Oregon and Global Insurgency: Punjabis of the Columbia River Basin

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the often overlooked but critical role of Punjabi laborers of Oregon in forming the radical Indian nationalist Ghadar Party in 1913. It addresses the international, national, and local forces behind the Punjabis’ migration to the state and the particular conditions they encountered once there. Framed by a series of post-9/11 concerns about the targeting of Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians, this inquiry explores not only the historical and social constructions of “us” and “them,” citizen and non-citizen, but the experience of Punjabi migrant laborers in remote Astoria, Oregon, where hardened racial and national lines were seemingly loosened. The repercussions of this were, I argue, global in nature, signaling the trans-national and indeed trans-hemispheric constituents of processes and events typically thought of as local and isolated. At a fundamental level, then, this thesis seeks to join the micro and macro, the particular and the general, and by virtue of excavating a “case study,” argues for a reconfigured approach that sees local history and global history as indissoluble.
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Brandon and Mona Mayfield who in post 9/11 America showed that our road is not yet determined.
Introduction - Questions from 9/11

“The point of critique is to make visible those blind spots in order to open a system to change.”

It is unequivocally post-9/11 America that sent me on the journey embodied in this paper. There were many horrors contained in that event and its aftermath. But that which gnawed at, maybe even haunted me, was the lurking danger of “otherness” for which 9/11 was used as “solid” proof – proof that whole civilizations and peoples were fundamentally and irrevocably unlike and opposed to a Western “us.” Edward Said had previously and brilliantly illuminated this as an enshrined outlook, terming it “Orientalism,” dating back centuries to imperial Europe’s earliest fears of and competition with the “East,” but still embedded in the West’s high art, politics, and common wisdom. Much of the official U.S. response called on this old rhetoric and fear, claiming 9/11 proved an unbroachable divide and essentialized difference between East and West as civilizations and as people. This, the official line went, was nothing less than the life-threatening clash of two civilizations and defined a call to war.

The domestic corollary of this clash of civilizations was the suspicion of Arabs, Muslims and South Asians living in our midst in the States. The U.S. government detained and interrogated over a thousand such people irrespective of their citizenship status or activities. Further, the government’s assault occurred in, if not fed, an atmosphere of grassroots hate crimes – house bombings, beatings, and even murder such as that of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh, shot five times at point blank range outside his gas station in Arizona.

Portland, Oregon, my home during these times, was the site of several prominent trials focused on the question of “Arab terrorism.” The American Muslims of the so-called “Portland Six” -- Patrice Lumumba Ford, Jeffrey Leon Battle, October Martinique Lewis (Battle’s ex-wife),
Muhammad Ibrahim Bilal, Ahmed Ibrahim Bilal, and Habis Abdulla al Saoub -- were arrested and convicted in 2002. Maher Hawash, a Palestinian-born engineer at Intel Corporation was held for more than six weeks without formal charge, convicted in 2003, and become the final member of the “Portland Seven.” All seven were found guilty of conspiring to aid the enemy, i.e., the Taliban or Al-Quaida. Brandon Mayfield, an Oregon-born Muslim convert and practicing local attorney, held for two weeks and erroneously linked by the FBI to the 2004 Madrid train bombings, was later exonerated and successfully sued the FBI, winning both a $2 million settlement and a public apology for his wrongful arrest. Finally, Pete Seda (Pirouz Sedaghaty), an Iranian-born tree-trimmer and the public face of the Muslim faith for 30 years in Ashland, Oregon, faces suspicions that he funded international terrorism through his operation of a U.S. chapter of the charitable Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation. Seda’s actual indictment, however, is for U.S. tax fraud. All of these cases generated national attention.

Like many people, I knew that suspicion of “aliens” at times of war has a long and sordid history in America: Germans, Jews, and Russians suspected as “revolutionists” during WWI; Japanese internment and the detention of many Germans and Italians during WWII. Given this, and the highly charged political atmosphere following the destruction of the Twin Towers, the trials involving Arabs and Muslims, many from the same Portland mosque, caught my attention.

I was struck by two particular things. First, Oregon is one of the more homogenous states in the country, has only a small Arab and Muslim population and seems an unlikely center of jihadi organizing. Secondly, all these trials contained an underlying theme of the difference between appearance and reality when it came to “those people.” Outwardly, they were successful community members – attorney, engineer, tree-trimming-cultural ambassador – yet
privately dangerous and plotting threats. As if to underscore this sentiment, in 2008, along with
documents across the nation but despite a plea from Portland’s mayor, the *Oregonian*, Oregon’s
largest daily press, distributed as paid advertising *Obsession*, a highly inflammatory DVD about
the threat of radical Islamists. While not concurrent with the trials, the DVD does seem to
speak to the times’ underlying and insinuating atmosphere that “they” are dangerous and
irreconcilably not of “us.”

I knew nothing of the past of Arabs, Muslims and South Asians in Oregon and I turned to
history with genuine curiosity and as a tool for establishing political claims, a right to be. What
follows is a story of Punjabis, largely Sikhs, in early 1900s Oregon who by custom, belief, and
natal origin – differences in many ways embodied in their turbans – were considered antithetical
to American-ness, and who engaged in history-changing international organizing against
imperial powers. It is a largely unknown story that reaches from India to England and Canada
with Oregon arguably a center of the “international conspiracy.” It is a story of amazing people
and deeds, and one which exerts claims on Oregon’s present. It is tempting to argue this is
reason enough to engage such history.

But there is more here than the rehabilitation of lost stories, as critical as those are. The
“more” is the relationship of such stories to Foucault’s deeply relevant urging to develop an
historical ontology of ourselves, “an historical investigation into the events that have led us to
constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing and thinking
and saying.” Foucault meticulously attended to the role of difference in the construction of
meaning. He, for example, exposed the historical constitution of “madness” to delimit the social
bounds and interdependence of the tolerated, sane and acceptable. This thesis utilizes his
method towards a more modest claim: the constitution of Punjabis as the “alien others,” the
“non-citizens,” is equally the construction of “the citizen,” “the included.” Their story is one window into the entwined creation of “us” and “them” and which I believe has deep relevance for the present. To ask who were/are “they,” one must ask who were/are “we.”

Historicizing ourselves – even our most personal selves – takes the onus off of “nature” and leaves the possibility for humans to do things differently. Joan Scott eloquently expresses this theme embedded in Foucault’s interest “in the way different epochs posed problems and found solutions to them; the way in which some solutions came to seem inevitable and necessary while others were overlooked or rejected. In what he called ‘the profusion of lost events,’ Foucault called into question the self-proclaimed inevitability of any moral or social system.”

This story of the radical Punjabis in Oregon holds, I believe, one such “lost event:” the unexpected experience of Astoria, Oregon navigating multi-ethnic living relatively uninhibited by national and racial intolerance. While not wanting to overburden the past with my hopes for today, I find this note from Astoria near breathtaking and worthy of a spotlight. Nationalism, let alone its steroidal cousin xenophobia, is a particularly pernicious blind spot in our past, the blind spots Joan Scott calls upon historians to illuminate. The story of Punjabis, particularly in Astoria, argues that who and how we have become what we are, far from inevitable, has involved choice and different forks in the road. My hope is that knowing such alternatives exist not just in theory but in our lived past, will provide perspective and mettle for our difficult present.

**The Puzzle**

On May 30, 1913, the *Astoria Budget* printed a notice from “Munsii [Munshi] Ram, Secretary of the Hindu Association, Astoria, Oregon” directed to the Astoria community. It was
an invitation to the local Finnish Socialist Hall to hear Har Dyal, a Stanford professor and "noted philosopher and revolutionist in India," deliver a special "lecture on India for the American residents of Astoria." That a Hindu Association and Socialist Hall existed in remote, 1913 Astoria, Oregon is for many its own startling news.

But this was far more than a lecture in a "red" hall arranged by a surprising organization. The May 1913 newspaper announcement marked the founding of the revolutionary nationalist Ghadar Party, its program an uncompromising and radical new direction in Indian nationalist politics. Created by the Asian Indians (or "Hindus" as they were often referred to at the time) of the West Coast, Ghadar's aim was nothing less than the armed overthrow of British rule in India. The group included overseas students and intellectuals such as Har Dyal, and its ranks were filled by the laboring Punjabi men who worked the mills and farms of the West, men who filled the hall that May in Astoria. Within a year of this meeting, thousands of Punjabis, overwhelmingly laborers from the West Coast of North America, led by a laborer from Portland, had returned to India with the hope of fomenting revolt against British rule. Most were promptly captured, tried, and detained or executed, their immediate revolutionary plans thwarted. Ghadarites were the target of conspiracy trials in Lahore, India and in San Francisco, California. For the latter, the U.S. government spent $7 million (half of which was paid by the British), at the time the most expensive trial ever mounted in U.S. history. These setbacks aside, Ghadar's secular politics united an unprecedented combination of social castes and religious backgrounds, and made an indelible mark on the Indian imagination and politics.

Yet Ghadar's roots in Oregon are a silenced history – both of the radical organization and the men behind it. Today most know nothing about pioneer Punjabis in Oregon, let alone that laborers and mill workers initiated history-making organizing. This, I believe, is linked to a
broader downplaying of non-European histories within Oregon and the tendency to view California as the locus of Asian migration history in the American West. That there are many more persons of Asian ancestry in California, including more Punjabis both then and now, has no doubt-skewed our lens. But the blurred vision of Oregon’s past cannot be reduced to a simple matter of demographics. Historians of Oregon bear some responsibility for the silencing of the experience of non-European actors in the state’s story. Such neglect, whatever its reasons, perpetuates the myth of an essential and singular Euro-American past in Oregon and trivializes the global dynamics that have shaped the region. But as history is ultimately not in the service of the past, perhaps most important is this silencing’s impact upon our collective sense of present and future possibilities, particularly with regard to questions of who “belongs.”

In this essay I hope to complicate how Oregon’s historical landscape is envisioned. I will sketch a narrative about the origins of Ghadar, its activities along the Columbia River and foundational meeting in Astoria far from Ghadar’s later center in San Francisco. I will consider how and why Oregon and the remote fishing town of Astoria and its Socialist Hall came to be so pivotal in Ghadar’s formation. To do so, this narrative much like the men it speaks of, must range continents. Where did these men come from and what was “home” like? What drew them to North America and what was their experience once there? What chance encounters and cascading effects arose from their presence? And what of Astoria - what was the town like and how did it live? How did socialists and “Hindus” come to inhabit and then affect the town? It is in these micro-constituents of global politics and local particularities that this story, perhaps like all stories, lives and breathes. But it is also true that the story woven from them reflects back upon the conceptual, interrogating received wisdoms like “periphery,” “citizen” or “national.” This, I believe, is the service of history: its questioning of the certainties that received wisdom
can so adroitly foster. Such questioning, an explicit aim of this research, is attended to most
directly in my concluding section on nationalism.

**Indian Ferment and Punjabi Migration**

The import of Punjabi migration to North America is hard to grasp if considering only its
numbers — a few thousand men. Instead, it was their temporal and cultural location that proved
so explosive. Compressed largely within the years from 1905 — the real beginnings of their
migrations to North America — to 1914 — the apex of Ghadar’s revolutionary efforts — these
migrants and their actions were enmeshed in the heart of both colonial and new world politics.24

The hundreds of Punjabis who lived and worked along Oregon’s Columbia River near the
turn of the last century were part of a larger migration. Millions of men left India in the late
1800s and early 1900s, a few thousand travelling to North America.25 Overwhelmingly, they
were a community of male laborers26 that stretched and moved along the West Coast from
British Columbia to the agricultural valleys of California. British Columbia, the earliest site of
significant settlement in North America, gained about 7,800 immigrants between 1903 and 1908,
after which Asian Indian immigration was essentially banned and many migrants moved into the
U.S.27 The official number recorded entering the U.S. between 1899 and 1913 was 6,656,
though arguably many more arrived illegally.28 Most were from the Punjab’s districts of
Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. There were Muslims and Hindus amongst them but overwhelmingly
they were Sikhs, often easily identified by their turbans and beards.29 This was a transient
population utilizing a porous U.S.-Canada border, making a chimera of hard and fast numbers.

