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Legacies of a martial race: Sikh investment and implication in the US police state

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Abstract

British colonization in India had devastating social, psychological, and political consequences for Sikhs in nineteenth-century Punjab. Still, much of the diasporic community remains nostalgic for this era of the Sikh "martial race"—a British-crafted racial category through which Sikhs were constructed as biologically and culturally suited for imperial service and consequently received privileged status within the colonial hierarchy. Today, this nostalgia emerges as a commemorative mechanism in US Sikh advocacy projects to incorporate the Sikh turban and unshorn hair into US military and police uniform. Through an analysis of community narratives around publicized Sikh deaths, this article explores the impact of martial race commemoration on Sikh subjectivity formation. Delineating when and how private grief is transformed into public remembrance, I argue such commemorative frameworks in US Sikh advocacy projects inform which Sikh bodies are worthy of collective mourning by suturing Sikh bodies' value to their service to US imperialism.

Keywords

agency, belonging, implicated subject, innocence, martyrdom, memory activism

Lining the walls of many Sikh gathering places, or gurdwaras, hang portraits of martyrs who gave their lives to defend sociopolitical justice throughout Sikh history. Among these, a gurdwara in California has included a recent photograph alongside them of Houston's first Sikh police officer Sandeep Dhaliwal, killed on duty in September 2019 (Figure 1). In the days after his death, Sikh Coalition—the largest US Sikh advocacy organization—released a statement "In Memory of Deputy Dhaliwal," but focused on reiterating the organization's campaign to challenge US military and police uniform policy, which prevents visible Sikhs (those donning a turban and/or unshorn hair) from serving without a time-consuming legal accommodation (Sikh Coalition, 2019). In the days after his death, national media outlets reported on Dhaliwal's commitment to service. Dhaliwal was often quoted saying, "serving in the police force is natural to us, as Sikhs value service" (NBC Asian America, 2015; Williams and Webber, 2019), while simultaneously referencing his father's service in the Punjab Indian police force—a commemorative link and driving force for his own. Two years after Dhaliwal's death, US Congress renamed a Houston post office after him, ensuring

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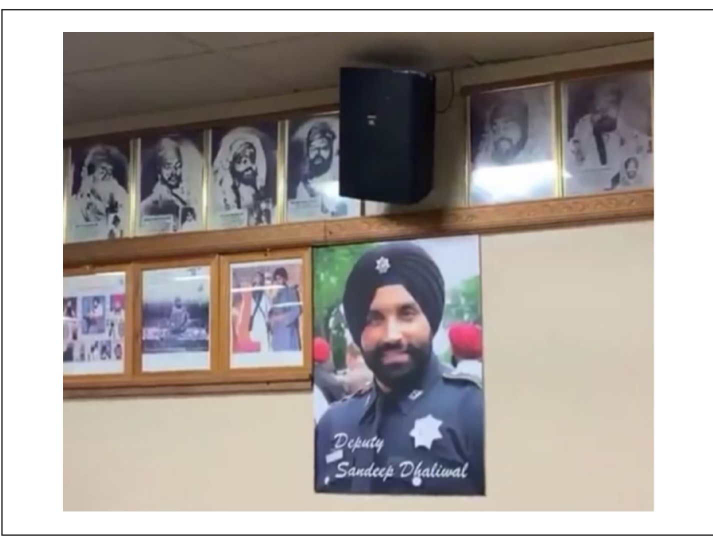

Figure 1. Sandeep Dhaliwal on the wall of shaheeds in El Sobrante, California gurdwara alongside shaheeds from the Indian government–led mass killings of Sikhs throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
Source: Photo by simran thind.

"the Dhaliwal name and the distinction of being the first Sikh to serve in the uniform of the Harris County Sheriff's Office will live on in perpetuity" (Cruz, 2020). Whether on a gurdwara wall of Sikh martyrs or as the name of a federal building, Dhaliwal's name and image seem to evoke a desire to memorialize Sikh service to the US state beyond temporal limitations of life and death. Considering contemporary cases of publicized Sikh death, how does US police or military service manifest as a commemorative strategy for Sikh life in the United States?

Taking up such a question, this article explores selective commemoration—what I call the disproportionate public memorialization of Sikh state actors—as a tactic to uphold public investment in US imperialism, that is, domestic policing and international warfare. Specifically, I explore different instances of publicized Sikh deaths to examine when and how individual experiences of grief are mobilized by Sikh advocacy organizations, community members, and national media into collective memory projects, and through which means they are identified as worthy of this transformation. I inquire: when and how is the trope of the Sikh martyr mobilized in response to contemporary Sikh death? What do these different commemorations, and community responses to them, illustrate regarding the project of Sikh belonging in the United States? I organize my argument around two case studies: first, Dhaliwal, the 42-year-old police officer shot in the line of duty, and second, Gurupreet Kaur, a 6-year-old who succumbed to hyperthermia while entering the United States through Mexico. Dhaliwal and Kaur died within 4 months of each other, both in the southwestern United States. This temporal and geographic proximity in death generated intertwined yet conflicting community conversations on the possibilities for Sikh subjectivities within the United States. Furthermore, while surveying commemorative strategies for Sikh inclusion, the Sikh "martial race" legacy emerged as a commemorative mechanism to measure subjects' worthiness of collective mourning, particularly in discourse mediated by Sikh advocacy organizations. During British colonial rule over India, Sikhs—followers of a political-spiritual tradition started in the Punjab region—were categorized as one of the "martial races," constructed as biologically and culturally predisposed to excel at military service (Rand and Wagner, 2012). Thus, I pursued a second round of analysis to explore the impact of this legacy on US-based Sikh commemoration.

