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Making Citizenship, Becoming Citizens: How Sikh Punjabis Shaped the Exclusionary Politics of Belonging

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ABSTRACT

In the decade after 9/11, many Sikh community organizations worked to neutralize public fear around a visible Sikh identity in response to rising anti-Sikh hate crimes. With the 2012 Oak Creek gurdwara shooting, community leaders suddenly saw these efforts as futile, leading to a strategic shift from creating positive awareness around external identity markers to positioning Sikhs as morally similar. Drawing on theories of racialization through Sikh history and interviews with Sikh community leaders, I argue that Sikh organizations' projects of belonging are limited by whiteness and the desire to find safety through the U.S. nation-state's exclusionary framework for citizenship.

KEYWORDS

Race; identity formation; Sikh; belonging; hate violence; Oak Creek

It's important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. *It keeps you from doing your work.* It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being.

– Toni Morrison, at Portland State University, 1975

On August 5, 2012, Sikhs in the United States found themselves spinning, untethered, at the center of white supremacist violence. As the early morning program at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin came to a close, a neo-Nazi gunman entered the place of worship and killed six people: Paramjit Kaur, Satwant Singh Kaleka, Prakash Singh, Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, and Suveg Singh.¹ Punjab Singh was struck in the head by a bullet and remained in a state of paralysis for over seven years, until his death on March 2 2020. In post-Oak Creek community advocacy projects, the shooting is marked by Sikh community organizations as the climax after years of anti-Sikh violence following 9/11,² demonstrating how Sikhs' visible identity made us “mistaken targets” of Islamophobia.³ However, this rhetoric ignores that the racialized experiences of brown religious people, Muslim and Sikh alike, are structured on a foundation of white supremacy⁴ and anti-blackness, which simultaneously constructs a paradigm of limited acceptance and variant tactics of exclusion to maintain the racial hierarchy. This examination of Sikh Punjabi racialization in the U.S. since 9/11 establishes how the community has continued to utilize its hypervisible, but malleable, identity to forge belonging. Yet, these conversations ignore how defining belonging through community-based efforts to raise awareness about Sikhs and Sikh identity in the U.S. functions to strengthen the physical boundaries of citizenship.



Figure 1. Signage that reads “God Bless America” and “Sikhs Are Proud to Be American Citizens,” distributed by National Sikh Campaign and frequently found outside the entrance to gurdwaras. Photo by Harnoor Singh.

Through a study of national Sikh awareness projects in the United States, this paper tracks shifts in self-representation by Sikh organizations that occurred over time, from 9/11 to the 2012 Oak Creek shooting, in response to mutations in the experience of anti-Sikh discrimination and hate violence. Analyzing the heterogeneity in Sikh community organizational strategy and politics of belonging in the United States, I aim to demonstrate the limitations of racial belonging via whiteness and the strategic but nuanced choices Sikh leaders are making to find safety and security through U.S. citizenship. By rooting this discussion in transnational Sikh experiences of othering, I demonstrate that there is a longer history for Sikhs to draw upon than just our experiences in the United States. By doing so, Sikhs can have a richer, more intentional process of identity formation that is not simply in response to the U.S. racial order and citizenship-based models of belonging.

The Transnational, Racialized Sikh Body

Sikhs emerged from Punjab an uprooted people, given no opportunity to participate in the independence deal that the British struck with Hindus and Muslims leading up to the end of colonial rule in 1947.⁵ While many other communities were similarly left out of this flawed plan to develop two nation-states for the region, the pain for Punjabis was immediate: Punjab was partitioned between the newly created nation-states of Pakistan and India, leading to massive displacement and communal violence.⁶ The following decades would be no more generous to Sikhs as they put down roots in East Punjab, India. Tumultuous and divisive politics initiated by the British continued after their formal departure, reaching

a violent climax with Operation Blue Star (June 1984), Operation Woodrose (June–October 1984), and Operation Black Thunder I (April 1986) and II (May 1988). This multi-stage Indian government strategy to silence anti-government resistance from Sikhs resulted in the mass murder of an estimated eight thousand Sikhs from June 1–10, 1984, with ongoing violence and disappearances to follow in years to come. The intentional targeting of visible Sikhs and Sikh identity in postcolonial India during these years has been well documented. In particular, there was a focus on amritdhari⁷ Sikhs due to an embodied commitment to Sikhi, one aspect being through the donning of personal weaponry. This collective resilience through a physical expression of sovereignty was seen as a direct cause and validation for the attacks, as amritdhari Sikhs were declared dangerous and a threat to national security by the Indian army. Thus, the targeting of a visible Sikh personhood is not unique to the United States nor the West, but instead has its origins in much more intentional and pointed attempts at incorporating Sikhs into a national polity.⁸

Yet, even prior to fleeing state violence as refugees, Sikhs had already entered the global landscape as British subjects and servants, recruited at disproportionately high rates into the British Imperial Forces through a coopting of Sikh legacies of physical readiness and warrior traditions, stereotyping Sikhs as a “martial race” naturally suited for military service.⁹ These colonial subjectivities positioned Sikhs as witnesses to the profits of whiteness, but without the global access they desired. As Sikh Punjabi emigration increased with community knowledge of strong economic opportunities outside India, other realities of life abroad – like discrimination on the basis of skin color – were a disappointment to Sikhs who had experienced colonial exceptionalism and a myth of equal rights for the sake of political expediency under British rule.¹⁰ While Sikhs negotiated belonging across domestic contexts – settler nations that explicitly targeted visibly Sikh bodies or simply “colored migrants” as infringing upon their colonial conquest – they simultaneously brokered their relationship to the racial contract, which developed a transnational white polity for those who could claim Europe as home while exploiting bodies, land, and resources on other lands.¹¹ Although Sikhs had access to European belonging through colonial subjectivity, they still could not be included, according to Charles Mills, in “a racial polity, a racial state, and a racial juridical system, where the status of whites and nonwhites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or by custom”¹² since the colonial production of whiteness was created to limit the gain of capital to a select few. Thus, while Sikhs balanced on the precipice of inclusion via colonial subjectivity, they were forced to experience violent othering at the hands of the Indian state (and continue to do so alongside Muslims, Kashmiris, Dalits, indigenous tribal communities, and other victims of postcolonial Hindutva¹³) in order to maintain transnational systems of power.