Perhaps half of these early North American immigrants were former soldiers in the
British Indian army.30 Punjabis had been the backbone of that force, comprising as much as half
of India’s native army by the late 1800s, a quarter of those being Sikhs. These troops had fought in defense of the Crown both overseas and at home, and their service, in a variety of ways, enabled and shaped their migrant experience and the British Columbia community. Having toured the area during their service, some soldiers returned as immigrants. Military service provided more ready cash, especially as compared to their brethren farmers, and facilitated migration. Many of these ex-solders were literate, able to write in Punjabi and, given their former service, to speak some English. They had developed information networks: correspondence to and from military men around the world, and news passed through the Gurdwaras, or Sikh temples, scattered across the globe. These men also brought their military prowess and a deserved sense of being crucially loyal, brave servants deserving of a special relationship with and treatment by the Crown, of which Canada was a part. All of these characteristics would prove to be critical in the years to come.

Besides soldiers, many of the migrants were Punjabi farmers. Oppressive land mortgages, declining commodity prices, land shortages and inflated land prices, droughts and famines fueled both emigration and political unrest. Outside of military service, overseas labor was the main means of gaining funds to save or expand land holdings. But raising the price of ship passage to North America usually meant further mortgaging their farmlands and was therefore its own high stakes gamble, but one many Punjabis made. While settlement in North America was new, labor outmigration was not: Punjabis had worked throughout Southeast Asia, Australia and Africa utilizing both the commercial and migrant laborers’ webs that were outgrowths of British colonialism. Word of fresh possibilities emerging in Canada and the United States spurred new Punjabi overseas migration and communities, particularly to the expanding economies of those countries’ resource-rich yet labor-poor western regions. These
farmer/laborers, like the soldiers, also possessed important social traits: they were part of information networks of family, village and districts reaching both home and the far-flung communities of overseas laborers. In many, the desire to succeed fostered a working use of English. They also brought hopes and expectations — their own, their families' and their villages' — for improving life. These qualities, like those of the ex-soldiers, would also prove important in the years ahead.

This sketch of the sojourning Punjabis suggests that their migration was not simply a response to poverty. More, it was expressive of the changes colonialism wrought in Hindustan and people's creative adaptation to and use of the openings provided by the colonial empire, whether as laborers for, or enforcers of, British rule. But in the migratory landscape of the Punjab, 1906 and 1907 were critical years. Punjabis' arrival in North America was closely connected to the growing anti-colonial unrest in Bengal and its spread to the Punjab, which deepened in 1907 with the outbreak of the plague and the death of half a million people. Farmers, laborers and others fled dire conditions. And, in an attempt to quell the Bengali and Punjabi movement, the British regime expelled numerous nationalist students and leaders. That people from both of these migrant streams arrived in North America reflected convergent and changing global options.

Concurrent with the unrest in India were the white colonial exclusionary policies developing against Asian Indians in places such as Australia and South Africa, compromising their ability to work and prosper, and encouraging movement into the booming economy of western North America, a draw in its own right. Additionally, Europe's role as a center of Indian émigré nationalist organizing was on the wane. This was in part due to activists' inability to attract a political base from which to launch meaningful action. But also, with the increasing,
and increasingly radical, unrest in the Bengal and Punjab, British attention had significantly limited nationalists' ability to function in London and Paris, their two centers.

British surveillance of European émigrés prompted a number of organizers and newly exiled Indian activists to move to North America. They sought the relative safety of the U.S., removed from English colonialism's home base. Further, U.S. intellectual circles generally sympathized (for rather obvious historical reasons) with those opposed to British tyranny and had, since the mid 1800s, developed a small subculture of infatuation with Indian spirituality. Beyond this, especially on the East Coast, there existed an important circle of political allies like the Anti-Imperialist League and nationalists from Mexico, Cuba, and Ireland, that latter group of longstanding importance to the Indian nationalists. This is not to argue, however, that the only bearers of the radical nationalism developing in the homeland were students and intellectuals; there were also laborers arriving in North America who were deeply influenced by this movement. Ghadar historian Puri argues that Punjabi farmers and laborers were largely unaffected by the nationalist movements or saw little relevance to their plight. This may be true. But there were certainly some that had been influenced, such as Sohan Singh Bhakna, a farmer who migrated from the Punjab to the lumber mills of Portland, Oregon and played a critical role in Ghadar's genesis. It was not long before intellectuals and activists such as Har Dyal, Thakar Das and G.D. Kumar took note of the large and politically awakening laboring community of the West, and the merging of these two social streams, so unique and important to Ghadar, began.

North America and Exclusion

If 1906-1907 were critical years in motivating the arrival of Punjabis in the western U.S. and Canada, they were equally important years in defining the political ground they landed on.
Their numbers were small relative to Chinese and Japanese migration, but their appearance occurred in the midst of, and in turn spurred, a frenzy of anti-Asian activity in the West. It is telling that the availability of ship steerage between India to North America was largely the result of efforts to exclude the Chinese through a process of legal moves (the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the U.S. and Canada’s Head Tax of $50 in 1871, $500 by 1903) and extra-legal communal violence played out against the Chinese for fifty years prior to the Asian Indians’ arrival. Ships formerly carrying Chinese migrants now filled their vessels with Punjabis.

At the time of the Asian Indian’s entrance in North America, the exclusionist movement was in many ways at its apex. The Asian Exclusion League (AEL), born and centered in San Francisco, is an exemplar of the tenor of the West Coast. Though originating in the United States, this organization, much like the migrants, was not one that recognized borders: the AEL’s organizational influence and core belief that the West “belonged” to whites infected the entire coast. The Punjabis’ rather sudden arrival and visible presence (their turbans) did not work in their favor. Alarmed, the nativists quickly developed an organization and name (Asiatic Exclusion League) expressive of their pan-Asian hatred (Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Asian Indians). The outlook embodied in this movement, and its relationship – official or otherwise – to the governmental policies of Canada, the U.S., England and India, helped define these new migrants’ experience.

But to be clear, the tail did not wag the dog. This movement did not dictate to the government. Instead, it was expressive of the aggressive nation building (and in the case of the U.S., colonial conquest such as in the Philippines) particular to both Western Canada and the U.S. In the U.S., demonized Asian laborers became part of a highly racialized continuum of workers outside the pale of citizenship much like African chattel slaves and Indigenous laborers.
In the early 1900s, both countries were desperate for laborers to log the trees, mill the lumber and work the farms. But Asian laborers – who provided the key labor for western expansion – were denied citizenship and thus barred from full cultural and political inclusion. In this there was essential agreement, if at times tactical differences, between official governmental policy and the exclusionist movements: Canada and the U.S. were to be white, Christian nations. In this way, Punjabis, and Asians more generally, helped define the meaning of Canadian and U.S. citizenship by what it was not.

In this crucible, the Asian Indian migrant laborers' experience in North America proved politically explosive. As a number of historians have argued, the experiential crosshairs of dispossession in their homeland, second-class status abroad, no support from "their" home government, likely produced the revolutionary turn embodied in Ghadar. Ballantyne, describing this general possibility, states: "In this sense, the experiences of both colonialism and diaspora can be understood ... as productive, destabilizing, and frequently dangerous sites of cross-cultural collision, contest, and change." They had migrated to solve hardships and expand their opportunities. They considered themselves full members of the British Empire. Their travel utilized the advantages of that status, migrating first to British Columbia, then part of the British Empire, and later into the U.S. Yet within the few short years of their arrival a significant shift took place. By 1913, as evidenced by the formation of Ghadar, many had become disabused of the notion they possessed a standing equal to other subjects of the British Empire and realized they were citizens nowhere. How and why this dramatic change comes about is dependent upon many factors, but without question their experience and reception in North America were critical components.
Early Settlement, White Right and Bellingham

Overwhelmingly, Punjabis came to North America to get ahead, not to pursue radical nationalism. Those first men arriving in Vancouver, B.C. went immediately to work, typically in the lumber mills of the area for lower wages and often the worst jobs. Owners recognized them as hardworking, reliable, lower cost help and a welcome counter to newly organized white laborers. Denied housing or relegated to the worst of the city, Punjabis pooled their resources and lived and cooked together. Some tried to “fit in.” Historian Puri estimates half of the Vancouver immigrants, mainly the former soldiers, adopted Western dress and manners.53 Despite hardships, they sent money home and some even invested in property in the region. One estimate states that by 1913 “the Indians living in Canada together had ‘seven and a half million dollars invested in real estate and business in Canada alone.”54 They formed organizations and cultural centers to provide the cultural and religious continuity of home and to ease their collective transition by sharing food, money and housing. Their often disheartening conditions were likely weathered by hopes for a better future.55

In a sense, merely arriving in Canada raised dangerous questions about their status in the Empire. Asian Indian immigrants saw unknown “riches… and freedoms” in Canada which aroused an “awareness of their ownbackwardness and that of their country.” But “the contempt and ridicule they experienced in their daily contact with the white residents was a cause for a hitherto unknown kind of predicament. Economic achievement beckoned them, but the social situation was hardly conducive to a feeling of ease.”56 As members of the British Empire the Punjabi laborers were technically welcome in all Crown lands, such as Canada. However, an unspoken tenet of this policy was that it was intended to foster white settlement in colonial lands, not the movement of colonized peoples into Euro-American lands.57 While their labor was
needed in British Columbia, the men were far from being considered equal or welcome partners. As Puri has argued, the "heritage of aggressive colonialism" was well ensconced by this time and clear "social, cultural, political and economic hierarchies" were assigning Asian Indians to the bottom rungs.\textsuperscript{58} Further, throughout North America many whites tended to see – and in some cases had been promised by politicians – the West as their last hope for unfettered prosperity. These attitudes were captured in the popular bar song of the day, "White Canada Forever:"

\begin{quote}
For white man's land we fight.
To Oriental grasp and greed
We'll surrender, no, never.
Our watchword be "God save the King,"
White Canada forever.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

The fear underlying such a shrill and offensive call was grounded in some measure of reality. At the time of the Punjabis’ arrival in Vancouver, B.C., labor leaders made claim that one-third of the adult male population was Asian.\textsuperscript{60} Such claim, coincident with the uptick in Punjabi immigration in 1906, unleashed a maelstrom of anti-Asian activity and sentiment. The fervor of the movement, combined with its alliance and affinity with similar movements in the Western U.S., caused the Canadian premier to fear British Columbian secession.\textsuperscript{61} Nativists made calls for exclusion of all “Asians.” Perceived as a threat to B.C.’s political balance of power, Punjabis lost the right to vote (a right not reinstated until after WWII).\textsuperscript{62} Employment for Asian Indians contracted, causing significant unemployment amongst them for the first time.\textsuperscript{63} Punjabi wives and families were barred entry. Calls for Punjabi expulsion increased as did the demand to prevent their entry into Canada altogether.

In response to this constricting political situation in Vancouver, and an expression of the same adventurous spirit that had brought them to North America, by 1906 Asian Indians began to drift south into the western U.S.\textsuperscript{64} In addition to this southern migration from B.C., direct
migration into California's interior began. There the men worked for the railways until the new lines were completed in approximately 1909. Many then shifted into agricultural reclamation projects or harvesting in the valleys of California. A number of these laborers became tenant or landowning farmers, some quite successful, often on land thought to be impossible to farm. But they too became targets for anti-Asian rhetoric as the right of plenty was to be reserved for white citizens. Like Canada, the perceived threat of these "Hindus" — to public health, white womanhood, job security — led to calls for their exclusion and expulsion from the country. California passed laws preventing Asian Indian citizenship, marriage to whites, and eventually ownership of land.

