Im/material and intimate relations: Considering ethnographic methodologies for already-surveilled communities

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Abstract

In this autoethnography of ethnographic training and methodologies, I reflect upon unaddressed tensions in a Los Angeles County gurdwara ethnography, pursued as an intellectualized response to the 2012 Oak Creek gurdwara shooting. I theorize the gurdwara (and other similarly sociopolitically located spaces) as "already-surveilled," where intimacy in a US white supremacist context must also be seen as a forced relation with the state surveillance apparatus. Analyzing field notes from the classroom and gurdwara, I offer three possible approaches to ethnographic inquiry: participant observation, bearing witness, and embodied conviction. I argue that, without an embodied approach, ethnographic approaches fail to incorporate analyses of power and precarity (the material), particularly for communities of belief (the immaterial). Finally, I offer a model for generating theoretical and methodological frameworks from embodied practices of belief or conviction—in this case, Sikh praxes of relation, knowing, and belief that are witnessed across various gurdwaras.

Keywords

Surveillance, precarity, hate violence, embodiment, belief, Sikh, gurdwara, ethnographic epistemology

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> *"One of the constants among Sikh communities in the diaspora is the space of the gurudwara, which doubles as a spiritual home and a community center. The violation of the gurudwara space by the gunman Wade Michael Page and the killing of worshipers inside reflects an intimate and invasive form of violence. Indeed, this transgression of sacred space is linked to traumatic memories among diaspora Sikhs surrounding the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar."*
>   – Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "AFTER WISCONSIN" (2012: 289)

> *"My shoes off at Gurdwara, my shoes off at the airport."*
>   – Swet Shop Boys, "Shoes Off" (2016)

Much of my desire to pursue a sociological inquiry of Sikh subjectivity in the US emerged in reaction to the 2012 Oak Creek gurdwara shooting, referenced in the epigraph from Hundle, during which my childhood Sikh community was attacked by Wade Michael Page, founder and member of several white-power music bands. Five years later during my first year of graduate study, I became increasingly bothered by my use, and the encouragement of my use, of participant observation within the gurdwara. Within a few months of starting my first ethnographic project, located in a Los Angeles County gurdwara, possible interconnections between training to develop an ethnographic gaze and gunman Wade Michael Page's own 'study' of the Oak Creek gurdwara prior to executing the mass shooting became too troublesome to bear. Although this was a different gurdwara space altogether, similar markings of intimate relations and embodied practice tied the spaces together in more ways than one. My growing and unaddressed discomfort led to an abrupt pause in data collection, a quick compartmentalization of the experience(s), and a shift into less 'invasive' qualitative methodologies. And, yet, while I have not yet returned to ethnography as a tool for my scholarship, the specter of my ethnographic training remains salient within my perceived possibilities of a study of Sikh life in the US nation-state. To contend with such an epistemological haunting, this paper grapples with the implications of pursuing academic research as a balm, or at the very least a productive response, to white supremacist violence in intimate community space.

Drawing upon many ethnographers before me, I theorize ethnographic methodologies as a construction of relations that both reflect and refigure those of the social worlds they depict (Bell, 2018; Desmond, 2014; Joseph, 1996; Simon, 2013). Examining the tensions of ethnography in the gurdwara, which I deem an 'already-surveilled space' manufactured by the US anti-terror industry, I integrate a surveillance studies framework with ethnographic theorizing to dissect the possible outcomes of doing ethnographic research in the wake of violence in intimate spaces. Take, for example, the Swet Shop Boys' 'Shoes Off' lyrics in the second epigraph; depicted is the mirrored removal of shoes that occurs (willingly) when entering spiritual homes and (forcibly) in TSA security lines. Viewing both of these as the height of intimate encounter, ethnographic research on the countless already-surveilled and overpoliced communities in the US could better theorize how relationality with the state is a type of intimacy generated through surveillance. Surveillance studies scholars already note that tactics of ethnography and surveillance mirror each other in their attempts to capture the movements, behaviors, social routines, and

social space that an individual or community occupies, thus lending ethnographic methodology well to studies of surveillance (Green and Zurawski, 2015; Walby, 2002). Studying surveillance becomes so crucial because, beyond state and institutional mechanisms of surveillance, such strategies are also taken up by (primarily wealthy) citizens as they classify and categorize those who are seen as not belonging in order to protect the boundaries of their imagined communities (Kurwa, 2019; Lowe et al., 2017). Centering surveillance as a constant relational apparatus within the nation-state is necessary, then, especially when doing ethnographies in communities who bear the brunt of white supremacist violence and state surveillance simultaneously, justified through the 'War on Terror' and its subsequent social and political categorizations (Joshi, 2006; Kumar, 2020; Singh, 2013).

