

THE MASSACRE AND MARTYR(DOM)S OF OAK CREEK: On the Problem of Diaspora, the Economy of Agonism, and the Extimacy of Relation-Making

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On August 5, 2012, a white supremacist descended upon a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, leaving seven killed and several injured in what was then purported to be the bloodiest massacre targeting a religious community in the United States since the Birmingham Church Bombing of 1963. Over the subsequent national news cycle, reporting condemned the racism thought to motivate this latest “hate crime,” meanwhile only incrementally arriving at a sense of its victims: that they were *Sikhs*; they follow *Sikhism*; their houses of worship are called *gurdwaras*; their scripture is the *Guru Granth Sahib*. However, while public discourse underwrote the tragedy of a little-known community targeted for its conspicuous turbans and beards, Sikhs themselves had learned to become far more ambivalent about their purported victimhood.

In the hours following the shooting, at a major gurdwara in California, I noticed a familiarity with violence extended well beyond the immediacy of any then here and now. Gurdwara complexes minimally consist of two built environments—the royal sanctum (*darbār*), in which collective ritual life is centered around the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and the open kitchen (*langar*), in which it is around the free preparation, distribution, and partaking of meal. I first proceeded to the sanctum, where the officiant (*bhāī*, literally, “brother”) initiated a performance

of the collective supplication (*ardās*) among the few hundred congregants. Each stanza of its standardized rhythmic blank verse calls the assembly to collective remembrance by uttering, in choral synchrony, *Wāhegurū* (the Supreme Being). On this day, the poignance of the third stanza seemed especially unmistakable. Its text memorializes exemplary men and women of past centuries whose resolute devotion could not be deterred, those who had “sacrificed their heads but did not surrender the path, became cut to pieces joint by joint, became de-scalped, mounted breaking wheels, became hewn alive by saws, sacrificed themselves in service of gurdwaras, refused to surrender the path, who upheld their Sikhi with each breath and hair.” Yet whereas the body of the supplicatory text is seldom altered, its conclusion is by convention supplementable. On this day, in the hours following the shooting, the supplication invoked also those just slain—however, not as victims, but as martyrs.

This article concerns the configuration, or mutual foregrounding, of seemingly distinct orders of violence. Modern Sikh memorial practices reveal a remarkable sensitivity to martyrs (*shahīd*) and martyrdom (*shahādat*), ethical beings and events, respectively, in which the self elicits its death in devotion to the Supreme Being. As elaborated in exegesis (e.g., see [Murphy 2004](#), 343–44), martyrdom emerges from a perpetual remembrance of the interconnectedness of all things (*nām simarān*), which emancipates the self from its self-individuation ([Mandair 2009](#), 215), or ego (*haumai*), in a new becoming (the *gurmukh*) given to universal compassion, spontaneous love, and relentless sovereignty ([Bhokal 2012a](#), 861; [Mandair 2009](#), 373, 377). Moreover, martyr(dom)s also contour collective memory, disclosing a “history of the Sikh people [that] has been one of marginalization and struggle at the periphery of three imperial hegemonies: Mughal, British and Indian/Hindu.” ([Bhokal 2011](#), 64). In an intertextuality ([Silverstein 2005](#), 7) or “becoming-comparable” characteristic of martyr(dom)s ([Bernal 2017](#); [Thiranagama 2014](#)), dis/similarities between instances thereof can index ([Silverstein 2013](#)), or “point to,” dis/similarities between the respective contexts of their occurrence, in this case, regimes imperial, colonial, postcolonial, and liberal multicultural.

At stake in the in/comparability of the event is a global economy of agonism, which mobilizes in this case at least two forms distinctive of late twentieth century socio-political struggles, the politics of recognition and ethno-nationalism. For a growing number of Sikhs, their tradition calls for an avowed agonism against white supremacy and a concomitant refusal of liberal political forms. Young activists relate their struggles against racial supremacy to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century struggles against state power, grounding their call for a politics

that would defy empire, cultivate coalitional alliances, and refuse well-worn performances of multicultural docility. Yet for institutional decision-makers of rank, who ground their authority in having witnessed majoritarian state terror firsthand, such agonism risks decades of partial but hard-won recognition, respectability, and legibility. Established community leaders focally concerned with mobilizing a politics against the nation-state for a homeland insist that other kinds of agonism in the diaspora might distract from ongoing struggles against India, whose violence is intuited as more profound in cruelty, brutality, and scope. In this generationally delineated disagreement articulated around the figuration of martyr(dom)s, the scalar complexity of the ethico-political is premised on the translation of time and place.

I probe the competing investments motivating political disjuncture by tracking what is here called the *problem of diaspora*, the seeming untenability of calibrations to and between home(land) and sites of dispersion. In *The Nation's Tortured Body*, Brian Keith Axel (2001; see also 2004) argues that martyrs slain by the Indian state motivate psycho-social investments in homeland constitutive of diasporic subjectivity by inspiring an imagination of, stake in, and demand for territorial sovereignty over and around Panjab. However, I find that martyrs slain by white supremacist violence instigate translations between struggles concerned with homeland and sites of dispersion, respectively, including, inter alia, the territories now claimed by the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The respective relation, mutual implication, and strategic negotiation of diasporic and para-diasporic investments indexing homeland and the sites of dispersion, respectively, inform the competing worlds at stake in disputes about political form. That is, the problematization of diaspora reveals how political imagination is figured by tacit presuppositions about the proper loci of agonism, or *when/where the action is*. For Sikhs, is it a homeland in Panjab, the apparent site of the tradition's founding, demographic growth, and given memorial canon, or is it unbound, inclusive of the sites of its dissemination, as implied by the tradition's universality?

