White Right and Labor Organizing in Oregon's “Hindu” City

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Throughout its history, White supremacy has been practiced in diverse ways with the goal of establishing systems of White control over societies. Local circumstances, pivotal events, and powerful individuals have shaped these systems, and the passage of time dictates constant change, adaptation, and variation — although violence as a means to uphold the system remains a commonality. During the early twentieth century, anti-Asian violence erupted along much of the Pacific Coast. How that violence played out in Portland, Oregon, differed from other locales, both in the United States and around the world. It stands as an example of how White supremacy, as practiced in one country, can both impact other systems and be impacted by expected and unexpected consequences.

ST. JOHNS, OREGON, sits on the banks of the Willamette River a few downstream miles from Portland’s center. Today, St. Johns is just another city neighborhood. In the early 1900s, this otherwise unremarkable town was home to an ugly ethnic riot and to the critical beginnings of a radical Indian independence movement.¹

In 1910, St. Johns had freshly blossomed from a collection of tents, shanties, and docks to a bustling town of four thousand. It boasted a new city hall and school, streetcar service to Portland, telephones, sidewalks atop muddy roads, hotels and boarding houses, and a lively real estate market. That recent transformation was one measure of the economic boom that Portland’s ponderously named 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial and American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair had delivered to the region.² In the wake of the fair, industries swelled and new residents, including tens of thousands of laborers, flocked to the area.³

Some two hundred Indians, overwhelmingly British subjects and Sikh military veterans or farmers from Punjab, were among those who had arrived and
A GROUP OF INDIAN, likely Sikh, mill workers stand in front of a North Pacific Lumber Company mill building in Barnet, British Columbia. During the early 1900s, Indians lived and worked from British Columbia to California and were persistently targeted by anti-Indian violence, including in St. Johns, Oregon. No known photographs of Indians in St. Johns or the greater Portland area exist.
ACROSS THE WEST, Indians were members of multinational work crews, with English as a common language. While diverse workplaces were a source of friction in St. Johns, they also exposed Indians to radical labor organizers, including socialists and members of the IWW. This photo documents that perhaps half of Indians, for a variety of reasons, adopted western headgear over turbans.

were working in St. Johns’ new or newly expanded industries. The Monarch Lumber Mill and St. Johns Lumber Co. were their primary employers, and many lived in Monarch’s bunkhouse at the outskirts of town. Others shared apartments above downtown businesses or rented neighborhood houses. Years of articles in the local St. Johns Review had reported on the town’s growth and promise, urging residents to recruit friends and family to resettle in St. Johns and contribute to its glorious future. The Review, however, rarely mentioned the Indians living in town. One seeming exception occurred in the summer of 1907, a time of rampant anti-Asian sentiments in the North American West. The Review reported on the unspecified criminality of one “I. Wilson,” who the paper deemed representative of the “gang of Hindoos . . . temporarily” located in St. Johns who needed to be “given an emphatic invitation to move on.” That “invitation” was forcefully delivered on March 21, 1910. That night, downtown St. Johns erupted in anti-Indian violence perpetrated by a crowd of two hundred, including many White laborers, a Review reporter, the town’s
mayor, the police chief, and two police officers. Collectively, they attempted to terrorize and violently expel the Indians living and working in their midst.

While the St. Johns riot is not broadly known today, in those times, ethnically motivated violence was all too common in the North American West. Chinese migrants were targets of western racial animosities, almost on their arrival in California during the 1850s. More proximately, the St. Johns’ rampage of 1910 appeared an unsettling repeat of the 1907 riots that rocked towns from California to British Columbia and targeted Indian, Japanese, and Chinese shopkeepers and laborers. In the wake of the 1907 attacks, laborers and their organizations effectively banned Indians from lumber mill work in Washington state. Government entities refused to prosecute and punish perpetrators and, instead, enacted proscriptions against the mobs’ victims. British colonial and Canadian national and regional authorities effectively ended Indians’ continued immigration to British Columbia. They also established a global policing unit to monitor Indians’ growing disaffection and to disrupt their increasingly radical affiliations.

Given their 1907 experience, Indians in St. Johns were not inclined to suffer another attack without a fight. In 1910, they fought back on the night

THE 1910 RIOT IN ST. JOHNS began downtown outside Condon’s Saloon. The mob ransacked Indians’ homes and pushed one man, who lived above a downtown business, out of his second-story window. The crowd also targeted Indians working in nearby St. Johns Lumber Co. Indians were forced onto the trolley and told to never return, an order they ignored. This photograph documents downtown St. Johns in the summer of 1908.
of the riot and broadened and sustained their resistance over the next two years. Individuals armed, declaring "we have no protection."9 As a community, they demanded prosecution of the rioters and were backed by the Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office and the British Consulate.10 They waged a media campaign and won allies to their cause. Most significantly, after the St. Johns riot and protracted legal battle, they became a center of anti-colonial organizing.

The St. Johns riot, prosecution, and Indian-activist aftermath illuminate a dense confluence of economic, race, and labor politics, globally and within Oregon, that shaped Indians' daily lives and ultimately their anti-colonial movement. Several key premises guide this analysis. First, “race” is a wholly human creation whereby differences in human physiognomy — hair, facial features, skin tone, and the like — are assigned social value and power.11 Second, “White supremacy” connotes the global system of structural power and privilege arising from and in defense of the dominant, and often assumed, belief in the supremacy of people defined as White that underwrites colonial empires. Or, as W.E.B. DuBois more trenchantly put it, “Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen.”12 Third, while White supremacy has long dominated humans’ global relations, it was and is neither invariable nor all-controlling. Instead, White supremacy shape-shifts across time, region, gender, and class, affecting the means and modes of both suppression and resistance.

