Note from the Editors

by Carmen P. Thompson

THE PRIMARY GOAL of this issue is to help readers understand White supremacy — what it means, what it has meant, and how it has presented itself in Oregon history. White supremacy is not just the Ku Klux Klan donning robes or burning crosses, but it can be. It is not just an individual act of racial discrimination, although it can be that, too. White supremacy is a collective set of codes, spoken and unspoken, explicit and implied, that society enforces through its institutions, governments, and legal structures in order to keep those deemed as White on top and every other racial group below them — with specific emphasis, in the United States, on keeping Black people at the bottom.

White supremacy is a system by which American society was initially, and continues to be, organized. Social organizing systems are imperceptible. They make a certain way of doing things seem fundamental, thereby normalizing that practice. Historical methodologies that trace change, continuities, turning points, and flash points are important tools that historians use to make sense of historical phenomena that otherwise are difficult to articulate. The authors of the articles and essays in this special issue make use of these methods to understand Oregon’s history of White supremacy, its manifestation in everyday life, and the ways people have resisted it.

This historical investigation was prompted by current events. On May 26, 2017, a White man verbally attacked two young women, one wearing a hijab, on the light-rail system in Portland, Oregon. Three men intervened, and the attacker killed Ricky Best and Taliesin Namkai-Meche, while severely injuring Micah Fletcher.1 Shortly thereafter, the Oregon Historical Quarterly’s Editorial Advisory Board gathered for its semiannual meeting, where board member Dr. Carmen Thompson suggested that, as a scholarly publication housed in the state’s historical society, OHQ could offer a complex, contextualized investigation of the history of White supremacy in our state. All agreed that the effort would be worthwhile. The ensuing work engaged dozens of scholars and community leaders and resulted from collaborative decision-making among the journal’s editorial staff and guest editors, Thompson and Dr. Darrell Millner. Over a dozen authors drew on lifetimes of scholarship and spent over a year writing, revising, and responding to editorial suggestions, fact-checking questions, and layout drafts.

This special issue is not neutral on the subject of White supremacy. It does not put blame onto readers who are labeled as “White,” but it is meant as a call to self-reflection. Millner, in one of our editorial meetings, put it best when he said: “We are not responsible for the past, but we are responsible for our relationship to the past.” We challenge all readers to look both inward and outward at the legacies and vestiges of what racial labeling has meant, and continues to mean, for people who are not White and for those who are.

History, as revealed in this issue, demonstrates that White supremacy is subtle. It is historical, it is organic, and it is alive and well in the twenty-first century. In America, being White has long been the standard, the norm, the universal image and framework through which the nation’s institutions have been conceptualized.

Conversely, those who are not White know and sense that the perspectives of Whites are the standard. In the same way, someone with a disability knows that the world is designed around people with a certain ability, or women know that our society offers greater opportunity for people who are labeled as male, or someone who is not heterosexual knows that heterosexuality is assumed. It is the same way with White skin and supremacy in America. With this in mind, the editors and staff of this special issue of OHQ ask you, as you partake of this scholarship on Oregon’s White supremacist history, to keep an open mind.