

Critique of Archived Life:

Toward a Hesitation of Sikh Immigrant Accumulation

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In 2016, with much fanfare and institutional support, the Pioneering Punjabi Digital Archive (PPDA) went online. Hosted at the University of California, Davis, the archive promises to provide “a window into the story of South Asian immigrants from the Punjab region in north India to California since the turn of the twentieth century” (PPDA 2016d).¹ Attempting to reveal how the Punjabi community struggled and then thrived in California, the PPDA (2016f) creates “a platform for Punjabi Americans to tell their own life stories through interviews, speeches, photographs, letters and diaries,” even writing the archive “collaboratively with the individuals and families.” Though these life stories are limited, focused predominantly on “early Pioneers, Farmers, and Professionals,” who also largely fund the archive, the PPDA (2016f) promises future inclusivity by reassuring its readers the archive will expand “to reflect the greater religious, regional, genera-

tional, and class diversity within the Punjabi American community.” Partial in scope but offering accumulated inclusivity in a deferred future, the PPDA (2016f) claims to provide “a universal story about the struggle for survival amidst great obstacles and the perseverance of the human spirit.”

The university, according to Roderick A. Ferguson (2012: 12), is also an archive of sorts. It functions to remove itself from the production of knowledge even while establishing the rules for admittance. It, too, assumes knowledge is a set of facts that can be written independently of the university’s own social context (Povinelli 2011b: 164). Since the sixties, elite migrants in the university have been central to this context and, Ferguson contends, have become an essential “part of the pageantry of minoritized subjects who could purportedly replenish American institutions as domains affirming national culture and independence” (152). The PPDA is one example of this diversity management and affirmation of the local in a national culture.

The archive is a collaborative project between UC Davis and the Punjabi American Heritage Society (PAHS), a local community group made up of elite professional Punjabis. As UC Davis loses public funds, becoming increasingly beholden to privatization, the Middle East/South Asia Studies program, which hosts the PPDA, relies on local community funders to support various initiatives. The PPDA, therefore, celebrates those who provided the funds—labeled pioneers—and who also become the ideal figures in the national imaginary while dispensing with the possibility of contradiction. And, indeed, the PPDA is celebrated as proving the inclusion and tolerance of the local community.

Bolstering representation through the institutional power of the University of California, the PPDA accumulates documents and records to preserve and make them legible. It collects narratives from elite families in the Central Valley to demonstrate American uplift within the contours of a particular community history. We undertake this project to question the reproductive logic that undergirds the PPDA’s representational frame in its accumulation of this history. Even while proclaiming extensive reach and access through its digital format, the PPDA sediments a particular classificatory paradigm, further imposing the structure of narrative sequence onto immigrant life—one that cultivates intimacy, revealing how Punjabis too represent a normalized and familial America—the utopian context

for aspiration (Berlant 1997: 3). Archiving these reproductive families, the PPDA's accumulation delegitimizes other scenes within the national scene, including poor immigrants. This fantasy of familial life then generates what become untimely lives in the moment of archiving and its constant cleansing and ordering (Berlant 1997: 179, 220).

How is it possible to highlight untimely lives without foregrounding redemption? Methodological reflexivity is not enough to overcome the dangers archives and archiving present, centered as they are on loss and its attendant recovery (Arondekar 2009: 4; Lowe 2015: 98). Our task cannot be, therefore, to collect subaltern histories since collection does not reorient desires that conjure objects for archival accumulation (Povinelli 2011b: 152). Put another way, an archive is a framework that perpetually subjugates difference by targeting not only the past but also the future (Reddy 2005: 115). Redemption awaits, we are told. To foreclose this always viable, though deferred, future, we must craft, as Arondekar (2009: 4) argues, "an archival approach that articulates against the guarantee of recovery." This approach is one of hesitation. Hesitation, Lisa Lowe (2015: 98) argues, "halts the desire for recognition by the present social order and staves off the compulsion to make visible within current epistemological orthodoxy." In other words, hesitation provides an opportunity to pause (*rahao*) and interrogate the archive's reproduction of frames of representability.