This article will center on three interrelated aspects of White supremacy as expressed by, or with respect to, laborers. It connects the prosecution of St. Johns' rioters to a particular brand of White supremacy pursued by powerful Oregonians to ensure a labor force. It explores why laborers dominated ethnic riots in St. Johns. Finally, it links the global forces shaping labor animosities and Portland's racial policy to Indians' anti-colonial organizing in the wake of the St. Johns' affair.

RIOT IN THE “HINDU” CITY

Indians migrated to Oregon in pursuit of work and safety, incentivized by the seemingly unconnected events of Portland’s 1905 fair and 1907’s widespread western ethnic riots. Four to five hundred Indians were among the tens of thousands of laborers who came to work in the region’s new and growing industries in the wake of Portland’s fair. They settled from The Dalles to Astoria, most living along the Columbia River and working in its many lumber mills. Besides promising employment, Oregon's added attraction after 1907 was that it was the only state in the West that did not erupt in communal anti-Asian violence. Oregon, then, seemingly offered Indians jobs and safe harbor from a punishing political storm. So it was a particularly bitter pill when, in 1910, hundreds of their neighbors and coworkers violently attempted to drive Indians from
their jobs, homes, and sense of safety in St. Johns.

By early 1910, Indians’ presence in St. Johns was a simmering undercurrent. In February, despite evidence being “scant,” the Morning Oregonian reported on the arrest of a “Hindu,” on suspicion of having set a fire at a St. Johns manufacturing site.13 Rumors circulated that St. Johns Lumber would replace Whites with “Hindus.”14 After the fact, the Morning Oregonian opined that the “race feeling” had been intensifying in St. Johns for weeks prior to the violence.15 Still, the exact trigger for the St. Johns riot remains unclear. The Oregonian reported that it began as an encounter between men in Condon’s Saloon, with alcohol a predictable fuse.16

A St. Johns Review article, headlined “Big Doings in St. Johns — Mob Chases Hindus from City in a Hurry,” provides a basic, if distorted, outline of events:

A crowd of Hindu haters met Monday night, either by accident or design, upon the street, and threats were made of chasing them all out of town. . . . The crowd had grown larger every minute, and a number of Peninsula young men had been attracted and joined the assemblage. The necessary leader [Gordon Dickey] then came to the front and a movement was rapidly formed to seek out the British subjects and banish them from St. Johns forthwith. With this intention a crowd made for the quarters occupied by the Hindus, while others went to the mill [St. Johns Lumber Company], which is running night and day. Every Hindu that was encountered was peremptorily ordered to stop work and get out of town at once.”17

This front-page headline in the March 25, 1910, edition of the St. Johns Review reported that the town was “in a condition almost bordering on anarchy” on Monday, March 21, 1910, when an anti-Indian riot broke out. That night, some two hundred White laborers, the mayor, the police chief, and two police officers tried to violently expel Indian residents.
The paper described the night as “bordering on anarchy” and lauded the night police chief and mayor for calming the crowd.18 The Review also opined that Indians had not been robbed of valuables or cash, merely that the “Hindus” were treated “pretty rough” or even “decidedly rough.” One man’s leg was “reported to have been broken” and others “slightly wounded.” Finally, the Review reported that a “number of the Hindus” were “escorted” to or “placed” on the streetcar to Portland, and told not to return.19

Portland newspapers were more inclined to depict the actual violence, describing windows broken, doors off hinges, bits of clothing scattered, “Hindus [pulled] out of their beds,” and “everywhere the evidence of riot, and in a few cases, bloodshed.” The Morning Oregonian reported that one Review reporter had participated in the riot.20 But neither the Review nor the Oregonian interviewed Indians until well into the trials some three months later. In court, Indians testified to being robbed at gunpoint of valuables and hundreds of dollars and to being beaten, sometimes with a gun. They revealed that one man was pushed out of a window, and that local authorities either passively watched or actively participated in the attacks.21

The Review contested only the means of the riot — it was unlawful and brought trouble to the city — not its aims. The paper claimed to speak on behalf
of “all” townspeople. “We all want the Hindus to go and mingle with their own kind. If they were cleanly in their habits, conform to American dress and customs, be of some good to the community, no objection to their remaining and becoming useful citizens would be made. . . . They love to parade up and down the public thoroughfares. Strangers coming to town get an impression that it is a Hindu city, and it is a great incentive for them to make a hasty exit. But to remove them, mob methods are not the proper ones.” In short, Indians had no place in the town and no right to threaten St. Johns’ reputation and future with their public “parading” — that is, being a part of town life.

Indians, however, were not cowed by the rioters or by the sentiments expressed by the paper. Instead, they fought against their attackers and for their right to live and work in St. Johns as equal members. On the morning after the violence, a group of Indians, led by labor contractor Kanshi Ram, went directly to British Consulate James Laidlaw in Portland to demand action. Laidlaw contacted the Multnomah County D.A.’s office and requested intervention. On March 22, the day after the riot, Indians walked the streets of St. Johns with Deputy District Attorney C.W. Garland in tow, pointing out their attackers. Garland issued nearly two hundred warrants. Laidlaw lodged a complaint with the U.S. State Department,
which instructed the U.S. District Attorney’s office to assist with the local prosecution. U.S. Secret Service agents soon appeared in St. Johns, questioning and arresting area residents. 23 Laidlaw hired local attorneys to assist with the prosecution. 24 These agencies’ convergence on the town within a week of the riots ratcheted up tensions even more. The Review was incensed that Garland arrived with a “horde of deputies and a band of dark-skinned British subjects . . . arresting citizens right and left without the least regard as to their guilt or innocence.” 25 A Multnomah County grand jury eventually issued formal indictments, but getting to that point involved a messy public fight. 26