Conceptualizing surveillance as a forced intimacy with the state and its formal and informal actors, I argue that ethnographers must better contend with how power, violence, and the belief of a world beyond them manifest in already-surveilled communities and their 'spiritual homes and community centers', as phrased by Hundle. To explore such tensions and intimacies, I first will overview existing literature to generate an interdisciplinary dialogue on shifting ethnographic relations, the utility of religion-based frameworks, and embodiment. Next, using field notes from my ethnographic coursework and my attempted ethnography in the gurdwara, I explore three possible approaches to ethnographic inquiry: participant observation, bearing witness, and embodied conviction. Through a self-reflexive approach to ethnography in the gurdwara, I argue ethnographic inquiry contains the possibility to develop more capacious literature on embodiment, faith, and precarity by developing methodological approaches rooted in the embodied multiplicities of the space being studied. While I explore these questions explicitly through the analysis of ethnography within Sikh communities, I demonstrate what a greater awareness of epistemological orientations and centering of embodied experiences of the immaterial can offer ethnography as a whole.

Relevant literature

Reckonings in ethnographic relations

The late 1900s brought about a reckoning for ethnography with respect to power, subject positionality, and transparency. Post-World War II critiques of academia and academic research, particularly regarding deceitful tactics to gain community participants (e.g., 1932–1972 Tuskegee Syphilis Study) or conducting studies on participants unable to consent (e.g., WWII concentration camp prisoners), led to a new form of researcher-participant relations bound by institutional procedures. The 1979 Belmont Report was published in response to the Nuremberg Code, laid out during the Nuremberg War Crime Trials, which was deemed inadequate for sufficient protections of research subjects. Over the next two decades, these guiding principles for ethical research transformed into institutional review boards (IRBs) as a formal oversight organization by the early 1990s. However, IRB procedures still only represented *institutional* protections; epistemological considerations of power relations were another movement entirely. Led by second wave

feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern scholars, ethnographic literature began to coalesce and transform academic ethnographic relations in the late 1900s, as well. Responding to an era where the majority of academics were implicated in the violence experienced by the communities they sought to study (and carried out their research without acknowledgment of such relations), scholars called for transparency around how the researched were being further dominated through epistemological violence that subjected them to identitarian categories required for said violence (Ortner, 2006; Spivak, 1988; Wynter, 2003). Transforming the notion of objective (i.e., ahistorical) research, in which global post-colonial relations remain unspoken, the circulation of these scholars' works launched a canon which readily grappled with the ethnographer's active construction of research relationality and its mirroring of the social and political dynamics we all create (Du Bois, 1947; Fanon and Philcox, 1963; Said, 1978). Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins remade the insider-outsider debate into a discussion of the "outsider within," arguing for "personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge" (1986: 29), whereas other scholars noted that, no matter one's social-political location, the "positioned subject [is] never outside the field of research and always radically implicated in the production of knowledge" (Shehata, 2014: 226).

In the contemporary era, considerations of researcher-participant relationalities ruminate on the ethnographic experience as one that upholds normative community behavior around identitarian categories while simultaneously, and inevitably, disrupting the practice of social and political hierarchies. 'Invading ethnography' is one such reflexive framework, which identifies studying hierarchies of belonging that are often solidified through the ethnographer's 'invasion' of the social setting of research (Adjepong, 2019). While negatively connotated words like invasion can allude to a desire to avoid such tensions in ethnographic research, Garima Jaju (2023) argues that such avoidance is futile as these are the innate contradictions of ethnography, which only reflects the natural paradoxes of our social words. Considering further Adjepong's and Jaju's use of invasion and extra-terrestrial to denote the ethnographer's entry into a social world, their theorizing indicates that it is not necessarily the *presence* of the ethnographer that has created an unnatural relation but the form of *relation* that they take up in such a role. In another sense, it is not identitarian categories that construct the insider-outsider dilemma but an 'objective' ethnographic mindset, or a colonial epistemological orientation, in what could otherwise be just another social encounter. Then, rather than overcomplicating our writing process to develop the perfectly neat 'ethnographic anecdote' (Adeyemi, 2019, 2022), in which our desire for academic comprehensibility pushes us to generate clarity through overwhelming detail and demonstrate the revelatory event of our findings, Kemi Adeyemi (2021) instead moves toward an ethnography that captures slowness and the seemingly mundane.

Rather than refusal of its occurrence, then, an active embrace of the shifting dynamics of power within ethnographic relations as a productive site for knowledge production can serve as a transformative framework for epistemological formulations of power, place, and identity-formation. Autoethnographies have become a significant framework for ethnographers to evaluate and reconstruct the ways they experience power relations along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship and more, particularly for those

whose positionalities run directly counter to the assumed status for tenured faculty (Behl, 2017; Smith-Tran, 2020). Engaging with autoethnography as a feminist praxis allows the researcher to legitimate long-term productions of identity and self that are experienced, and perhaps articulated more precisely, in the process of doing ethnographic work (Crawley, 2012). Considering such autoethnographic boons, one might consider a potential solution to place the gaze of ethnographic fieldwork into the hands of participants; however, even then, participants and researcher(s) still remain within the framework of capturing quotidian elements of one's life for the production of knowledge (Prins, 2010). In fact, some argue that there is "no possibility of ethical purity in ethnography […] when its methods seek, by and large, to emulate the common life themes of others in scholarly fashion" (Neves et al., 2018: 248). In this way, alternative productions of ethnography through *self*-surveillance do not actually address the dynamics of power, violence, and dehumanization at hand, but rather engage in a game of musical chairs of surveillance in which the ethnographer always has the last say when they return to their office to write the legible field note memo (Guhin and Wyrtzen, 2013). Especially when taking violence and precarity into account, the stakes of the writing change. Jason De León (2015), for instance, interrogates the capacity for ethnographic methodology and writing to fully articulate the witnessing of other people's experiences of structural violence and resultant trauma in a way that does not occlude the structures of violence they are experiencing, but, instead, captures the discomfort around displaying and documenting violence.