An ethnographic pursuit of psycho-social cleavages consequently reveals the extimacy of, or mutual co-implication of *internal* and *external* in, collective relation-making, that is, making solidarity, alliance, or coalition. The urgency of relation-making bespeaks an assembling that might refuse the mutually imbricated workings of global empire, raciality, patriarchy, class, and capital (Smith 2015, 385). Yet its political (contra *social*, e.g., Durkheim 2013; Goffman 2021) achievement also proves elusive, as Sikh ethno-nationalism and human rights campaigns have, over the decades, evinced all too well. In focusing on the extimacy

of relation-making, I pursue a study capable of thinking *together* the disjunctures *within* collectives and the disjunctures *between* collectives. Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange (2018), for instance, problematize solidarity-building grounded in the putative parity *between* Asian American and Black experiences by scrutinizing generationally delineated disjunctures among the prior. Disagreements about political form reveal the stakes motivating the dynamic relation between relations-with-others and relations-with-self, in this case implicating disparate inheritances of violence, investments in time and place, and the in/comparability of ethico-political events.

To bring into ethnographic focus the problematization of diaspora, economy of agonism, and extimacy of relation-making, I turn to the semiotic sciences for a vantage unto their mutual imbrication in situated sense-making practices. In the debate at the center of this study, contested investments in the locus of the real motivate arguments around violence in its scale and structuration. For diasporas inheriting multiple orders of ethno-racial violence, the scale of structural violence proves important precisely because majoritarian violence so obviously operates otherwise than punctuated events. Scalar analytics are central to the anthropology of diaspora (Bakker Kellogg 2021; Bernal 2020; Lukasik 2021), both in its concern with agency (e.g., competing construals of homeland through which social actors negotiate the terms of political recognition; see Bakker Kellogg 2019, 476, 481), and with discursive structuration (e.g., the remapping of homeland violence, following the war on terror; see Lukasik 2021, 566). As studies of raciality have demonstrated, fixation on evental spectacle can obscure its more entrenched, perduring, and patterned workings (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020, 72; Rosa and Díaz 2020). An analysis of scale, or arrangement of world (Carr and Lempert 2016; Pritzker and Perrino 2021, 366–70), therefore brings into view the competing senses of time and place at stake in disagreements in and about diaspora.

The ethnographic moment at the center of this study draws on analytic sensibilities garnered through more than two years of field research investigating multisited mediations of the Sikh tradition, including among gurdwara communities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and India. At the above gurdwara in California, management committee members called me to join deliberations in the langar hall, having noticed my discoursing outside and otherwise from years of irregular attendance in protests, informal discussions, and community organizing. This participation did not anticipate the sober moment as fieldwork at the time, though subsequent notes and the composition of this essay have perhaps made it so, if only by retroaction. In this case, the ethnographic field consists in the dialogic

pursuit (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 38–39) of the problematization of diaspora, extimacy of relation-making, and economy of agonism in both their face-to-face and imagal modalities. The langar hall instantiates an “offstage” (Shryock 2004), a site wherein collective interventions in public life are devised and, in this case, calibrations to and between homeland and sites of dispersion are made un/tenable, relations internal and external to a collectivity are negotiated, and the horizon of a politics is perpetually re-imagined.

The format of this ethnography tacks between analyses of images and face-to-face interaction, interactional modalities wherein martyr(dom)s make a problem of diaspora. It first examines the built environment of the langar hall for everyday sensitivities to martyr(dom)s. Images thereof installed on its walls enact a diasporic imaginary, which scales an evolving tradition of struggle in memorial canon. The ethnographic focus then shifts to a heated half-hour dispute between young activists who blame refusals to politicize white supremacy for moral failure and elder gurdwara management committee members who rebuff such interventions for indulging in a performative radicalism. The cross-legged assembly wrangling on the floor of the langar hall reveals competing investments in when/where the action is, relaying between generationally delineated turns-at-talk that each ground their respective models of agonism in reference to those slain just hours earlier.

In so proceeding, this study seeks possibility in the service of a more decisive articulation of otherwise distinct agonisms and, in doing so, offers itself in the meditation of a yet-to-come.

DIASPORIC IMAGINARIES: The Scaling of Struggle in Memorial Canon

Bibi (honorific, “sister”) Amandeep Kaur commands the foreground of the photograph, peering directly at the viewer against the blurred bodies behind her (Figure 1). She informed human rights organizations of the abductions, tortures, and executions perpetrated by police in Panjab, and was executed by them for it. Bhai (honorific, “brother”) Mani Singh faces his executioner, instructing him to cleave not at the wrist but rather the digit of his finger for a truer implementation of the joint-by-joint dismemberment decreed by the then governor of Mughal Lahore (Figure 2). He was arrested for thwarting attempts to ambush arriving pilgrims and executed for refusing to disavow *gurmat*, the teachings of Guru Nanak and his successors.



Figure 1. Bibi Amandeep Kaur.

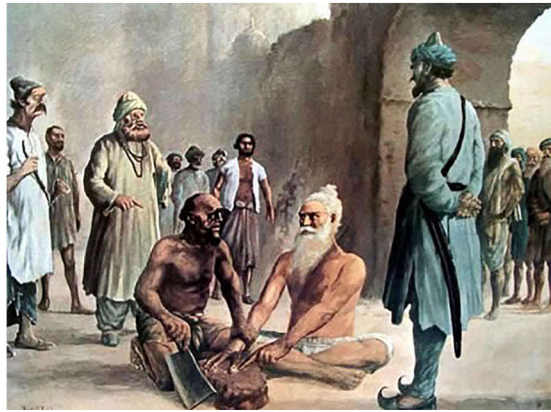


Figure 2. Bhai Mani Singh.

About forty such images of martyr(dom)s line the four walls of the langar hall, hanging on high, evenly spaced, halfway between floor and ceiling. Painting reproductions, mid-twentieth century experiments in modern visual forms mostly in the medium of oil, depict martyrdoms-in-becoming, bodies being hewn in half, tied and burned alive, and cut joint by joint by successive powers of and since the seventeenth century. Photographic reproductions, circulated before death or collected afterward, focus on martyrs yet-to-be, bodies that become slain by the Indian state in the 1980s and 1990s. Congregants in the langar hall ordinarily notice this series of images while partaking in the dispensed bread, sitting cross-legged, back to back, and in linear array (*pañgat*), though passersby can sometimes be noticed contemplating them while standing in suspended gaze.