On the first day of St. Johns’ Justice Court hearings, the courtroom was packed with supporters of the accused. Indians were also present, but reportedly stayed outside. 27 In deference to the workingmen, proceedings were held at night and on Saturdays, with sessions sometimes lasting until midnight. Judge Conrad Olson feared the hearings would consume the entire summer, given the sheer number of cases as well as the number of
witnesses, attorney fights, and translations necessary. Every day seemed to add new drama. John Kim, a plaintiff and the acting interpreter, was accused by St. Johns City Attorney Henry Collier of influencing testimony. A brazen Hendricks took the stand that day and admitted to watching a “Hindu” being beaten but claimed to be unable to identify the perpetrators.

The major turning point came with the removal of Olson for his remarks following the testimony of N.E. Ayer, manager of St. Johns Lumber Company. Piqued by Ayer’s continued support of the Indians, including his promise to hold their jobs, the Review reported that Olson said, “if the wife and children of Mr. Ayer of St. Johns Lumber Co. were forced to mingle daily with the Hindus, the lumberman who is assisting the prosecution would soon change his opinion regarding them.” The Ayer family was present in the courtroom. Olson went on to accuse the Indians of lying in their testimony. The Oregonian reported that the Hindus “resented” the statement, and “gathered in the hallway immediately and decided to protest.”

Garland, the lead prosecutor who had already experienced other means of the city’s obstructionism, declared Olson’s remarks the final straw. He ordered the investigation immediately removed from the city.

ON APRIL 27, 1910, the Morning Oregonian reported that the St. John’s mayor and eight others, including eight police officers, were indicted for failing to disperse rioters who attacked the town’s Indian residents. Charges against the mayor and police were eventually dropped. Two White laborers were convicted, but their sentences were suspended.
local court and turned over to the grand jury, a body empowered to compel testimony with the threat of jail. Judge Olson may not have been entirely unhappy with this turn of events; days earlier, he had requested the grand jury take charge. He was, after all, in the unenviable and volatile position of agreeing with the sentiments of the rioters but charged with prosecuting them in clear public view.\textsuperscript{32}

In this politically charged atmosphere, Indians and non-Indians alike awaited the grand jury findings, most especially whether city officials would be indicted for not attempting to quell the riot. The grand jury worked for three weeks, as local newspapers speculated on the findings and their release date.\textsuperscript{33} On April 26, 1910, the \textit{Morning Oregonian} announced the indictments for failing in their duty to disperse the rioters or stop the disturbance: Mayor J.F. Hendricks; G.W. Dunbar, the night Chief of Police; O.R. Downs, Justice of the Peace; and G.W. Etheridge, a policeman. Dunbar and Etheridge were also indicted for assembling to drive the Indians out of town, assault, battery, robbery, carrying weapons, and disturbing the peace. Collier was implicated by the grand jury’s official report, but escaped indictment.\textsuperscript{34} Dickey was indicted as the ringleader. “Dickey,” the \textit{Morning Oregonian} wrote, “is accused of having dragged one of the terrified Hindus from the very presence of Mayor Hendricks by the hair of his head, while the dusky skinned native of India screamed for protection. The Mayor was at that time presiding in the City Hall at a meeting of the firemen, and the Hindu had fled to him for protection, it is charged.”\textsuperscript{35} Besides Dickey, laborers Ray Van de Bogard, John N. Groves, and Dan Herrold, along with Milton Unger, a sweetshop owner’s son, were also charged.\textsuperscript{36} Given the contentious nature of this case, and that St. Johns was a small town, it is noteworthy that the 100 or so local witnesses

\textbf{FORCED TO LEAVE} Vancouver, B.C., due to his radical activism, Taraknath Das was living and studying in Seattle at the time of the St. Johns events. Surprisingly, he was appointed translator for some of the legal proceedings. He is pictured here in 1912 in a yearbook photograph from the University of Washington.
interviewed by the grand jury, and thus responsible for the formal charges being made against their neighbors and city officials, were named in the indictment.37

Separate trials for the indicated men were set in Portland. Dickey, considered the ringleader and the legal linchpin, was the first to be tried in June 1910.38 Taraknath Das, one of the more prominent Indian radical activists on the West Coast, was appointed as the court’s interpreter in the proceedings, raising a serious question about how closely Oregon authorities were attuned to the broader politics of the Indian community.39 Dickey was represented by three attorneys, and his trial lasted two weeks.40 The British Consulate had attorneys present to assist with the state’s prosecution, as did the U.S. District Attorney’s office.41 Dickey’s defense team subpoenaed at least seventeen witnesses, and the state almost ninety, White and Indian alike.42 Throughout, the St. Johns Review editorialized about the autocratic and “czar-like” legal tactics being employed against the town’s citizens and officials.43

After two years and multiple hearings and trials, ultimately only two laborers, Dickey and Van De Bogard, were convicted. Both had their prison or jail times suspended, and both were released on parole without bond, “pending . . . good behavior.”44 Charges were dropped against all of the indicted police.45 After a year, Hendrick’s felony charges were dismissed.46 He promptly petitioned the St. Johns City Council to pay his legal fees, which, on a close vote, it agreed to do.47 All trials were completed by March 1912, a full two years after the riot. Their repercussions, however, echoed long and far after.