Sikh migration to the U.S. increased exponentially in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the hypervisibility of Sikh identity made it a notable symbol upon which racial otherness could be established as the turban became a marker for foreignness, incivility, and the unknown from other lands waiting to invade.¹⁴ Given immigration laws, the migrant population out of Punjab for several decades was overwhelmingly young Sikh men who, upon arrival in the U.S., often faced violent backlash from fellow laborers or legal discrimination barring nonwhites from marriage, citizenship, and owning land. While some Sikh men challenged this illegality of Sikh belonging through logics of whiteness, like the well-known case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), others took up transnational anti-colonial sensibilities, developing a nuanced understanding of how nation-states were

collaborating to build empires of exclusion built on colonialism and white supremacy.¹⁵ These historical divergences demonstrate the nuances in Sikh methods of asserting power in response to nation-state exclusion: Thind chose to argue his right to citizenship through colonial legacies and white-determined superiority,¹⁶ Gurdit Singh chartered a ship bringing hundreds of Sikh Punjabi migrants to Canada on the basis that they should be recognized as equal British subjects, and countless Sikh men participated in cross-racial marriage in order to find some sort of legibility in the then current legal frameworks of the U.S.¹⁷ These nuances can demonstrate both the choices that individuals made and make in seeking racial and legal belonging, and also the nuanced ways in which the state prevents their entry.

Still, it is important to note how all of these cases came up against limitations of belonging via whiteness. For Thind, while all citizenship cases to that point had been rooted in scientific, genetic definitions of whiteness, his was the first to be based in “common knowledge” of who was white, using Thind’s hypervisibility as a Sikh man to establish the cultural legibility of whiteness and citizenship in the U.S.¹⁸ For Gurdit Singh and the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*, even their anticolonial resistance was rooted in the right to pursue migration freely, like their white counterparts, because of their status as British subjects, not on the basis of basic human rights and desires to pursue migration freely. For Sikh Punjabi men marrying primarily Mexican women in Southern California, it was finding legibility of one’s individual choices within the legal realm of the United States. In all of these instances, it is the Sikh-specific *dastaar*¹⁹ and *daari*²⁰ that established distance from whiteness, but also the desire to find distance from blackness, as Sikhs, and South Asians broadly, have cooperated in existing ethnic-racial hierarchies through reifying the black-white color line.²¹ Thus, understanding how Sikh racialization in particular has had a circuitous route both in shaping and being shaped by historic struggles for belonging within the nation-state elucidates how hegemonic racism is sustained through transnational projects of legal belonging.

Considering these narratives of violence, migration, and conditional acceptance, the utility of the physicality of Sikh identity must be analyzed as a key turning point in the racial logics of whiteness to establish axes of othering outside of a white-black binary. The multiplicities of racialized religion for South Asians (Muslims and Sikhs, in particular) uncover that it is the visible markers of faith *in addition to* color that lead to these communities being “rendered theologically, morally, and socially illegitimate,” as Khyati Joshi suggests.²² Within a U.S. context, the religious visibility of Sikhs and Muslims disturb the ideas of “meltability” and salvageability that fuel a white, Christian American (sub)conscious for its idealized society. This reckoning of the visibly othered body thus becomes, as Jasbir Puar describes, a process of terror “being both read *from* their bodies as well as *endowed upon* their bodies; [...] both an identificatory modality producing individual bodies and a generalized rubric applied to populations.”²³ As a terrorized American psyche builds these models of racism from individual, racialized bodies, it manifests as the denial of cultural human rights, leaving Sikh communities unable to exercise agency when it comes to visible religious practices and identifiers within American institutions²⁴ – the trial that many Sikh organizations have chosen to litigate.

Because of the ways in which the *dastaar* embodies, in Puar’s words, “the impossibility of resonance, of appearing to feel the same,”²⁵ anti-Sikh xenophobia has continued to morph and mutate to match these disturbances in the American national psyche. The precarity of

Sikh life and “the Sikh self becomes constituted by a transformed subjectivity that responds in multiple ways to pervasive and sudden violence,” as Anneeth Kaur Hundle notes,²⁶ which, after Oak Creek, is a clear threat in both public and private spaces. As Sikh organizations have tried to keep pace with these shifting threats of physical violence, there have also been transitions in how Sikhs are being marketed to the mainstream. While originating with a focus on distinguishing the physical aspects of Sikh identity as unique and exceptional, community organizations have now shifted to using Sikh awareness projects to mark Sikhs as morally legitimate and legible within the American context. These shifts in public relations are indicative of the changing nature of racialization and white supremacy, particularly how hypervisibility and morality are interconnected in the project of race and whiteness.