In 1997 and 1998, Bal installed these “photos of the martyrs” (*shahīdān dīān phōtōān*) to honor militants and non-combatants abducted, tortured, and killed by the Indian state in the 1980s and 1990s; inspire the gurdwara community to reflect on them as ethical and political exemplars; and motivate the movement for an independent Sikh homeland in and around Panjab (“Khalistan”). Bal is a working-class gurdwara organizer in his fifties who migrated to the United States after men in his family were disappeared and killed by state police in the 1990s. He reports installing these images so that congregants might recognize the sacrifice of martyrs (“*saṅgatān ihanān dī kurabānī recognize karaṅ*”), find inspiration in them, (“*saṅgatān nē ihanān tōn parēranā laiṅī*”), and cultivate an unshrinking exuberance (“*saṅgatān ihatē laggū chaṛadī kalā*”) in the service of a vociferous struggle. He explains that “these men/people are never ordinary [*ih bāndē āmm bāndē nahīn hūndē*],” precisely because they “sacrificed the most valuable thing, their

lives, for their tradition and their community's heritage [*ihanān nē āpaṇē dharam tē āpaṇī kaum dī heritage vāsate sabh tōn jiādā kīmatī chīz āpaṇī jān kurabān kītī*].” For Bal, martyrs instantiate a resistance against state violence that makes possible and conduces the practice of tradition.

The exalted rank of the martyr is meant to compel political investment in homeland. According to Axel's (2001) study of Indian state violence against Sikhs, the mutilated body of the martyr motivates a longing for prior wholeness, instituting a properly diasporic subjectivity in the desire for territorial sovereignty over a homeland anterior to its colonial and then postcolonial disfigurement. However, images in the langar hall, unlike online archives of the already mutilated (as in Axel 2001), depict martyrs from the 1980s and 1990s yet to be mutilated (e.g., Bibi Amandeep Kaur) and martyrs from past centuries becoming-mutilated (e.g., Bhai Mani Singh). The martyrs depicted in these images do not exhibit any conventional signs of dejection, because realized beings are emancipated from pain and sometimes even pleasure (though, in one exceptional photograph, a young Harjinder Singh Jinda smiles while offering confections to his collaborator, Sukhdev Singh Sukha, in celebration of their upcoming execution, having assassinated the former chief of the army staff responsible for commanding the attack on Darbar Sahib in 1984). Depressed upper eyelids, even countenance, and steady posture instantiate signs of existential equipoise characteristic of modern Sikh martyrological iconography, even if transgressing gendered expectations of the austere body (e.g., in the piercings, makeup, bindi, and vivid suit worn by Bibi Amandeep Kaur), and even if defanging the wholeness of the complete body (e.g., in the turban/*dastār*, sword/*kirpān*, and possibly bracelet/*kaṛā* removed from Bhai Mani Singh).

Bal initially collected photographs of contemporary martyrs with collaborators in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and India. Bal began by circulating these images in Panjabi-medium diasporic newspapers, amid protest demonstrations, and at gurdwara programs commemorating martyrdom (*shahīdī samāgam*). (On the public display of Sikh martyrs, see also Chopra 2018.) These images instantiate a diasporic imaginary, or a “globalized domain of images” (Axel 2004, 35), a field of visual artifacts that constitutes diaspora by inspiring the shared imagination of an originary homeland. This martyrological diasporic imaginary is organized around the figure of the Khalsa, the order of “saint-soldiers” (*sañt sipāhī*) instituted by Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) in 1699, that is also the authorial voice and beneficiary of the supplication voiced in the sanctum (“This supplication is of the supreme and collective Khalsa, let the collective Khalsa call to mind, *Wāhegurū, Wāhegurū, Wāhegurū*”). The event that organizes this imaginary

occurred in June 1984, when the Indian military attacked the sacred premises of Darbar Sahib (the so-called Golden Temple) on the celebrated martyrdom anniversary of the fifth master, Guru Arjan (1563–1606), raided other gurdwaras across the country, set fires to and confiscated libraries of priceless, handwritten manuscripts, and destroyed rare artifacts. The campaign marshaled thousands of soldiers and months of training (Tatla 2015), targeting, according to Joyce Pettigrew, the existential “heart” (1995, 8–9) of Sikhism, not simply a struggle for regional autonomy. Yet the events of 1984, counterinsurgency, and militancy remain obscure and little understood. The Indian state has yet to admit the true extent of its systematic terror nor its cover-up thereof (Kaur 2019). Langar halls in the diaspora instantiate one crucial site wherein state violence has been memorialized for more than three decades, contrary to indifference from academics, media, and international actors (see Mahmood 1996, 244), and whereas the public installation of recent martyrological iconography had until recently been prohibited in India (Singh and Purewal 2013, 144).

The diasporic imaginary installed in the langar hall situates the conflict in and against the state in an evolving tradition of struggle by making serially contiguous the paintings of renowned martyrs slain since the seventeenth century and photographs of recent martyrs murdered by India. As Bal explained, a likeness couples ancient (*purātan*) and recent martyrs, “their [contemporary martyrs] rank and status resembles that of past martyrdoms [*ihanān dā darajā rutabā purāṇē shahīdān nāl miladā juladā hai*].” By placing images of martyr(dom)s across otherwise distinct eras in a single serial array, temporal continuity is projected from spatial contiguity. The semiotic transposition offers one of the longest-standing arguments for periodizing Indian state violence of the 1980s and 1990s as the third and most recent massacre (*ghallūghārā*) (see also Tatla 2015) since the “greater massacre” (*vaḍḍhā ghallūghārā*) of Sikhs in 1762 by the Durrani Empire and the “lesser massacre” (*chōṭā ghallūghārā*) in 1746 by the Moghul Empire.

