition pointed out that "[o]ur 65-acre exposition site, only eight miles from the heart of Portland, is surrounded by Oregon's scenic vacationland" (Oregon Centennial Commission 1959). Not a single word was dedicated to Vanport; instead it celebrated the Bonneville Dam—one of the big concrete structures along the Columbia River that was part of a vast system of hydrological interventions to produce hydropower and facilitate river navigation. This is somewhat ironical since the Vanport flood triggered a reappraisal of flood control along the river and led to the construction of even more dams, including the Dalles Dam that led to the submergence of Celilo Falls—a fishing and settlement site that had been in more or less continuous use by indigenous groups for 15,000 years (Fredlund 2007; Barber 2005, 32; 34; Robbins 2002). Thus, for many indigenous observers, Vanport until today represents a "double tragedy" (CELP 2018).

In the mid-60s, plans to erect a big stadium in the area did not materialize, but the site hosted other exhibitions and today features soccer and softball fields, a golf course, a nature preserve, and Portland's International Raceway. However, Vanport's history has resurfaced and has been made visible again also at the site upon which it stood more than half a century ago. Today, there are at least a few signposts, organized walking tours, and even a few uncovered ruins. "[T]he intangible remnants of Vanport live on," as the Smithsonian Magazine has pointed out in 2015, as "a reminder of Portland's lack of diversity both past and present" (Geiling 2015).

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