Methods and Data

This paper combines semi-structured interviews with Sikh community leaders and a discourse analysis of Sikh organizational rhetoric to understand Sikh identity formation. My recruitment efforts for interviewees were focused on outreach via e-mail and phone based on a list of qualified participants that I generated. My initial list was created based on current and recent leadership of Sikh organizations that have a more national (versus regional) focus: The Sikh Coalition, Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), Sikh Research Institute, and the National Sikh Campaign. I interviewed at least one current and/or former member of each organization. I also reached out to people who had been highly influential on their own self-created platform – individual or communal (i.e., *Kaur Life* magazine editor, Sikh youth camp organizers, and Sikh bloggers/writers). My identification of an individual as a “Sikh leader” was measured through informal solicitation of community members in California and the midwestern U.S., as well as on the basis of those who came up most frequently in a Google search for “Sikh,” “Sikhs in the U.S.,” or “Sikh leaders in the U.S.” Finally, because of the focus on historical and present violence that Sikhs in the U.S. have faced, I attempted to limit my respondents to people above age 30 who have lived in the United States for at least 20 years with only two exceptions – one interviewee under the age of 30 and the other who grew up in Canada – totaling 13 interviews ranging from one to three-and-a-half hours.

Applying an oral history approach to the interviews, I mapped the interviewees’ lives through questions on how Sikhi²⁷ was taught to them in childhood and then how those initial lessons were shifted based on experiences at school or in other settings, with a particular focus on how these conceptualizations of Sikh identity shifted (consciously or unconsciously) after 9/11 and the Oak Creek shooting. Through these questions, I connect personal perspectives on Sikhi and Sikh identity with the work that these leaders are doing in the community at large. I chose to focus my interviews on community leaders because of the large influence and access they and their collectives have in relation to more regional and/or grassroots efforts, thus leaving a more explicit impact on mainstream and institutional understandings of Sikh Punjabis.

Sikh Identity Formation in an Era of Precarity

The following sections examine how Sikh racialization shifted into a value-based narrative to counter the villanization of a hypervisible Sikh identity. The Sikh organizational strategy of creating “awareness” around Sikh identity often centers desires for mass visibility and representation over all other aspects of identity formation. Despite attempts to repurpose markers of exclusion for the community’s belonging, I argue that Sikh community leaders have locked the community in a cycle of transitioning between attempts to achieve citizenry and differentiate the markers of their own exclusion. Focusing on a narrative of Sikh identity construction that is rooted in erasure and acculturation as a response to past violence and the fear of future occurrences, Sikhs have found themselves in a recurring process of survival mode.

“We are not Muslim”: Searching for Sikh Legibility, Post-9/11

The contemporary conception of Sikh advocacy was 9/11. As told by Amardeep Singh, co-founder of the Sikh Coalition, his involvement in speaking out on hate crimes against Sikhs after 9/11 stemmed directly from work he was doing regarding anti-Sikh violence in Punjab:

We’d send one email a day with a testimony from a Sikh who had been tortured to raise awareness ... and then 9/11 happens. So, all that effort that I was putting in personally, professionally, to do human rights work because of how much ‘84 changed things in my life, got switched to what was happening to Sikhs in the U.S. I had a group of friends who were really into Sikh human rights issues and, instead of publishing documentation of Sikh human rights abuses, we started documenting hate crimes and discrimination in the U.S. And Sikh Coalition was formed.

I establish this initial connection between the formation of a major Sikh advocacy organization and historic anti-Sikh violence (particularly state-sanctioned violence as outlined in the literature review) to demonstrate how the embodiment of historic racialization is central to how Sikh awareness projects function in the U.S. The lineage connecting these justice projects means there is also a carrying over of emotion, intention, and strategies to building awareness about violations of the Sikh body. Valarie Kaur, a self-identified civil rights activist who uses her skills in law and film for Sikh awareness projects, elaborates on the factors that shaped foundational approaches to Sikh organizing:

After 9/11 ... we were in crisis response mode and it was premised on the idea that the crisis, the backlash was going to fade and then we would establish a new normal. But because of the war on terror and the policies by the state and hate crimes on the street, we never got out of crisis-response mode. And then we started to get funded to build organizations that were designed to respond to crises and being rapid response.

The reflections of Valarie Kaur and Amardeep Singh, two advocates who were establishing their careers pre-9/11 and whose career trajectories drastically shifted as a result, demonstrate the structural problems with “awareness” projects that became Sikh organizations’ bread and butter as they established their crisis management processes. Funds were raised

and given to support legal cases to shift policy around religious discrimination, address high rates of bullying of Sikh children, and develop national trainings for Sikhs to gain skills in media talking points, policy change, and community engagement to produce positive visibility.²⁸

Although this work developed a much-needed national network for Sikhs during a time of precarity, it also established a precedence for Sikh community organizing to be rooted in triumphing over U.S.-specific racialized violence and the resulting trauma, rather than acknowledging transnational projects of whiteness built through colonial relations and cooperative surveillance of radicals across borders.²⁹ The structural fallacy of these projects is that they believed it was a case of “mistaken identity” and misunderstanding that led to violence against Sikhs, that it was something that could be educated away – rather than a fundamental value of the U.S. racial order.