While justice was woefully inadequate, that the trials even occurred was nonetheless notable for the times. The much larger 1907 anti-Asian riots in Bellingham and Vancouver, B.C., received no such prosecutorial attention.

PLAINTIFFS IN 1910
ST. JOHNS RIOT TRIAL

B. Singh
Khem Chand
Ali Raka
Indgar Singh
John Kim
G. Frank
Ali Mahamad
C.A. Dass
N. Box
F. Mahamad
Succha Singh
Ber Singh
Scandee Jan
Suba Singh
Hernamg Singh
Me Ha
The British Consulate in Seattle performed the formality of a complaint to the U.S. government but pressed no further. Bellingham authorities threatened action, but those arrested were never prosecuted, reportedly due to their inability to secure witnesses. In Vancouver, the government took no action against the rioters. Instead, the local and provincial governments, in league with British colonial authorities, banned further Indian immigration and intensively surveilled the extant community.

Yet, in response to a smaller riot, Oregon authorities, with the aid of the British and U.S. governments, pursued, prosecuted, and convicted assailants. The ensuing legal and political battle was unprecedented in the West, and its ambivalent outcome is emblematic of Oregon’s specific racial strategy. By prosecuting the rioters, including the city officials, Portland authorities made an object lesson about mob violence in small-town Oregon. But the failure to secure numerous convictions, impose jail time, or definitively incriminate city officials indicates the strategy’s ultimate loyalties. The verdicts suggest a political unwillingness to convict Whites over issues of race. Ultimately, authorities seemed to say enough was enough and declare the matter closed.

The British Consulate’s involvement in the St. Johns prosecution was significant. As a Portland resident and member of the city’s elite, Laidlaw likely embraced the local racial ethos. More importantly, he likely viewed mollifying Indian subjects as best serving British interests. By 1910, the British Crown and its consulates were closely monitoring the unrest and radical organizing among Indians in the North American West. By intervening in the St. Johns affair, Laidlaw attempted to blunt Indians’ roiling discontent and foster the belief that British and American authorities could be trusted to protect Indians’ lives and dignity. His actions had little effect. As radical St. Johns’ resident Sohan Singh Bhakna later wrote, Laidlaw “did not do anything meaningful” with respect to the riot. Shortly after the close of the trials, Indians in St. Johns began organizing to overthrow British rule of India.

OREGON’S RACIAL STRATEGY

The comparative racial calm of Portland and its environs, relative to the West Coast, was not due to a pervading sense of equality, but instead, to a particular iteration of White supremacy with respect to labor needs. Western Oregon’s racial strategy directly facilitated the nurturance of a White state built on the labor of workers from around the globe. It was not meant to champion Chinese, Japanese, or Indian rights or to foster their inclusion as citizens.

As articles in this issue highlight, Oregon was founded as a state for White people. Laws such as the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act (DLCA) fostered the dispossession of sovereign Indigenous peoples and the transfer of land
ownership to Whites. Founders excluded African Americans from residence in Oregon. The state constitution was an overtly exclusionist document that explicitly denied the vote and property ownership to any “Negro, Chinaman, or Mulatto,” and restricted the vote only to “male” citizens. Oregon’s founding in the late 1850s reflected an America wracked by race and an impending Civil War.

Yet influential Oregonians in and around Portland also forged a strategy to attract and retain Chinese migrants. Men who penned and supported Oregon’s constitutional racial proscriptions came to recognize that Chinese migrants fleeing violence in California during the 1860s could provide Oregon with needed labor. As historian Marie Rose Wong writes, Oregonian editorialist Harvey Scott believed that, “as long as the country was filled with a large number of Asiatics willing to work, why not adroitly exploit them as a state resource?” Scott and others continued to oppose citizenship or any civic equity to Chinese and other non-White peoples. But those powerful men also utilized their judicial and policing positions, along with control of the influential Oregonian editorial page, to establish a civic compact decrying and combating ethnic violence. They proved effective.

Widespread ethnic rioting and expulsions did not take place, and from 1880 to 1910, Portland’s Chinese population increased as people fled the violence of other regional cities. Second only to San Francisco’s in size and prestige, Portland’s Chinese community hosted opera houses, shops, and gardens, and by 1890 comprised 25 percent of Portland’s foreign-born population. Millionaire businessman Moy Back Hin was appointed an honorary consul in 1906, one of only four in the United States. Portland was also a global center in the production of forged documents for subverting exclusion, a business involving both Chinese and White people and aided by local port inspectors. Portland leaders’ strategy created rifts between local authorities and federal agencies overseeing immigration, with important implications for later Indian organizing.

Scott’s “good sense” of promoting industry and growing rich by utilizing Asian labor gained considerable currency among local businessmen, politicians, and ordinary citizens, and the practice persisted through waves of migrants from Japan, India, and elsewhere. While the strategy failed to prevent violence altogether, the pact was well-established in western Oregon by 1910, as evidenced by the prosecution of the St. Johns rioters. Oregon’s history is a reminder that while the world was engulfed by what DuBois dubbed “the white religion,” its practice varied in time and place, shaping people and movements, sometimes with far-reaching consequence. The particular practice of White religion in Oregon impacted Indians’ migration to the state and their later political organizing. The St. Johns riot illustrates
that the policy could not always contain racialized fears, and that events well beyond Oregon influenced local sentiments. It also highlights the class fractures within White supremacy, locally and globally.