In 1907 the racial tensions of the entire West Coast exploded in a watershed moment for the North American Punjabi community. The event was the anti-Indian riot in Bellingham, Washington.

Bellingham was a booming mill town with active labor organizations. It also had a vocal anti-Asian faction affiliated with the Asian Exclusionist League of San Francisco, itself fresh off an anti-Japanese campaign. Many of the Punjabis who had left Vancouver and its increasingly hostile atmosphere in 1906 had drifted the fifty short miles south and found ready work in Bellingham. In the late summer of 1907, insecurity over jobs and an economic downturn in Bellingham combined with anti-immigrant hatred to ignite an anti-Punjabi riot. On Labor Day, September 2, 1907, several hundred white men, mostly workers, combined with some of Bellingham's municipal and commercial leaders to attack the roughly 200 Asian Indians of the town. They were beaten and their living quarters ransacked. All the Punjabis left town the next day. In fact, after the riot no Asians — Chinese, Japanese or Asian Indians — were left in Bellingham. Support and approval for the Bellingham riot spread throughout the West Coast via
the mainstream press and through the particular efforts of the Asian exclusionist movement based in Seattle, Washington. Outbreaks of violence followed in numerous other Washington towns – Blaine, Anacortes, Aberdeen and Everett – along with attacks in towns from Alaska to California.67

The impact of the violence of Bellingham on the state as a whole is notable. As Jensen argues, “[w]hite workers obtained a virtual free hand in imposing their standards in Washington after the riots and recaptured their monopoly on available jobs in the lumber industry. The hold of Euro-American workers over lumbering would not be broken until World War I…”68 Neither the federal government nor the British consul worked to curb this wave of hostility, thus most Asian Indians soon disappeared from the lumber industry in that state altogether.69

Asian Indians fleeing Bellingham scattered throughout the West and many crossed back into Vancouver. But the floodgates of violence and intolerance had opened. Days later these unfortunate men were witness to a second anti-Asian riot, this time one in Vancouver which made international news. On September 7, a white supremacist crowd marched to Vancouver city hall to demand a “White Canada.” Attacking Chinatown first, the crowd then moved toward the Japanese community where it was met with armed Japanese Canadians. Order was not restored for several days. The intensity of racial rancor demonstrated by the riots produced a turning point in Canadian immigration history: doubting the continued allegiance of the remote province if not accommodated, the federal government joined British Columbia’s effort to make a white Canada forever.70 This was done through a concerted effort to prohibit Asian immigration through the imposition of various measures: quotas on Japanese emigration; “continuous voyage” regulations requiring that Asian Indians’ make no change of ships between their country of origin and Canada, and pay a $200 landing fee; the enforcement of ‘head-tax’
laws against the Chinese and, when all that proved ineffective, passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923.\footnote{71}

Throughout all of the escalating measures against them since their arrival on the West Coast, the Asian Indians did not stand idly by. They fought to bring their families, they demanded fair wages, they resisted threatening mobs, they found ways around restrictive landowning laws, they publicized their conditions back home, and they fought the continuous journey provisions. But in all of this, and unlike the Chinese and Japanese migrants who were also the targets of mob-violence and government proscriptions, they received no backing from their home government.

Unlike Hindustan, the governments of China and Japan were not composed of outside powers. Not known for their concern for common people, the Chinese and Japanese rulers still had reasons to act on behalf of their countries’ migrants. First, the governments of both countries were interested in their international prestige. The persecution by foreign governments of their citizens abroad reflected poorly on their country’s power and status. Further, the government of China and Japan were quite interested in preserving the substantial monies accrued from overseas migrants and the safety valve that migration and its remunerations provided. These twin concerns largely framed their diplomatic intervention on behalf of their citizens in North America such as contesting the quotas for migrant laborers and making formal complaints against such things as anti-Asian riots. Their actions provided Chinese and Japanese laborers some measure of governmental protection. The Asian Indians of North America did not receive similar assistance from the Indian government. Instead, the Crown set up an international network of police spies against its subjects.\footnote{72}
The British Crown and Raj's inaction (other than police activity) was not simply due to colonial disdain, but entangled in the complications of empire. Because of the anti-British struggle in India and China, Imperial policy aimed to "refrain from [the] specific naming of a "racialized group in order to avoid providing grist to the anti-imperial mills in India, China, and Japan." Consequently, and despite British concerns for the Punjab’s stability and the continuing loyalty of Sikhs especially in the military, the acknowledgment of racism in Crown lands would reverberate throughout British colonies in a way the Empire could not afford. Thus, the Raj and Crown authorities, despite the dire conditions in the Punjab and the mitigating effect of emigration, enacted restrictions on Punjabi migration in coordination with British Columbia.

These measures stemmed from British desires to quiet the racial hoopla in the Canadian province and its detrimental effects on public opinion in India and internationally. But British actions were also shaped by their concern for the growing political impact migration was having, particularly the cross-fertilization occurring among Asian Indians and other nationalist and socialist organizations in North America. The politicization of the Punjabs in the U.S. was of particular concern. England could not rely on the U.S., a country without loyalty to Crown needs and with a colonial empire potentially at odds with her own, to oppose Asian Indian political ferment. For all of these reasons, three "quiet" measures were instituted to restrict Punjabi migration: 1) passport controls by the Raj in Hindustan; 2) the continuous journey provision worked out with Canada and ensured by the cancellation of direct shipping lines between the two countries; and 3) for those Punjabis already in North America, a police network, particularly strong in Vancouver, to monitor and disrupt their organizing.
Punjabi Responses

Ghadar was shaped by people subjugated by the British at home and attacked and discriminated against abroad. They came to understand they were citizens nowhere and second-class subjects everywhere. Ghadar arose out of the anger and conviction that such injustice was due to lacking, and resolved by taking, control of their homeland. It-called not for shared power with the British, but for their overthrow. Ghadar represented a creative and conscious response to the migrants’ new conditions.

But Ghadar was not the only response to their changed conditions. Some continued in their loyalty to the Crown. Some migrants turned towards religious solutions and ideal communities. Some simply returned “home.” Attempts to secure justice – court challenges, delegations to Ottawa and the British Colonial Secretary in London – continued. Others found ways to pursue their dreams of a better life despite everything, such as the men in Vancouver and California who continued to amass considerable property holdings and often with little concern for or attention to political issues. Especially given the frequent perception that Ghadar began in California, it is worth briefly examining the shifting migrant adaptive strategies and identities there.

As noted, Punjabis had made their way to California working initially for the railroads and later moving into agriculture. Farming paid better than the railroad or lumber mills. But California’s interior farmlands also resembled the agricultural river valleys of the Punjab and provided familiar work. Forming financial and labor organizations and strategies suited to their new political environs, many of these men achieved considerable success, owning or farming large tracts of land and developing stable communities, though usually remote and insular. Punjabis’ choice of farming was also conditioned by the fact they had little competition for jobs.
from white workers. Their communities shared space (and sometimes affinity given the problems white union labor posed for both) with the anti-union, rural growers from whom the Punjabis often leased or farmed land. All of this made of a way of life quite distinct from the dense, politically enlivened, internationalist cities or mill communities of Vancouver, Portland or Astoria. This may be why few Indian historians of Ghadar argue that the organization originated amongst this agricultural community.

But analyzing exactly how, why and where a movement begins resists a firm grip. Conditions in India and North America were such that throughout the entire sojourning community there were halting, partial steps towards what later became Ghadar. But it seems few of these occurred in the agricultural valleys of California. It seems that success in California initially fostered identities and strategies as pioneering farmers building long-term communities, intermarrying with Mexican women and building the state's first Gurdwara in Stockton. But 1913 was a pivotal year: Asian Indians founded Ghadar in Oregon and the California legislature passed the California Alien Land Law. That law prohibited peoples ineligible for citizenship (Asians) from owning land or holding leases longer than three years. This law was an intentional blow to the achievements and future possibilities of California's Punjabis. As Ghadar organizers fanned out from the 1913 organizing meeting in Astoria they found ready support, and considerable monies, for Ghadar from many in California's fields. By 1914 and 1915, migrants from California left in droves to return and fight in India.

Thus, in different years and places there was a multitude of responses to the changing conditions in North America: religious movements, remote farms, going home, and Ghadar. But it is understandable why, as more radical outlooks developed, such a movement as Ghadar would develop – consciously or organically – outside of Canada. But where? Punjabis faced heavy
surveillance by Canadian and British crown forces in British Columbia; the AEL held political and organizational sway in much of Washington, and California was comprised of relatively insular farmland communities. What of Oregon?

I would argue several factors coalesced in Oregon which proved conducive to Ghadar’s formation. Oregon was not free of anti-Asian animus. But key state political and business leaders, while still decidedly opposing the social and political inclusion of Asians, recognized the strategic importance of their labor in building Oregon and its major city, Portland, to the heights they dreamt possible. These leaders lobbied for the people of Oregon to not make the mistakes they saw occurring in other parts of the West, especially San Francisco. Their success in propagating this outlook resulted in little organizational hold for anti-Asian activity, less communal violence and, when it did occur, less tolerance for it especially by public officials. Astoria, Oregon, the site of Ghadar’s founding, could be considered a microcosm of this “enlightened” outlook but with a critical twist given the town’s large and influential Finnish socialist community and long and profitable dependence upon Chinese labor. Further, Oregon’s, especially Astoria’s, remote status was a plus: far enough from B.C.to gain protection from its political police and hostile atmosphere yet close enough to enable ties to its political ferment and spokesmen. Finally, in Oregon there came to be key leaders, particularly laborer Sohan Singh Bhakna and labor contractor Kanshi Ram, with the astuteness to recognize political openings, the ability to bridge the laboring and intellectual communities, and the strength of political vision and will to make Ghadar happen.
Oregon

Through both direct immigration to the States and through the fluid border with Canada, Asian Indian laborers began arriving in Oregon and Washington resulting in pockets of Indian laborers throughout the region. Mill owners were attracted to these laborers due to the general shortage of labor, their work ethic, and also as a counter to the growing labor organizing efforts of many Euro-American workers. Ethnic violence elsewhere furthered Punjabi settlement in Oregon.

It is easy to imagine that some displaced and unemployed Punjabis found their way to Oregon in the aftermath of the 1907 Bellingham and Vancouver riots, both swelling extant Punjabi settlements and creating new ones. It is also easy to envision the lumber mills in the out-of-the-way towns along the Columbia River greedily hiring these new men as labor was chronically short in this land rich with trees. The largest community of Punjabis developed in and around Astoria, but was amplified by communities that stretched along 125 miles of the Columbia River, including Bridal Veil, Winans, Portland, St. Johns, Linnton, Goble, Cathlamet, Rainier, John Day and Seaside. Contrary to received wisdom, then, Oregon apparently became an important centre for sojourning Indians. It provided work away from the polarized politics and economics of both British Columbia and Washington in the wake of the 1907 riots. Yet it was still close to the larger, and more established, Punjabi community of British Columbia, and its increasingly active political life.
Photo 1. Ranier, Oregon Mill With Housing In Background

Photo 2. Lumber Camp Near Goble, Oregon
Photo 3. Bridal Veil Lumber Mill With Housing Shown In Upper Left.
Photo 4. Clatskanie, Oregon Flume\textsuperscript{98}
Oregon was not free of animosity towards the Asian Indians. The press in both Portland and Astoria ran its share of stories promoting the myth of the “Hindu invasion” then common across the West Coast, along with reports on the various riots against the Punjabis in Bellingham, Everett and Vancouver. In what can only be described as a hate crime, an Asian Indian man was shot to death on Halloween 1907, 30 miles east of Portland in Boring, Oregon. Asian exclusion societies, which targeted Chinese, Japanese and Asian Indians immigrants, gained some coverage in the daily press and took some nominal organizational forms in both Portland and Astoria.
Communal violence occurred as well, most notably in St. Johns, Oregon, a town a few miles to the northwest of Portland. On March 24, 1910, a group of men gathered outside a St. Johns saloon. Gordon Dickey, the foreman of the St. Johns Pulp Mill was the ringleader. “Speeches,” or at least rabble rousing, took place. Soon the crowd, which had grown to nearly 300 men, moved towards the Punjabi laborers’ homes, ransacked them, beat and robbed the men (it was right after payday), and pushed or caused men to jump from their second floor boarding rooms. The mob also went to the mill and forced the Asian Indians to leave work. According to the Oregonian, all of the Punjabi men left St. Johns that night, many after having been forced onto the streetcar bound for Portland proper.