Yet the diasporic imaginary also motivates differences between kinds of martyr(dom). The langar hall models, extends, and evolves a tradition of the warrior-saint (*sant sipāhī*) modeled on the exemplary lives and teachings of Gurus Arjan (1563–1606) and Teg Bahadur (1621–1675), whose teachings courted mortality at the hands of Moghul imperial authority. The array of images periodizes, by grouping together images of the lives of the gurus in distinction from images depicting subsequent campaigns against the Moghul Empire, skirmishes against tribal potentates, and anticolonial resistance against the British Raj, as well as both the militancy movement against and extrajudicial killings by India. As instantiating

its two exemplary instances, the gurus might even seem to exceed martyrdom itself. The ambivalence is enregistered in the supplication, for instance, in which their companions are recalled in the ways that they were slain, but they themselves are not. Precisely because Bal and others group different “kinds” of martyr(dom)s together, some kinds can be conspicuous in their absence. This langar hall, for instance, like most, does not install depictions of those slain by racial violence in the United States (though, see [Kaur 2023](#)).

The dis/similarity of martyr(dom)s across instances is precisely what furthers the ongoing evolution of a tradition of agonism, including its appropriation. Images installed in the langar hall both authorize ethico-political stances in the here and now and memorialize past struggles, bringing different kinds of martyr(dom)s across time and place into emergent dis/similarity. However, postcolonial anxieties occlude the creativity of its repetition (on the creativity of martyrological iconography, see [Mittermaier 2015](#), 586 and [Varzi 2006](#)), reducing the memorialization of martyr(dom)s in the Sikh tradition to “optical illusion” (e.g., [Das 1992](#), 247) and “the obsession to mechanically analogize new events to a limited stock of past events” ([Das 1992](#), 253). Post/colonial states have relatedly sought to appropriate the tradition, prizing Sikh men of caste as a loyal race of “special warrior-martyr[s]” ([Fox 1985](#), 8; see also [Fenech 1997](#); [Imy 2019](#)) for their putative, if properly subdued, bravado and valor. However, this “iconolatriy of manliness” ([Mandair 2005](#)), which genders the capacity for self-sacrifice, makes men paradigmatic of Sikh subjectivity, eliding the multiplicities constitutive of Sikhs (see [Singh 2005](#)), including women martyrs who span from the period of the living gurus into the future. [Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh \(1993, 4\)](#) argues that “ironically, Sikh literary heritage abounds in precisely the kinds of images for which western feminist critics yearn so painfully.” In the langar hall, martyred women are quite literally depicted in images. [Bibi Amandeep Kaur](#) and other women refute the gendered stereotypy of martyrdom, as does the supplicatory text that makes exemplary the martyrdom of both “men and women” (*siṅghān siṅghaṇīān*).

The institution of memory is therefore also its creative evolution in a tradition of struggle. The mutually co-implicated evolution of the martyrological tradition and an ever-changing field of politics becomes a key site for thinking the ethics of ego-loss informed by the brutal violence of nations and states, whereas functionalist analyses focus primarily on instrumental utility. For instance, a characteristically secularist necropolitical analysis models martyrdom after suicide bombings as its paradigmatic case, reading martyrdom for ideological duplicity, resentment, and religious fervor, as a world-hating vow to destroy “impure corporeal life”

(Mbembe 2019, 50), an act of “subjugating life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2019, 89), a vengeful calculation “to take the enemy down with you” (Mbembe 2019, 89), and a self-suicide wrought by a “desire for eternity” (Mbembe 2019, 92). Ethnography shows that martyrdom indeed often does “manipulat[e] [death] toward nation building” (Mbembe 2019, 65; see also Bernal 2017, 27), for instance in “an economy of heavenly reward” (Varzi 2006, 37) or a vengeful desire to transcend the material world (e.g., Hacking 2008, 23–25). However, the functional figuration of death makes possible its thinking otherwise, not only its manipulation. Sikh discursive practices seldom ground martyrdom in the promise of a hereafter. Rather, the living are called to contemplate death in the unrelenting project of foregoing an ego now, the study of which might awaken a truer sense of what it mean to live.

THE 9/11 GENERATION: Intervention in the Release of Agonism

In the langar hall where images of martyr(dom)s are installed on high, the assembly sits cross-legged in concentric circles, a symmetry reflecting the egalitarian ethos at stake in gurdwara settings. Vir addresses the assembly as a form of the divine itself (“gurū rūp sādḥ saṅgat jī”), a routine conversational opening that acknowledges the authority of the assembly and frames the discussion as one of collective contemplation (*vicār*), which, much like martyrdom, is premised on foregoing ego (*haumai*). In practice, the forbearance involves treating disagreement delicately, to not indulge in the narcissistic trappings of facework, and to not offend any in the vaunted assembly of seekers. Vir is an elected gurdwara management committee member in his fifties, one of many such predominantly men responsible for overseeing the everyday operations of the gurdwara, including informal decision-making initiatives such as this one, which calls the assembly to authorize the gurdwara community’s official response to the shooting. I admired this assembly of two dozen men and women for their *sēvā* (selfless service) in operating the langar hall, teaching Sikh history and Panjabi at the Khalsa school, programming community health campaigns, and undertaking various ad hoc initiatives. The lives of most are anchored in the sociality of the gurdwara, including asylees who had migrated during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as more educated classes who had arrived as early as the mid-1960s. In the innermost circle sat young, college-age activists familiar to me from various protests, youth camps, and social media, rather than from the day-to-day operation of the gurdwara. They sit quietly—at first.

The deliberation soon arrived at sponsoring a candlelight vigil, convening an interfaith dialogue with local religious community organizations, and issuing a

public statement thanking law enforcement for their service, though one suggestion to call for gun control was dismissed for treading in matters of political controversy. For many, including the consensus at this langar hall, a recognition that Sikhs are conducive to, rather than threaten, national aspiration is so sought after precisely for its prophylactic promise that it might correct misconstruals thought to motivate abuse and violence against them. Sikh men have become renowned as particularly ironic victims of racial violence according to a “hypothesis of mistaken identity” (Puar 2007, 178), which proposes that anti-Sikh violence stems from a conflation between the “monstrous” (Puar 2007) turbans and beards of the Sikh body and the overdetermined figure of the Islamic terrorist (on “racialized religious markers” of Sikhs, see Singh 2013, 123). In the “racial panic” (Rana 2011) following 9/11, Sikhs have become actionable targets of fatal violence under what might be called the racial sovereignty of transnational white patriarchy (Grewal 2013), emblemized in the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was slain in the days after 9/11 by a gunman who wanted to “shoot some towel-heads,” and who warned that “I’m an American. Arrest me and let those terrorists run wild.” The consensus underwrites now standardized forms of public participation, which are thought to help garner sympathy, accrue goodwill, and ward off further violence.