As this newfound terror of hate violence pushed Sikhs into a battle for positive visibility against xenophobic and racist attacks and policies, Sikh community leaders felt the need to clarify who Sikhs were, or were not, since this new stigmatization was not explicitly anti-Sikh, as it had been in Punjab, but anti-brown/Muslim. As Valarie Kaur shares, “immediately after 9/11 we had bumper stickers that said ‘we are Sikh not Muslim,’ and then we quickly pulled those bumper stickers and understood ‘we are American’ is the thing that we need to do because otherwise it implies that there is a correct target for their bias.” While Sikh community rhetoric, for the most part, did move away from the post-hate crime narrative of “mistaken identity,” there has still been a larger failure to understand the source of the violence. Tavleen Kaur, a community scholar and activist, described how her father’s tires were slashed in North Carolina even though he does not have a visible Sikh identity. She says, “It wasn’t even that [attackers] needed to see a *dastaar*, a *daari*, and that’s what triggered a lot of the violence. It was just being brown.” Again, it was not a case of “mistaken identity,” but that an othered identity folded Sikhs into the larger racialized religious category that also incorporated those who the U.S. government and media were identifying as enemies of the state.³⁰

Still, the rhetoric continued to focus on creating Sikhs as a distinct entity separate from these “terrorists,” even if it was no longer portraying all Muslims as the enemy. Gurwin Ahuja, Executive Director of the National Sikh Campaign, identified this flaw as a lack of a collective definition of Sikhs: “we don’t have one, even despite our own efforts . . . like if you go to a random uncle and you tell them, ‘describe who Sikhs are,’ they’ll just basically say we’re not Muslim.” It must be recognized that this way of defining Sikhs by who they are not – Muslim – is directly in response to white nationalist definitions of national security that limit belonging through identifying who must be excluded. With the sudden rise in attacks on Sikhs after September 11, Sikhs knowingly or unknowingly chose to participate in anti-Muslim racism in response to feeling frozen in crisis response and in attempting to solidify a definition of Sikhs during a period of instability.³¹

The belief that education on Sikh identity was enough to solve hate violence against Sikhs reveals that these awareness projects miss one key point – whiteness is limited.³² The creation of whiteness is the creation of marginality and, through this, the production and assignment of value to particular bodies.³³ In arguing that more intentional education about

Sikh identity will move Sikhs from the margins of exclusion into acceptance, Sikh organizations and community leaders failed to acknowledge that whiteness does not only function through exclusion, but also distance and dehumanization. Questions of value and difference are forced upon racialized people constantly, as Simran Jeet Singh, Senior Religion Fellow at the Sikh Coalition, puts it:

When you choose to look different in society and particularly as a religious minority from a young age, you're expected to explain who you are in a way that other people aren't . . . so the people asking you feel satisfied that they understand why you're doing what you're doing, why you're choosing to look different.

While some Sikhs might be able to argue for selective inclusion as contributing members of society, the limits of whiteness force them to do so by devaluing other members of the Sikh community, or in relation to the devalued bodies of other racialized communities marked as deviant. Thus, we see how racialized people are forced to engage in conversations about which aspects of themselves they are willing to strip away for inclusion into a limited definition of the human.

Through the project of awareness, Sikh organizations have attempted to reframe Sikh legibility and visibility in a way that does not establish Sikhs as the other. However, what complicates these projects is that by basing all aspects of Sikh identity in the context of awareness-building or educational work, they reframe Sikh existence as aspiring toward inclusion into a society invested in the perpetuation of Christian, patriarchal, white hegemony. While core Sikh tenets were originally built up as radical ways to dismantle structures of oppression and hierarchy, they are now being utilized to argue for “global acceptance”³⁴ into a white supremacist nation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this acceptance does not come without its costs.

“We are Americans”: Asserting Sikh Exceptionalism after Oak Creek

The cycle of crisis response and policy battles continued for over a decade until a new flashpoint for anti-Sikh violence in the U.S.: the 2012 Oak Creek shooting. While contemporary Sikh advocacy originated with 9/11, Valarie Kaur expressed that “Oak Creek became a place where we, as national Sikh advocates who have been working together for years in whatever form since 9/11, all congregated because we were confronting the thing that we had fought so hard to prevent. And all of us had the words failure on our lips.” While Sikhs had faced rising hate crimes in the decade prior to the shooting, the Oak Creek shooting initiated a more intimate stage of fear. Rubin Paul Singh, a community educator and activist said, “after September 11th, I felt like I was not welcome in this country. But the thing about Oak Creek was, despite all that, our gurdwaras were our one safe space [...] everyone else could look at me as their enemy, but that was the place where I was with my brothers and sisters, my mothers and fathers. It was the one safe place I could be myself without fear.” With the violence now entering spaces of worship and community, Sikh leaders realized that their attempts to distinguish Sikhs enough to humanize them had not been sufficient.

In large part, Sikh organizations were limited by the strategies they employed to educate a public audience on Sikh identity. Focusing on mainstream media and policy change alone as ways to find positive visibility or legibility, Sikh community projects were shaping Sikh

identity and existence by the possibility of recognition and inclusion into a white supremacist society, which only served to push Sikhs into the hole of victim narratives. Amardeep Singh reflects on how victimhood became central to creating visibility for Sikhs:

The number one topic in news articles about Sikhs were around hate crimes and discrimination, and the Sikh Coalition definitely played the lead role in getting stories about Sikhs into the press, but the stories about Sikhs in the press were all about the bad things that happened to us. And it was always bothering me and killing me that we were not able to humanize the community [so that we were] not defined by our difference and the discrimination that occurs because of the difference.

Valarie Kaur also reflected on the failings of post-Oak Creek media coverage in developing a more holistic understanding of Sikh experiences in the U.S.:

We got the most media attention we'd ever gotten in the wake of Oak Creek, but I don't think the media attention that we got did very much to cultivate empathy or compassion within our fellow Americans, inviting them to see us as American or to grieve with us as American. And that may have been different if they had given us a longer window, but we were still getting around Sikhism 101 and how to pronounce "sick" or "seek" before the curtain fell and they were on to the next issue. [But with] our profound illegibility and the insistence of seeing us through the lens of terrorists and trying to undo that all that . . . I don't know how far we could have gone, even if they gave us more time.