WHAT’S EMPIRE GOT TO DO WITH IT? ORGANIZED LABOR AND ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE

During 1910, national media ran fearmongering articles on the supposed “Tide of Turbans” and “Hindoo invasion” threatening the West.\(^5\) In turn, the riot in St. Johns was widely reported on, adding more grist to the region’s animosity mill.\(^6\) Anti-Asian vitriol spread in whispers and grumblings from
one mill to the next, with worn exclusionist handbills passed along in saloons and boarding houses. I have found no evidence of explicit exclusionist organizations in St. Johns before that March night. Nevertheless, leaders of organized labor and overt exclusionist movements dovetailed, in both strategy and philosophy, and the labor newspapers of the day framed a pervasive anti-Asian message. In this, Portland was no exception.

The *Portland Labor Press (PLP)* was the city’s leading labor newspaper and the mouthpiece of the Portland Federated Trades Council. In the summer of 1907, the *PLP* reported that the council represented five-thousand men and women, and over forty unions. By February 1910, the paper declared that “every union in Portland” reported an increase in membership and “slow but steady improvement in hours and wages.” During the years preceding the St. Johns unrest, the *PLP* reported on strikes, documented the state of various trades, and opined on civic elections.

The pages of the *PLP* were also consistently peppered with anti-Asian rhetoric, primarily against the Chinese and Japanese. This included numerous reprints of exclusionist missives and demands to maintain the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. There were calls to prevent the admission of “coolie labor” and enjoinders to “join a labor union and protect yourself against the Japanese invasion.” The *PLP* argued that the solution to crime was to target immigrants. It carried numerous reports on New Zealand and Australian labor organizations’ efforts to restrict Chinese immigration. In March 1907, the *PLP* supported the launch of a local Labor Party, which supported Asian exclusion.

The paper did not simply express fears about competition for jobs but also constructed Asian laborers as morally deficient if not depraved. Its pages carried obscene notes such as “Three bad Chinamen have been turned into good ones by electrocution [at] the Massachusetts state prison for killing four others in a tong war. Total of seven reformed Chinese for the state.” In the supposed service of labor, in February 1910, the *PLP* wrote: “It is said no one ever sees a Jap funeral and that the 10-cent Jap restaurant makes use of the cadavers to save butcher bills. This is a little strong, but it is passing from hand to hand among some of the union labor men as a means of encouraging patronage of white cooks.” While obviously dehumanizing, the articles fed White supremacist views and actions, and delineated the *PLP*’s position on the racial boundary of laborers to be organized and defended.

Intersecting with its consistent anti-Asian politics was the *PLP*’s hostility toward the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The *PLP* condemned the IWW for two reasons. First, the IWW opposed the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with which the *PLP* and the Trades Council were associated. Unlike the IWW, the AFL under the leadership of Samuel Gompers organized only skilled, and overwhelmingly White, workers and was an
avid proponent of Chinese exclusion. Second, the PLP attacked the IWW for recruiting Chinese, Japanese, and Indian workers — all overrepresented in unskilled positions — into its organization. In one article, the PLP dismissed the IWW’s recruiting principles as being merely in service of a numbers game to undermine the AFL, writing it was “little wonder that that organization is accepting Japanese into membership in order to make a showing.”67 In 1907, the PLP refused to back an area IWW-led strike of 3,000 lumber mill workers, a large stoppage by Portland standards.68 Instead, the PLP criticized the IWW’s disruption of the American labor movement with respect to the movement’s ethnic and skill divides.69

The PLP, like other western labor presses, consistently demeaned “coo- lie” or “contract” laborers. These were dog-whistle terms signaling non-White and, by definition, unfree, inferior workers’ inhabiting a demeaned position within the global colonial labor system that privileged organized, White laborers.70 In February 1910, the PLP reprinted shrill claims from the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL), an explicitly exclusionist San Francisco–based organization that drove the 1907 riots: “There recently arrived in one day 191 Hindoo laborers at the port of San Francisco. Many people consider them worse than the Chinese coolie.”71 The AEL, and thus the PLP, were agitated over a lapse in San Francisco immigration officers’ regulation of Indian migration. U.S. immigration officials instituted the selective enforcement of administrative rules and effectively slashed the entry of Indians from 1,710 in 1908 to a mere 377 in 1909. Several immigration agents in San Francisco, however, refused to abide by the prejudicial policy promoted by agency superiors and local nativists, and by the close of 1910, they briefly restored Indian immigration to previous years’ levels.72 The resulting landings that year — a mere 1,700 Indians amongst millions of other migrants — constituted “nothing more nor less than a threatening inundation of Hindoos over the Pacific Coast” that mainstream and exclusionist newspapers hysterically railed against.73 This political hurricane of national headlines and western labor agitation made landfall on March 21, 1910, turning a routine Monday night in St. Johns explosive.

White workers were key organizers and actors in the St. Johns violence, much as laborers had been in other ethnic conflicts in the American West. They had grounds to be frustrated with their lives. They suffered the dangers and physical tolls of the mills and mines that built the West, while the wealth they produced overwhelmingly flowed to bankers and industrialists. Given the global power and legacy of White supremacy, however, White workers’ frustrations frequently manifested in beliefs that if other laborers, including Indians, were shut out, their position could be improved or at least safeguarded.
Laborers’ organizations were largely unwilling to stand for parity as the most effective weapon in their fight for economic equality. While many, if not most, western workers believed that Asians threatened “white jobs,” only a vocal minority organized to expel Asian workers or were swept up in moments of rage. A tiny percentage of laborers, most notably those affiliated with the IWW and a few within socialist circles openly rejected this outlook.