Against this consensus, the cadre of young activists sitting in the cross-legged assembly call instead for a press statement addressing white racism by name, a rally rather than a vigil, and solidarity with seemingly similarly aligned Black, Indigenous, and Muslim communities, and under no circumstance any thanks to police. Jot, Gem, and their peers instantiate a “9/11 generation” (Maira 2016; see also Nijhawan and Arora 2013) whose fluency in the idioms of social justice emerges in response to domestic forms of racialization under the global war on terror. Theirs is part of a larger generational movement to make compatible tradition and movements of social justice (Nijhawan 2016, 12). Practically, this involves building culturally sustaining institutions adjacent to and within gurdwara settings (Luthra 2021) that seek to meet urgent community needs, for example, addressing substance abuse, domestic violence, and homelessness, as well as broader agendas such as environmental justice, civil rights, anti-imperialism, and labor organizing. Their frustration lies with the seeming servility of their community’s attempts to garner recognition through education campaigns, interfaith forums, policy interventions, and liberal rituals of public mourning, which they believe forfeit the agency of the warrior-saint so unmistakable and visible in the langar hall.

Jot scans the circumference of the circle and finally erupts, piercing the harmony of the consensus by forcefully asking what appealing to *gōrē* (whites) had

ever achieved for “us.” The intervention comes as a three-pronged criticism. First, the inclusive first-person plural implies that the consensus wrongly assumes that others like him and his peers are included in their constituency, pressing the assembly to acknowledge the servility of its consensus in contrast to their refusal. Second, the intervention implies that perpetual efforts to garner sympathy have not yielded at least proportionate reward, given that anti-Sikh racial violence persists seemingly unabated. Third, and perhaps most unsettling, the assembly is charged with folding the universal teachings of Guru Nanak into the mandates of whiteness/liberalism. In doing so, Jot makes palpable “the fact of whiteness” (Hartigan 1997), rendering explicit the race of the otherwise unmarked addressee of liberal recognition, or what might be called a “white listening subject” (Flores and Rosa 2015). In Punjabi, *gōrē* has come to stand for white and liberal cultural forms against which diaspora can be positioned. The insistence on making explicit the fact of whiteness becomes especially jarring in this case, precisely because race, caste, and ethnicity are not sanctioned social categories for gurdwara settings, in keeping with the universality of *gurmat*. Though, matters prove far more vexed and vexing in practice, as this dispute makes apparent. Jot’s indelicate entry perks up his peers.

Proceeding in tight succession to retain the conversational floor, one of Jot’s peers voiced an idiomatic expression problematizing the servility of the consensus as an instrument of whiteness/liberalism: “Whites have made us into spoons [*camacē*].” Another situated the stance of the assembly as one of beggars (*manḡatē*), in contrast to the background knowledge that one only begs of the Supreme Being, not any human. The series of arguments stakes a will to defy proper to the tradition, registering the contradiction between performances of docility designed for white liberal listening/viewing publics and a proud tradition of defiance, struggle, and sovereignty. At stake is the forfeiture of a sovereignty, ceded to the colonial “Christian-secular continuum” (Mandair 2013; see also Bhogal 2012b) and in complicity with imperial hegemony, anti-Blackness (Judge and Brar 2017), and white supremacy (see Kaur 2020).

Gem latches on, voicing a parallel between Moghul and American empires: “Would it ever make sense to ask the Mughals to appreciate that we’re nice and peaceful people?” Gem makes comparable liberalism/whiteness and past regimes like the Mughal Empire, framing the prior beyond any biographic adversary. Under the moral-judicial rubric of so-called hate crimes, liberal discourses characteristically understand such violence as matters of criminal trespass, an individuated transgression against and contrary to law, rather than political violence, the

structural trespass of the juridico-political regime itself (see Mamdani 2015, 63). However, martyrdom partly consists in asymmetry, a mortal encounter with an existent power of greater magnitude. For Gem, this asymmetric power is structural in race and empire. He proclaims this explicitly: “This is structural racism,” enumerating a history of racial injustice in slavery, Native American genocide, Japanese internment, and killings targeting Sikhs in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. In making commensurate anti-Sikh violence and a history of American violence against other conspicuous minorities “of color” (cf. Sexton 2010, 47–48), Oak Creek becomes situated in both the tradition of martyrdom and the history of the United States. As becomes apparent, however, the conspicuous academic register of concepts such as *structural violence* draws charges of theoretical abstraction inadequate to the concrete moment. Sunaina Maira (2016, 259) suggests that the grounds for a complex, creative, and evolving politics of solidarity requires an understanding of mutual histories and struggles (on reciprocity, see Atshan and Moore 2014), not of shared subjection alone. Liu and Shange (2018) further emphasize the role of empathy in solidarity (cf. Cox 2022, 104). In this case, their existential entanglement with others is left unsaid in the translation between political organizing elsewhere and an abbreviated face-to-face discussion in the gurdwara.

In triangulating between the diaspora, seemingly similarly situated others, and the brutality of a nation-state exacting historically comparable kinds of racial violence, the deterritorialized political horizon scales, by making coeval, sites of agonism, that is, of settlement and homeland. Gem, Jot, and their crew referred to those slain in Oak Creek as *shahīd* (martyrs), the most recent of vaunted martyrs, but their inspiration by martyrs like Bhai Mani Singh, whose poetic excess calls for more violence in the moment of death, is implied, for example, in Gem’s reference to the Mughal Empire. In doing so, these activists urge others to forego a merely nominal acknowledgment of martyrdom, calling instead for collective action in alignment with the fearlessness characteristic of realized beings (the *gurmukh*), though not necessarily a brush with mortality. Here, white supremacy is the most recent order of violence amid the evolving historicity of a tradition.