Sikh Studies scholars have noted the significance of social media on mediating and informing Sikh diasporic subjectivities, particularly in relation to experiences of anti-Sikh violence (Devgan, 2013; Singh, 2014; Takhar et al., 2021). Accordingly, I carried out multiple web searches for news articles, blog posts, social media dialogues, and web pages that discussed the deaths of Sandeep Dhaliwal or Gurupreet Kaur. Round two of analysis identified online community discussions around Sikh participation in the US police and military and, subsequently, Sikh community organizations' advocacy materials and news reports on the contemporary ban on Sikh identity markers (turban and unshorn hair) in US military and police uniforms. Data points were then evaluated through their mobilization of Sikh historical and contemporary narratives around belonging, safety, and inclusion, particularly in relation to the "martial race" theme.

Central to this article is Michael Rothberg's (2019) framework "the implicated subject," which theorizes how commemoration plays a key part in either eliding or grappling with the power gained through harms one did not directly commit (e.g. the social, political, and financial capital accumulated by descendants of slave owners). For Rothberg, recognizing implication induces a form of political responsibility that moves us beyond the binary of victim-perpetrator, especially in acknowledging how historic violence and exclusion continue to mark our present experiences of inclusion, safety, and belonging. In analyzing US Sikh subjectivity formation, I use Rothberg's framework of implication and political responsibility to grapple with tensions between Sikh involvement in US imperialism alongside Sikh precarity amid white supremacist violence. While drawing from vastly different time periods and regions, what I think through here are the simultaneous possibilities for safety and threat generated by the same visible markers (Sikh turban and unshorn hair) and how such possibilities are navigated and crafted *through* selective commemoration. In other words, while the Sikh martial race legacy may not be well known in the United States, its use as an inclusive advocacy strategy by US Sikh organizations obscures possible implication that Sikhs hold for their historic and ongoing participation in British imperialism. Thus, this article contributes to memory studies literature on implication by demonstrating how communities under threat of racist violence can use selective commemoration to disavow their responsibility for political violence. As collateral damage, commemorative tactics for inclusion also result in determining which bodies are publicly grievable through their value to the state and its imperial projects.

Sikh subjectivities and the historical narrativization of inclusion

The first Sikh migrants to the United States arrived via California in the early 1900s, primarily from Punjab, India (La Brack, 2005). During British rule over Punjab from 1849 to 1947, Sikh traditions of weapon-carrying and four centuries of challenging tyrannical rule in South Asia marked them as worthy to protect the Empire (Imy, 2019). While martial race categorization relied on racist tropes, it also refined Victorian notions of masculinity around strength and capacity to rule, making it equally significant in shaping gendered Sikh subjectivities (Streets, 2004). Sikhs' privileged status in the colonial hierarchy manifested as highly focused recruitment tactics; only 12% of Punjab's population, Sikhs represented 22% of World War I recruits from the region. As a result, many early Sikh migrants were implicated in imperialism, transporting them around the globe to act as the imperial arm of British conquest (Das, 2018; Roy, 2013).

Still, recent hate violence in the United States continues to mark Sikhs as vulnerable (Hundle, 2012). In 2012, a neo-Nazi gunman entered the Oak Creek, Wisconsin, gurdwara and killed six community members, while, in the 2021 Indianapolis FedEx warehouse shooting, Sikhs constituted half the victims despite being less than 1% of the state population (Tuohy and Contreras, 2021). These events demonstrate how US nationalism constructs Sikhs, and their turbans, as

symbols of foreign, masculine terror through the continued "War on Terror" (Puar, 2007; Singh, 2019). On the contrary, these practices denote a Sikh's devotion to divine Oneness through a refusal to alter the natural form of the body (unshorn hair) and mark the body as innately sovereign (turban). Today, 41 out of 50 US states now have at least one established gurdwara, demonstrating wide-reaching settlement of US Sikhs.[1] However, hate violence manifests on the body of the gurdwara, too, through graffiti and vandalism (Kaur, 2021) and protests against new gurdwara construction (Singh, 2002). Due to ongoing violence against Sikhs across India and increased economic precarity for Sikhs in Punjab specifically (Kaur, 2019), return migration seems unviable for most US Sikhs. Thus, (re)articulating the martial race legacy in a diasporic context draws upon an established pathway for racist and patriarchal belonging. Such inclusion, however, requires upholding the logics of US state violence, which predetermines the value of bodies via racist and patriarchal subjectivities and uses state violence to justify such de/valuing (James, 1996). By repackaging participation in imperialism as a question of honor, inclusion, and legacy rather than implication in political power, Sikh organizations' continued commemoration of, and investment in, a martial race subjectivity "propagate[s] the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present" (Rothberg, 2019: 1).