Thus, for communities who are always already experiencing surveillance by the state and its formal and informal actors, the constant possibility of re-establishing community interlocutors within the gaze of the surveillance state must be taken more seriously as an ethical implication (Ali, 2016; Lincoln and Cannella, 2009). Whereas IRB offers institutional protections and scholarly debates have furthered considerations of epistemological violence, ethnographers must still consider the potential ramifications of their methods of inquiry when engaging in already-surveilled community spaces. While not engaging in qualitative research or ethnography at all within these communities would be a false solution furthering the silence around subaltern experiences, a commitment to *addressing* rather than *resolving* tension in ethnography can allow ethnographers the space to practice the same self-reflexivity they desire for their respondents (Friberg, 2019; White, 2001).

Refiguring ethnographic epistemologies

So, in an attempt to address, rather than resolve, the tensions in my attempted gurdwara ethnography, I consider how the epistemological orientations of such a project would need to transform. Most would view a Sikh community or gurdwara ethnography as one of a racialized religious community, as I myself also originally classified it during the time of study. However, the category of religion—generally presumed to be a static category of inquiry—has been thoroughly critiqued by many scholars, particularly the use of religion as an analytically identifiable, discursive framework that exists separately from notions of power, temporality, and location (Asad, 1993; Carrasco Miró, 2020; Geertz, 1966; Saliba, 1974). Guhin's (2014) theorizing on religion as *site* rather than *category* provides a useful

starting point to consider the ways ethnographers can reinterpret religion as a social location through which theories of social life can be both generated and tested. Moving past an essentialized understanding of "what religion is [to spend] more time talking about what religious people do," ethnographers can understand the study of religion as a study of the material and immaterial that is both informed by one's social world and a concerted method to make meaning of it (Guhin, 2014: 591).

A well-cited example of this is Saba Mahmood's ethnography on the women's piety movement in Cairo, which embraces self-reflexivity in ethnographies of religion quite openly. Mahmood urges:

> my readers and myself—embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry. (2004: 39)

Mahmood grapples with turning "the critical gaze upon ourselves" and being "remade through an encounter with the other" (2004: 37). In doing so, she entertains Asad's (1993) thesis that religion in its discursive and disciplinary forms is very much a project of power—both in our own political conceptualizations of religion, agency, freedom, and equality and in how these preconceptions determine our approach towards constructing alternative formulations of said categories. However, Mahmood also resists theorizing power as a force which moves in a singular direction; while her writing "is motivated by the desire to challenge the adequacy of our inherited analytical tools in understanding political challenges that we currently face in the world," she draws upon Abu-Lughod to understand power as shaping the field of social relations, thus grounding meaning-making around social relations within their particular relational context (Abu-Lughod, 1990; S Mahmood, 1996: 507). Considering these formative scholars' works, rather than continue to elide the tensions between seemingly oppositional forces of power in social relations, what would it entail to enact an ethnography of religion that contends even with the confines of its formulation? Beginning the theoretical foundation, instead, from localized and particular 'religious' or spiritual frameworks perhaps offers a more holistic understanding of how visible and nonvisible manifestations of 'belief' guide everyday actions and behaviors, especially the ways in which they are limited by fields of power. Although belief, too, must be contended with as emerging out of Protestant ideologies and being haunted by Anglo-Christian linguistic frameworks, it still captures a great deal of what we mean when we hope to witness how individuals position themselves in relation to what is tangible and intangible in the world (Blankholm, 2020; Derrida, 2002).

For Sikhi, then, and many other south Asian-based philosophies, the interaction of material and immaterial emerges through the concept of dharam, most easily defined as a morally driven discipline. That is, not simply beliefs or actions, but a consistent and repeated *set* of actions, both meaningful and mundane, guided by a moral conviction that is simultaneously invested in material justice and immaterial righteousness (Miri-Piri). For Sikhs, the crucial element of this is also the movement towards a state of constant consciousness of *how* one is engaging with this morality and discipline, ensuring that

one's actions do not fall into ritualism nor one's belief into dogma. By remaining continuously attached to Gurmat,[1] a Sikh remains in a constant state of consciousness-development (manmat to Gurmat) through engagement with the quotidian (grist jeevan). On its face, this reads in line with the Aristotelian notion of habitus upon which Mahmood draws: "an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character" and thus developing moral virtues through outward and inward coordination (2004: 136). And yet, Asad's argument of the universalized concept of religion itself reflecting a historically-specific construction of discursive power requires us to consider a more specific application of Mahmood's, or Aristotle's, construction of habitus to Sikh dharam (Asad, 1993: 28–9). In brief, while Mahmood and Aristotle conceptualize embodied practices of belief as an acquired *excellence*, the practitioner of Gurmat is not aiming for excellence—a quality generally denoted through increased worldly status—but rather a full absorption into eternal, unconditional, and immaterial love. Where material renderings of the immaterial translate repeated practice into increased quality, Sikhi manifests dharam through darshan, the witnessing of Oneness through ultimately attained consciousness.