Against models of archival intimacy and recovery, which look to cultivate transformative hope alongside limitless public access to a private knowable and transparent subject—what Berlant (1997: 6) writes constitutes "a more labile and optimistic culturalist perspective"—this article hesitates in a vexed archival space without guarantees or loss.² Within this hesitation, we explore traces of untimely lives displaced in creating archival legibility. These traces reveal a different form of being that challenges the reproductive logic of the PPDA. We begin by examining the PPDA itself and how it authorizes Punjabi American life in the United States. We then explore the various lines in the PPDA that refuse such ordering. Finally, we end by thinking about the impossibility of tying present immigrant lives into a narrative sequence by foregrounding immigrant lives at an impasse.

We cultivate a hesitation through a comparative approach that couples archival research with brief ethnographic forays. We rely on articles about

Punjabi American life in both the archive and the public sphere, which are placed alongside our encounters with Punjabi Sikh immigrants who work in canneries and the fields. Scholars on Punjabi Sikh immigration have largely focused on youth diasporic culture (Brah 1996; Maira 2002), the relationship between the diaspora and Khalistan, a Sikh homeland (Shani 2007; Tatla 2012), or the post-9/11 violence faced by Sikh immigrants and the attempts to ameliorate this violence by advocacy organizations (Puar 2007; Brar and Judge 2017). In contrast, we focus on elderly immigrant workers and their ordinary, albeit precarious lives in California's Central Valley, lives that are not conceptually tied to a different future demanded by youth, the struggle for a homeland, or inclusive politics in the United States. These encounters with the largely disregarded elderly do not seek to provide a face or voice to oppression—a development that would reproduce the very logic of intimacy through personal complaint—nor do we wish to foreground the thrill of discovery within the PPDA's absences in a “second-order archive, reaffirming the very logic of archival power” (Povinelli 2011b: 153).

Instead, we try to consider the embodied activities and conceptual repositories offered by our interlocutors—lives that require we consider the physical pain and degradation of the body and the routine violence within the workplace. This ethnographic pause in “still life” highlights the points of impossibility the PPDA encounters in its project of archiving that foregrounds an American future (Stewart 2005: 329). For, as Kathleen Stewart (2005: 329) argues, examples from still life do not provide “a grid for mapping,” but instead suspend the linearity of narrative sequence. Lingering in this disturbance, this article does not seek to fill a gap, provide redemption, or make immigrants legible. Instead, it discloses how certain immigrant Sikhs dwell in a disorienting and disordered impasse. This impasse produces epistemological anxiety instead of intimate recovery since Sikhs are unable to accelerate toward an archivally intelligible horizon. This deceleration demonstrates how Sikh immigrants are continuously stitched onto multiple nodal points, eluding the scholar's fixing grasp and highlighting the disrupting nature of immigrant being. Such life then cannot be grafted onto archival reproduction, ethnographic retrieval, or redemptive futures.

Reproduction

In contrast to this impasse without legible contours, the PPDA tries to make Punjabi immigrant life singular and intelligible by invoking reproductivity. The PPDA upholds reproductive contours through what Lee Edelman (2004: 3) polemically calls “reproductive futurism,” which “authenticate[s] social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of the Child.” And, indeed, the reproductive family signaled by a pioneer’s children’s efforts to secure and reproduce conditions of production entwined with an American future. Thakur (Tuly) Singh Johl provides an apt example of an accumulation of such a future through domesticity. The PPDA reveals how Johl’s ability to reproduce allows him to pioneer a tight-knit Punjabi American future. For example: “Eventually he and his family became successful peach and walnut farmers owning hundreds of acres of land. Gradually, he was also able to sponsor his family members to join him in California, including his son, Dr. Gulzar Singh Johl, in 1948 and later his wife, Basanti Kaur, in 1958. Today there are hundreds of members of the Johl family who live in the Yuba City area” (PPDA 2016h). Johl procures his place in the archive through both his productive farms and his familial reproduction through both his offspring and chain migration. With this generational succession and narrative sequence intact, Johl becomes a pioneer and tames the land.³

Johl is not the only example; all the pioneer genealogies secure a future through the figure of the Child. Perhaps one more example will suffice. The PPDA documents how Puna Singh and Nand Kaur literally secure conditions of American production through their children since their reproductive capacities provided the conditions to overcome racist American law. The PPDA (2016g) notes:

In Sutter County, they raised seven children (five boys and two girls). In 1929, Puna Singh bought twenty acres of land in his children’s names (it was illegal for him to own land according to California’s Alien Land Laws) where he and his wife established a small dairy farm. Soon after, he bought another 79 acres of land—enough property to provide his family with a home and a lifestyle of relative comfort and security.

Puna Singh fortified the boundaries of his acquired property by normalizing its properties in which fertility marked by the Child, once again, remained central.