But the next day a number of the Punjabis were back in St. Johns, the county District Attorney in tow, identifying those who had participated in the riot against them. They bravely named the mayor, police chief, a newspaper reporter, two volunteer firefighters, some shop owners, and numerous laborers from the local mills. Warrants for 190 men for beating and robbing 38 “Hindu workmen” were issued and a grand jury was convened to investigate the riot. Moreover, the mayor, city attorney, and police chief were charged with dereliction of duty. Ultimately, only one conviction was sustained against Gordon Dickey, a mill foreman. The mill, the main employer of the Punjabis in St. Johns, continued to employ the men, its owners asserting that “(t)he Hindus employed by us do work that other men will not touch.” Most of the Punjabis returned to work immediately, but several were arrested for carrying revolvers and stating, “We have no protection.” Besides arming, the Punjabis stayed active throughout the long course of the St. Johns riot legal battle, attempting to involve the British consulate and testifying in many court cases. That Punjabis were not cowed by white violence or inclined to endure it is notable due both to its occurrence a few short years before Ghadar’s formation, and
to the presence of two men, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Kanshi Ram, pivotal in Ghadar’s later formation.¹⁰⁷

That in their fight the Punjabis had the considerable backing of the District Attorney of Portland is significant and demonstrative of the larger racial policy regarding Asian laborers shaping Portland and the state. In 1859, Oregon was the first state admitted to the union on an explicitly anti-Chinese platform: barred from citizenship, Chinese were also explicitly excluded from both the right to vote (as were “Negroes and Mulattos”) and property ownership.¹⁰⁸ In the ensuing years, and especially in Portland, additional legislation dictated how the Chinese could live “appropriately”: where and how they could set up house, run laundries, and otherwise be employed.¹⁰⁹ However, in the critical years of 1885 and 1886, when riots backed by city authorities drove the Chinese first from Tacoma and then Seattle, similar expulsions did not take place in Portland.¹¹⁰ In fact, Oregon’s Chinese population increased from 1880 to 1910.¹¹¹ As argued by the historian Marie Rose Wong, this was due to two critical factors. First, a key framer of the Oregon constitution (and its anti-Asian stance) was also a law-and-order judge concerned with the spread of vigilante violence and, combined with the efforts of Portland’s mayor, took strong stands against it. Second were the editorials of the Oregonian penned by Harvey Scott.¹¹²

The Oregonian was the premier paper of the Northwest and Scott its brilliant journalist and editor from 1865-1910.¹¹³ Scott’s was a bully pulpit from which he espoused his vision of Portland and Oregon as a civil, law abiding place focused on economic growth for the individual and region. He openly supported the Exclusion Act of 1882 and held many of the views dominant of those times including the supposed inassimilable and inferior character of the Chinese. But such views did not prevent Scott from seeing the utility of the Chinese as cheap
labor essential to the development of the region’s seemingly limitless potential. He believed with the Exclusion Act in place, the “problem” of the Chinese would naturally disappear as the labor needs subsided. But in the meantime they were essential for Oregon to reach its golden dream. His editorials appealed to the “common sense” of ordinary citizens and their hopes for economic progress. He lobbied hard against the vigilante violence of both Washington and California, the notions that Chinese labor was draining the country of wealth, and excoriated the newspapers that espoused both. This “good sense” of promoting business and growing rich utilizing Asian labor gained considerable currency amongst local businessmen, politicians, and ordinary citizens for the fifty years of his tenure. While the rest of the West raged against the Chinese, Portland’s Chinatown grew becoming the second largest in the U.S. Scott’s “voice of reason,” though still thoroughly rooted in anti-Asian beliefs and the pursuit of personal and business profit, took hold especially in Portland and created a notable, if self-serving, counterweight to the violence and enmity that engulfed so much of the West.

Arguably, Scott’s views also took hold in Astoria, ninety miles west of Portland, but with distinct features. Unlike St. Johns, Bellingham, and Vancouver, no anti-Asian communal violence ever took place in Astoria, making the town a notable exception. Astoria, at the turn of the century, was ethnically varied and its townspeople had developed a certain tolerance for diversity. In 1910, nearly half the city of 9600 people was foreign born, including large Chinese and Finnish communities which brought distinct contributions to the town, including a strong current of radicalism. While the town was divided by languages, English, however broken, operated as the lingua franca in commercial and community interactions. The town’s relative tolerance, radicals, and large, stable Asian Indian community, I believe, led the organizers to choose Astoria, a remote port in the outback of the U.S., for the public launching of Ghadar.
Astoria and “Hindu Alley”

Astoria had the largest and most diverse community of Asian Indians in all of Oregon, estimated to be around hundred men at its peak. An early public notice of their presence was a small article appearing on Halloween, 1906, in the *Astoria Daily Budget*. It told of the death of a “Hindoo” by consumption after an illness of several weeks. “Sunday Sing [sic]” died in the local hospital after having been found ill on the city streets two weeks earlier. The story, a paragraph in length and sandwiched between notices concerning the price of eggs and a boat sale, ends with “[v]ery little if anything is known of him altho [sic] there are some Hindoos working at the Hume mill who visited him when he was first taken to the hospital.” A closer consideration of this article is enlightening both about Astoria and the Punjabis.
Besides its explicit admission that "little if anything is known of him," the article’s language suggests that the Punjabis were a new and unfamiliar group in town and provides a useful benchmark for the coming years. For example, it uses the rather crude "Hindoo," and not the later and more common referent of "Hindus," which referred not to their religion but to Hindustan, or roughly what is now India. Also, the spelling of the man’s last name was given as “Sing,” a surname familiar to Astoria given the town’s many Chinese residents, and not “Singh,” the name taken by many of the newcomer Sikhs. The article’s referencing of the Hume Mill invokes a critical family in the life of Astoria generally and the Punjabis in particular. In its allusion to the Chinese and referencing of the Hume Mill, the article provides important hints about the economic and social forces which shaped the Punjabi laborers’ lives in Astoria.

The Hume Mill was arguably the reason most Punjabis were in Astoria. The Humes, having already established the hugely profitable salmon canning industry centered in Astoria, moved to expand and diversify their holdings. In 1903, they began construction of their lumber mill to supply boxes for the national and international shipment of canned fish and to capitalize on the up-and-coming lumber industry. It was this mill that employed the Punjabis.

The region’s lumber industry, like salmon canning, was a profitably, extractive industry dependent upon on immigrants to fill its vast labor needs. By 1920 "Clatsop County [where Astoria is] was Oregon’s number one lumber producer." As reported by the Astoria press, "the Hume Mill went into operation in 1904…. Between 1905 and 1906 the mill was bought by A.B. Hammond. Shortly after he took over the mill, Hammond traveled to India and brought back Hindu laborers…" Direct recruitment from India was not needed for long. Punjabi migrants began arriving in Astoria through a combination of their adventurousness, the
constriction of employment opportunities in Canada, and a need to escape the ethnic violence they experienced in both Canada and Washington.

Thus, besides expanding local industry, the Hume/Hammond mill diversified Astoria’s labor force as noted in the following local historical account:

It is estimated that in the early 1900s the Hammond Mill in Astoria employed about six hundred people of different nationalities. Besides Italian, Greek, Japanese and Middle Eastern workers, there were nearly one hundred East Indians living in bunkhouses along the waterfront near the mill in Alderbrook [a district of Astoria]. Beginning in about 1906, until the mill burned on September 11, 1922, Birch Street between Fifty-first and Fifty-second streets was Astoria’s so-called “Hindu Alley.”

The men of this “Hindu Alley,” and the communities in and around it, were overwhelmingly single, laboring men ranging in age from 19 to 50. There was, however, one Sikh family, Bakhshish Singh Dhillon, his wife Rattan Kaur and their four children (Kartar, Budh, Kapur and Karm), who built a house in Astoria and sent their children to the Alderbrook public school.
Photo 7. Dhillon Family Of Astoria\textsuperscript{126}
The “Hindus” of Astoria were primarily Sikhs from the Punjab region of India. But in their midst were also Hindus and Muslims. There was also a college student from the University of Berkeley, Bhagat Singh Thind, who worked summers in the Astoria lumber mill to pay for school and later challenged U.S. federal citizenship criteria in a landmark court case. Leading intellectuals occasionally spent time amongst the laborers. For example, on the invitation of the Hammond workers Rama Chandra, a principal propagandist for the soon-to-be-formed Ghadar press, visited, talked politics and briefly convalesced in Astoria.

During their years in Astoria, the Punjabis were an active and diverse community. They were involved in wage strikes, taught wrestling and fielded competitive wrestlers, like Dodam Singh and Basanta Singh, sued one another in court, got in fights with fellow employees, got arrested for drinking and fighting, filed for citizenship, played with the few Punjabi children in town, cared for one another, talked and otherwise entertained themselves in the times they were not working.

This is not to say that life was idyllic for Asian Indians in Astoria. Racist and anti-immigrant justifications were used to argue for their expulsion from the mill, cut their wages, or justify individual acts of physical violence. But in an atmosphere of approved ethnic violence across the West, it seems important to note where it did not occur. Through ups and downs, a stable community of Punjabis endured in Astoria. An early exodus of Punjabis occurred in 1914, a direct outgrowth of Ghadar’s influence, as captured in this local article: “The Hindus employed at the Hammond Lumber company’s mill are planning to return to India in the immediate future for the purpose of joining in the revolution that is expected to ensue, while England is involved in the war with Germany.” However, it was the destruction of Hammond Mill by fire in 1922, not a pogrom such as in Bellingham, which marked the end of the Asian Indian community in
Astoria. Their staying power and development of political resistance is entwined with the histories of the Chinese and Finnish communities of Astoria.

