

The Asian Reporter

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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



Remixing Portland, 2016

In River City right now, about half of our school kids go home to ethnic minority families, but no one needs to panic. This presents us with all kinds of upsides. Among them: Getting Portlanders untangled from Portlandian — that lingua franca of commonly held attitudes and idiom. The one shared among many who’ve given us our nationally envied scores for neighborliness, for transportation alternatives, and of course, for cool environmental stewardship.

And while there are good reasons why good Portlanders speak how we do — Monkey Year 2016 is a good year to let some of these habits go. To let them go wherever no-longer-hip clichés go to relax, tan, reboot.

From the perspective of ethnic-stream families earnestly believing in better sharing River City’s robust mainstream, there’s a world to be gained by reforming a few of our idioms in attitude and speech. Take Portland’s smart urban sarcasm — better than post-modern irony, is old-school sincerity. Simple optimism works best of all.

A good place to start our Monkey Year is rethinking three stubborn chestnuts: Portland Polite, Portland White, and Portland PC.

Portland Polite

You’ve heard it said. And not in a good way. It means that I’m not saying what I’m really feeling. It criticizes an inhibitory social habit that keeps me from harming another’s dignity. And it preserves our social harmony. *Conflict-adverse* is similar critique, also in currency.

Pero here’s another perspective: In most of our Arab and African, Asian and islander, Russian- and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, we call this behavior: *Good manners*. Civility. Both in our sending nations and right here, kids learn early that communal harmony matters much more than personal feelings. Teens or adults not tuned into this expectation, we dismiss as obviously not-loved-right (not disciplined well) by their moms, aunties, and grandmas. Knuckleheads.

Polite Portlanders are important. Our city is a colorful blend of communities determined to integrate us into a global mercado of politics, products, and ideas. Around our raucous kitchen table, plain-speaking Harry S. Truman is always welcome, but only if balanced by the gentle Lion of Africa, Nelson Mandela. Only if jovial Dalai Lama

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mixes it up too.

While this sounds like an upgrade to, say, Portland Polite 2.0, it’s actually that *plus* a return to the way confident and kind Americans talked, not so long ago. So let’s call this, Portland Polite 3.0.

Portland White

America’s whitest city! — headlines used to shout. Thank heaven, mainstream opinion leaders have stopped reporting it and repeating it. Because it’s not true. Not where we live. Citing tidy U.S. Census Bureau tables does not make it truer. On our street, no one marks the boxes or licks the stamps on those government surveys. Our family hasn’t since President Reagan busted Berlin’s Wall. Not since Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” and Harrison Ford’s antics in *Return of the Jedi*. Quite some time. A lot of time without shifting our official perception of how non-white we are.

Truer is: River City has been a vigorous intersection of many-many nations for roughly 140 centuries. U.S. Army captains Lewis and Clark paddling up two centuries ago, did not change the truth of this.

President Jefferson’s Corps of Discovery did, however, put an Anglo-American POV firmly into place. Into this place. From 1805 forward, our official narrative has been the English-only version. From that perspective, Portland White looks right. But where we live, every workday morning, a crazy mix of brown and black and blue folks pack into my car.

Our foreign-born neighbors (1-in-5 Portlanders, 1-in-4 Beavertonians) did not happen by sneak attack. Really not. What happened is a history of segregated POVs. A thick mainstream point of view, paralleled by several ethnic-stream ones. Proof: Recall any recent instance of a bad intersection between white and black or brown Portlanders. Replay our irreconcilably contrasting POVs. Our startlingly different worldviews have been built by

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