The refusal of given habituated political forms anticipates a yet-to-come that would acknowledge an incommensurability between the ritual servility of liberal mourning and a tradition of defiance concerned with releasing ego from its own habituated impulses for self-preservation. In the parking lot after the meeting, Gem, Jot, and their crew admitted that they expected the assembly to dismiss their intervention precisely because their call to conflict stood so at odds with entrenched consensus. They see hypocrisy in gurdwara leadership and organizers

who place images of martyrdom in the langar hall yet organize public performances of docility before the nation. They imply that, though political mobilization against racial violence in the diaspora can be as vociferous as struggles against Hindu nationalism in India or Moghul imperial power in the past, a collective mobilization against white supremacy would have to risk social dissonance, misrecognition, and illiberalism. Perhaps the expectation of failure made the tenor of their polemics all the more strident, owing to a general melancholia born of the ever-present possibility of abuse and violence (Hundle 2012, 289) that also interdicts its very mourning (Grewal 2013). Activists had noticed that the gurdwara management committee members had adjourned the meeting within minutes of their intervention, confirming their suspicion that the gurdwara's response was already devised well before the call for participation. In surmising a second or recursive offstage behind the veil of collective deliberation, they wondered whether their participation mattered at all. The implication here is that mobilizing against a broader racist society threatens to unravel and re-constitute the character of gurdwara politics and for that matter of community itself.

THE 1984 GENERATION: Conservation in an Economy of Agonism

"We lived through Desert Storm, our brothers and sisters were slaughtered in Delhi," interjected the now agitated Vir. The gruff rebuke silences the cadre of activists into ceding the floor, startling any listeners entranced by their unexpected series of arguments. Vir explains that he and others in the assembly had both witnessed state-sponsored pogroms targeting them in the streets of Delhi in 1984 and dealt with abuse targeting them during the First Iraq War. After the assassination of the Indian prime minister in response to India's attack on Darbar Sahib in 1984, Hindu mobs sponsored by the state had burned alive, shot, and publicly executed Sikh men and women in Delhi and across the country. And in the wake of Desert Storm, also well before 9/11, anti-Sikh violence had targeted Sikhs in the United States then as well.

Vir's intervention ironizes the rhetorical form of the arguments issued by activists sitting directly across from him. His use of the exclusive plural "we," which refers only to those with firsthand experiences of this violence, makes conspicuous the young activists for their remove from these events, in contrast to others among them. In so dividing the assembly, Vir plays on Jot's initial use of the inclusive first-person plural, which charged the assembly with servility. Here, Vir charges Jot and his crew with lacking the experiential authority to warrant such stridence. Second, the citation of Delhi and Desert Storm parallels, and reverses,

their citation of slavery, genocide, and internment. The counter-citation undermines the purported novelty of their contextualization by scaling memory otherwise, anchoring the relevant kind of violence in that of the Indian state, the exceptional gravity of which is acknowledged across the generational divide, but which only some gurdwara organizers and decision-makers can claim to have experienced firsthand.

The epistemic authority of firsthand experience grounds the kind of violence that becomes paradigmatic. According to Vir, the young activists have no standing to impugn the community's strategic approaches to racial violence in the United States, because they had not earned the scars to claim any authority on matters of life and death. Vir then recalls having petitioned school districts to counter bullying when these students were still in elementary school, an especially caustic diminution of their standing. The quip charges the activists with arrogance, or at least thoughtless disregard, in their attempt to sensitize an assembly that needs no reminder about what it means to deal with routinized abuse, harassment, and assault. The retort itself preempts further counterargument, in that activists themselves acknowledge that Indian state violence of the 1980s and 1990s is more profound, grave, and serious than anti-Sikh violence in the United States.

Vir's abrupt rebuke makes stark an unmistakable rift between activists and the rest of the assembly. Sitting opposite Vir, Tej and Pal are his allies in the factionalized terrain of local gurdwara politics. Both were college students in Panjab during the 1980s and 1990s, a formative site of organizing around Sikh ethnonationalism. Tej is a familiar face in the gurdwara setting, a community organizer who discourses online and offline to draw attention to the human rights record of India, the injustices of its current and past governments, and the need to consolidate collective political will against it. Tej, like many ethno-nationalists, has sought solidarity from others with little success, and remains frustrated by indifference to the plight of Sikhs among international media, the human rights community, and governments. Pal stands by the doorway at the circle's periphery, perhaps as a form of ethical self-effacement or perhaps to monitor the discussion from without. Pal, unlike Tej, hesitates to embroil himself in such corrosive discourse, whether online or in this langar hall. He is rumored to really "pull the strings" behind the gurdwara management committee decisions, a stature owing partly to his modest wealth from business and partly from his related pull with NGOs, government officials, and politicians in the United States and India.

Nevertheless, Tej and Pal each offer concessions that might repair the now factionalized assembly. Tej explains that "this isn't a time to make things political,"

having noticed the uneasy tension in the room. For Tej, as with his peers who support an independent Sikh state, protesting white racism distracts from efforts that could be expended toward more pressing problems in India. Tej was also perhaps obligated to repair the rift because he was the one who recruited the “youngsters” to join the deliberation, having canvassed the gurdwara premises for familiar faces from rallies, protests, and social media. However, perhaps to placate any impetus to further quarrel, Tej had conceded that “the youths’ sincerity should be respected,” explaining that he admired the “youngsters” for their passion. Pal builds on the concession, agreeing that candlelight vigils are “not really a Sikh thing.” Pal instead proposes a public memorial culminating in a collective supplication (*ardās*), resolving to solicit a college-aged woman adept in public speaking who could represent the local Sikh community in the performance of a memorial at the municipal public park in collaboration with elected city officials. The concession is offered as compromise, an agreement with Jot about the incongruity between the forms of public participation authorized by the consensus and otherwise by tradition.