Thus, even with the immense national spotlight in the moments following the Oak Creek shooting, Sikhs were caught in the dynamic of trying to find legibility within a white, Christian context of the human.³⁵ Jasjit Singh, then Executive Director of SALDEF, describes his experiences showing up in Oak Creek the morning after the shooting: "Immediately, they told me to please talk to the camera. Actually, I was in a suit and tie and it was abundantly clear that immediately they wanted me to talk to the camera. They felt like, this is our chance, we want someone to be telling our story. In the 20 or 30 minutes I was there, I did more interviews than I did in the whole 7 years I was at SALDEF." With the intense focus on humanization and validity in an American context, U.S. Sikh leaders found themselves stuck in a cycle of media sound bites and normative rhetoric, attempting to distance themselves from the rhetoric on brown bodies as terror-inducing while being forced into portraying them solely as possible victims of white nationalist terror. Thus, the media, while perhaps creating visibility for Sikhs, could not alter the racial context of the U.S.

On the flip side of this cycle of crisis response and victim narratives created by mainstream media practices were the perspectives of those who saw the Oak Creek shooting as a failure in establishing legibility for Sikhs. Rather than continue the effort to educate non-Sikhs on their visible identity, these individuals chose to focus their time on establishing how Sikhs are embodiments of American identity instead. One such example is the National Sikh Campaign (NSC), launched after Oak Creek, with the promise that it would not only stop hate crimes, but also "highlight the Sikh community's contributions, better integrate [Sikhs] into American society, and lay the foundation for more Sikhs to become leaders in America."³⁶ This approach of redefining Sikhs, or any immigrant community, as assimilable, "melttable," and contributing members of American society is not novel, but NSC started a new chapter in Sikh awareness projects that shifted the focus away from clarifying the physical markers of Sikh identity to stressing similarities in moral values embedded in

Sikh beliefs and practices. In fact, the entire strategy of the NSC was built on making Sikhs legible in a U.S. context. Geoff Garin, President of the Peter D. Hart Research firm, was hired to lead focus group studies in Chicago and Iselin, New Jersey to discover what aspects of Sikhi resonated with an American public, published in a report titled “Sikhism in the United States: What Americans Know & Need to Know.”³⁷ In our conversation, Gurwin Ahuja emphasized the political capital of framing Sikh awareness campaigns on “common values”:

Regardless of demographic, if you're a hardcore Trump conservative or if you're to the left of Bernie Sanders, the most important aspect of Sikhism that resonated with the American public was equality. In that we found that there's a tremendous ability to enhance people's understandings and feelings towards Sikhs by talking about equality. Now, every time I talk about Sikhism, I lead with that value. I talk about gender equality; I talk about how the turban represents commitment to fight for equality. And the reason I think that resonates is how many religions do that?

By reframing belonging based on shared values, this new phase of awareness projects makes the case that Sikhs are exemplary or more worthwhile of inclusion into U.S. political and sociocultural society than other racialized communities.

This transition to explain Sikh identity through shared values is a move to redirect the conversation away from obvious *physical* difference to moral *embedded* similarities. Addressing Sikh positionality as a hypervisible yet “unknown” other in the U.S. context in this manner, I argue that these projects mark a dangerous shift in Sikh advocacy. Highlighting Sikhs who have achieved high levels of education, wealth, or inclusion into institutions like the U.S. military, NSC builds a narrative of Sikh inclusion rooted in racial capitalist ideas of value and worth to the nation-state.³⁸ Additionally, many of their commercials focus on basic human traits like Sikhs watching *SpongeBob* with their kids, enjoying *Game of Thrones*, or being PTA moms.³⁹ NSC's double whammy – asserting Sikh exceptionalism by saying that Sikhs have the largest religious commitment to equality, while also trying to humanize Sikhs through trivial characteristics – only offers a humiliating characterization of how desperately certain Sikhs want to attain belonging as (white) Americans.

The existence of awareness campaigns in the community is not a rarity; millions of dollars of the wealthiest Sikhs have gone into finding ways to both distance Sikhs from anti-Muslim racism⁴⁰ and also introduce the notion of the democracy-loving American Sikh into the mainstream.⁴¹ Sikhi is a faith that equally values the discipline needed to attain a higher consciousness and physical signifiers as reminders of one's commitment to this lifestyle to connect with the One universal force.⁴² Thus, as advocacy projects and awareness campaigns move to define Sikh identity within U.S. citizenship and whiteness, it is necessary to interrogate their frameworks. According to the Sikh Coalition's website, “through courtrooms, classrooms, community and Congress, we work to protect the constitutional right to practice your faith without fear.”⁴³ However, if building Sikh identity is focused on the necessity for public visibility – whether in courtrooms, classrooms, Congress, or on CNN – it must go beyond seeking the end of anti-Sikh violence through educational aims. These identity formation projects must address, at least as an eventual aim, the deconstruction of structural causes for racialization of and violence directed at Sikh communities. It is particularly dangerous to continue on this path because of the way these collective identity

projects attempt to frame Sikhs as inherently American (i.e., inherently white), thus erasing historical and present realities of Sikh experience, such as the rising number of Punjabi Sikh detainees in ICE facilities across the nation.⁴⁴ While the reality of ongoing racialization will continue to haunt Sikhs in the diaspora, it is necessary to question who has the authority to build these narratives for the larger community and the long-term intentions to belong based on white nationalist terms.

