

Testimony to Senate Committee on Redistricting and House Special Committee on Redistricting
Saturday, April 10, 2021

Chair Taylor and Vice Chair Knopp, and members of the redistricting committees,

I am Sharon Gary-Smith and I live in Portland, Multnomah County, Congressional District 3. ***I am a legacy child of the once-bustling African American communities of North Portland/lower Albina, the eldest of four daughters of the late Bobbi Lou Mosley Gary and Frederick Douglas Gary, Jr., race and education activists***, who fed their daughters food and social justice, and reminded us to “never forget who you are and whose you are.” I grew up with a strong sense of self, delivered by my parents’ fact-filled lessons of struggle and overcoming, of Black resilience and cultural and community power. I grew up knowing there is strength in the numbers.

I am also one whose family was displaced, driven out and dispersed when Black homes, land and wealth were snatched through racist City policies using eminent domain to deprive us of our voice and diluting our representation. Yet, I retain the richness of a once-thriving self-sufficient, culturally rich community with barber and beauty shops, a community economy that supported restaurants, clothing shops, social clubs, neighborhood markets, community schools and a full-service credit union started in the basement of their N. Shaver home by Verdine and Otto Rutherford, active leaders in our local NAACP branch.

I learned to recognize how intentional omission of our ethnicity, race and economic interests is frequently designed to limit our ability to ‘be present,’ to be counted and to thrive. So, I fully recognize the power of data collection by the census to ensure that each of us is counted as one person and one vote in Oregon. I know that accuracy and extra effort to identify all in our communities is essential to real representation. ***This is a critical time to get it right.***

Though your committees may feel an urgency to press forward with the data currently available, I know that has not been in the best interests of BIPOC communities. The important task of redistricting must include addressing census data inaccuracies, ensuring that maps are redrawn to avoid undercounting that continues to deny us accurate numbers, as Oregon history reminds us. I would be pleased to work with you and the Oregon legislature to ensure that redistricting engages BIPOC communities more readily, that we are participants in real community engagement, not merely community outreach – the first brings us in as stakeholders with real power and influence over outcomes, the latter and most familiar, merely informs our community what you intend to do. *Sharon Gary-Smith is the president of the NAACP Portland 1120B Branch.*