According to historian Hayden White, the nineteenth-century construction of an *absolute* historical narrative solidified the elision of implication, constructing history with transcendental authority as with God or Nature. Previously, in history as discourse, a reader of history could still recognize "the circle of moral conceptions that defined their practical social horizons; of leading them to identify this circle as their own conscience and guarantor of the integrities of their selfhood" (White, 1987: 103). However, seeking a singular

> historical representation permits the reader to give free reign to "the imaginary" while remaining bound to the constraints of a "symbolic system" but in such a way as to engender in him a sense of "reality" that is "more comprehensible" than his present social existence. (White, 1987: 89)

As a result, investing in singular history rationalizes the social consequences of political violence. The impact of the historical "reality" and "imaginary" that White identifies here is not entirely distinct from Anderson's (1983) "national imaginary," which guides desires of belonging in the United States through the symbolic system developed out of a racist, patriarchal, and class-based order. The US-specific national imaginary, then, confers upon communities a historical narrative that is white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist to conceptualize the self, while also obscuring these political investments (Du Bois, 1940). In another way, one can understand US historical narrativization to mean that an absolute *commemorative* space also develops a particular moral frame that is then mobilized to define one's subjectivity—in other words, a rejection of implication.

Jackie Wang's "Politics of Innocence" extends this theorizing, where empathy—or how we indicate who is equally moral—is also determined by white supremacist and US nationalist frames of value. In discussing which US police murders of Black people are deemed grievable, Jackie Wang articulates that the notion of innocence becomes a stand-in for "nonthreatening to white civil society"—a discursive mechanism to obscure the actors who enact Black physical and social death by refocusing public attention on a debate around individual morality of the deceased (Wang, 2012: 2,3). Making claims for empathy based on innocence means that "[t]he desire for recognition compels us to be allies with, rather than enemies of the State, to sacrifice ourselves in order to meet the standards of victimhood" (Wang, 2012: 2). Such political endeavors can be characterized as "wounded attachments," where contemporary political aims are limited within historic means of inclusion and exclusion (Brown, 1993). For Sikh advocacy work, then, situating contemporary

diasporic commemoration within the narrative framework and moral discourse of the Sikh martial race legacy can transform a historic experience of British colonial inclusion into a contemporary pathway for US inclusion, all while obscuring political responsibility for such a project. I consider this possibility next.

Sikh commemoration and shaheedi

Across time and space, the gurdwara has been a place for community gathering, organizing, and learning, where commemorating shaheeds (martyrs) plays a key role. In Punjab, gurdwaras are usually constructed to mark the site of a significant historical event and display artifacts from that event to indicate the co-temporal presence of Sikh Gurus (enlightened teachers) with their present-day Sikhs, or students (Murphy, 2005). Gurdwaras in the diaspora, lacking such site-specific attachment to Sikh history, carry this history through portraits of shaheeds. Pulling details from Sikh oral tradition, earlier martyrs are depicted through colorful paintings, while those from the late 1900s are photographed in black, white, and sepia. Lined chronologically along the upper edge of the wall, the portraits look down upon the room like omniscient narrators of Sikh history to come. To contextualize celebrations of martyrdom in larger Sikh praxes, as individuals, Sikhs are called to destroy desires for self-recognition and realize the liberatory possibilities of humbling oneself before the equally present divine in all creation, or Oneness. Shaheedi, derived from Arabic, also means to witness. The shaheed, then, is a Sikh who has gone beyond their individual practice to call attention to the denial of Oneness and demand the rectification of such denial through self-sacrifice—a form of witnessing injustice. This sacrifice is then continually witnessed by the larger Sikh community through the wall of shaheeds and carried forward as a material way of being in the world (Haripriya, 2018).

The majority of diasporic gurdwaras decorate their internal walls with shaheeds from the first several centuries of Sikh history, during which Sikhs challenged pre-colonial tyranny across South Asia. In some cases, Sikhs who were killed during Indian government–led massacres of the 1980s are included (Chopra, 2010), although rarely shown are women from any of these periods. In one noted instance in Vancouver, there is a rejection of Sikhs as solely a martial race—a wall of Canadian Sikhs who returned to Punjab to sow seeds of anti-colonial dissent among the Sikh imperial forces and violently overthrow British rule (Figure 2). We started with Dhaliwal, a Sikh cop killed in the line of duty, who has been included in the wall of shaheeds in a California-based gurdwara (Figure 1). Thus, while commemoration is a core part of Sikh collective identity, the nuances in each gurdwara's wall of shaheeds indicate it is also a project of curating a historical narrative for communities to orient themselves toward (Trouillot, 1995). Ongoing "colonial aphasia" allows one to use the Sikh martial race narrative as simultaneously "at once selectively available and out of reach" for developing critical Sikh subjectivity (Maan, 2005; Stoler, 2011: 122). By "unanchoring" the Sikh martial race from its aim as a project of racist and patriarchal violence, in that the martial race trope justified imperialism through false biological traits and incorporation into imperial rule, Sikh advocacy organizations facilitate memory projects that vacillate between commemorative and mediatized memory. Here, commemorative memory is that "in which the past is invoked at set times and places for specific social purposes and mediatised memory [is] where the past is consumed as entertainment or as part of the identity projects of individuals" (O'Connor, 2019: 3). By refusing to make linear sense of archived histories and colonial violence, we can trouble choices in commemorative narratives that occlude the recognition of implicated subjectivities (Judge and Brar, 2021; Vimalassery et al., 2016). A new framing of Sikh subjectivity through implication can attend to the denial of racist and patriarchal violence that occurs through collective memory projects (Kaur and kehal, 2020).