The Chinese in Astoria – Wealth Production and the Fruits of Tolerance

It is impossible to talk about Astoria without reckoning with the considerable economic and social importance of the Chinese community, itself inseparable from the development of the salmon canning industry. The Humes established the industrial salmon canning, but the Chinese laborers ultimately made it possible and profitable. Centered in Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River, the industry became important not only to the nation’s food supply, but also as a major source of wealth for the Pacific Northwest. In fact, for Oregon and Washington before World War II, salmon canning ranked in value only behind timber and wheat.138

In this way, the Chinese workers shared a tie to the Humes with the Punjabi laborers who later came to work in the Hume Mill. But beyond this straightforward connection is the deeper tie to wealth production for the town and region. Much of the American West before WWII lacked the labor needed to capitalize upon the region’s abundant resources. Industrialists like the Humes and Hammonds depended upon, recruited and attracted laborers from the world, especially Asia, to fill their crews. They and their industries tied remote Astoria into a global system of people and goods, with immigrants central to wealth creation in the American West.139

In Astoria and along the Columbia River, the Chinese were particularly critical to the salmon canning industry. The employment of Chinese laborers, which the Humes initiated, was formative in both the town’s commercial and social life.140 Beginning with a trial employment of 13 Chinese laborers in 1870, “by 1880, they numbered nearly three thousand in several dozen canneries on the river.”141 The center of the Columbia River Chinese population in 1880, and
later its commercial and social center, was Astoria’s “Chinatown.” By 1880, more than a third of Astoria, a town of 7,222, was Chinese, overwhelmingly men employed as cannery workers.¹⁴²

To expand, Astoria’s canneries had to compete with the railroads for Chinese laborers. Beginning in the 1870s, rail building had become erratic and by the late 1880s had dropped off sharply, signaling both an economic downturn in many industries and making more Chinese laborers available for cannery work.¹⁴³ But another factor increased the availability of Chinese laborers in the Pacific Northwest: “[t]he outbreak of anti-Chinese violence in California, which drove many Chinese into other states or to urban centers.”¹⁴⁴ In short, Astoria’s fish canning industry was able to expand and prosper due to the acceptance and employment of the Chinese men who had lost railroad jobs or had been expelled from other parts of the West by ethnic violence.¹⁴⁵

The large Chinese presence could be seen and felt in Astoria. Though living in a distinct district, they were an integral part of the town’s life. Their neighborhood was an active and diverse place with an opera house, living quarters, markets and gardens. Largely a male population, the men lived in barracks and cooked and cleaned together. Not everyone worked in the canneries. There were inventors amongst them. Some of the men labored in the wealthy homes of Astoria. They ran restaurants. The few merchants conducted trade with the broader Astoria community and engaged in a lively business with Portland’s Chinatown, 90 miles upriver. There were opium, prostitution and gambling houses, and judging from police records, these were utilized not just by the Chinese. Highlighting the importance of its Chinese community, the famous Chinese nationalist, Sun Yat Sen, visited Astoria during a U.S. fundraising tour.¹⁴⁶
Despite the relative security of their lives in Astoria, the Chinese immigrants faced a highly racialized world both in and out of the canneries. "Chinatown" is a palatable way of saying the Chinese lived in a segregated commercial and social world. And there were speeches, press articles and fights against the Chinese spanning forty years. Further, while critical to the development of the cannery industry, the Chinese were not its only employees. They held the lower paid and most numerous positions while the upper, more specialized tiers of the labor force were European American, primarily domestic born workers. In other words, the canneries employed a highly racialized, two-tiered labor force.

But there also seemed to be acknowledged limits to the racism and, at least by some, a conscious recognition that Astoria's social climate was different than much of the West — and to the town's advantage. The *Weekly Astorian* in 1886 commented, "they [the Chinese] congregate here [Astoria] in the same fashion [as San Francisco] because they are driven off elsewhere and have no place else to go," and reasoned that "[m]any Astorians refrained from anti-Chinese activities because they believed the laborers might abandon the canneries, thereby causing the collapse of the local economy." This article's reasoning may be an outgrowth of the influence of Harvey Scott and the *Oregonian* as argued above.

But whatever its ultimate source, the article's rationale that Astoria had benefitted greatly from the Chinese is well founded. Astoria was the center of the largest salmon production in the world, and Chinese labor was central to it. Chinese laborers had expanded opportunities for skilled white laborers, generated tremendous wealth for the cannery owners and the Astoria community at large, and had established a significant, ongoing presence in the city. On some level, the townspeople of Astoria understood that their prosperity was based on their acceptance
of ethnic diversity. This fact helped ease the entry of Asian Indians into town. But there was also a critical third factor.

![Photo 8. Finnish Socialist Hall Of Astoria](image)

**The Radical Finns of Uniontown**

The Finns, particularly the large radical enclave amongst them, made their own unique mark on Astoria and significantly shaped the Punjabi experience there. While fewer in number than the Chinese, nonetheless in 1905 almost twenty percent of Astoria’s population, or roughly 2000 people, were Finnish. Much like the Chinese and Punjabis, the Finns had left a country of ruined farms and political ferment, and were part of a larger emigration tide. Migrating from a country of fishermen and drawn to Astoria’s fishing in the 1850s, the Finnish population grew through the end of the century with the majority remaining fishermen, but with some farmers, laborers and shop keepers amongst them.  

Due to their trades, the Finns largely did not ...
compete with either Chinese or Asian Indian laborers. In fact, Finnish fishermen were quite
dependent on the productive labor of Chinese cannery workers and this functioned to undercut
the draw of anti-Asian rhetoric.

The Finns had other complications with the anti-Asian politics circulating in the West.
Finns blamed the long Russian occupation of their country for its crises, and many in the Finnish
overseas community, including those in Astoria, nurtured a hatred for the Russians. Likely due
to this, coverage of Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905 was careful, lengthy and positive in
Astoria’s press. The coverage often included laudable descriptions of Japanese society, rulers
and people, putting it at odds with the anti-Japanese propaganda then current. This, combined
with their often direct dependence upon the labor of Chinese cannery workers, arguably
combined to undercut the impact of anti-Asian politics amongst the Finns.153

The Finns, much like the Chinese, had a visible and felt presence in town. They lived in
their own district called Uniontown, with boarding houses, some homes, and a flourishing
commercial center all at the west end of Astoria. Called the “Helsinki of the West,154 it was the
largest Finnish community west of the Mississippi River.155 The Finnish community itself was
sharply divided, however, between the more conservative “Church Finns” and the political
radicals.156 Despite this division, they worked together combating alcoholism, forming co-ops,
and generally sponsoring cultural and educational events to promote and maintain Finnish
ways.157

While the “Church Finns” were numerically dominant, the radical Finns had an influence
well beyond their smaller numbers, and the peak of their activity and influence coincided almost
exactly with the presence of the Asian Indian laborers in Astoria, roughly 1904 through WWI.
In 1904, twenty-seven radical Finns formed The Astoria Finnish Socialist Club (ASSK). By 1918 it had grown to 403 paid members. One-third of its members were women, with the bulk of the membership drawn from the bachelor fishermen of the town.\textsuperscript{158} It became “the most active Finnish-American organization in Astoria” and was one of the largest and most influential locals within the national Finnish Socialist Federation (SSJ).\textsuperscript{159} The SSJs defined themselves as “foreign language organization within the Socialist Party of America (SPA).”\textsuperscript{160} In Astoria, these politics could be described as an amalgam of the internationalism and labor-focus of socialist politics, expressed with an ardent Finnish educational and cultural emphasis. But these politics and the men and women who promoted them, also had particular relevance for the Punjabis most notably in the promotion of the socialist message of the international brotherhood of workingmen, regardless of country or creed.

More particularly, the Finnish socialists shape the story of the Punjabis in Astoria in two very concrete ways – their press and their hall. First, to promote their socialist views and educate a wider audience, they produced two weekly Finnish papers in Astoria.\textsuperscript{161} The existence of these papers speaks to the vigor of the socialist circles in town. It also extended their influence across not only Astoria, but the country. As the “largest Finnish newspaper published in town,” it was often the main source of news from and about Finland for the broader Finnish community, thus broadening its influence well beyond socialist circles.\textsuperscript{162} Further, given the prominence of these papers, editors and contributors were drawn to Astoria from around the country. These men and women were talented organizers and propagandists, schooled and experienced in the broader socialist politics of the U.S., and arguably a critical counter to the parochialism which often infects small towns.\textsuperscript{163}
In April 1911, a major achievement of and focal point in the life of the Finnish radicals was unveiled. The Finnish Socialists of Astoria dedicated the five-story hall they had built, complete with a 825 seat theatre, a billiard and card room, bowling alley, gym, library, a ballroom with “the finest dance floor in Oregon,” storefront, and meeting rooms (amongst other features). It was “the grandest building in Uniontown and the second largest of its type in Astoria.” It was this hall the Asian Indians used for the foundational organizational meeting of Ghadar.

In short, the Finnish socialists of Astoria were a force beyond their numbers – through their presses, the talent that accrued to those presses, and their significant social hall, a hub of social life and activity in Astoria. At the core of that influence was the socialist belief in the unity of laborers irrespective of national origin. This, I would argue, was a significant in the creation of Astoria’s atmosphere of tolerance, including its notable absence of communal violence.

The Mix of Astoria

For many complex reasons, Astoria was both ethnically diverse and tolerant. The small, remote town also had significant radical currents. Sun Yat Sen’s visit highlights radicalism’s currency amongst the Chinese of Astoria. Both the Finnish socialists and Punjabi nationalists had a known history of explicit political affiliations and affinities with other revolutionary groups. Astoria, then, could be imagined as a place of relative ease for its international community of workers, but also for its explicit radical sympathies.

Arguably, the ability to express these affinities across cultural lines also existed. English was likely the lingua franca, with individuals within the different ethnic communities more or
less conversant. Particularly amongst the radicals there were multiple possibilities for the thwarting of language barriers. Whether they were newspaper editors and writers, merchants and labor contractors, literate laborers or laboring students, all had reasons to possess English language skills. Finally, it is hard to imagine that as an editor or writer for a socialist press or as an organizer for a new Punjabi revolutionary group, people were not alert to the likeminded around them.

I have no smoking-gun document to tell us what happened between the Ghadarite organizers and the radical Finns. But the very fact that Ghadar’s meeting was held in the Finnish Socialist Hall implies a conversation — or several — was held between these people. That there was a conversation implies a sense of possibility and openness, if not like-mindedness. Such a sense of possibility would happen only if people were carefully watching, listening and noting their social surroundings. There was a sense that the boundaries of the day could be crossed. The Punjabis utilized these openings to launch a movement that reverberated around the world.

**Ghadar**

Some push us around, some curse us.  
Where is your splendor and prestige today?  
The whole world calls us black thieves,  
The whole world calls us “coolie.”  
Why doesn’t our flag fly anywhere?  
Why do we feel low and humiliated?  
Why is there no respect for us in the whole world? (Ghadar poem) \(^{166}\)

Ghadar was formed by the very men who were “low and humiliated” and without respect “in the whole world.” In their quest to overthrow British rule, the source of their humiliation, the organizers of Ghadar joined intellectuals and laborers, and crossed divisions of religions and caste to include Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh in a stridently secular organization. \(^{167}\) But such earthshaking political moves do not happen in a simple stroke and Ghadar was no exception. It
was the political culmination of numerous efforts, false starts, and dead-ends, many of which took form in Vancouver.

Cultural and religious organizations created by the expatriates, especially in Vancouver, were early and crucial centers of political life influencing the entire West. Of particular note were the Gurdwaras and the Gurdwara Committee, later known as the Khalsa Diwan Society. Similar to its role in the Punjab, the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver (Pt. Moody) was initially concerned with the “corrupting influence of [the] foreign environment and resolved to … maintain the purity of Sikh religious norms.” This included concerted attention to those not observing the rahit, or Sikh code of discipline and conduct, often in an attempt to accommodate to their new environs. But given the tumultuous times, not surprisingly the group became increasingly politicized and a center in the years-long fight against the exclusion of Punjabis in British Columbia. By 1911, the Khalsa Diwan Society came to work closely with the Hindustani Association and United India League, explicitly nationalist political organizations in Vancouver, sharing both building space and organizational positions.

