

Voice 1: Imagine yourself walking around Seattle's downtown area. Things aren't quite as industrial as they are today, but there are still some tall buildings...

Voice 2: People milling about...

Voice 1: Suddenly, though, you hear a noise.

Voice 2: Not just one noise. The noise of—

Voice 1: Tens of thousands of people.

Voice 2: Yelling, screaming, and—

Voice 1: Lo and behold, it's a protest.

Voice 2: But this is not the Women's March, or even the March For Our Lives. This is not a modern march—

Voice 1: It is November of 1999...

(theme music plays)

Voice A: Seattle is—

Voice B: Well, we don't use umbrellas.

Voice C: Coffee.

Voice A: Computers?

Voice C: It's a city with a needle.

Voice B: Home to sasquatch.

Voice D: Home to the Museum of History and Industry.

Voice B: Innovation.

Voice C: Rain.

Voice A: A story.

Voice D: A history.

(music fades out underneath)

Voice 1: My name's Atul, and with me today I've got a different MOHAI Youth Advisor. More specifically, one of our writers, Leela. Say hi Leela!

Voice 2: Hi Leela!

ATUL: So Leela, why are you here today?

LEELA: Well, I'm usually more behind the scenes, but I love the WTO protests as an example of a huge social movement. Plus, I can never miss out on arguing with Atul.

ATUL: This is Rainy Day History, pre-recorded at MOHAI. In this first season, we're exploring inclusion, exclusion, objects, people, and how the Seattle we know now, the questions we grapple with now about what it means to be a Seattleite -

LEELA: Are all part of a bigger story of belonging. Enjoy the show, whether it's raining outside or not.

(small sound of rain fades in and out)

ATUL: We think of Seattle as a hustling and bustling globalized city.

LEELA: Hustling and bustling? Atul, you sound like a tourism ad.

ATUL: And I'm not the only one! Just earlier this year, Seattle was ranked the 9th best city to live in by the *US News and World Report*.

LEELA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What's the point?

ATUL: Well, the point is that there's this narrative that sees Seattle as an interconnected port city. One of globalization and big companies, not unions and little guys.

LEELA: Let me guess, that wasn't the full story?

ATUL: Not really. Seattle has long been considered an industrial town.

LEELA: Like the Museum of History and...Industry!

ATUL: Huh, yeah. And along with industry, factories, and labor come...labor activists. Seattle has a long and complicated history of labor rights and labor protests. In the 1880s, a union group formed called the Knights of Labor.

LEELA: Like with chainmail armor? Sounds very chivalrous.

ATUL: No, just a moral conscience and belief in the quote-unquote "working man" and the 8 hour work day.

LEELA: Well, that sounds pretty good.

ATUL: Actually, it wasn't always good. The Knights of Labor had their own history of inclusion and exclusion. In 1885, the Tacoma, Washington Knights of Labor violently excluded the

Chinese workers who made up 10% of the population at the time. The same thing happened in Seattle a couple of years later.

LEELA: Huh. That doesn't surprise me. It makes sense that immigration and labor were intertwined, sometimes in racist ways. Think back to the Chinese Exclusion Act we talked about in the Japanese Incarceration episode.

ATUL: Which you should listen to if you haven't!

LEELA: Shameless plug, Atul. Shameless plug.

ATUL: What can I say?

LEELA: More about the actual topic of this podcast?

ATUL: Well, later followed the International Workers of the World, or IWW, in the early 20th century.

LEELA: As in, workers of the world unite?

ATUL: Yeah! Unlike the Knights of Labor, who fashioned themselves as anti-socialist and anti-anarchist, the IWW had a radical leftist bent. They were determined to advocate for the rights of workers using many means, including, and this was much less common at the time—

LEELA: Protest?

ATUL: How'd you know?

LEELA: Lucky guess.

ATUL: Huh, okay.

LEELA: Actually, not just a lucky guess. I remembered about the General Strike of 1919. In Seattle, it was one of the most successful strikes of its time, because 65,000 workers of all different occupations walked off the job at the same time, as unions in Seattle grew stronger as wartime industries boomed. The strike, although often accused of being "radical communist propaganda" at the time, was a nonviolent act that united many different unions and worker federations. The racial dynamics were still...complex, because many different communities of color had their own separate unions, based on a past history of exclusion. But they all agreed to honor the strike.

ATUL: That's a slightly better way of working together than Chinese exclusion.

LEELA: Yeah. In a way, the stories of strikes and protests can be ones of *inclusion*, so that there are actually enough little guys to take on the big guy.

ATUL: Which, of course, brings us 80 years into the future from the General Strike, to 1999 and a time where the big guy was the World Trade Organization.