As an addendum and the only woman that appears in the Early Pioneers section, Nand Kaur bolsters Puna Singh's labor. Her brief entry below Puna Singh's highlights how she became acclimated to the United States because of her domestic role. The PPDA (2016g) states that "she adapted to American life quickly as she was soon busy raising her children and helping her husband with the family farm." Her domestic labor fortifies the reproduction of an American family. Therefore, fertility and its descent in the United States, marked through the ability to engage in agricultural and familial improvement, coordinated Puna Singh's individual capacities for land ownership and, in so doing, for the PPDA, extended *his* dominion over property and the American landscape in general.

Our goal is not to diminish the difficulties of immigrant life in the United States, but to consider the rationality that undergirds the archive's form. Settling, for example, becomes central in building legibility. The use of the word *pioneer* to describe Punjabi migration itself invokes the settlement of wild untamed land. The pioneer is a central node in making sense of United States history as a narrative of progress—of moral and material improvement. As Brendan Lindsay (2012) explains, the pioneer was a trope for European progress and civilization against the native savage, stretching from the pilgrim to Westward expansion. Lindsay notes that the "pioneer of the colonial era was a familiar, kindred spirit possessed of qualities many emigrants would seek to emulate in the nineteenth century" (59). Within this conceptual frame, historians in the nineteenth century, such as George Bancroft and William Henry Bartlett, then located "the success of the nation in overcoming such wastelands and savages with the heroic labor of the pioneer farmer"—a trope that continues to define mainstream US history (49).

The PPDA mirrors this "pioneer" formation, demonstrating a complicity with the settler colonial logic of the United States. Each entry documents how the pioneers undertook an arduous journey to make land productive and populous. For example, the PPDA (2016f) records in Tully Johl's entry how "today there are hundreds of members of the Johl family who live in

the Yuba City area.” The entry on Nand Singh Johl reads similarly. The PPDA (2016e) declares that “today hundreds of his descendants and other relations who share the surname Johl call the Yuba City area home.” This investment in a pioneering identity managing putatively empty land then elides the settler colonial nature of early migration by simultaneously colonized subjects and integrates immigrants into a familiar history and future. Such contradictions central to the movement of capital become obscured as local difference becomes wedded to the broader nationalist imaginary of the “pioneer.”

Immigrant life, therefore, is rendered intelligible by the PPDA through a familial genealogical legibility that foregrounds the ability to settle a landscape. But this legibility becomes confounded when we consider the disrupting lives other kinds of Punjabi immigrants in the early twentieth century. Though recognizing the brutal violence immigrants faced, the PPDA emphasizes how pioneers negotiated this violence to become successful citizens. The PPDA (2016f) comments on how the “emotional and material hardships experienced by families who were separated for decades due to the exclusionary US immigration policies” were overcome by “the ways the early pioneers eventually moved up the economic ladder despite tremendous obstacles,” which then leads to “the remarkable contributions of Punjabi Americans in recent decades.” The PPDA structures lives as progressing through sequential chronological eras—those of the Early Pioneers, the Farmers, and the Professionals. This narrative sequence creates what Povinelli (2011a: 77) calls a future anterior tense in which a neat teleology entraps immigrants in a posthistorical future from the viewpoint of the last man. By focusing on this known future to understand the Punjabi immigrant broadly, the PPDA orchestrates a particular grammar in which a liberating reflexive future is always on the precipice awaiting a determined reach.

In this grammar, nonarchived lives become collateral damage failing to reach the desired end of historical being. Scholars have noted the difficulties immigrants faced in creating the narrative sequence that the PPDA foregrounds. Nayan Shah (2011: 94) aptly notes the difficulty of creating a properly circumscribed domestic life, writing that “sustaining an autonomous domestic household was not feasible for either most international migrants or domestic migrants whose livelihoods depended on agricultural