To Vancouver and its ferment were attracted students and nationalists from India and Europe, such as Bengali student activists Taraknath Das and Surendra Mohan Bose, and Gyani Bhagwan Singh, a Sikh priest and nationalist orator par excellent. From cajoling to threatening, every effort was made by these groups and individuals to convince the authorities of British Columbia, Canada, India and England of the injustice of their policy with regards to the Punjabi migrants in North America. Through their newspapers and the networks of the Gurdwaras and migrants, these efforts became well known and sympathized with throughout not only North America, but in India and the migrant Punjabi communities of the world.
But while protesting and publicizing their treatment, the community had not yet made the radical turn towards Ghadar. It was arguably foreshadowed, however, in 1909 when Bhai Bhag Singh, a former Bengali Lancer "and now Secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society, made a bonfire with his certificate of 'honorable discharge'" outside the Gurdwara.\(^{172}\) His act was accompanied by the Executive Committee of the Sikh Temple's condemnation of the further wearing of British military medals.\(^{173}\)

The importance of the burning of Indian military papers is hard to overstate. Since the partition of Punjab by the British in 1849, Sikhs had played a critical role in the Indian army, both within India and throughout the British Empire. In 1857 there was a mutiny by Indian troops against British rule. The Sikhs did not join the revolt but fought to save British rule. Even British accounts argue that without the Sikh detachments' loyalty and valor, British rule in India might well have ended that year. Consequently, the act of burning military papers by decorated former military men in the Vancouver Gurdwara was laden with meaning. Besides challenging their tradition of loyal fighting service, it also destroyed their claim to benefits in colonized India.\(^{174}\) The burning also underscores the choice of "ghadar," meaning revolution and mutiny, for the press and popular name of the movement. The act of defiance in the Vancouver Gurdwara was indicative of a significant political turn against British rule in the homeland.

All of this— the organizations, the burning of military papers, the newspapers — while not successful in disabusing Canada or the British of their policies, did succeed in breeding a strong sense of solidarity and a shared hostility to the British.\(^{175}\) It was not successful, however, in imaginatively or organizationally taking root amongst the broader Punjabi laborers. The critical bridging of Vancouver's political ferment — and its gelling into an organization of unapologetic
revolutionary action - to the broader laboring migrants took place in the U.S. Key to this was Sohan Singh Bhakna, a mill laborer, and Kanshi Ram, a successful labor contractor, both of Portland, Oregon, and both Ghadar heroes. 176

Kanshi Ram, raised a Hindu, credited as a Ghadar founder and its first treasurer, was executed upon his return to India after the Lahore Conspiracy trial against Ghadarites in 1916.177 Of Sohan Singh Bhakna I have more to tell.178 A formerly well-off Sikh farmer from the Punjab, literate from some schooling, he came to the U.S. after having squandered his family’s fortunes drinking and gambling.179 In the years before his departure, he had changed his lifestyle and begun to take more careful stock of the world, including political life. Contact with key religious figures at home had fostered a disdain for religious discrimination and for the observance of caste restrictions.180 Further, while not active, he had followed and been influenced by anti-British activities in the Punjab.181 With this as background, he arrived in Portland in 1909 aiming to pay off his mortgage debt with the cash from his job at the Monarch lumber mill.182 Instead, he became a leader in Ghadar – its first president, the overseer of the San Francisco office with the departure of Ghadar’s chief propagandist Har Dyal, and, finally, its trusted frontrunner to India at the outbreak of WWI.183 His stature in Indian radicalism – his uncompromising involvement in Ghadar and leftist politics for decades – is perhaps best described as “he was an institution by himself.”184

In 1912, Kanshi Ram and Sohan Singh Bhakna met with G.D. Kumar, an activist from Vancouver. This meeting bridged the radical movements of Vancouver with the laborers in the lumber mills of Oregon and was the beginning of giving that fusion organizational expression. All had their reasons for wanting such a connection.
For Sohan Singh Bhakna, entering the U.S. with its relative freedoms – to vote, to carry a gun, to develop one’s own country – was an illuminating contrast to the colonial life of home.\textsuperscript{185} Canada’s increasing exclusion of Punjabis was viewed by Sohan and other migrants, in touch through their networks, as expressive of that same colonial policy. Beyond these general features, both Kanshi Ram and Sohan Singh Bhakna had both been involved in the opposition to the St. Johns riot just two years prior. In the context of the rising tide of radicalism developing amongst the migrants, the armed and legal opposition shown in St. Johns could be considered indicative of a growing resolve to no longer be treated like “black thieves” everywhere (as the Ghadar poem put it).\textsuperscript{186}

For his part, the British Columbia activist G.D. Kumar had for several years attempted to bring his anti-colonial politics to the laborers of the region.\textsuperscript{187} A former college teacher in India, he made his living in Canada as a shop keeper. His political pursuits were focused on the publication of \textit{Swadesh Sewak} (in Gurmukhi), a paper which circulated in both Canada and India. Kumar was concerned with religious and social reform, such as discouraging alcohol use amongst the migrants. But his paper also clearly opposed Hindu exclusion and advocated Hindustani self rule. Over time, the paper increasingly called upon Sikh troops to rise against the British and resulted in the paper’s banishment in India. Besides producing the press, Kumar and others secretly met with groups of working men in Vancouver, winning some to his brand of revolutionary politics. All of this caught the authorities’ attention, including Vancouver’s daily papers, and Kumar felt compelled to leave the country. He joined Taraknath Das, the Bengali radical student then publishing a nationalist paper (in English), in Seattle. The two established and ran the United India House in Seattle, which attracted a small group of laborers and students
to its weekly lectures. Kumar visited centers of labors around the Northwest. In early 1912, he went to Portland.

This 1912 meeting resulted in the formation of the Hindustani Association and was held in the rented house of Kanshi Ram. Sohan Singh Bhakna was elected president, Kanshi Ram treasurer, and Kumar the general secretary. Later that year, a second chapter was formed after Bhakna and Udham Singh Kasel, laid off from Monarch, approached Kesar Singh in Astoria to form a like organization. That branch was headed by Kesar Singh, Munshi Karim Bakhsh and Munshi Ram (later penning the call for Ghadar published in the Astoria Budget), respectively President, Secretary and Treasurer. The groups held weekly Sunday meetings to discuss politics and produced a short-lived press in Urdu, the latter ending when Kumar was hospitalized.

While arguably an important joining of Vancouver’s activism with the laborers of Oregon’s mills, the politics of these groups was not yet that of Ghadar. Beyond the production of a newspaper, the groups’ stated aims were: “receipt of vernacular papers from India, importation of youth from India to America for education and with a view to devoting their lives to ‘national’ work in Indian and weekly meetings to discuss politics.” The more radical turn to Ghadar came from the laborers of Portland and St. Johns.

On the evening of March 25, 1913, Kanshi Ram gathered the workers in his house in St. Johns for what would be an historic meeting. With Kumar’s sudden illness, and presumably to help catalyze the movement, Kanshi Ram, Thakar Das and Bohan Singh Bhakna had sent for Har Dyal, a well-known Indian nationalist and activist teaching at Stanford University. Dyal met with the men that night in St. Johns. After great debate, the laborers rejected Dyal’s and others’ suggestion of sponsoring Indian students as a necessary precondition for obtaining
Hindustan’s freedom. Instead, the workers lobbied for immediate, direct and radical political propaganda amongst the thousands of men of the West Coast, and a proposal for the Asian Indian workers to “gird their loins to liberate India and work on revolutionary lines, was carried.” Other key decisions of that meeting affirmed British rule as the cause of all suffering in India; that youth educated in India under British rule were incapable of fighting for independence; that overseas workers in the U.S. were key to liberation as they had gained political consciousness and money; and that they now needed an organization to end British rule in India through armed revolution with the aim of establishing an American-type democratic government, a so-called United States of India. To propagate these goals, it was decided they needed an organization and press (Ghadar), based in San Francisco. The political turn towards Ghadar had been made, and the men set upon the task of establishing it.

Within two weeks of this gathering, Bhakna, Ram and others organized meetings in the mill towns scattered along the Columbia River in order to establish chapters united by the March 12th resolutions of the Hindustani Association of America (commonly known as Ghadar). From March 31 through April 14, 1913, local men and others traveling from Portland and St. Johns, gathered in Bridal Veil (20 men), Linnton (100 men), and Winans (100 men). By late spring, they were ready for the culminating meeting in Astoria.

This public meeting, announced in the Astoria Budget, was held May 30, 1913 and keynoted by Har Dyal. It was attended by the Punjabis of Astoria and by delegates from all along the river. Here the official program of Ghadar was proposed and passed. Those attending looked to England’s engagement in WWI as their opportunity to make their dream of ending British rule through force a reality. Central to their revolutionary analysis and strategy was winning the armed forces in India, still dominated by Sikhs, to mutiny against the British
colonizers, and that mutiny would be spontaneously and ineluctably followed by a general uprising amongst the broader Indian population.\textsuperscript{197}

From these beginnings in Oregon, the movement established a weekly press published out of San Francisco and in numerous languages – Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and occasionally English. Har Dyal, Ghadar’s most prominent spokesperson and chief propagandist, oversaw the office and publications in San Francisco.\textsuperscript{198} The first issue of \textit{Ghadr}, carrying the news of the organization’s formation, garnered great interest amongst the farmers in California and a second organizational conference was held in Sacramento in December of 1913. Chapters spread throughout North America, and on to India and the far flung communities of Punjabis in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Manila, Siam, and Panama, weaving thousands of men across the globe into a movement for power.\textsuperscript{199}

It is outside the scope of this essay to consider the outcome of these men’s efforts once back in India other than to reiterate that, with the outbreak of WWI, thousands of them returned to India with the aim of overthrowing British rule. Most were promptly captured, tried, and detained or executed, and their insurrectionary plans failed. Amongst those returning were key activists from Oregon. Bohan Singh Bhakna, sent by the Ghadar Party to lead the men once in India, was sentenced to life in prison but later commuted to over twenty years. Kanshi Ram, along with others, was executed in Lahore shortly after his return. But despite this, and as analyzed by a number of historians, while not immediately successful, the men and their movement made an indelible mark on the Indian imagination and the movement towards self rule. But the relationship between these men and the people of Astoria, I believe, also merits consideration. In this it is helpful to more carefully consider the press release from Munsii Ram published in the \textit{Astoria Budget} on May 30, 1913.
Munsii Ram's notice reflects a trust in their relationship with the broader community of Astoria. It was written in impeccable English, highlighting both a skill and a desire to reach out to the broader Astoria community. It was addressed to the editor of the paper, itself a confident move. Ram speaks as both the "Secretary of the Hindu Association of Astoria" and "on behalf of the Hindu residents of Astoria," revealing an assumption about Astoria's knowledge of the "Hindu residents," and their organization, and reflecting a change from "the Hindoo Sunday Sing's" death seven years prior when, "[v]ery little if anything is known of him ..." Munsii Ram describes the keynote speaker, Mr. Har Dyal, as a "noted philosopher and revolutionist in India" who is to be "accompanied by Mr. R. Chandra, a well known Hindu journalist and author, who is at present a political refugee in this country." There is no concealing the politics of the event or those involved but instead highlighted a "revolutionist" and a "political refugee." Ram also promoted the time, place and plans for the arrival of the speakers, promising a "splendid reception" by the Hindu community, revealing no fears of their arrival being known, if not an overt invitation to join in that reception. Finally, Mr. Ram noted the specific "lecture on India for the American residents of Astoria," a clear attempt to speak to a broad audience. All of this bespeaks a comfort in and openness with the community in which these Punjabis lived. At a time of openly violent attacks throughout the West against Punjabis and others, most of which were endorsed by the powers within those communities, this level of comfort is significant, even more so given the openness about the politics being promoted.

That Ram's notice both attempted publication in the local paper and was published is notable. Both are suggestive of the important openings allowed by life in Oregon generally, and Astoria more particularly, that the Asian Indian laborers recognized, cultivated and utilized in their creation of Ghadar in 1913. Astoria's history of relative racial and political tolerance, the
radical Punjabis' political affinities with the Finnish socialists, the practical assistance of a public and sympathetic meeting hall, combined with a strong enclave of Punjabi laborers in Astoria and politically enthusiastic communities stretching over a hundred miles upriver likely provided a strong argument for Ghadar's leading activists to publicly cement their organization in Astoria.

Thus, even within the untenable conditions of ethnic cleansing taking place throughout the West, I agree with historian Chris Friday that in a multitude of ways "people consistently negotiated to empower themselves and make their lives more tolerable within large and rather harsh structural constraints." If people can be forced – or recognize the need – to leave a place such as Bellingham because of its political climate, they can equally identify and develop a more favorable one such as Astoria. With the founding of the Ghadar movement in 1913, the Asian Indian laborers seemed to have done just that.