LEELA: And the emblem of the little guys taking on the World Trade Organization were a number of elaborately decorated cardboard turtles.

(Jaunty piano music plays and fades out underneath)

LEELA: The cardboard turtle is an iconic MOHAI object. It's displayed near the end of the True Northwest: The Seattle Journey timeline. It is an object that represents a unified front, the start of a revolution,

ATUL: And the history of environmentalism and labor in Seattle history, a debate that still matters today, from corporate expansion to plastic straws.

LEELA: You may wonder, can one small turtle costume really symbolize so much? And the answer is yes, yes it can.

ATUL: In order to understand its importance and what it represented in 1999, let's start with what in the world the World Trade Organization is.

(pause)

ATUL: Uh, Leela, do you know what in the world the World Trade Organization is?

LEELA: I thought you'd never ask. The World Trade Organization is an intergovernmental organization that regulates international trade. And in 1999, at the beginning of the dot com boom, they wanted to *deregulate* trade. The WTO held an annual meeting that cities could put bids in for. In the end, in 1999, it came down to Seattle versus Honolulu.

ATUL: Who would choose Seattle over, Hawaii?

LEELA: Pat Davis, the Seattle Port Commissioner who lead the bid, must have been very persuasive.

ATUL: Like me?

LEELA: Uh....

ATUL: Wow. Harsh, Leela. Anyway, in a pattern of protest that had become a Seattle trend by the late 20th century, workers and unions from all over the area decided to use the WTO meeting, which started November 30th, as a starting point to promote their ideologies, beliefs, politics, and to protest for their rights. Protests started weeks before the meeting started.

LEELA: They were all united around one thing: the belief that the WTO and the deregulations served corporations rather than people or the environment. One poster in the MOHAI archives proclaims, "Don't let the WTO boil you like a frog!"

ATUL: Frogs? I was promised turtles.

LEELA: Don't worry, Atul. The turtles were costumes. The group "Public Citizen," led by Lori Wallach and Mike Dolan, constructed several hundred cardboard and spray paint turtle costumes to protest a decision, earlier that year by the WTO, to disregard environmental regulations on shrimp fishing.

ATUL: Turtles used to get caught in the nets.

LEELA: So they were an effective public face for the protests.

ATUL: All together, they were teamsters and turtles!

LEELA: Sometimes, when I hear people talk about the WTO protest, it's like this weird blip in Seattle history. But it wasn't a blip! It was part of a larger history. When people talk about it now though, they focus a lot less on things like the turtle costumes, and more so on another history...of violence and police brutality.

(Somber piano music plays and fades out underneath)

LEELA: The police and Mayor Paul Schell, without permission from the federal government, set up a "no protesting zone." It failed—protestors protested in the area anyway, and the police were violent toward them. Years later, a federal jury decided that arresting protestors in the no protesting zone had violated their 4th amendment rights.

ATUL: The police came with tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. The violence built. A personal testimony by environmental protestor Tico Alameda, collected by the WTO History Project at UW, says:

LEELA: Eventually, the marchers split in two directions: tens of thousands heading towards the WTO meeting with the hopes of "shutting it down;" and other tens of thousands favoring a peaceful sit-down protest in the streets surrounding the hotel where many of the WTO delegates were stuck waiting while the events played out further downtown. A few blocks away from this sit-down protest, members of the anarchist "Black Block" were beginning to smash windows and

light fires. The Seattle Police Department was beginning its crackdown on both the violent *and* non-violent protestors.

ATUL: The protestors were a broad group of people; many were inspired by different ideologies. There was a nonviolent group who merely wanted to bend the direction of the WTO, others, many anarchists, who destroyed property to protest trade and capitalism.

LEELA: And I imagine that at that point, any journalists who had written news stories about the international union solidarity, witnessed at Memorial Stadium just a few hours earlier, were scrapping those stories in favor of accounts of the storming of Starbucks or Nike Town.

ATUL: The media latched onto the violence and dubbed the protests “The Battle of Seattle.”

LEELA: Noah Smith, a professor at Stony Brook University, wrote in an article in *Atlantic* magazine that the media didn’t just aggrandize the violence of the protests—they mocked the protestors, he says:

ATUL: “If I could go back in time, I would make the WTO heed the concerns of the Seattle protestors. They were not silly. They were right.”

LEELA: In some ways, they were successful as well—they left their mark on the WTO and the cultural context of the time. Writers 20 years later used them as a point of reference. Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper resigned after frustrations at how he handled the protests. The WTO meeting which intended to be major world news, was overshadowed by the protests. The nations of the meeting failed to come to a consensus, and Bill Clinton, president at the time, signed a treaty aimed at addressing child labor and then left a day early. Sometimes Seattleites live in our own bubble, but the WTO protests put us on a national stage. 1999 must have been a wild time...