Yet, given how endemic White supremacy was and is globally, it is difficult to argue that workers were more racist than anyone else. For years, men and women from all walks of life took part in anti-Asian violence, from California to British Columbia. In St. Johns and elsewhere, shop owners and professionals spoke from podiums, mingled in crowds, threw rocks, broke windows, and robbed and beat “Hindus” and others. Mainstream newspaper reporters fanned if not instigated the hysteria. Editors and politicians recited a litany of differences — from ethnicity, skin tone, and appearance to religious practices, values, and ethics — that branded them as impossibly and forever alien. People in similar positions around the globe offered similar rationales with similar intent and effect: the curtailment of the rights of “Asians.” Still, while the belief in and action on White supremacy dominated society, laborers had specific fears and animosities rooted in the racial hierarchy of global
colonialism that played out in global mills, mines, and factories. Whiteness, in other words, was and is rent by class.

Between 1850 and 1930, more humans traveled the world than at any previous time in history. In North America, migrants were not primarily shopkeepers, doctors, or teachers. They were workers who came by the millions and did the critical, and often dangerous, labor of felling the trees, working the mines, and setting the rails that built the country. In the North American West, these workers were in the trenches of a labor system that formed the epicenter of the world’s ethnic mixing. This massive movement of global peoples, so essential to industry, also threatened the promises and expectations of the White settler society that very same industry underwrote.

Colonialism and democracy were deeply incised by a global racial hierarchy. European powers did not grant democratic rights in India or in other countries they colonized, which gained those rights only after ending colonial rule. In settler colonies such as the United States and Canada, however, White men fought for and benefitted from the greatest extension of democratic rights ever extended to commoners. Globally, in belief and in fact, “White” became synonymous with republican self-rule, “free” people, and the privilege of work befitting “free labor.” This correlation had even greater valence in America, the only settler country that maintained a slave system within its territorial borders. As historian David Roediger argues, domestic chattel slavery bound “white” and “free” in America’s
labor rhetoric, a conflation that endured after slavery was formally abolished and enveloped other non-White peoples. These beliefs and their underlying economic realities constructed and maintained a two-tier labor force and civic polity largely and enduringly defined by race.

White laborers’ ethnic hostilities festered in the disconnect between settler colonies’ social and political expectations and their economic realities. Industrialists’ need for legions of workers and settler colonies’ political promises to White commoners did not perfectly align. Moreover, the power relations in which such disparities were resolved favored industrialists, not workers. Laborers’ anxieties were further heightened by the rapid, and ravaging, industrialization that upended their lives following the American Civil War. It transformed not only how they lived and worked, but with whom, as millions of global workers migrated to the western United States. Founded on the promise of land ownership and an ever-expanding western frontier, the late 1800s also brought Americans to the end of a continent and, for millions, to the end of dreams of being independent, landed producers, rather than permanent wage laborers.

For millions of American laborers, unprecedented race mixing and often brutal proletarianization were entwined realities; their politics reflected this dual reality. Sociologist Jonathan Hyslop dubs labor’s particular brand of racism fused with class struggle as “white labourism,” arguing that it dominated the global organized labor movement and served as a “partner in empire.” Or, put in the parlance of those times, the “our” in the common fighting refrain of “don’t take our jobs” and “don’t invade our country” was deeply tied to the legacy of settler colonialism and the specific expectations of European commoners. In a young town such as St. Johns, where the social order was still being determined — very much including whether the community would accept its many global laborers — it is not altogether surprising that the brooding racial and class animosities of the entire coast turned a Monday night saloon encounter explosive. Powerful Oregonians were ultimately unable to control these larger empiric dynamics of labor and race.

Focusing on empire broadens the conceptualization of the race politics of organized labor beyond White workers’ fear of wage competition, the existence of an economic downturn heightening fears of job loss, or a specific tactic used by “bosses” for keeping workers divided and exploitable. All of these claims hold some truth, but in other ways fall short. They overstate owners’ planning and control and degrade laborers’ agency, if sometimes of an ugly sort. In 1910 St. Johns, there was no economic downturn, Indians were not substantially underpaid, and area unions were strong. Perhaps more
importantly, “competition” implies rationality, while notions of colonial “entitlement” and “promise” reverberate precarity and manifest unpredictably.

A global, colonial frame on labor also helps explain Indians’ political focus in St. Johns in the wake of the trials. Notably, while they suffered no fools, Indians’ organizing focus was not against White workers; and, although they utilized the justice system, their essential focus was not on greater rights in America. Instead, as Sohan Singh Bhakna put it, “The St. John’s attack was a wakeup call and a game changer for all Indians working in Oregon and Washington State. . . . [workers] took the slavery curse to their hearts [for the] first time.”82 In the spring of 1912, nearly simultaneous to the close of the St. Johns riot trials, they organized a new group called the Pacific Coast Hindi Association and elected Sohan Singh Bhakna president, Kanshi Ram treasurer, and G.D. Kumar secretary.83 They became the organizing nucleus for Ghadar, the global, radical independence movement formally launched downriver in Astoria, Oregon, in 1913.84 From North America, Ghadar gathered recruits from across the world, primarily through the distribution of its newspaper. Ghadar sought the overthrow of British rule of India, and with the outbreak of World War I, several thousand recruits returned to India with that intent.