“We are revolutionaries”: Cultivating a Diasporic Sikh Identity from Its Roots

Imagining a new type of identity creation that is more radical and removed from identifying as Sikh Americans, Sikhs can revitalize a centuries-long Sikh history of resistance against state and empire to guide a new method of Sikh advocacy. Inni Kaur of the Sikh Research Institute shares that when she thinks about her Sikh identity, “what holds me is really the teachings, the absolute freedom that has given me and nurtured in me.” Being free from any model of belonging that is structured on a nation-state can remind Sikhs of previous methods of dealing with violence. One such teaching comes from Tav Prasad Savaiye, a composition amritdhari Sikhs are required to read daily, which discusses the futility of attaining worldly power or enlightenment through pilgrimage and ritualism if one is still unable to find eternal Truth through the realization of Oneness. The final line in a stanza that explicitly highlights the materialistic lifestyle of powerful rulers reads:

ਏਤੇ ਭਏ ਤੁ ਕਹਾ ਭਏ ਭੂਪਤਿ ਅੰਤ ਕੌ ਨਾਂਗੇ ਹੀ ਪਾਂਇ ਪਧਾਰੇ ॥੨॥੨੨॥

Even if one can become such a mighty emperor (through war animals, gold, and large armies), they must leave the world with bare feet.⁴⁵

Considering this lesson from Guru Gobind Singh Ji, Sikhs must acknowledge how their search for belonging through colonial frameworks of power comes at the expense of a historical legacy of radical resistance. Rubin Paul Singh imagines a Sikh future in which we have broken free of this current cycle of belonging through exclusion and returned to a radical Sikh existence: “As a history teacher, I’m always pointing to PowerPoint slides of what great things Sikhs did in the late 1800s, early 1900s. My hope is that my great-grandchildren are not pointing to the same slides.”

Others, like Gurjot Kaur, previously a staff attorney at the Sikh Coalition, are inspired by historical Sikh activism to come up with new solutions for old problems, such as restorative justice responses for hate crime perpetrators:

Fighting oppression is our bread and butter and we’ve been doing it for a long time – way before any of these anti-discrimination laws were written. And so, these fundamental ideas of shifting away from retribution and revenge to restorative solutions is something that I’m constantly trying to bring to the table.

As Gurjot Kaur indicates, there is a possibility for Sikhs to do “awareness” work, or practice “Sikh values” in a public way, that is more in line with the essence of the faith. Bringing perpetrators of hate crimes into Sikh spaces to reconcile and heal, and as an alternative to carceral punishment, is one method she has encouraged to battle anti-Sikh sentiment in the U.S. Furthermore, Tavleen Kaur hopes that “we start to see that Sikhi is radical and even the basic things we follow which we think are so radical is just the starting point of that entry into radical consciousness.” While Gurjot Kaur works within the limited confines of

organizational politics, what would happen if we could expand beyond the conventional and state-based modes of freedom we have started to embody? Instead, as Inni Kaur said, what if we returned to our Sikh teachings to move beyond finding Sikh identity through citizenship?

In this journey toward a more rooted, revolutionary Sikh praxis of community organizing, it is also important to recognize the multiple layers of violence that many Sikhs experience, not just external discrimination from hate crimes, but also gender-based violence, homophobia, and lack of resources or visibility for undocumented Sikhs to name a few. prabhdeep singh kehal, another community scholar, shared that as Sikhs, we must remind ourselves of “the people that are suffering the most as a result of [oppression]” in order to “think about what it means to be a Sikh in this world.” Reminding ourselves that people who have the most to gain from belonging through restrictive models of belonging *vis-à-vis* citizenship and whiteness will not be able to imagine more creative, radical, or Sikhi-based models of inclusion, prabhdeep singh kehal says, “I don’t actually trust [those with privilege] to lead us to liberation or create a pathway to liberation.” Acknowledging these nuances in experiences of violence and Sikh identity demonstrate that while community representation is motivated by the collection of individual experiences of othering, choosing to represent the community through privileged approaches to belonging will not guide us toward an authentic or honest discussion of how racial othering and white supremacy are operating within and on the community. These methods will only exacerbate the exclusionary work of citizenship by embedding it within the Sikh community itself. In order to deconstruct framings of existence as survival and belonging as citizenship, the U.S. Sikh community must recommit to a framework of Sikh identity and belonging that is no longer driven by a fear of exclusion, instead looking to Sikh history to find the language and politics that go beyond inclusion as the antidote to precarious modes of existence.

“Becoming” a Diaspora: Imagining a Future of Sikhs Outside of Whiteness

Identity creation in the face of erasure and oppression is not a new concept for Sikhs – from the refusal of the Indian government to include Sikh as a religious categorization on birth certificates (Sikhs are categorized as Hindu) to modern-day campaigns by Hindu American Foundation (HAF) to erase all mentions of Sikhi as its own separate faith from U.S. textbooks (rewriting it as a sect of Hinduism). Rather, it is the shift toward seeking belonging within a white, Christian hegemonic society that is specific to the U.S. and this contemporary moment in projects of Sikh belonging. While I do not contest that Sikhs in the U.S. should organize on a large scale to address issues of hate violence and racism (broadly, however, not solely focused on anti-Sikh violence), current projects capitalize on existing frameworks of categorization and power. As anti-Muslim violence raged across Delhi during Donald Trump’s visit to India, and in light of Modi legalizing policy that would extremely limit Indian citizenship attainment for Muslims, we are reminded of the global connections between establishing transnational polities rooted in exclusionary frameworks for belonging and citizenship.