Across these formulations, the physical presence of the ethnographer becomes a salient embodied site through which multidirectional confluences of power can be examined. Considering embodiment as a paradigm for autoethnographic inquiry produces a new phenomenological location from which researchers can conceptualize the(ir) body as a productive site of analysis and theorizing (Csordas, 1990). Particularly, the ethnographer who is able to mobilize embodiment as a framework for epistemic multiplicity can "attend to the differences between the embodiment one begins with, and the one generated by acquiring the skills and competencies of others" in the research process (Pitts-Taylor, 2015: 23). From a Sikh standpoint, the body acts as a temporary holder for the spirit, which is present in the world for the purpose of realizing Oneness through constant praxis (kehal, 2020). Inspired by the remembrance of historical embodiments of freedom, Gurbani (Sikh divine poetry) offers reminders that each body is equally capable of manifesting Oneness through discipline, action, and reflection. For the gurdwara specifically, autoethnography is particularly salient as it replicates Sikh "ancestral forms of sense-making" by centering a deliberation of embodied wisdom (practiced Gurmat) through imagined theoretical space and the grounded production of knowledge (Kaur-Bring, 2020: 11). Therefore, in already-surveilled community spaces, embodiment is a key mechanism to both study socially- and politically-generated limitations placed upon the body and practices of the body that aspire beyond such limitations.

Methods & setting

My data draws from classroom ethnographic training and research at a Los Angeles county gurdwara from October 2017-March 2018. Analyzing my class notes and fieldnotes, I reckon with what is reimagined, transformed, and remains uncertain through an ethnographic form that takes up the shifting forms of materiality, surveillance, precarity, embodiment, and belief. In this analysis, I use the approaches of participant observation and bearing witness to consider the resonances between reverence and

surveillance that emerge in the space constructed as both racialized and religious within US sociopolitical hierarchies. Afterwards, I utilize Sikh embodied practices within the gurdwara to offer possibilities for an ethnography of embodied conviction that more readily considers immaterial experiences in the already-surveilled space. I focus not on what is unique about Sikhi, but what a case study of Sikhi-centered ethnography can offer to the method.

Field notes: between reverence and surveillance

Participant observation

10/9/17 lecture[2]
- *first days are most important because you won't ever capture as much detail*

10/16/17 lecture
- *there's a narrative of self that can be broken by ethnography*
- *whatever you study, your goal is to unravel the assumed narrative*

As a first-year graduate student, I enrolled in a 20-week ethnographic methods course meant to thoroughly train me in the method through a review of literature, classroom lectures and discussions, and first-hand experience. My training on the latter primarily focused on participant observation—engaging in behaviors of the site while also notating my surroundings, both at a level deemed appropriate by site members and my reproduction of their normative behavior. My classmates and I were taught to consider the least disruptive note-taking practices, from typing on our phone to handwriting to voice memos to memorizing what we could. Classroom conversations homed in on a grounded theory approach, in which we would familiarize ourselves with the theory enough to be able to discover a 'puzzle' within our research project. Then, through our ethnographic observations, we could offer a contribution to the literature and perhaps offer the research subjects something about their lives they did not already know. Compensation was usually restricted to visibility via scholarship or, in the rare case where graduate students received additional research funds, monetary. Each student was required to come up with a project for the duration of the course, which, for many, resulted in collecting data for the mandatory second year thesis or the larger dissertation project. Fully confident that my doctoral research would engage with processes of identity-formation amidst precarity for the US Sikh diaspora, I thought, *where better to practice ethnography than in the gurdwara?* As a newcomer to Los Angeles, it was my main site of interaction with the local community, and, unfortunately, my training did not move beyond the traditional considerations of insider-outsider bias or benefit (despite the wealth of nuanced literature on the subject, some of which is discussed above), so I had no warning of the psychological wage that 'studying' my community from the 'inside' would initiate.

Due to this lack of foresight, any form of community intimacy immediately became a perceived tension—a problematic reflection of shared Sikh identity and a violation of the objective researcher ethic. Mainly, participant observation as an approach failed to

contextualize how my epistemological orientation (studying Sikh identity forged in response to white supremacist violence) crafted my understanding of relational intimacy in research. Although we were told on the first day of class to make sure we were transparent about our intentions in the research site, particularly as a form of reciprocal trust, notions of transparency did not map onto a community setting in which all are welcomed unquestionably and positive representation is often lacking. These two mentalities combined became an unintended cover for my ethnographic inquiry, as the community soon forgot that I was both the researcher and community member—or perhaps they never fully understood what this could mean to begin with, and, most likely, neither had I. More candidly, I worried, Wade Michael Page violated the gurdwara through physical violence, but what sort of violation would epistemic violence cause?