In sum, the Punjabi community gained strength in Oregon and Astoria; they were not driven out as historians have argued and I assumed when beginning this study. Instead, they left Oregon not because of mob violence, but because they chose to go home and fight. Few visible traces of their presence endure as these men built Ghadar and not farms and Gurdwaras. The legacy, then, of Punjabis in Oregon is not one of ethnic cleansing but one of people empowering themselves and finding community and aid in their environs. In these post-9/11 times that have produced hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians – crimes not so unlike those one hundred years prior in 1907 Bellingham – such legacy has great resonance and argues that the political and racial structures we often presume are immutable are not.

But perhaps most important is what this story about Punjabis demands of us as its listeners. Will it become another spectacle, another sensational tale of suffering and triumph
filed away with others but which never alters our national self-conception? Or does its full hearing carry the possibility, if not demand, of remaking the narratives of who “we” are?
Appendix A

Thoughts on Nationalism

I have eschewed nationalism the better part of my life, yet this research regarding early 1900s Punjabi migrants and activists in Oregon is embedded in the story of two nations, India and the U.S. How am I to navigate this? What are the landmines? Is there any story here other than the tragedy of nationalism?

I view nationalism as a fundamentally limited enterprise as nations are by definition exclusionary enterprises, and their formation is embedded in the critical power relations of colonialism with all of the violence that has accompanied, if not defined, modernity. Yet the making of nation states the natural unit by and through which to examine a story is a distinct limitation, if not plague, within the social sciences.\(^ {205}\) My goal then is to consider the problems and implications of “methodological nationalism,” or the “naturalization of the global regime of nation states” for my research.\(^ {206}\)

Two nation states stand at the heart of my work.\(^ {207}\) There are two national narratives vying to be the standard bearer of this tale, threatening to claim the story. I see this posed as two entwined problems or questions. On the one hand, does showing the presence and contributions of the Punjabis in Oregon argue for making them “Americans too” or otherwise folding them into the country’s national narrative? Conversely, for those sympathetic to the long-distance nationalism of Ghadar as the Punjabi’s political response to their position in the world some one


\(^ {206}\) Wimmer and Glick, 576.

\(^ {207}\) Ultimately, there are more than the nations of the U.S. and India involved in the formation of Ghadar. Canada, for example, is a notable player. However, for the simplicity of argument and due to the fact that my research is primarily centered on the U.S. and India, I am narrowing the parameters in this paper to two nations.
hundred years ago, does that oblige an uncritical espousal of their Indian nationalist dream both then and now? What are the dangers or limitations in either of these perspectives?

On the first half of this quandary – the question of inclusion of the Punjabis into the American national narrative – historian Mae Ngai is instructive. At the heart of her incisive argument is the premise that the U.S. immigration and citizenship policies were critical in the construction of a white America.\textsuperscript{208} As she states, "Immigration policy is constitutive of American’s understanding of national membership and citizenship, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion that articulate a desired composition – imagined if not necessarily realized – of the nation."\textsuperscript{209} Ngai highlights the tension between America’s use of immigrants and immigration for the literal building of the U.S. productive capacity and for the building of the country socially, culturally and imaginatively.\textsuperscript{210} On the one hand, the U.S. immigration laws facilitated the utilization of the global labor market to build the country’s infrastructure and staff its productive capacities, meaning millions were let in to work. On the other hand Ngai argues, the state’s conference of citizenship was reserved for the select, and racially defined, worthy few.\textsuperscript{211} Immigrants were categorized and admitted, or not, as citizens according to hardened racial terms.\textsuperscript{212} As applied to the Punjabis (or Chinese and Japanese), especially in the West with its vast labor needs, they were part of the force that logged the trees, milled the lumber, and worked the farms. But they were barred from full cultural and political inclusion in the nation by the denial of citizenship. Otherwise put, they were defined by law as the “other” to the U.S. citizen.

\textsuperscript{208} Ngai constructs this in distinction to European Caucasian due to its folding together of various “whites” from the old country (Ngai, 7, 25).
\textsuperscript{209} Ngai, 5.
\textsuperscript{210} Ngai, \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{211} Ngai, 17-18; 37-38.
\textsuperscript{212} Ngai, 38.
Such legal acts – conscious, if contentious, choices by people in a society – of “othering” have a long lifeline in America. U.S. immigration laws are situated, as argued by Ngai, on the continuum of the highly racialized construction of America from its earliest beginnings, most notably the legal definition of African slaves as chattel barred from U.S. citizenship.213 The key difference between Asian laborers (Chinese, Japanese, or Punjabi) and African slaves is not the racialized category of citizenship, but the state of the laborer: free or unfree; immigrant wage earner or slave.214 While both groups were for years barred from full membership in the American nation, their respective labor was equally fundamental to its building. Much as early America was constructed on the backs of African slave labor, America’s westward expansion of empire was dependent upon migrant Asian labor. The laws and practices surrounding both peoples – African slaves and Asian migrants – were not just exclusionary. They were also constitutive. The conference of citizenship imaginatively and practically established Americans as white Christians in contradistinction to the non-white and non-Christian peoples, whether indigenous, Muslim, Buddhist, Shinto, or Sikh present in the country from day one.

The histories of immigration and slavery are also bound together in America’s foundational myth. Donna Gabaccia argues that amongst diverse immigrant-receiving nations and white settler regimes such as Canada and Australia, the U.S. is distinct in its “generation of an immigrant paradigm to explain the making of its nation.”215 Gabaccia defines this paradigm as a “particular interpretation of American exceptionalism.”216 More particularly, she states:

213 Ngai, 38.
214 Prof. Henry Yu, UBC class discussion 10/28/09.
216 Gabaccia, 11.
“It portrays the United States as the world’s first democracy and its most open frontier in the nineteenth century and as the world’s strongest industrializing economy in the twentieth. These exceptional traits made the United States extraordinarily attractive to humble settlers, seeking freedom and prosperity, from abroad. Second, it views the incorporation of immigrants as the key to the American character – we are a ‘nation of immigrants.’”

Gabaccia’s language highlights that this American exceptionalism assumes that all migrants wanted to or became American immigrants or settlers, and works to define America as a chosen land for millions from around the globe. But more importantly Gabaccia argues that this “myth of nation building … serves to exclude racial minorities,” notably Native Americans and African slaves, neither of which can plausibly be construed as immigrants. Thus, America’s “immigrant paradigm” serves to silence a foundational part of America’s colonial past – slavery and the colonization of Indian lands. Consequently, how one tells the story of immigrants, including the seemingly worthy task of unsilencing their role and contributions can, without attention, contribute to dangerous misconceptions vis-à-vis the American national myth.

From the historical vantage points developed by Ngai and Gabaccia, I want to return to the first part of my quandary regarding the place of the Punjabis in American history: what are the problems and implications of retroactively including a formerly barred people within the national story? On the simplest level, reason argues that such after-the-fact insertion reinforces the tyranny of the nation through the binary logic of exclusion or inclusion. Such reasoning leaves little room for the millions of people who identify with and travel among multiple places on the globe.

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Garbaccia, 11.
Garbaccia, 15.
Further, as argued, America in part defined itself by the exclusion of Asian Indians. Their entrance into the U.S. was highly politicized and carefully monitored. They were the targets of violent mobs and barred by law from becoming citizens. On a human level, retroactively folding them into the national story feels both too simplistic and within what Said describes, when speaking of exiles, as banalizing the immigrant experience.\(^{219}\) What of the debt to those lives who, have paid dearly in a process so aptly described by Said as, “irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, ....has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography”?\(^{220}\) Is their sacrifice suddenly acceptable because these people are now part of the American fabric? Or are we simply expunging a nation’s sins with a narrative of inclusion?

Besides trivializing the experience of past immigrants, the logic of retroactive inclusion cannot explain the continuing habit, and harm, of designating Arabs, Muslims and Asian Indians as outside the American nation. Ignoring or failing to fully reckon with the past does not come without a price. Historian Trouillot insightfully observed that, “We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naïveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naïveté is always a mistake.”\(^{221}\) Post-9/11 America provides a powerful case study of Trouillot’s point.

\(^{219}\) Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge: Harvard Uni Press, 2000), 174. “On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience firsthand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as ‘good for us.’”


\(^{221}\) Trouillot, xix.
In the wake of the Twin Towers' collapse, and as noted in my introduction, the U.S. government detained and interrogated over a thousand Muslims, Arabs and Asian Indians irrespective of their citizenship status or activities. These detentions were part and parcel of a broader atmosphere of hate crimes in the country. It is perhaps little surprise that Japanese-Americans were among the first, and most fervent, to denounce these actions. They had experienced first-hand America’s enduring view that “immigrants are aliens, not citizens” and thus the fragility of “alien” legal status. The wartime internment of Japanese-Americans had effectively and dramatically, Ngai argues, “nullified their citizenship, exclusively on grounds of racial difference.” In speaking out against the targeting of Muslims and Arabs after September 11, Japanese-Americans bore powerful witness to the cost of naiveté for the oppressed.

Thus, an uncomplicated insertion of the Punjabi migrant story into the American myth does not explain or deracinate their persistent construal as suspect or foreign, and thus dangerous. Instead it fosters the dangerous illusion America is beyond its own history. It silences a fundamental feature that gave shape to the Punjabi’s experiences here – their exclusion and the critical political importance of that exclusion to American nation building. It participates in the triumphalist narrative (the inclusion of yet another immigrant story proving again the resilience of America) that, as Gabaccia argues, works to cover America’s colonization of Native land and its importation and reliance on African slaves. In short, it fosters the “omission and historical error’ [that] produce nations and their foundational myths” which historians, especially

222 Ngai, 269.
223 Ngai, 229.
224 Ngai, 175.
those not compromised by methodological nationalism, should be at the forefront of complicating.\textsuperscript{225}

There is yet another problem with the simple inclusion of the Punjabi migrants into the American story. Gabaccia argues international migration and ascendant nationalism were linked and shaped by both sending and receiving countries alike.\textsuperscript{226} This would imply not simply a cross-national tale, a tale of interactions, but one which is mutually defining of two nations. Indeed, the history of Punjabi migrants in North America is integral to a second national narrative, the narrative of Indian nationalism. Does the experience of Punjabi sojourners and radical political activists argue for inclusion in both countries, one country or neither?

The Punjabis labored in both India and North America and were disrespected in each. This dual experience changed them and fostered their formation of Ghadar. Their organization denounced their mistreatment everywhere and laid its cause as the lack of a self-ruled homeland. Ghadar countered great nation nationalism (Canadian and U.S.) with its own anti-colonial nationalist dream and program. These men dreamt of creating an Indian nation to which they could “go home” and be an integral and respected part.

But “home” proved to be a complicated concept. As Malkki argues:

“In the sedentarist analytical scheme, then, ‘[g]oing home involves only the most minor cultural adjustment problems...’ To go home is to go where one belongs. But is it? Two problems present themselves right away. First, one thinks of how this sedentarist bias unintentionally mirrors the increasingly elaborated nativism of anti-immigrant or xenophobic violence that often relies on the slogan ‘[Category name] go home!’... Second ...
recent work has shown how fraught the concept and the lived experience of home can be, and how little studied it is.\(^{227}\)

Ghadar’s political program, in response to U.S. and Canadian nativism, was to “go home.” The aim of going home was to change “home,” i.e., to create an Indian self-ruled homeland. In contrast to their experience with the exclusionary nationalism of North America they envisioned a secular, caste-free, multi-ethnic state. Ghadar was creating a newly imagined home distinct from the home they had left, most notably free from British rule.