Ghadar represented a particular political turn that can only be understood through the global lens of empire. As historian Maia Ramnath writes, it was a merging of “the history of race and class in the United States, and of colonization,” which organizers linked to “an explicitly anti-imperialist revolutionary program, rather than simply calling for inclusion in the existing society. Thus the Ghadarites’ galvanizing moment occurred precisely at the point where the politics of race, labor and imperialism converged.”85 Those frames came together in St. Johns not singularly, but in the context of the wider attacks on and resistance by Indians. In other words, like the causes of the St. Johns riot, the source of Indians’ political awakening was not simply a result of local events, but an expression of global colonial currents. Not coincidentally, that awakening came in North America, where racial targeting, exclusion, and laborers’ democratic rights existed side by side.

Indians’ organizing highlights a surprising synergy to the racial targeting and democratic exclusion of Indians and others, which paralleled White laborers’ (relative) democratic rights in settler colonies. The Indians who founded Ghadar fought those laborers who targeted them for their non-Whiteness, but they also sought the rights and relative freedoms those same workers exercised. They explicitly did both in St. Johns. It was in their exposure to democratic freedoms, if deeply riven by class and racial oppression, that Indians saw the power of self-rule and organized to
become citizen laborers of India. Indians came to understand that obtaining the rights to rule and be citizens of their own country — rights globally reserved for Whites — was crucial. Without such powers, they would always be considered “black thieves everywhere” as later Ghadar poems put it.

Skin tone and turbans were markers of the global colonial hierarchy of race and labor that followed Indians from the fields of Punjab to the mills of the Pacific Northwest. They arrived in an America perverted by domestic African chattel slavery, where notions of free and unfree labor and citizenship were deeply implicated by ethnicity. (Europe, by contrast, profited from that “peculiar institution” at arm’s length with overseas colonies.) “Coolie” was an epithet hurled at them despite their being, like millions of other migrants to North America, “free” wage laborers. By virtue of their ethnicity, Indians carried onto tainted American soil the racial signifier of “coolie,” racialized and degraded as unfree workers by the PLP and other labor newspapers.

Whiteness wears many markers, but at its heart is, and was, the suitability for citizenship, political inclusion, and self-rule. In the wake of the St. Johns riot and with the aid of radical intellectuals, Indians came to realize that without overthrowing British colonial rule, they would always be considered “black thieves everywhere.” This linkage between global colonialism’s racial hierarchy and the conditions of labor guides us beyond consideration of the injurious curse of racists to the workings and divides of global labor,
which politicized and motivated thousands to reverse the course of their lives and risk everything to return to India to overthrow colonial rule.

The interdependence of labor, race, and colonialism is intrinsic to understanding North American labor politics. As Hyslop argues, the “internationally constructed synthesis of militant labour and racist visions was a major cultural source of the rise of working class racism” across the colonial empire specifically aimed at and in response to Asian laborers.91 Without this perspective, our history is distorted. A false divide is imposed between so-called ethnic history and labor history. A radical history under our nose — the Indians of St. Johns who drove the foundation of Ghadar — is silenced. The politicization and actions of Indians and others must instead prompt rethinking of the frame of American labor history to include a global colonial perspective that shapes the attitudes and position of all laborers, not just non-White “others.”

I would like to thank the editor and guest editors for their vision and hard work in bringing this edition together, along with Erin Brasell and Helen Ryan for their smart and focused help in finalizing this piece.

1. I use “Indian” to denote people who hail from current-day India and Pakistan, roughly lands formerly known as Hindustan before independence in 1947, and who were then British subjects. “Native” or “Indigenous” denoted the peoples whose lands in North and South America were occupied and stolen, initially as part of a British colony and then by the newly minted American and Canadian governments. “Hindu,” in its best usage in these times, meant people from Hindustan. Its common usage also conflated a religion and a people. The majority of Indian immigrants to North America during these times, however, were Sikhs, along with a small number of Hindus and Muslims. “Hindu” was commonly used as a racial pejorative, alternatively spelled as “Hindoo.” I use the term “Asian” as a term of convenience, but advisedly given its Orientalist connotations. In American race politics, it has worked to lump people of many cultural backgrounds into one alien “other.”


6. The riot was on the night of Monday, March 21, 1910. Because the Review was a weekly, the first report of it was on Friday, March 25, 1910.
8. Jensen, Passage to India, 51.
9. “More Arrests for Riots Promised,” Morning Oregonian, March 24, 1910, p. 4. The Daily News [hereafter TDN], responded to the Indians returning to work, and that some of them were armed, and threatening to cause a “Race War,” as its front page article put it. (“Race War?,” TDN, March 25, 1910, p. 1, 3). TDN, a Portland paper, was consistently sympathetic to white laborers in its coverage of the riot. In the wake of the riot, it lacked from lamenting that “innocent men [were] arrested” (meaning the rioters), to predicting an ensuing “race war” (“Race War?”), and by April, claiming “there was no riot” (“All About That ‘Riot,’” TDN, April 2, 1910, p. 3).
16. Ibid.
17. “Big Doings in St. Johns,” Review, March 25, 1910, p. 1. The Review was a bi-weekly paper and this was the first edition after the riot.
18. Ibid. This Review account stands in sharp contrast with the fact that the next day numerous city authorities were served warrants for their arrest by the Multnomah County District Attorney and the sheriff.
19. Ibid. It is worth noting that the streetcar men who participated in the riot that evening were union men who won a long strike beginning in late 1906, which had broad community support. See, for example, Portland Labor Press, “Carmen Are On Strike,” December 17, 1906, p. 1; and “Were Illegally Under Arrest,” January 21, 1907, p. 1.


30. “Hindus Roiled by Remark of Olson,” *Morning Oregonian*, March 29, 1910, p. 12. The Indians were accused of lying several times, including of falsely accusing men of having taken part in the riot.