Throughout the U.S. chapter of Sikh history, Sikhs have continuously attempted to define their own belonging on the basis of whiteness. As a result, this has led to arguments of Sikh exceptionalism, framing Sikh identity within the context of white racial logics of inclusion and ignoring other possibilities for community organizing rooted in Sikh

teachings and history. Moving forward, if Sikhs can understand how to more effectively build a collective identity that is in flux for the sake of humanizing each member of the community, rather than to incorporate and accommodate the boundaries of exclusion set by the terms of formal and cultural citizenship, it is possible to rectify the ongoing embodiments of American exceptionalism and white supremacy that are being superimposed onto Sikh identity. Drawing upon resistance in Sikh history and the present, Sikhs can practice what Stuart Hall envisions as the value of recognizing identity as beyond a singular temporal moment:

Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.⁴⁶

Acknowledging that identity is constantly in flux and built in response to current conditions, Sikhs must more actively choose their frameworks for identity formation. Given the inability for assimilation and resonance of the Sikh identity within white supremacist, heteropatriarchal cultural systems that shape the U.S. nation-state, possibilities for inclusion are created at the expense of the humanity of non-normative or deviant communities. Stuck in the neoliberal project of justice and belonging, the Sikh community is only one of many that have become lost in the distraction of trying to prove their inherent value, worth, or desirability to attain citizenship.

Instead, Sikhs can and must realize the power of visualizing identity creation as an act of resistance rather than one of survival, of what *could* be rather than what already exists. This reframing allows for more voices and narratives, disrupting the status quo through more expansive possibilities for who can be a Sikh and how Sikhs can exist within the United States. Returning to the radical roots of Sikhi and Sikh history, Sikhs can operationalize memories of resistance and activism to move beyond the limitations of belonging via whiteness. The act of *becoming* a diaspora is one that can inspire new types of identification outside of colonial and Western frameworks of existence – an experience that is much more liberating.

Notes

1. Sikh community center used for singing *Gurbani* (compilation of transcendent poetry, writing, and reflections of Sikh Gurus and other mystics to reflect the universality of Oneness), reflecting on Sikh history, serving langar (free community meal started by the third Sikh Guru, Guru Amardas Ji), running community programs, and more. Open to all and frequently used as a space to support the larger community during times of need (e.g., gurdwaras opening up to families left houseless by climate disasters or preparing langar for distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic).
2. With over 300 cases of violence and discrimination in the month after 9/11 and continued hate violence leading up to and following the Oak Creek shooting, there has been a litany of instances when Sikhs have become targets of this anti-Muslim racism, attacked for being a visible “other” in a country that boasts religious and other forms of freedom. (See “Fact Sheet on Post-9/11 Discrimination and Violence against Sikh Americans,” The Sikh Coalition, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/images/documents/fact%20sheet%20on%20hate%20against%20sikhs%20in%20america%20post%209-11%201.pdf>).
3. Anti-Sikh harassment and violence (racial epithets, TSA profiling, violent beatings and killings, harassment of Sikhs in highly visible blue-collar jobs like taxi drivers, etc.) is a common

experience for visible Sikhs since at least 9/11, although earlier immigrants share anecdotes of anti-Arab rhetoric during the Gulf War and Iran hostage crisis.

4. According to Frances L. Ansley, white supremacy is “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.” See Frances L. Ansley, “Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship,” *Cornell Law Review* 74, no. 6 (September 1989):1024.
5. Busharat Elahi Jamil, “The Sikh Dilemma: The Partition of Punjab 1947,” *Pakistan Vision* 17, no. 1 (2016): 89–118; A.H. Sandhu, “Sikh Failure on the Partition of Punjab in 1947,” *Journal of Political Studies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 215–232.
6. Jawaharlal, “How Did Partition Change the Religious Map in Punjab?,” July 2015 update, *South Asia Blog*, July 3, 2015, <https://southasiablog.wordpress.com/2015/07/03/a-more-detailed-punjab-religion-map/>; Jawaharlal, “How Did Partition Change the Religious Map in Punjab?,” January 3, 2014, <https://southasiablog.wordpress.com/2014/01/03/religious-map-of-punjab-before-partition/>.
7. Those who have pledged themselves to Sikh ideology and sovereignty through Khande ki Pahul or Amrit Sanchaar, the initiation into the order of the Khalsa, or sovereign Sikhs. Receiving Amrit requires the maintenance of a visible Sikh identity (*kes*, unshorn hair to respect natural and divine life; *kanga*, comb to maintain *kes*; *kara*, an iron bracelet historically used as a weapon in battle; *kirpaan*, sword to protect the Sikh tradition of physical readiness and promote radical notions of people-driven justice; and *kachhera*, long underwear to maintain modesty and discipline) and the daily practice of Sikh philosophy through meditation, service, and a commitment to realizing Oneness through practice of Gurbani.
8. For more resources on anti-Sikh violence in 1980s India, as well as its aftereffects on the diaspora, see the following: R. Chopra, “Commemorating Hurt: Memorializing Operation Blue Star,” *Sikh Formations* 6, no. 2 (2010): 119–152.; Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Ravleen Kaur, “Reliving the 1984 Sikh Killings: What the Media Couldn’t Tell You 33 Years Ago,” *Youth Ki Avaaz*, June 7, 2015, <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2015/06/1984-sikh-massacre/>; Amarjit Singh Walia, “I Lived through the Sikh Riots – And 30 Years Later, I’m Not Ready to Forgive or Forget,” *Quartz*, October 30, 2014, <https://qz.com/india/289671/i-lived-through-the-sikh-riots-and-30-years-later-im-not-ready-to-forgive-or-forget/>.
9. Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, “Recruiting the ‘Martial Races’: Identities and Military Service in Colonial India.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 3–4 (2012): 232–254.
10. Darshan Singh Tatla, “Rural Roots of the Sikh Diaspora,” in *People on the Move: Punjabi Colonial and Post-Colonial Migration*, ed. Ian Talbot and Shinder Thandi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51.
11. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
12. *Ibid.*, 13–14.
13. Eliza Griswold, “The Violent Toll of Hindu Nationalism in India,” *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/the-violent-toll-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>.
14. Herman Scheffauer, “The Tide of Turbans,” *The Forum*, 43, no. 6 (June 1910): 616–618, <http://pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/grand-media/image/img002.jpg>.
15. Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
16. Jasmine K. Singh, “‘Everything I’m Not Made Me Everything I Am’: The Racialization of Sikhs in the United States,” *Asian Pacific American Law Journal* 14, no. 1 (2008): 69.
17. Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
18. Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 66.