Figure 2. Anti-colonial shaheeds in Surrey, British Columbia gurdwara. Sign reads, "This gallery is dedicated to the sacrifices of those Canadian Gadari freedom fighters that left Canada and went to India to fight for freedom of India and faced imprisonment, life imprisonment and death penalty."
Source: Photo by author.

Examining the utility of the martial race legacy to US Sikh advocacy projects, I contend with the consequence of confining contemporary Sikh subjectivities to that of a constantly excluded victim: a Sikh subjectivity that cannot consider its implication. In the next section, I analyze how the martial race legacy is mobilized in Sikh advocacy projects to incorporate the turban and unshorn hair into US police and military uniform standards. I also explore how this commemorative model has morphed alongside liberal discourses of reform and inclusion. Then, I contrast forms of grief taken up after the deaths of Gurupreet Kaur and Sandeep Dhaliwal and examine resistance to considering Sikhs as implicated. Through these analyses, I demonstrate how Sikh bodies are marked as grievable or not, a possibility measured through their distinct proximities to the state, or the racist and patriarchal possibilities for empathy and incorporation into the United States.

Sikh citizenship through the police state

The commemoration of a martial race legacy has come to the forefront of Sikh advocacy tactics in recent years, solidifying military and police service as a key avenue of participation in the nation for Sikhs in the United States. In April 2009, Sikh Coalition acquired two uniform accommodations for Sikh clients seeking to serve in the US Army, launching a campaign that continues to be one of its most popular among the organization's supporters more than a decade later. The campaign, which aims to obtain unbridled access into the US military for Sikhs with unshorn hair and/or turbans, frames its work as "following in the footsteps of the African American, women's rights, and LGBT communities. . .to systematically remove barriers that prevent Sikhs from serving in the US military" (Sikh Coalition, n.d.). As Sikh martial race histories do not directly link to US inclusion, the strategy becomes one of drawing parallels with the inclusion of other US minorities,

developing a commemorative strategy within US imperial legacies. Sikh Coalition argues the campaign would create equal employment precedent for US-based Sikhs: "if the nation's largest employer allows observant Sikhs to serve, this will make it harder for employers everywhere to discriminate against our community" (Sikh Coalition, n.d.). The US Department of Defense has maintained that Sikhs are unable to make a secure seal with military-grade masks due to their beards, while the turban and unshorn hair underneath prevent proper protection through a helmet, rationalizing their uniform policy as protecting "the soldier's mission, health, and safety" (AP, 1981). In addition, accommodations to uniform would not allow for *esprit de corps*, or the unification of troop morale through their uniformity.

To counter the narrative of Sikhs being unable to comply with uniform standards, Sikh Coalition memorializes the history of Sikh service in various US-led wars as evidence that Sikhs can serve safely and properly (Sikh Coalition, n.d.). Furthermore, they argue Sikhs are *primed* to serve in the military, drawing upon British martial race categorization, and continue to call the US ban on Sikh military service a "presumptive ban," implying an obvious removal if further information was considered (Sikh Coalition, 2017). A historical timeline of Sikh US military service is labeled as "a timeline of the history of honorable and capable service by Sikhs in the US military," and those who do receive accommodations become "Sikh Americans who are serving their communities without compromising their faith" (Sikh Coalition, 2020). Here, the Sikh Coalition draws upon both US-specific and international commemorative links to suture Sikh belonging to broader imperialism through advocacy.

In 2013, a year after the Oak Creek, Wisconsin, gurdwara shooting, Sikh Coalition rebranded their individual litigation strategy into a multi-year campaign called "Let Sikhs Serve," targeting an end goal of unrestricted Sikh service in the US military. Utilizing the 1-year anniversary of the Oak Creek shooting to remind US policy makers of the significance of military service to Sikh American freedom, two Sikh community leaders wrote in *The Hill*, an outlet geared towards and read widely by US-policy makers and their staff:

> While the raising of awareness was one positive development to come out of such a horrific incident, it begged the question: why is it that this distinctly visible minority group—of driven entrepreneurs, successful professionals, family-oriented citizens—have only been noted and praised in tragedy? And further, why is it that Sikhs do not appear to be part of the American fabric?
>
> A central part of the problem is that Sikhs have not been allowed to contribute to one of the most powerful forces that binds Americans as a people: shared sacrifice in an all-volunteer military that works tirelessly to defend and promote our common values as Americans. (Singh and Singh, 2013)

Although the Oak Creek shooting is marked as a tragedy, grief and discussions of white supremacist violence are elided in the larger project of Sikh incorporation into US imperialism, despite targets of such imperialism marking it as a white supremacist project, as well (Kumar, 2020). By converting the martial race legacy into a commemorative frame, Sikh advocacy organizations can only recognize Sikh death as a loss because it was unable to be celebrated as a martyr for the country through military service.

While Sikh Coalition is the only organization that takes up large-scale litigation on this matter, several other organizations have been part of the project to "Let Sikhs Serve" and improve the public image of US Sikhs for uninhibited military service. National Sikh Campaign (NSC), whose mission is "to promote a better understanding of the Sikh community in America and other Western countries, and to project a positive image and profile of the Sikh community," similarly commemorates Sikhs in the military as part of their strategy to demonstrate the Sikh community's contributions to the United States and other Western nation-states (National Sikh Campaign, n.d.-a).