Vir, Tej, Pal, and other organizers have developed a strategic but ambivalent approach to the rituals of liberal self-representation criticized by the activists. Especially since 9/11, gurdwara management communities have learned to collaborate with city government and schools, police departments, and interfaith forums, in doing so making Sikhism legible to centers of power and drawing praise from other Sikhs. In garnering sympathy in the United States and fueling an ethno-nationalist movement in and against India, they claim to instrumentalize, but not internalize, liberal forms, a strategic presentation of self designed to contest one state by recruiting another. In this gurdwara, committees are elected, among other things, for their alignment with a struggle in Panjab. Relatedly, in this case, the strategic presentation of English-speaking Sikh women fluent in the language of liberalism instantiates another strategy by which the well-formedness of Sikhism is strategically performed for public valorization. Women’s involvement in gurdwara decision-making proves complex, including in efforts to contest the patriarchal administration of institutional space, the tokenization of women for the purposes of facework in gurdwara party politics, and, of course, attempts to heed an egalitarianism communicated by the tradition.

In this case, the problem of diaspora is settled by fiat, conserving the primacy of homeland against competing scalar intuitions grounded in disparate experiences of violence. Activists motivated an urgent political conversation about white supremacy by attempting to secure a footing in the interactional styles

operative in the gurdwara setting. The cadre practiced indirection, careful not to risk embarrassing any specific person, which would have transgressed the ethics of the gurdwara setting; referred to themselves in the third person as *dās* (“slave” of the Supreme Being), rather than risk an egoic self-indulgence through first-person indexicals like “I” or “me”; but, ultimately, succumbed to indulging in harsh moral censure that re-entrenched egoic factionalism. Activists could not hold the floor, because, inter alia, ethnic Panjabi interactional customs afforded turn-allocation privileges based on seniority in age. In yielding to *ethnic* interactional norms, the dispute resolves an agonism anchored to the time-space of homeland.

The conservation of a liberal consensus is meant to further a more vociferous struggle for homeland, a yet-to-come premised on foregoing agonism otherwise. When I spoke to members of the assembly after the meeting, they explained that the young activists did not realize that little could be gained in agitating against whiteness/liberalism (*qōrē*) in the United States. To them, college students back for summer break threatened to embroil the community in unnecessary conflict, disrupted the otherwise constructive tenor of the discussion, and offered solutions that seemed far more “academic” rather than practical. When I asked members of the assembly about the demands placed on them by the martyrdoms of Oak Creek, some insisted on differences within martyrdom. They did not dispute the martyrdom of those slain in Oak Creek, which defensibly consists in attending a gurdwara in the face of mortal violence, and all agreed that a Sikh must be capable of conflict should the need arise. However, the tradition, I was told, does not always demand further conflict in response to martyrdom, pointing to more quietistic acts of death depicted in the langar hall.

Perhaps surprisingly, the problem of diaspora also aligns generational struggles, as in their respective experiments in political imagination. After all, such intergenerational divisions are also permeable (Nijhawan 2016, 12) and evolving (Murphy 2004). Although the activists failed to topple a thinly veiled monopoly over collective decision-making, they claimed success for having forced a conversation about a more serious and risky politics. In this respect, they seem very much like a previous generation of organizers like Bal, who, in installing the images of martyr(dom)s in the langar hall also called his community to contemplation. For disputants themselves, *activist* and *management* are mutually designated social roles signifying, among other things, the sharp distinction between the idiom of social justice and the administration of the gurdwara, respectively. Yet insofar as both factions seek to politicize collective action in ways that guide collective decision-making, the distinction between activism and institutional management may

itself prove unviable. The localizability of agonism is precisely what that the problem of diaspora both conserves and threatens to unravel.

INDETERMINACIES: The Extimacy of Relation-Making

Ten years after the massacre of Oak Creek, a more expansive class of predicates (e.g., those who “were killed/shot”) supersedes *shahīd/shahādat* (martyrs/martyrdom) in everyday references to the slain. The semantic shift indexes the evolving circumstances in which the slain are now recalled—to underline the racial valence of such violence, less so a long-standing tradition of ethical becoming. As the problem of diaspora would have it, competing investments in time and place anchor the kinds of memorializations that become socially enregistered in the here and now.

Likewise, apropos of the generationally delineated dispute in the langar hall, quite different experiences of violence motivate the scalar dimensions of political imagination. Young activists and elder institutional decision-makers are both concerned with supremacies white and Hindu, which precede 9/11 and 1984, Trump and Modi, and the war on terror and Hindutva, respectively. However, vying investments in the proper locus of agonism, or *when/where the action is*, differentially motivate the kinds of politics that seem viable, that is, conciliatory performances of liberal mourning in the service of repairing the seeming social rupture wrought by racial violence versus mobilizations that would politicize community in the furtherance of a struggle against white supremacy alongside seemingly similarly situated agonists.

The figuration of the martyr(dom)s throws this deliberative calculus into relief, calling for collective contemplation into the scalar complexity of the here and now. The ephemerality of diasporic martyr(dom)s owes, at least partially, to spatio-temporal remove from home(land), to dislocation from the paradigmaticity of ethico-political event. What, then, might the problem of diaspora, and impasses consequent thereto, teach us amid the calls for broad-based relation-making so sought after in shared struggles, that is, against global forms of capital, empire, raciality, and patriarchy?

An economy that would restrict the viability of waging multiple seemingly incommensurate struggles simultaneously may need to be reconsidered. In this case, decision-makers of rank existentially proximate to the violence of the postcolonial state resort to conciliatory performances of public mourning in diaspora, refusing to risk decades of partial but hard-won liberal sympathies that might be leveraged in the service of a more effective agonism for homeland. Ethno-nationalist

politics so often conserve a liberal “anti-politics” (Ferguson 1994; Ticktin 2011; see also Lukasik 2021) otherwise, restricted to vying for seemingly scarce symbolic capital apportioned by a liberal order that is both enigmatic as it is global.