19. *Dastaar* is the term used by Sikhs for what is colloquially known as a Sikh turban, but it literally means that which is done with the hands. Perhaps giving more understanding to the reverence that a *dastaar* holds, the verbs used with the act of donning one's *dastaar* in Punjabi translate to make or decorate, demonstrating the beauty and intention in the daily practice by *dastaar*-wearing Sikhs. Many Sikhs will reference the time of making their *dastaar* each morning as time to reflect on Sikh martyrs and those who gave their lives in order for us to maintain the *dastaar* and other aspects of a physical Sikh identity today.
20. Traditionally an unshorn beard, although many Sikhs nowadays have started to keep a closely trimmed beard to reflect Western beauty standards of hair maintenance.
21. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
22. Khyati Y. Joshi, "The Racialization of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism in the United States," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 39, no. 3 (2006): 212.
23. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 169.
24. Miho Iwata and Bandana Purkayastha, "Reflections on Cultural Human Rights," in *Human Rights in Our Own Backyard: Injustice and Resistance in the United States*, ed. William T. Armaline, Davita Silfen Glasberg, and Bandana Purkayastha (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 113–123.
25. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 177.
26. Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "AFTER WISCONSIN: Registers of Sikh Precarity in the Alien-Nation." *Sikh Formations* 8, no. 3 (2012): 287–291.
27. The original name for the practice of Sikh ideology, although more commonly used is the term Sikhism, the Western or anglicized term created to be in-line with Western -ism terminology of religion. Sikh Studies scholar Arvind Pal Mandair has conceptualized how the faith has been colonized away from Sikhi (the original ideologies) into Sikhism – see *Religion and the Specter of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
28. The Sikh Coalition, "Our Campaigns: Sikh Advocate Academy," <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/our-work/empowering-the-community/sikh-advocate-academy/>.
29. Seema Sohi, "Repressing the 'Hindu Menace'," in *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*, ed. Vivek Bald, Miabi Chatterji, Sujani Reddy, and Manu Vimalassery (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
30. Many Sikhs, when discussing post-9/11 violence, will blame the dissimilarity between Taliban turbans and the Sikh *dastaar* in inciting confusion and fear against Sikh identity.
31. Interestingly enough, there is a collective definition of a Sikh, also written somewhat during a time of precarity as Sikh practices and lifestyle was being diluted through colonization the loss of communal power. The Sikh Rehat Maryada, or the Sikh code of conduct, approved in 1945 in Amritsar by a Sikh organizing body (Shrimoni Gurdwara Parbandak Committee) establishes that a Sikh is any human being who faithfully believes in (i) Vaaheguru (One Immortal Being), (ii) Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh, (iii) Guru Granth Sahib, (iv) the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus, and (v) Amrit Sanchar created by Guru Gobind Singh (defined extensively in footnote 17), and does not follow any other *dharam* (guidelines or prescriptions for righteous behavior).
32. Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
33. Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
34. Dawinder S. Sidhu and Rajwant Singh, "Cultural Appropriation Not Always a Bad Thing," *Baltimore Sun*, March 18 2018, www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-op-0319-gucci-turbans-20180316-story.html.
35. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
36. National Sikh Campaign, "About," <http://www.sikhcampaign.org/about>.
37. National Sikh Campaign, "Polling & Focus Groups," <http://www.sikhcampaign.org/research>.

38. National Sikh Campaign, “Origin Story: Our American Dream,” http://www.wearesikhs.org/american_dream.
39. National Sikh Campaign, “Neighbors (Funny),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoIcPAerFCY>.
40. Islamophobia is Racism syllabus, “Resource for Teaching & Learning about anti-Muslim Racism in the United States,” <https://islamophobia.isracism.wordpress.com/>.
41. The majority of funding for Sikh organizations and projects comes from Ik Manzil, a group of “Sikh philanthropists” who are able to commit \$25,000 a year for three years in order to gain membership. Since 2009, they have donated \$1.4 million to Sikh nonprofit organizations (Ik Manzil, “What We Do,” <https://ikmanzil.org/what-we-do/>).
42. All aspects of Sikh physical identity are tied to action. As Gurwin Ahuja mentioned, the *dastaar* being a physical identifier of Sikhs became a call to action for Sikhs across South Asia as we were known to be warriors and defenders of the defenseless throughout Sikh history.
43. The Sikh Coalition, “About Us,” <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/about-us/>.
44. David Noriega and John Templeton, “America’s Quiet Crackdown on Indian Immigrants,” *Buzzfeed News*, January 31 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidnoriega/america-quiet-crackdown-on-indian-immigrants>. See also Tavleen Kaur’s contribution to this special issue.
45. Guru Gobind Singh Ji, translated by Surinder Singh Kohli, *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib*. (Birmingham, UK: Sikh National Heritage Trust, 2003), 42.
46. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222.

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