Recalling the “rich military tradition” of the Sikh martial race, NSC claims that Sikh “enthusiasm for military service has been challenged by mandates to cut our hair and remove our turbans” (National Sikh Campaign, n.d.-c). NSC also reorients historic Sikh mobilization against social oppression toward a campaign for Sikh military service:

> Taking a stand for ethics is integral to Sikhism—from Guru Nanak’s work toward dismantling the Indian caste system, to our core belief that the purpose of life is to grow closer with God through service to others. When Sikhs immigrated to America, they did so with the expectation that they would give more than they would take. . .. Many also bravely serve in the United States military, working alongside soldiers of all colors and creeds to protect the American homeland and our enduring values. (National Sikh Campaign, n.d.-b)

NSC remakes a Sikh praxis of abolishing material and spiritual hierarchies into a general project of “service”; in this, the implication, or political responsibility, of the object or objective of service is not further complicated. Service, instead, obscures implication by imagining the state as benevolent through its promise of universal brotherhood.

Another such effort stems more directly from Sikh Coalition through Major Kamaljeet Kalsi, the first person to receive an accommodation in 2009. Kalsi started the Sikh American Veterans Alliance in 2018, as “creating opportunity for more Americans to serve their nation is not just a matter of national security, but a matter of national identity—everyone should be able to see themselves as part of the world’s greatest fighting force” (Sikh American Veterans Alliance, n.d.). In Kalsi’s experience, “wearing his ‘religious uniform’ provides him confidence as a soldier” and, he argues, “military service is a natural fit for many religious Sikhs” (Dickstein, 2017). With this, Kalsi borrows the logic of Sikh elite who collaborated with the British to increase Sikh recruitment in the early 1900s, as martial race status was restricted to Sikhs who donned a turban and unshorn beard, to enforce what the British interpreted as a productive form of social discipline (Imy, 2019; Rand and Wagner, 2012). In addition to commemorating martial race strategies through military uniform, Kalsi connects fighting ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) with the US military to the historic challenging of the Mughal Empire by the Sikh Gurus:

> This is a story that Sikh children grow up listening to. It teaches us lessons of sacrifice, bravery, and social justice. It taught me to stand up for the practice of all religions. . . Sikhs have been fighting against violent extremism and religious intolerance for centuries. (Kalsi, 2017)

Kalsi argues that the US military will be able to draw upon this legacy and expertise if it incorporates Sikh identity into uniform standards, which will allow US democracy to emerge victorious:

> We show our strength when we recognize the civil rights of small minorities. And when we do, we also gain in our fight with our enemies. ISIS tolerates no dissent, no disagreement, no difference. Our acceptance brings new people to our side, just as ISIS’ intolerance pushes many away. (Kalsi, 2017)

Kalsi roots Sikh service in the US military as a simultaneous Sikh *and* American victory for democracy by linking histories of Sikhs battling Mughal rule to the US fighting ISIS. Harpreetinder Singh Bajwa who received a 2019 accommodation for the US Air Force stated, “Today, I feel that my country has embraced my Sikh heritage, and I will be forever grateful for this opportunity” (Epstein, 2019). Kalsi, and those who received accommodations after him, imagine the possibilities of Sikh belonging in its manifestation through military service, a direct result of martial race commemoration shaping Sikh advocacy projects.

Though this narrative has been dominated by Sikh men for many decades, Sikh women are starting to find pride in the martial race legacy and, in doing so, broaden state-determined inclusion for possibilities of “female empowerment.” In June 2020, *The New York Times* reported on West Point’s first observant Sikh cadet, 23-year-old Anmol Narang who shared that “military service was always in her blood. ‘My grandfather was in the Indian Army,’ she said in an interview. ‘It was always a big part of my life and something I was always interested in’” (Karni, 2020). One month later, in a LinkedIn post that garnered close to 37,000 reactions and 1700 comments, Naureen Singh shared how her recent completion of the US Air Force training program was inspired by her own father’s legacy, Col GB Singh, “the highest-ranking Sikh to serve active duty with a turban in the US Army” (Singh, 2020a). She connects her choice to carry on her father’s legacy with Sikh history’s “really empowered Sikh females [who] continued to rise up and defeat the odds” (Singh, 2020b). Whereas the martial race legacy incorporated subjects into a racist, colonial hierarchy through masculine tropes, the liberal discourse of inclusion in the United States has transformed such a category into one that can also empower women. In this case, since many Sikh women do not engage with Sikh embodied practices (one consequence of the colonial masculinization of Sikhi), the martial race legacy becomes about preserving a bloodline of Sikh soldiers—ironically a more direct tie-in to US racial ideologies. Despite the campaign’s move to include women, legal scholars have shown that reform-centered advocacy cannot effectively disrupt the state’s racist and patriarchal(de)valuing of bodies (Spade, 2015). The results of commemorating a Sikh martial race without considering political responsibility emerge. As community traditions of self-defense, colonial and state projects of imperialism, and familial legacies of military participation are all collapsed into a singular narrative of “service,” a commemorative framework is forged. From here, we begin to witness pre-judgments on whose life is worthy of being commemorated through their value to the state.

Who dies a martyr?