However, if violence in the diaspora and violence in the homeland are in fact *not* of different “kinds,” the scalar dimensions of political imagination, including the loci of agonism, may no longer be appropriable to any one time/place. Indeed, the pursuit of a more general agonism capable of contesting global supremacies together may already be under way. Diasporic Sikhs are increasingly alive to the convergence of white supremacy and Hindu fascism not only in electoral politics (Thobani 2021) but also among international security regimes, as in the Indian state’s recent actual and attempted assassinations of Sikhs in Canada (Singh 2023, 7–8) and revelations confirming the collusion of the British army, intelligence, and government in the perpetration of India’s brutal violence in 1984 (see Singh 2014).

The labor of configuring political juncture, however, is to be achieved. That is, the failure to arrive at a new political synthesis also instantiates the partial, ongoing, and open-ended project of “articulation” (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), or the recomposition of otherwise distinct agonisms. At stake in the articulation of such otherwise distinct agonisms is a yet-to-come, one that cannot be guaranteed, assured, or legislated in advance, nor delimited to any model of revolutionary subjectivity already known.

That is, refusal itself constitutes a crucial moment in the ethics of relation-making. The politics of solidarity are so often premised on achieving a togetherness of otherwise distinct projects, whether in instituting “mechanical” (cf. Durkheim 2013, 57–87) similarity (e.g., enacting the shared social standing of migrants against the xenophobia of nationalism; see Rozakou 2016), or “organic” (cf. Durkheim 2013, 88–104) functional differentiation (e.g., between military and charity in global struggle; see Li 2019). Yet solidarity is also to be refused. For instance, third world (Mohanty 2003) and transnational (Grewal and Kaplan 1994) feminisms have long problematized the imperial universalism of white feminism that denies women their historically differentiated agencies.

At stake in refusal is a sensitivity to difference requisite to the ethical demands of relation-making. For instance, Liu and Shange (2018) call for “thick solidarity” (see also Abad 2021), which would refuse the benefits of being not-Black, of being among Blackness, and of gaining from anti-Blackness. Here, actual solidarity would cede power (Shange 2019, 156), defer to those impacted (Liu and Shange 2018, 196), acknowledge debt (Shange and Liu 2019), and refuse profiting from non-Black privilege—contra progressive pedagogies that level difference

in the service of “multi-racial” solidarity (Shange 2019). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, 35) call for “contingent collaboration,” which would recognize incommensurability, refuse the appropriation of decolonization even by projects of social justice, and unsettle the self-arrogated innocence of allies even if it requires the un-coalescing of coalitional politics.

That is, the workability of coming together can turn on the ethical demands posed by incommensurable difference, which, as implied by its extimacy, is also at stake in disjunctures *within* collectives. In the langar hall, incommensurate intuitions about political workability, that is, whether agonism obeys an economy or otherwise might be conjugated, are resolved by fiat. Each faction espouses a politics pursuant, and hews, to its formative experience of violence, however experience did not thwart intergenerational concert alone. Ethical (in)sensitivities breaching the interactional protocols of the gurdwara setting also foreclosed the possibility of intergenerational coalition. The articulation yet-to-come hails a meditation on the protocols of relation-making, that it might “[renew our] habits of assembly” (Harney and Moten 2021; see also Callahan 2020).

Perhaps paradoxically, the ambivalence, difficulty, and (im)possibility of extending/withholding relation-making, that is, of solidarity, alliance, and coalition, furthers the need for a politics thereof. The incipience, false starts, and internal discord of collective decision-making make for crucial, sometimes inevitable, moments in the arc of a collective becoming that risks mutual affection between self and other, in what might be called a “poetics of solidarity” (Maira 2016, 258–63), a processual production/rupture generative of emergent political subjectivities and cleavages that may be neither nameable nor intelligible. The risk-laden practice of relation-making is therefore simultaneously memorial practice and the anticipation of a new world, a condensation of time and place with others (Wilder 2022, 109–12).

In excess of and otherwise to discrete self and other, the indeterminacy of gathering may then itself be the crucial site of the *action* (Hothi 2023). The shared footing before an indeterminate future also subverts an untenable divide between analyst and ethnographic subject, one lesson that compels this study. An acknowledgement of this shared footing helps resist indulging in all-too-ready moral polemics that disqualify either side of a generational divide, as if narrow-minded traditions are unenlightened to the plight of others, or as if arrogant radicalisms are more vested in self-styled vanguardism than risking anything of themselves. More to the point, as implied by its extimacy, majoritarian violence from “without” and intra-collective violence from “within” may themselves be mutually co-implicated, as would be their wounds.

A futurity in excess of and otherwise to the numinous blossoming of the wound is yet to come, but may also already be among us.

ABSTRACT

This article concerns how competing investments in the real motivate political disagreement. The ethnography focuses on face-to-face debate in the wake of spectacular white supremacist violence against Sikhs in the United States. Young activists relate their struggle against racial supremacy to martyrs from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, motivating their call for a politics that would defy empire, cultivate coalitional alliances, and refuse well-worn performances of multicultural docility. However, for institutional decision-makers of rank, who ground their authority in having witnessed majoritarian state terror first-hand, such agonism risks decades of partial but hard-won respectability, legibility, and safety. This article argues that the in/comparability of eventual violence is staked by a global “economy of agonism,” which mobilizes in this case at least two political forms distinctive of the late-twentieth century in each the politics of recognition and ethnonationalism. The article probes the competing investments motivating political disjuncture by tracking what is here called the “problem of diaspora,” the seeming untenability of calibrations to and between home(land) and sites of dispersion. An ethnographic pursuit of psycho-social cleavages consequently reveals the “extimacy” of, or mutual co-implication of internal and external in, “collective relation-making,” i.e., in making solidarity, alliance, or coalition amongst seemingly similarly situated others. [race; religion; diaspora; semiotics; solidarity; white supremacy; Sikh; Panjab; Punjab; India, Hindutva]

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