New Scholarship Explores the History of White Supremacy and Resistance in Oregon

A special issue of the Oregon Historical Society’s Oregon Historical Quarterly is dedicated to discussing the painful impacts of White supremacy in Oregon, as well as highlighting those who have led resistance efforts throughout history.

Portland, OR – January 28, 2020 – “We are not responsible for the past, but we are responsible for our relationship to the past.” These words spoken by Portland State University Professor Emeritus Dr. Darrell Millner helped shape the Oregon Historical Society’s most recent issue of its Oregon Historical Quarterly journal: a special issue dedicated to discussing the history of White supremacy and resistance in Oregon.

Over the course of two and a half years, the Quarterly’s editorial staff and the issue’s guest editors Dr. Millner and Portland State University visiting professor Dr. Carmen Thompson worked with dozens of authors and community members — who drew on lifetimes of scholarship — to produce a nuanced investigation of this complex and uncomfortable aspect of our state’s history.

While the content of the issue is grounded in the past, it was inspired by current events. In June 2017, two weeks after the murders on the light-rail train, the Oregon Historical Quarterly’s Editorial Advisory Board decided to respond to the increase in public displays of White supremacy by doing what our journal does best — publishing authoritative scholarship about our state’s history. The hope is that this special issue will help readers understand how White supremacy, both spoken and unspoken, has presented itself in Oregon’s past and also informs our present.
“I think my whole career, in one way or another, was just a prologue to being a guest editor on this project,” said Darrell Millner. “To offer an alternative to the traditional, misleading narrative of Oregon and American history is a daunting challenge. I feel fortunate in this regard to have had a teammate like the Oregon Historical Society and the Quarterly staff in this effort.”

Focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the special issue includes new and newly considered scholarship and primary sources that help illuminate a complex aspect of Oregon’s history. Fifteen authors, supported by over twenty peer reviewers, explore themes such as settler colonialism, labor organizing, and the global color line.

“The Oregon Historical Society’s mission is to advance knowledge about all the people, places, and events that have shaped this state. Journals like the Oregon Historical Quarterly are vital vehicles for public education about the lesser known – and often painful – areas of our history,” said OHS Executive Director Kerry Tymchuk.

“I hope readers get a sense that White supremacy is part of American DNA and that it operates and has operated at every level of American life since settlement,” said Carmen Thompson in an interview for the Oregon Historical Society blog, Dear Oregon. “The phenomenon of White supremacy is not accidental or coincidental; our governments and institutions have planned and proliferated it from the beginning. I also want readers to understand the concept of Whiteness — ongoing, daily expectations of privilege — and how its associated effects can be overcome, or at least mitigated, through open dialogue and acknowledgment of the cost and consequences of our nation’s hierarchical racial system.”

The Winter 2019 special issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly on “White Supremacy and Resistance” is now available for purchase in the Oregon Historical Society’s Museum Store for $10, and a subscription to OHQ is a benefit of Oregon Historical Society membership. Copies of the special issue can also be ordered by calling the OHS Museum Store at 503.306.5230. Abstracts for the articles featured in this special issue are available online.

About the Oregon Historical Society

For more than a century, the Oregon Historical Society has served as the state’s collective memory, preserving a vast collection of artifacts, photographs, maps, manuscript materials, books, films, and oral histories. Our research library, museum, digital platforms & website (www.ohs.org), educational programming, and historical journal make Oregon’s history open and accessible to all. We exist because
history is powerful, and because a history as deep and rich as Oregon's cannot be contained within a single story or point of view.