However, when the Ghadarites arrived “home,” many of those who had not emigrated did not share the new imagery and this played a significant part in Ghadar’s immediate defeat. In the Punjab, for example, many Sikh religious figures and institutions – whose North American counterparts had been crucial in the early formation of Ghadar – considered the returnees apostates. Far from wanting Indian independence, they recruited soldiers for the British WWI efforts.\(^{228}\) This speaks to Malkki’s argument regarding how “fraught the concept and the lived experience of home can be...”\(^{229}\) Ghadar’s nationalist dream – the newly imagined home – lacked significant political purchase in their natal home. The men of Ghadar, including their imaginings about themselves, their country and their future, had all changed in this overseas sojourn. Neither their identity nor their conception about home was immutable.

Static or fixed assumptions about home are closely related, as Malkki argues, to notions that the loss of “home” entails the loss of an equally fixed cultural identity.\(^{230}\) Cultural identity, however, resists the ossification and essentialism that nationalism requires in its quest to assign

\(^{228}\) Puri, 85.
\(^{229}\) Malkki, 509.
\(^{230}\) Malkki, 509.
humans to their proper place. The Punjab’s history as a centuries-long, fertile cultural crossroads reveals the notion of a fixed cultural identity as absurd. Further, Ghadar’s immediate experience and political disconnect upon returning “home” argues against notions of fixed identities. The Ghadarites had returned “home” changed men. They did not lack identity, but had become something new in North America. This transpired in a complex and varied process of being defined as the Indian (or Hindu) “other” at borders and in censuses, and in their exclusion and persecution by mobs and mill owners. In their contact with Irish, Finnish, Chinese and other nationalists and socialists in North America, their status as “others” came to be understood as being a people without a self-ruled homeland or nation. No longer simply Punjabis, Sikhs, Muslims or Hindus, they had become Indians with the dream of an Indian nation.

The dream of an Indian nation, while temporarily defeated with Ghadar during WWI, was achieved in 1947. Indian historiography views Ghadar as an opening salvo in the Indian nationalist endeavor. But the eventual creation of the Indian nation produced two countries, the partition of the Punjab, and historic dislocations and violence. The partition of the Indian subcontinent enhanced and ossified divisions between Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus as the definition of the new states of Pakistan and India were based on essentialized differences between historically intertwined and largely cooperative peoples. A border was erected on those differences. The Punjabi short story “The Exchange of Lunatics” poignantly expresses the absurdity enshrined in these new nations. It tells the tale of a governmental decision to transfer the inhabitants of the insane asylums to their new and “proper” countries after 1947. The concept of “proper” countries, seemingly so logical to government, is lost upon the insane.

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who cannot understand their inability to ever return home to their farms and former Sikh, Muslim or Hindu neighbors, friends, or family. The dark humor of the story resides in exactly what, or who, here is insane.

The Ghadarite dream of an inclusive, tolerant and secular Indian nation resided in a reality fraught with divisive contradictions. These contradictions were, in part, rooted in the power dynamics at play in the establishment of India, including both the longstanding British imperial interests and the state of the anti-colonial movements, and are outside the scope of this paper to analyze. But it is on point to note the irony of Ghadar’s call for the establishment of a United States of India, seemingly an emulation of a country which persecuted and excluded the Punjabi migrants.\(^{233}\) Part of this is understandable given the United States’ defeat of the British. But more fundamentally, historian David Scott’s argument is germane that what should be of concern when “historicizing past hopes (such as anti-colonial ones)” is an analysis “less of the transformative projects themselves than of the way those hopes reflect a certain understanding of the problem to be overcome... the way the sources of discontent or the obstacles to satisfaction are conceived and defined.”\(^{234}\) Ghadar sought to overcome the British, not imperialism or nationalism. While certainly historically defensible as a countering of great nation chauvinism (U.S., Canadian and British), Ghadar’s opposition nonetheless remained within the nationalist confines that enshrine difference by definition and inescapably reside within the unequal power dynamics of colonialism which stamp our world. And in this sense there is a question of whether the story could end in any way other than problematically, if not tragically.

\(^{233}\) Deol, 57.
\(^{234}\) David Scott, 5-6.
For me, then, the story of Ghadar and the men who made it should not be recounted as a romanticized nationalist struggle but as a series of questions. What happened? What are we to do from here? The questions we ask about Ghadar — and many other such struggles around the world - must be different at this end of the historical arc of nationalist and socialist struggles than at its inception. As David Scott argues:

“Today nation and socialism do not name visionary horizons of new beginnings any of us can look toward as though they were fresh thresholds of aspiration and achievement to be fought for and progressively arrived at; to the contrary, they name forms of existing social and political reality whose normative limits we now live as the tangible ruins of our present, the congealing context of our postcolonial time.”

This is the challenge of recounting the story of Ghadar and its roots in Oregon. To sanitize the making of America and its exclusion of Punjabi migrants compromises a critical chapter in both U.S. and Indian history. Equally, to avoid the problematic present of Indian nationalism –to speak of Ghadar as if it has the same resonance today as in 1914 – does us a disservice. Either would trade, as Trouillot so eloquently expressed it, a false innocence for crucial understanding. Because if the complicated, interdependent Indian and U.S. histories are glossed, we the world’s people, lose critical problems that must be faced. Where has nationalism gotten us? Is there anything beyond the tangible ruin-of American and Indian nationalism within this story?

To the final query I would answer a small case “yes.” First, I believe fully confronting methodological nationalism’s impact requires this. Because without the “tyranny of the national,” what different stories could we tell? Nationalism no doubt has stalked our archives, robbed us of anything other than that which it craves, and replicated itself with the remains of its thievery. In the case of my particular research, I have argued a history of relative racial tolerance

235 David Scott, 29.
236 Gabaccia, 1.
existed in Astoria. But our silent thief has likely left just mere scraps about the past complexities transpiring in Astoria. In that early blush of nationalist endeavors when all looked so plentiful and possible, whether in America or India, could anyone have known what alternate stories or evidence we would need some one hundred years later? Errors, omissions and silences so large today could well have felt so trivial then.

But scraps we have about Astoria, including about the town’s general racial acceptance and about the particular political affinities between radical Punjabis’ and the Finnish socialists expressed in Ghadar’s formative meeting in the Finnish Socialist Hall. Such tolerance is a rejection, if partial and flawed, of the exclusion so formative of the American nation. Further, much in the Punjabi experience in North America negates ideas of static, immutable, even “natural” identities impervious to interaction and adaption, notions which are so critical to nationalist agendas. The people of Astoria in many ways were all “foreigners” and exiles at the edge of the world – both east and west. And as Said argues, “exiles cross borders, breach barriers of thought and experience,” taking less for granted, less as dogma. 237 Given this, perhaps the story of the Punjabis in Astoria – with its micro-constituents of global politics and local open-mindedness - can feasibly be mined for its moments of a sort of frontier humanism where the productive interdependence of people from many origins trumped rigid, nationalist dictates. Astoria seemingly resisted the “tyranny of the national” blowing in the world’s winds.

237 Said, Reflections On Exile, 185.
Appendix B

Critical Notes on Authorities

I claim that the story of Punjabis in the Columbia River Basin is a silenced story. As is often the case with history, things are a bit more complicated than that. It is more accurately stated that largely for historians of the North American West, Ghadar’s roots in Oregon is a silenced history. By contrast, Indian historians studying Ghadar have provided details about the Punjabi presence and activity along the River since at least the late 1960s and are the source of many of the particulars used in this essay. Reading their accounts I was both elated about the information but perplexed by the fact that historians on the other side of the world knew more about happenings along the Columbia River seemingly than those close by. This poses some interesting historiographical questions which I will simply touch on here and leave to another time, or to other historians, to address more substantially.

In her seminal work on Asian Indians in North America, Joan Jensen argues that the violence typified in Bellingham and amplified in its wake “eventually pushed Indians out of many areas and jobs in Washington, Oregon, and much of northern California, forcing their retreat into agricultural regions of central California where other Indians had already settled, Euro-American workers had not yet organized, and growers were expanding their operations.”

As a broad brush, I have no disagreement with Jensen’s characterization. But this “centrality of California” is picked up and argued by others, such as Ronald Takaki. This erasure of the Oregon leg of Punjabi experience also appears in the excellent catalogue produced at UC

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238 Jensen, 42.
239 Takaki, 301.
Berkeley about Punjabis in California. The catalogue’s cover is a photo taken in and of a family in Astoria. A Punjabi family comprised of a migrant father, mother and children was a distinct rarity. Yet, other than one partial phrase, Oregon is not otherwise mentioned in the catalogue. The issue is not one of an improper credit. More, it is a subtle, and certainly unintentional, erasure of what I argue in this essay is a critical component of the Punjabi migrants’ experience. What accounts for these omissions or oversights by such excellent historians?

First, there are obvious issues of language. Indian historians literate in Punjabi, Urdu and the like could access Ghadar records that historians such as Joan Jensen and Ronald Takaki assumedly could not. There are also issues of demographics. That there are many more persons of Asian ancestry in California no doubt skews our lens and fosters a tendency to view California as the locus of Asian migration history in the American West. This tendency, if unexamined, can continue to hold ground as California has had a prominent, ongoing Punjabi community from the early 1900s while Oregon has not. Besides demographics, there are also the simple workings of our business as historians. Within each historical work there inheres the possibility of learning from and building upon it—and I am deeply indebted to these authors as my extensive references to their works indicate—along with the pitfall of being blinded by its received wisdom. And here I think the historicity of our trade is of importance.

I believe there is an interesting, if missed, cross-talk between historians such as Jensen and Takaki and the Ghadar historians such as Puri and Deol. All were writing roughly in the late 1960s or early 1970s and all were concerned with the role of those often excluded from history—

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the underclass and oppressed. But these seemingly took different expression in the two countries, arguably for good historical reasons. I would like to conjecture and pose some questions for later interrogation, about what might explain the differences between the historians of the two countries.

In the U.S., it was a time when progressive historians began to highlight the under classes of the country, very much including the persecution they suffered. It was a time of fighting for recognition of the "real history" minorities and the poor had in the U.S. — often second class status and targets of white racism from all levels of society. In India, while focused on a similar subject, given the high tide of revolutionary nationalist struggle (Viet Nam, the Cultural Revolution of China), historians were likely looking for earlier revolutionary heroes to counter the domesticated nationalist politics of the day. Ghadarite history would provide a rich pursuit. These are the broadest of strokes. My point is that each country's historians were seemingly addressing a similar moment and subject, but from their own political and historical framework. But they were not addressing each other and this story was — in the States at least — inadvertently silenced.

Another contributor to the silencing of Oregon's Punjabi migrant experience is differing beliefs about basic people's abilities to make history. This in part accounts for the considerable divergence over the details of Ghadar's formation, particularly the relative weight and role of intellectuals and students versus laborers in its inception. The genesis of a movement is a complex issue and one in which I do not claim theoretical competence. From my life experience, however, I would make the simple argument that it does not happen without either group. Further, there is in society, including amongst historians, a strong tendency to underestimate the ability of basic people to make history. The relevance of these points is that if one is inclined to
focus on the role of students and intellectuals, San Francisco, the location of Ghadar's press and organizational office, will be conflated with the place of its beginnings. Oregon will be lost. Historian Bose most conspicuously makes this argument and underestimates, I believe, the broad turn in consciousness of the laborers and their critical role in Ghadar. Jensen briefly mentions Oregon and the formation of the Hindustan Association, but overwhelmingly focuses on the efforts of Har Dyal and, consequently, San Francisco.

Again, these are my questions, conjectures, and points of curiosity. It is an intriguing story within a story. But most of all, it argues for the crucial importance of research being done informed by historians across the globe, theoretically framed outside of nationalist bounds, and with humility about the beliefs, prejudices, and blindness we bring to our work.

242 Jensen, 180-183.