34. The court did not follow the recommendation of the grand jury.


42. *State v. Dickey*, Multnomah Co. Circuit Court, Motion and Affidavit, on behalf of Dickey, undated; Affidavit on behalf of Dickey, Undated Certification of R.L. Stevens, June 4, 1910, Sheriff Multnomah County Oregon of Service of Subpoenas by JH Jones, Deputy; Form CC9 Criminal Subpoena on behalf of the State of Oregon, June 2, 1910; Affidavit of C.W. Garland, June 1, 1910; Multnomah County Circuit Court microfiche, Portland, Oregon.


46. “Hindu Riots Case Ended,” *Morning Oregonian*, March 6, 1912, p. 12. I have not yet located the court documents for the mayor’s case.

47. *Supplement to the Review*, March 8, 1912. Dunbar similarly petitioned for the City to pay his legal fees, but it was not approved. “Council Proceedings,” *Review*, March 15, 1912, p. 1; “Council Proceedings,” *Review*, April 5, 1912, p. 1. Perhaps more can be learned if more case files are located. The grand jury records, rich in witness testimony, reportedly have been destroyed. Court records indicate prominent local citizens posted the thousands in bail after Dickey’s and others’ arrest. Who in the community felt the need to support the rioters, and what about the many who seemingly did not support them and gave testimony against them?

48. Multiple conversations and emails with historian and Bellingham riot expert, Dr. Paul Englesberg of Ferndale, Washington, January and February 2014.


50. Some precedence for Oregon authorities’ prosecution of the St. Johns rioters can be discerned in the response to the Boring murder trial of 1907. That murder and trial demand further research and attention, including in its proximity to the Everett, Washington, riot. See footnote 24 for more on that incident.

51. St. Johns officially became part of Portland soon after the trials concluded. While economics was likely the primary motivation for the merger, it is possible that the small town’s ethnic policy chastening was part of the terms of St. Johns’ admission.

52. My research regarding Laidlaw and his role in St. Johns are limited to records held in Laidlaw’s personal records held in the James Laidlaw papers, 1886–1977, MSS 21, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon [hereafter OHS Research Library], which hold nothing specific to the St. Johns events. I also reviewed the records of the U.S. Attorney for the Judicial District of Oregon held at the Seattle Federal Records Center, Seattle, Washington. Laidlaw was also involved on some level with the Boring, Oregon, prosecution of the murder of an Indian laborer. With time and money, research in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C., and the British National Archives in London might secure more correspondence between Laidlaw and his superiors and with the U.S. State Department.


54. Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 51. I have largely adopted Marie Rose Wong’s argument from *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey*, regarding the establishment of Oregon’s racial policy with respect to the Chinese, which was not homogenous throughout the state, but more in northwestern parts of Oregon. See especially pages 6, 31, 33–34, 47, 49–50, and 51–60.


and Portland all had Chinese consuls.

57. Ibid., 123.
58. Ibid., 143–44. If ruled by a port inspector ineligible to enter, or reenter, the United States, a Chinese person could appeal through the courts through a process called a habeas corpus filing. Eighty percent of such filings in Portland were by Chinese and the vast majority of these were ruled in favor of them, to the distress of customs authorities and their overseers in Washington, D.C. Ibid., 141.

59. See Wong, Sweet Cakes, Long Journey, for an extended analysis of the racial policy forged around Chinese and its impact on Portland.

61. One example is the front page, “Mayor, Justice, Police Indicted,” Los Angeles Herald, April 27, 1910, p. 1, reporting on the indictments of the St. Johns city officials.

63. PLP, February 11, 1910, p. 4.
67. PLP, August 24, 1906, p. 2
70. This writer is aware of, and does not mean to naturalize, the concept or erase the historical and often violent history involved in determining who was considered white — for Italians, Slavs, Irish, Jews and others — that was an integral part of those times.

76. Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 6. 23.
77. As historian Rudi Batzell writes, “Often seen as simply racist, the [Chinese] Exclusion Act was specifically aimed at barring labour migration: Chinese scholars and merchants

78. It is outside the bounds of this article to discuss democracy and neo-colonialism.


80. In the 1890s, the closing of America’s so-called “frontier” became an important American historical reference point and analytical frame as expressed by Frederick Jackson Turner.


82. Bhakna, Jeewan Sangram, section 6, page 11.

83. Puri, Ghadar Movement, 52. The group is also referred to, given transilientation issues, as the Hindustan Association of the Pacific Coast. On his return in India for Ghadar, Kanshi Ram was executed. Bhakna was arrested and sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment. He was released after sixteen years, but re-imprisoned for his revolutionary activities. He remained active in radical politics until his death at the age of ninety-eight.

84. Ghadar translates as either mutiny or revolution. In the immediate sense, Ghadar was unsuccessful, with most adherents immediately jailed or executed in India. The movement is, however, credited with being the opening salvo of twentieth-century independence and with inspiring successive radical movements and organizers.


88. Perhaps as a consequence, Marx never fully theorized this pressing issue that stands at the core of the call for workers of the world to unite.

89. With England’s outlawing of African chattel slavery in the 1830s, the nation sent out Indian indentured labor — “coolies” — exporting men and women across the empire, if not to North America. Compared to the millions of indentured Indians working across the globe, the several thousand in North America were a mere drop. To the later regret of British colonial overlords, however, these few Indian “free” wage laborers in North America, buoyed by Queen Victoria’s 1858 promise of equal status, unleashed a clash of competing colonial promises and aspirations that with Ghadar came to haunt British rule.

90. Takaki, Strangers from A Different Shore, 301.