Relegating relations to participant and/or observer, I felt frozen as conversations from 'public' spaces in the gurdwara were carried over into 'semi-private' social conversations at a café or even more 'private' discussions over family dinners. My ability to demarcate the boundaries of a defined research project, as I had been trained to imagine it, blurred further as I was asked to take part in significant community dialogues and events within weeks of joining the sangat (community). I began to simply live life with my participants. In a note 3 months into my fieldwork, I see that I was made the 'media spokesperson' at a Christmas carnival hosted at the gurdwara for local low-income families. I tell a community member, "If I were to organize this event I just wouldn't have any of that. No calling the media, no congress people, just doing it." They reply, "Sure...when the hate crimes stop, then we'll stop. Until then, we need the media." At that time, participant observation required positive media representation, so I obliged. As my ethnographic training focused on becoming a trusted member of the site to avoid altering the nature of the site for inquiry, I began to wonder—what happens when I am granted too much trust? What would even classify 'too much trust' if, ultimately, I am the one conducting the fieldwork, collecting the field notes, and determining the final writing of my findings? Can I still conduct ethnography when I am 'too' inside? Intimacy and privacy became relative concepts to emulate.

Questionable at best and intrusive at worst, participant observation as an approach failed to trouble the binaries of public-private constructed by state metrics of relation. Intimacy constructed as an affective register to embody and capture through one's ethnographic positionality raises questions about the narrative inquiry to which the method is committed. The public and private as frameworks of surveillance, and legacies of settler-colonialism, have been considered as means to rethink our conceptualization of governance, legality, and autonomy (Glenn, 2015; Goldstein, 2008; Richards, 2012; Seawright, 2014). As a summer intern at a New York City Sikh advocacy organization in 2013, I vividly recall being present for the announcement of a multi-plaintiff lawsuit against the NYPD, whose counterterrorism surveillance program had planted informants claiming to be recent converts in need of guidance within local mosques and Muslim student organizations. An imam shared the protective tactics they had taken on, taping their own sermons in case the NYPD used anything out of context, while a college student who was tricked by an NYPD informant assigned to follow him that they were best friends shared how his trust in the community had been forever broken. What does it mean to

break or unravel an assumed narrative of self that does not place one's invasion of the community, of its pre-existing intimate encounter, at the forefront? What does the continuous chasing and attempts to embody a feigned intimacy, trust, and authentic experience require of the ethnographer? With hopes of something more capacious, beyond the imagined binary of participant observation, I started to ponder alternative approaches to ethnography.

Bearing witness

Nov. 20th lecture
- *as ethnographers, we are joining an existing conversation + need to consider how we will participate in that convo*

Nov 27th
- *what are the "problems" @ the site? (either defined by the site or by you)*
- *in what diff. ways do people use the site?*

A gurdwara manifests through the centering of Guru Granth Sahib Ji (compilation of divine poetry) in its physical space alongside the aspirational centering of Guru Sahib in the spirit and mind of the gathered saadh sangat (saintly community) through repeated actions of reverence and remembrance. As these practices which embody Gurmat (Guru-driven wisdom) are consciously intertwined in a Gursikh's day, they also manifest similar ontologies across gurdwara space and time. A Sikh, or anyone familiar with Sikh practices, could enter a gurdwara program at any time and join the sangat in their collective participation in remembrance of Vaaheguru (the great enlightener and creative force). The resonance across gurdwara space is furthered by Sikh ideologies of openness to all and the desire to constantly 'jap Naam'[3] or remember the Creator, mediating on Oneness through action and thought. More simply, the practices within the gurdwara are on a forever loop, open for anyone to join at any time, repeated across time and space for eternity. As a young Sikh woman, visibly identifiable through my dastaar (turban), these were experiences that manifested quite tangibly whenever I entered a gurdwara space to which *I felt* a stranger—phrased intentionally because neither the gurdwara or sangat ever saw me as such. One embodied practice of Gurmat is witnessing and embracing Vaaheguru in all creation, so my wellbeing and acceptance in the space became a part of Sikh practice for the local sangat. The strange was immediately rendered familiar through repeated practices, constructions of space, and greetings between sangat members.