(jaunty piano music fades in and finishes)

ATUL: 1999 is a funny time, if you think about it. Because it was so close to when we were born, but we just missed it! Like, it both feels so far away and so close. The parents of teenagers remember it, but not teenagers themselves.

LEELA: Luckily enough, at the museum there are many a person born before 1999.

ATUL: You’re saying its full of old people?

LEELA: They’re not old! Just not teenagers. Anyway, MOHAI staff pitched in to help us make sense of this very, very recent history. From Lynne, who said “This ain’t no Ninja Turtle costume!” to Rachel, who declared,

ATUL: “This artifact I love because it demonstrates the power of art in protest. Trying to conceptualize the harm caused by WTO trade agreements can get very abstract and hard to connect with. By picking the turtle as symbol of environmental destruction, it made the issues tangible and opened up the conversation. Art brings in necessary beauty and whimsy and joy to street protests!”

LEELA: The turtles have left their mark on the museum *and* on the world. Which of course, leads us to ask the question: how did the turtle get from the world to the museum? Clara, in Collections, told us that:

ATUL: “The Curator at the time, Elizabeth Furlow, had friends and connections among the protestors and so had them bring stuff in within the first weeks after the events took place. She was able to collect things then, including several of these turtle costumes, that would have been impossible to track down later (or would have been thrown out in the intervening years). The collection also includes rubber bullets and zip ties used as handcuffs.”

LEELA: The WTO protests opened up a doorway for a new kind of history collection. Rather than receiving donations 50 years after an event, MOHAI memorialized the event as it happened. And you know, Clara, who told us that story, recently curated the *Seattle Style Fashion/Function* exhibit at MOHAI.

ATUL: Now you’re the one with the shameless plugs.

LEELA: What can I say? I really like my fashion, and my functionality.

ATUL: Maybe the turtle *is* a good example of Seattle style, in a way.

LEELA: Well, I probably wouldn’t wear it to school. Maybe you would though...

ATUL: Yeah, I took a look at it, it’s pretty cute.

LEELA: I was joking, Atul.

ATUL: Oh. Well, even though it’s on display in *True Northwest*, it does portray a combination of creativity and pluck that’s quintessentially Seattle. Using cardboard to make turtle costumes to protest anti-environmentalism?

LEELA: Plus, it was a chance for everybody to come together.

ATUL: A lot of our stories have been about ways in which Seattle has learned and must learn from keeping people out. This story is more about keeping companies out, through turtles. Is that good? I’m not sure. But it shouldn’t be forgotten. Or else what would I argue about with my friends?

LEELA: John F. Goodman, in an anthology of stories about the WTO protests produced by Evergreen College, puts it well. He says:

ATUL: “There are not enough words to describe the emotions created in me while marching in the streets of Seattle together with brothers and sisters from all walks of life, chanting, ‘This is what democracy looks like.’ Environmentalists, union members, Native Americans, people from all over the world were standing together against the WTO and what it stands for. That was awesome.”

LEELA: Compared to events from 50 years ago or 200, we’re still very much “in the moment” as we reckon with globalization and anti-globalization in the wake of the WTO protests in Seattle. It is important to think about an accurate historical legacy for the event.

ATUL: One that is, after all, full of turtles.

(Finale music plays)

ATUL: And that’s it for this first season of Rainy Day History. We hope you’ve enjoyed these small snippets of Seattle history. Maybe you’ve learned a little about different areas of Seattle, and what it means to be included as a Seattleite.

LEELA: We hope you were able to see the themes of unity within these stories, and how they still impact us today.

ATUL: And the stories don’t stop here. If you want to learn more about any of these objects, come to MOHAI.

LEELA: And remember, this podcast was imagined, created, and written all by the MOHAI Youth Advisors.

ATUL: You can learn more about the MOHAI Youth Advisors, and stay connected by visiting mohai.org/mya, or follow us on Instagram @mohaiteens.

(jaunty piano music plays and plays out underneath)

FINCH: This is Finch. I’m one of our editors, here with the credits.

This episode was researched by Julia and Leela, written by Leela, and recorded by Leela, Atul, and Emily T. Our editors are Grace and myself. I wrote the theme music and performed it along with Tyler and friend of the pod, Sylvie Wang. Our logo was designed by Grace. Marketing help came from Julia, Tyler, and Grace. Special thanks to Pei Pei, Chris, Tori, and Emily T, fashion icon, celery queen, bringer of all snacks and tea, and meticulous notetaker. Stay dry out there!