labor.” For example, in 1923, Rajani Kanta Das, a special agent in the US Department of Labor, published a report titled *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast* in which he argued that the transient and idle nature of most immigrant existence, its nondomesticity, created problems since immigrants did not lead a settled family life. Das (1923: 83) records these troubles in his moralistic language: “Cases of homosexuality among the Hindustanees have also been known. Homosexuality is a common vice in the mining districts, lumber camps, wheat fields, and fruit ranches. . . . That this vice exists among the Hindustanees, who are as a rule without women, is shown by a few criminal records.” Shah (2011: 8) traces the moralism and policing behind this stranger intimacy, unraveling, he writes “the anachronistic stabilizations of settlement, nuclear family, and sexuality,” which upholds “the settled heterosexual household as the privileged model of social organization and political participation.” Producing narrative detours rather than a continuous sequence, these queer lives refuse codification and instead signal a different time. This time is not a redemptive time; it does not overcome the past through reproductive legibility signaled by the settled domicile. And, in doing so, these lives refuse our desires for collection within the intimate cartography of the United States, revealing how, as Spivak (1987: 200) writes about the efforts of the Subaltern Studies Collective, “even the most successful historical record” is also “crosshatched by cognitive failure.”

Erasures

Lines in the archive that are not linear, lines that do not lead to the same place the PPDA inhabits, become even more pronounced in the PPDA's documentation of post–World War II Punjabi immigration. For the PPDA, one central figure who reveals the pioneering capacities of Punjabi immigrants in the postwar period is Didar Singh Bains. The PPDA (2016b) informs us that “through sheer hard work and perseverance he quickly rose to the rank of foreman, where everyone acknowledged that he did the work of four men. Having a very limited education, he used his natural instincts, intelligence, and keen business acumen to purchase his first piece of land in 1962, then another, and another, and by 1978 he became the largest peach farmer in California and the world and became widely known as the ‘Peach

King.” The narrative is supposed to inspire. Millions of dollars circulate through the willfulness of a biologically adept mind that understands the movement of capital innately. According to the archive, “His idea, and the will and ability to help people change their lives, makes Didar the epitome of the American Dream.”

The archive begins to bend, though struggling to align itself. The PPDA (2016b) elaborates Didar Bains’s family life: “On June 21, 1964, Bains married Santi (Poonian) Bains (born in 1944), daughter of Paritem Singh Poonian, a nurseryman and farmer who helped many Sikh farmers by loaning them money when the banks would not.” To trace such a familial genealogy is to preserve, to create an archive. Women can suffer in this preservation. Sara Ahmed (2006: 73) notes how “the imagined thing called ‘the family’ is, of course, associated with the body of the father: his body is metonymically associated with the body of the family.” The father is preserved and secured; a clear line is drawn to Paritem Singh Poonian from Santi Marie Bains. Poonian’s association with Sikhs is another certain line; he reproduces Sikhs through financial help and care. Ties line up nicely, revealing an aligned genealogical continuity of the Punjabi community.

There is a desire to preserve the reproduction of the father’s image, to draw a singular and continuous line from Punjab to California, from hard work to wealth, from Sikh to Sikh. Genealogy, however, is not so clear—in Foucault’s (1977: 139) words, it is “a grey meticulous task and patiently documentary,” an interrogative and critical reading practice that refuses neat origins. Inheritance, as genealogy teaches us, is not so easy, not as sublime and sedimented as we desire. The entry on Didar Bains, for example, erases such discontinuous trajectories. As Karen Leonard (1992: 279n33) notes, Santi Marie Bains is “a third-generation Punjabi-Mexican descendant on her mother’s side (Janie Diwan).” Janie does not have a line drawn to her in the PPDA. She disappears as a condition of possibility even though the PPDA (2016f) promises that it “documents the unique Punjabi Mexican community.” Erasures then are a type of preservation. Erasures accumulate and produce a neat and aligned history.

In 1922, two Mexican men abducted their sisters who had married Punjabis. The women were imprisoned and flogged (Leonard 1992: 63). To whip into shape entails making lines inhabit a proper form to reproduce the

right contours. It is to lay lines on flesh to ensure more ephemeral lines are maintained. One of these women, as Leonard (1992: 245n6) points out, was Janie Poonian's mother, Santi Bains's grandmother. A line to Janie Poonian is troubling, much as a line to her Punjabi father did, since she reveals the failure of a purely selfsame narrative sequence of the father. Some lines, Ahmed (2006: 18) reminds us, refuse to reproduce properly. But this archive can try to prune what the past was incapable of curtailng. A line from Punjabi to Mexican is a disturbing inheritance for those who desire to accumulate a neat ordering. Lines that disrupt this legibility require discipline to shape them accurately or erase them altogether. And women often bear this violence to guarantee lines are generated correctly and a perfect shape is molded. To repeat, Janie Poonian is absent from the archive.