In reflecting upon my experiences of ethnographic training and practice, I began to consider how I was forced to alter this pre-existing relation to the gurdwara to conduct observations and interactions as an ethnographer. Although my gurdwara of study was physically distant from the Oak Creek gurdwara, the shooting occurred as a clear marker of transition between my existence solely as a community member into an ethnographer, meaning my journey towards academic research as a response to white supremacist violence was conscious. The understanding of the gurdwara as a space already-invaded set up for the possibility to become a space invader or extra-terrestrial myself. The

capturing of life that happened through physical violence then turned into my own attempts to capture and document Sikh life through intellectual violence, in which both my own positionality and community members' were evacuated from our relations to each other. I sought out the help of Sikh visual artist Simranpreet Anand to illustrate these shifts in relationality (Figure 1), particularly through my diagram in the bottom right tracking my movement through the darbar hall, where Sikhs come to meet with Guru Sahib. Here,

Figure 1. Gurdwara space-time, illustrated by Simranpreet Anand.

she illustrates how my interactions within the looping time of the gurdwara and the open space became disjointed and truncated as I shifted from sangat member to ethnographer. The images surrounding are from the Oak Creek gurdwara, as the specter of this community haunted my ethnographic epistemologies. I began to witness gurdwara space as a research project, noting practices to be notated rather than embodied and experienced. The space of the gurdwara was no longer a home but a laboratory for studying problems of the material rather than transcending into the immaterial.

This is not an argument for an identitarian restriction to 'insider ethnography'. Instead, I want to question whether there are possibilities of knowledge production that are foreclosed through the process of pursuing training only *prior* to observation and engagement? Perhaps more relevant, when do we consider our ethnographic training to begin and end? I often reflected with an ethnography classmate that many of our observational skills were already honed from a lifetime of being overpoliced (or, already-surveilled) due to racism, queerphobia, and misogyny. What are the informal types of training we are considering as useful, whether it is through heightened awareness from precarious experiences or even already being engaged with the community with whom we want to jointly pursue a formal research inquiry?

Given that, I wonder further what types of ethnographic inquiry could I have produced if I sought out my Sikh community members as my educators in ethnographic inquiry, as opposed to simply participants or subjects of observation. Most trained ethnographers would agree they are joining an existing conversation, but the difference is which dialogues and narratives are considered part of that conversation and where does the ethnographer consider themselves an interlocutor (11/20 class note) rather than the final say (11/27 class note—how will *you* define the site). What would emerge if the ethnographer simply observed, humbled, in waiting to be trained and asked to produce something by the community instead? What kind of ethnography could we imagine then?

Embodied conviction. Khalsa Care Foundation (1/14/18)

> Pacoima, CA
>
> January 14, 2018, 6:55 AM
>
> I almost miss the gurdwara because I'm coming from La Cañada instead of Palms, so the gurdwara is on my left instead of on the right [side of the road] as usual. I notice at the last moment and quickly merge across and into the turn lane, pulling into the parking lot. It's emptier than usual, which makes sense since I normally come around 7:30[AM]. I drive further into the parking lot to try and get a shady spot, even though I know by the time I leave, my car will be sweltering as it always is. Taking a moment to stretch, I get out of my car and grab my chunni (headscarf). I debate if I want to take my shawl, but I know it's supposed to be another hot day, so I leave it for now. I walk up to the gurdwara entrance and notice the shoe rack has been moved from where it usually is (this is my first time back since before winter break), but there are a few shoes there, so I just take mine off anyway. I turn around and see the sunrise is making a nice purple and blue background behind the nishaan sahib.

I walk inside the darbar hall at this point, but it's completely empty. I pause at the entryway to text B.S., "So what do I do if no one is here?" He immediately responds, "Start!" I laugh to myself as I shouldn't have expected anything else from him. I continue walking in to matha tek (offer my head, bow before the Guru) and, as I'm getting up, I see a young couple coming in behind me who I haven't seen before. They start to lay down the sheet, so I get to work bringing over the tabla (hand drum) and vaajaa (pump organ) while others set up the mic system. Once we're done, the young man greets me and asks if we should get started; I say yes. His wife sits down and starts to play a few keys on the vaajaa. She opens up the Amrit Keertan to Asa Ki Vaar and begins singing – "ੴ (IkOnkaar)".

As with ethnography, in Sikhi, the quotidian is not mundane. For Sikhs, each new moment is yet another chance to connect with Vaaheguru—the creative force that resides in and is the connective tissue of all. When I stumble upon these field notes a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, when attending gurdwara with the full sangat present was not a possibility, they feel like a familiar friend calling me back to what is most apparent in the unseen, the immaterial, the embodied. I can feel the sensations that are left out of the field notes—the energy of mind and body that crackles upon seeing the Nishaan Sahib wave across the sky, the birds chirping in the few silent breaths before the fingers hit the keys of the vaajaa, and the voice that yearningly and hopefully utters ੴ—One creative and pervasive Force—into the vast morning.