Selective collective memorializing of deceased Sikhs by the Sikh community has been marked by both racist and patriarchal tropes of state belonging. In June 2019, 6-year-old Gurupreet Kaur died from dehydration in the Sonoran Desert after a many-months-long journey to the United States from Haryana, a state neighboring Punjab (Frayer, 2020; Karimi, 2019). While the family gained organizational support and legal representation from a few community spaces, and some media attention over time, the US Sikh community remained largely silent. A few Sikhs with large social media followings shared the CNN report of her death, but they received no more than 50 retweets, most receiving much less. Death from hyperthermia became common for undocumented migrants after the United States launched Prevention Through Deterrence in the 1990s, which used hyper-policing to limit viable crossing points to those accessible through the Sonoran Desert and manipulate the decay caused by extreme heat to erase undocumented migrant deaths (De León, 2015). Thus, calling attention to the death of Gurupreet Kaur would have aggravated US desires to obscure racist border violence, counterintuitive to a project of Sikh inclusion. In contrast, when Dhaliwal was killed 4 months later, CNN had a 3-minute segment on Dhaliwal’s funeral, and many politicians, government agencies, and popular icons commemorated Dhaliwal’s passing—including the US Secret Service Twitter account. The week of Dhaliwal’s death, UK-based Sikh artist “Inkquisitive” shared his artistic rendering of Dhaliwal embracing a small child, a photograph that had gone viral after his death (Figure 3). In Inkquisitive’s version, Dhaliwal’s turban unravels into a US flag; the post garnered more than double his usual Instagram engagement at 42,000 + likes, indicating the mourning for Dhaliwal had become transnational (@inkquisitive, 2019). As of writing in October 2022, a Texas jury sentenced Robert Solis, the man charged with killing Dhaliwal, to the death penalty, using Dhaliwal’s death to further uphold logics of US state violence (*News India*, 2022).

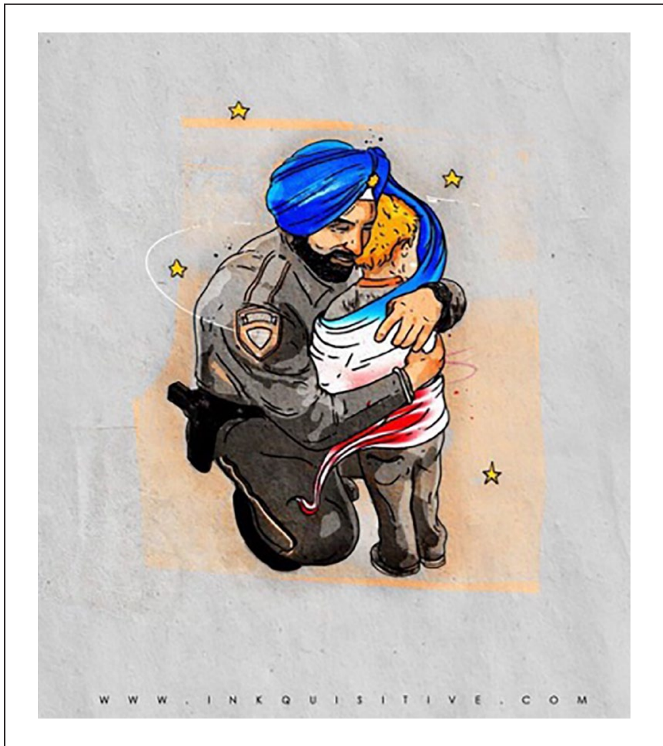

Figure 3. Illustration of Dhaliwal by UK artist "Inkquisitive," creatively depicting a photograph circulated after Dhaliwal's death.

Using Python coding packages for data mining and analysis, I was able to scrape all tweets mentioning Kaur and Dhaliwal from the time of their deaths through December 2021, the time of analysis. The generated word clouds demonstrate markedly different impact and focal points (Figures 4 and 5). There are 230 tweets about Kaur and 7470 on Dhaliwal to date. Twitter user @ simran, a co-author of *The Hill* article, received 8.2K retweets on his tweet announcing the death of Sandeep Dhaliwal and 4.4K retweets for the death of Gurupreet Kaur. While tweets on Kaur focus primarily on US border violence broadly, and slightly less so on her cause of death and her Indian nationality, tweets on Dhaliwal largely highlight his positionality as a state civil servant, followed by desires for him to "rest in peace" and condolences to the family. Several words used to describe Dhaliwal make no appearance in the word cloud on Kaur: honor, peace, and good. Still, in death, each body is marked by its proximity to the state—Kaur through her traversing of the US border apparatus and Dhaliwal through his service as a police officer.

In the days after Dhaliwal's death, a few voices brought attention to the stark contrast in commemoration of life and death for Dhaliwal and Kaur. Sikh poet D Kaur contextualized the celebration around Dhaliwal's life through the history of US police as slave catchers and the responsibility Sikhs must accept in claiming power on stolen land. She shared,

> i want to raise question on what are we mourning & what are we also normalizing? . . . what does it mean for us to celebrate turbans & representations & sikhi in a country that was not made for us + does not want us + kills people of color everyday + uses us as tokens? (@_dkaur, 2019)

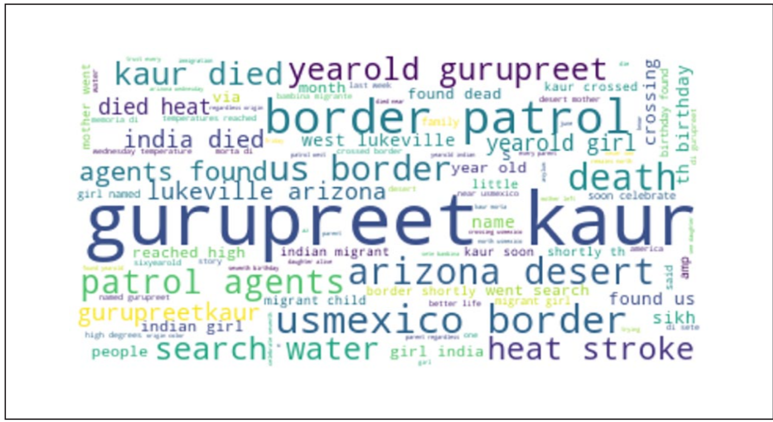

Figure 4. Word cloud of tweets containing “Gurupreet Kaur” from 12 June 2019, until 8 December 2021.