In thinking about the quotidian, Sikhi, and ethnographic inquiry, I recall Cynthia Mahmood's *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, a text that has been lauded in Sikh communities as the 'right' way to study us. Mahmood voices her research commitment as an exploration of "what are people capable of when the everyday is disrupted" (1996: 2) through a study of the humanity of Sikh militants in the decades after the 1984 Sikh genocide. She attempts to balance the space between what one chooses to make visible about their entry into community and the process of building those relationships through a candid reflection on her prior academic work and connections bringing her to the Sikh community for this timely project. She does not do away with her own 'outsider' positionality as part of the value of her analysis; she makes clear her own experiences of state and gendered violence broadly, as well as their intersection with the violences that Sikhs have and are experiencing. Contextualized in her own experience, the choice to engage with Sikhs as a community experiencing the social forces of the world from their unique position in history is a productive site for inquiry. Most notable is her ability to hand the agency of storytelling and ethnographic inquiry back to her community interlocutors. Mahmood closes the book with her own nightmares of violence that continue, now newly tinged with violence from Punjab, while she acknowledges her ability to leave the violence behind in her subconscious. Leaving a paragraph break, she returns to the voice of Balraj, one of her participants, who says he does not like the ending for it does not account for hope: "We might be fighting, we might be suffering [but] we have God's love and we are filled with hope," he says. Mahmood responds, "I will end on that note" and closes the text (1996: 275).

Jan 29th
- *how is your site driven by past, present, + future?*

February 12th
- cultures + communities tell a story about themselves → are you going to go w/that story or against it?

The past, present, and future is embodied within and on the walls of gurdwaras (T Kaur, 2021). The Oak Creek gurdwara, similar to Darbar Sahib after the 1984 massacre, chose to memorialize a bullet hole in the doorway to the Darbar, the main hall where Guru Granth Sahib Ji is present. The walls of most gurdwaras maintain the collective memory of Sikh shaheeds, or sociopolitical martyrs who sacrificed themselves for justice throughout Sikh history, by lining the walls with paintings of these martyrs depicted in their moment of sacrifice (H Kaur, 2023). This collective memory is then vocalized through the daily ardaas in which the entire sangat stands before Guru Granth Sahib Ji and calls upon Sikh historical lineage of sacrifice, service, and devotion as a process of simultaneous remembrance, reverence, and hope to embody similar Guru-oriented manifestations of self and collective. In this context, going 'with' or 'against' community narrative is not so simple, and in the first place tends towards a colonial understanding of objectivity that has made up existing academic literature on colonized communities since the early 1800s (Mudimbe, 1988). Within Sikh Studies, too, contention around legitimacy of shared community knowledge and oral histories has a long history itself, where the colonial archive and library became foregrounded as the only legible form of knowledge production (Grewal, 2017; McLeod, 1980; Siṅgha, 2004). In response to such epistemic homogenization, newer studies of Sikhs still fail to illustrate the various social and political locations that exist within Sikh communities, producing a colonial Sikh Studies (Kaur and kehal, 2023; Sian and Dhamoon, 2020). Although certain structures of belief and practice cut across these differences, the connection of each Sikh to Gurmat is directly derived from their embodied reality; the living Gurus identified as much in calling upon all Sikhs to reject casteism while developing Sikh practices that specifically challenged those who dominated the casteist hierarchy (e.g., challenging notions of pollution via mixed-caste space or meals).

Coming from this theorizing point, embodied conviction produces alternative possibilities. Rather than a binary of 'going with or against' community narratives, an ethnography that considers embodied realities and associated beliefs about those realities is fully immersed in a historical and relational analysis of that community space. Rather than the ethnographer entering as either an oppositional force or one to be incorporated discreetly into the fold, perhaps more fruitful would be approaching as a quiet student to understand how community interlocutors navigate and negotiate the same social forces in which the ethnographer is equally intertwined. Situating the ethnographic analysis within hierarchies of power and intimacy as crafted by the state means that ethnographic analysis and writing does not need to be concerned about a false binary of agree-disagree, but instead a deeper consideration of the stakes of precarious lives to which each community has a unique relation.

As I reconsider my relationship to ethnography as a method and site of inquiry, I instead turn towards Sikh embodiments of learning, observation, and engagement to imagine how I might engage in qualitative research next. Returning to Guhin's (2014) conception of religion as a site, where he posits certain 'religious' concepts could be more widely applicable if not confined to a distinct category of religion, I generate approaches to ethnography developed based on Sikh practices of belief. In Guhin's case, he offers that prayer could serve as a framework through which the study of human and nonhuman interaction could be empirically studied. Drawing from this, the following ethnographic approaches, in some way or another, attempt to emulate Sikh dharam through praxis; in other words, they are working with reflection and action, theory and method, all at once:

> **Shoes off:** A commitment to leaving external debris and materials at the door; not forcibly bringing the "outside" into my methods. This extends a step beyond grounded theory ethnography in its commitment to also be more conscious about the preconceived lenses and notions with which researchers enter communities. Although these mindsets cannot be erased completely, and pretending so would be equivalent to ignoring researcher positionality, "shoes off" recommits to prioritizing the community's theorizations about self and relationality rather than creating a grounded theory that is focused on legibility in the academic literature or canon. In this formulation, removing shoes is not a forced violation of embodied self, as with surveillance, but a humble acceptance of and respect towards what is required to *be in* community rather than *inside* a community.

> **Matha tek:** Giving up any self-perceived sense of knowledge (ego) and committing to a research ethic that is rooted in radical humanity and Oneness. After committing to a "shoes off" methodology, a mentality of "matha tek" – or giving oneself up to a greater wisdom in the process of relearning one's understanding of the world – can shift power dynamics of invasive ethnography back towards the community, reminding the ethnographer to learn from community first, offering their own skills, resources, and platform to amplify community ways of knowing and being.

> **Sangat:** Ethnographic inquiry in Sikh spaces requires a concomitant understanding of collective and singular embodiments of lived reality. The immaterial is realized by an individual but, in Sikh spaces, it is manifested through the collective. Ethnographic writing analysis would be humbled through a similar approach (e.g., citation practice, epistemic orientations).

While some elements of these practices might mimic traditional ethnographic forms, I posit that without contending with pre-existing theoretical frameworks alongside methodological practices, ethnographies of already-surveilled spaces will fall short in their conceptualization of these embodied experiences and the im/material that each community negotiates in their own way(s). So long as ethnography sticks too close to its foundation—in its etymology, a process to graph distinct races and groups, or in its method, to observe and capture through writing the distinct experiences of social forces—it will fall short of the rich and expansive theories of life and living it can offer.

Conclusion: an ethnography of embodied convictions

In his own work on the translatability of embodied convictions, Asad suggests that researchers and academics must approach the project of translation "with the reverential attitude on the part of the believer toward the Creator, an act that combines feeling and act, public visibility and private thought" (2018: 58-59). In his case, generating scholarship on Islam that is rooted in conviction (rather than terror or surveillance), allows Islamic epistemologies to sit "uneasily with the ambition of state power and the pervasiveness of capitalist exchange" (Asad, 2018: 61)—forces and institutions whose desires for power would rather claim a neat translation or, in the words of Adeyemi, an ethnographic anecdote to serve their own ends. To disrupt what Asad calls the binary of public and private practice, I pursue such 'an act that combines feeling and act' through a self-reflexive engagement with my experiences of ethnographic training and fieldwork in the gurdwara and the difficulties of doing so without conscious reflection on power dynamics and intimacy. I take Sikh embodied practices and the gurdwara as a case study; returning to my prior field notes and, instead, centering Sikh embodied practices of belief and relationality, I develop approaches to ethnographic inquiry that take seriously community theories of social relation (e.g., intimacy) and power (e.g., knowledge production) that have broader implications for studying precariously constructed spaces.

The stakes of such a project are that, while traditions that practice visible personhood, like Sikhi, might seem to create easier pathways for the ethnographer to embody that experience (e.g., taking on the Sikh dastaar, or turban) (Moors, 2017), the question of conviction remains as an immaterial factor in study. Although researchers can embody the material facets of their interlocutors' experiences, they cannot capture the conviction and belief that drives them towards this embodiment in the first place (Carrasco Miró, 2020; Parvez, 2017)—a reification of a secular-religious (e.g., public-private) binary of life. For those that do attempt an embodied epistemology, the experience of precarity for racialized religious groups cannot be distilled; instead, it must be studied within the context of their economic and geographic particularities (Shams, 2019). Understanding how 'the Sikh self' and other already-surveilled bodies "become constituted by a transformed subjectivity that responds in multiple ways to pervasive and sudden violence" (Hundle, 2012: 289)—what Mian (2021) terms 'psychic maiming', or a constant experience of spiritual self-management in relation to state surveillance and violence—researchers can contextualize the practice of faith, embodied or not, within the context of threat and movement, peace and disruption, as a process of searching for sovereignty beyond a world constantly denying it.

What are the offerings of ethnographic methodologies to such epistemological orientations then? One possibility is what Cynthia Mahmood demonstrates, through a collective storytelling of sorts. Collective ethnographies demonstrate a collaborative praxis of self-reflexivity, whereas standardized identity categories as variables of quantitative and qualitative research flatten the dynamic nature of our social worlds (Spieldenner and Eguchi, 2020; Wężniejewska et al., 2020). A collective ethnography, for example, could be generated in consultation with community members around needed self-reflexive experiences; consciousness-raising groups, community circles or teach-ins

could cover tender topics like the exclusion of oppressed class/caste Sikhs or the prioritization of cisgender and heterosexual Sikh voices. While the entire process need not be documented, portions the community chooses to be archived could manifest in a community space for the purpose of ongoing conversation and embodied practice and transformation. Living firmly in the contradiction of multiplicities (Löwenheim, 2010; Tomaselli, 2001), such a collective ethnography need not bend to a single narrative of embodied convictions, instead raising up the chorus of voices, each in their own unique relation to our social world.

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Notes

1. Eternal wisdom of Shabad Guru, manifested through transcendent poetry, writing, and reflections of Sikh Gurus and other mystics to reflect the universality of Oneness.
2. These and subsequent notes have been copied verbatim from my handwritten notes during UCLA Sociology's ethnography methods sequence from October 2017 through March 2018.
3. Sikh signifier of all as the One, that is, all ideas of a One such as Allah, Raam, God, the Universe, Time-Space, Universal Energy, and Divine. are considered One and the same.

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