Figure 5. Word cloud of tweets containing “Sandeep Dhaliwal” or “Deputy Dhaliwal” from 27 September 2019, until 8 December 2021.

D Kaur ended her reflection by asking Sikhs to be self-reflective in “being warriors” and protect those who are left to the mercy of the police state, including ICE. Others, however, rejected a framework of implication for Dhaliwal’s participation in the US police:

> He gave a bigger sacrifice than any of the ones who are opposing Dhaliwal Saab’s [marker of respect in Punjabi] death. His exsistence [sic] in the police force was a slap on the face of institutional racism . . . You fix systems from the inside out. (@rasans_, 2019)

Of note, public commemoration has not been consistent within the passing of Sikhs who took up civil service. The death of 43-year-old Army veteran Parminder Shergill in 2014 faced an intentional silencing from the community, as he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was shot by police during a mental health crisis (Gonzales,

2014). While local elders wanted to mourn quietly, community organizers used it as a chance to address a taboo topic. Like Dhaliwal's family, Shergill's family called upon the martial tradition: "'It's a typical Indian immigrant story,' [Parminder's cousin] says. 'Sikhs are known either as farmers or warriors.'" Despite the attempted mobilization of Shergill's service in relation to the Sikh martial race, there was no national attention or calls for justice. Shergill's death demonstrates not only stigmas around mental health, but also how mental illness precludes commemoration within a state inclusion discourse that privileges neurotypical bodies.

Hence, only the deceased Sikh who dies *honorably* in the line of duty is commemorated as a martyr. Innocence, as conceptualized by Jackie Wang, upholds the moral purity of whiteness and becomes a mechanism for non-Black people of color, like US-based Sikhs, to participate in anti-Black abuses for their selective incorporation into the US state. However, in the case of Gurupreet Kaur, her presumed innocence—generally granted to undocumented children—is elided within a framework of commemoration that prioritizes inclusion into the United States as its end goal. Because Sikh embodied practices have been masculinized through colonial and imperial frames, the turban and unshorn hair both queer Western norms of masculinity while also denying Sikh women and non-binary Sikhs the ability to be recognized as such (Gill, 2022; Mahmood and Brady, 2000). Thus, Gurupreet Kaur's death, while invoking grief, did not carry traction for the project of Sikh inclusion—between her lack of US citizenship and presumed lack of Sikh embodied markers, her body could not carry forth such a commemorative project. Instead, Gurupreet Kaur's death represented the violence of US border control—perhaps why she is only formally commemorated in an exhibit on intimacies of state violence at the Tucson Jewish Museum & Holocaust Center in Arizona (Figure 6).

Sikh organizations and the community at large have yet to attempt commemorative projects that account for implication by acknowledging the power and safety Sikhs received, and continue to receive, through imperialism. However, individual voices are attempting to build the foundation for such an approach through online dialogue. In May 2021, a week-long conversation on Sikh involvement in US policing was sparked when Twitter user @beynaam (2021) posted, "sikhs in north america will be all '[f***] the indian government for 1984' and then be pro police. or even better, be IN the police." In this assertion, she evokes possibilities for transnational solidarity around police brutality, connecting Sikh experiences of Indian state violence[2] to political responsibility for participating in US imperialism. Some individuals furthered this sentiment by making explicit links between state actors and institutions:

> KPS Gill[3] and Derek Chauvin are the same. No justice (@comrade_marcus, 2021)

> the police actively cooperated with the state in order to push the genocide in 84, it's the same thing here. . . police don't serve the people they serve the state. (@nun2mee, 2021)

> 1984 was not just an event but a structural form of violence that had been sustained for years. Settler state policing in [North America] is also a structure . . . which carries out violence, harm in the name of securing the state. (@arshallow, 2021)

In response, some argued a validation of police service through an argument of alternative historical encounters: "if there [had been] more [Sikhs] in the Police Force. It would have been harder for the government to carry out what they did" (@Sabi_Singh93, 2021). A few individuals challenged this logic by mentioning the already disproportionate presence of Sikhs in the Indian police and military, a remnant of the martial race legacy. Still, the most evident foreclosure of acknowledging implication in current commemorative projects comes in one brief exchange:

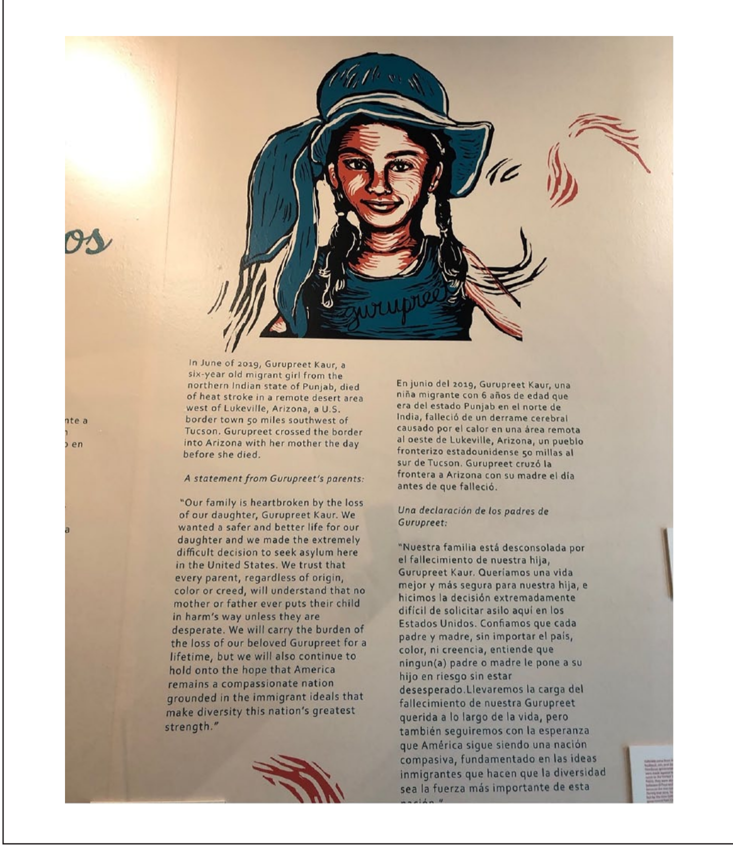

Figure 6. Gurupreet Kaur in Asylum/Asilo exhibit, "to address a chaotic circumstance of the government's own making," Tucson Jewish Museum & Holocaust Center.
Source: Photo by Maxwell Greenberg.

> You'd think facing the state sanctioned violence we did in 1984 would make people more sensitive to how [the police] operates in America. But instead it feels like "well I'M not being harmed here so [relieved face emoji]." (@preetypants123, 2021).

> "Well I'M not being harmed here so."
> Of course not, I don't commit crimes. (@GurvirShinda, 2021).

Claims for empathy fall short when they have been constructed through racist and patriarchal notions of innocence. In commemorating the martyr-state actor, through the martial race legacy, innocence allows for the most effective form of advocacy through a denial of implication while requesting inclusion into the nation-state imaginary.

Re-narrativizing Sikh commemoration

Through an analysis of commemorative uses of the Sikh martial race legacy, I have demonstrated how Sikh advocacy projects and community members co-create a narrative discourse, historic and contemporary, that identifies the perfect Sikh citizen subject to be mourned through existing social

and political categories of value. In placing Dhaliwal on the wall of shaheeds, community members recall a history of imperial inclusion rather than resistance (Figure 1 vs Figure 2). The martyr-state actor (Sandeep Dhaliwal) becomes part of a larger project of commemoration for both the US state and Sikh advocacy organizations. The state actor who does not die honorably (Parminder Shergill) is not granted innocence and thus becomes a localized instance of mourning instead. The non-state actor (Gurupreet Kaur) is denied martyrdom, innocence, and legibility altogether, forcing legitimate mourning and commemoration of their death into the private realm, thus absolving the human consequence of US border enforcement, another form of US imperialism. The public mourning of the latter two deaths is both unrecognizable to and futile for collective commemoration projects oriented toward state belonging. Other publicized Sikh deaths, like the Oak Creek victims, are reoriented in terms of their utility for state incorporation. All of these subjects take on an exclusively victim positionality that does not leave room to consider institutional or historical implications of belonging.

In prioritizing the positionality of the Sikh martyr-state actor, a Sikh subjectivity legible to the US state emerges by rejecting alternative possibilities of US imperialism as a violent project. By upholding a racist schema of innocence, Sikhs' implication as a martial race is elided, while empathy and grievability are granted to those already included in the US state. Yet, it is these same obscured legacies that mark the true intricacies of implication: it was through military service that Sikhs became privileged British subjects and through imperial migration that many Sikhs transformed their martial race status into settler-colonial citizenry. Ignoring the conditions of such inclusion, and the political responsibility that comes with it, constructs a highly selective commemorative project for Sikh narrative histories and contemporary Sikh deaths. In acknowledging how hyper-focusing on precarity limits commemoration—by siloing those who hold political responsibility into power-less victims—we can understand how the narrativization of the Sikh martial race shapes Sikh memory and subjectivity formation and excludes more liberatory ontologies for both. Those who continue to disrupt and challenge the retrospective significance given to Sikh colonial history ask us to consider another memory, another narrative—perhaps to build a new wall of Sikh martyrs.

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Notes

1. States without a known gurdwara are Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

2. While outside the scope of this article, the following monographs offer vibrant analyses on late 1900s anti-Sikh violence across India: Mallika Kaur's *Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict*, Brian Keith Axel's *The Nation's Tortured Body*, and Cynthia Keppley Mahmood's *Fighting for Faith and Nation*.
3. Former Director General of Punjab Police KPS Gill is known for creating an incentive system for officers to capture and kill militants, resulting in thousands of Sikh murders throughout the 1990s (Ensaaf, n.d.).

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