Though an archive can try to prune what the past was incapable of curtailng, lines cannot be easily erased, nor can they be contained within the logic of recuperation. An archive can be abundant, producing even its own contradictions and interruptions, its own counterarchives and counterstories (Arondekar 2015: 106). This destabilization in minority archives unsettles our own desires for historical recuperation of loss, remaining excessive. Following these insights, against the recuperative model, we drew these lines to Janie Poonian neither to recover nor restore Janie Poonian as a lost originary point, to narrate a lost history in a minority archive, but to disturb and undermine the recuperative model of archival production in the PPDA itself. We do not offer a rich narrative of Janie Poonian's life, but neither is she absent. She is present but not preserved—productive, but not reproductive.

This abundance exists within the archive itself. In the 1920s, Kartar "Ram" Bains arrived in the United States via Mexico, after being initially denied entry. Kartar Bains, the PPDA (2016b) reveals, "eventually bought land to establish his own orchards." As we have noted, however, reproduction and intimacy are not as sanitary as the intimate public demands. The PPDA (2016b) states that, "having remained a life-long bachelor, [Kartar Bains] left his property to his nephew, Gurpal Singh Bains, when he passed away in 1979." Gurpal Singh Bains is Didar's father.

Our own historical research confronts the archive. In an interview with *Outlook*, Didar Bains said, "I came in 1958 from Nangal in Hoshiarpur.

I worked for different people doing manual labour and bought my first farm with my father in 1962” (Bhatt 2011). More lines become entangled. An article in *India Abroad* offers another line: “In 1964, [Didar Bains] leased 200 acres from his Mexican-Sikh in-laws” (Nayyar 2015: M6). The hidden, but present lines in the archive can be tied to other lines—a productive entanglement, but not a reproductive one. Instead, in these lines that we bind, shapes are distorted, and we now find an American embodying a contingent Dream with a beguiling certainty.

The contradictions that Santi Bains brings to the fore are ignored within the PPDA. Instead, the PPDA (2016b) recuperates Didar Bains himself as a patriarchal originary point:

Since the 1960s, Bains has sponsored countless family members, helping create a large network of Bains[es] in the Yuba City area. This work to bring not only his own family members, but many other families over earned him the title of “Immigration Machine” in the Sikh community. None of these people have been a burden on the government because Didar has helped them and others financially either by cosigning for them going into business for themselves or by helping them to become doctors, engineers, and other professionals.

By documenting the capillaries of an “Immigration Machine” extended into the American landscape, reinvigorating its being, the PPDA presents and preserves Didar Bains’s concern and care for the nation and his facsimiles. But a vertiginous archival reading undoes the certainty of the PPDA and refuses the grammatical tense of its project. As Nayan Shah (2011: 275) observes, such nonsequential lives explode “constrained understandings of temporality and spatiality, the conceptualization of life course and affiliations and the use and understanding of affect and social ties,” central to projects such as the PPDA.

Detours

Migration itself is not sequential (Grewal 2005: 68). It functions through knotted community relations irreducible to a singular origin such as Didar Bains. In other words, migrations refuse the cultivating discipline of an

immigration machine, remaining an unruly and disruptive site for those in quest of patriarchal origins. Dharm Singh is an immigrant and migrant worker who presently lives in Fresno County. He works picking grapes and pruning vines. He is eighty. The trailer Dharm Singh inhabits is also unruly, even though situated within the cultivated and ordered lines of a productive vineyard.⁴ His trailer sits next to a shed where a John Deere tractor and bags of sulfur are stored. In front of the trailer, bins are staged to be picked up. Raisins overflow the bins, refusing the order imposed by harvest and avoiding their future consumption. But then they are punished, caked onto the asphalt by laboring forklifts. They get stuck beneath our shoes when we go to meet Dharm Singh.

Ethnography can accumulate for an archive, which is especially true with regard to the colonial archive (Axel 2007: 15; Stoler 2009: 31–39). Ethnography supplies the lines an archive demands, which it incessantly orders and at times fails at doing so. Tentatively, then, the archive's development depends on the continually transformative potentials provided by ethnography. Or, stated more cautiously, an ethnography could become deployed to uphold the logic of an archive. Going toward a disruption of Sikh immigrant lives would require that Dharm Singh not become another accumulated object for the archive to order within its reproductive frame.

Ethnography can also help since it troubles the ordering of an archival desire (Marcus 1998: 57). In Laura Nader's (2011: 211) view, "ethnography is a theory of description." It is a theory that, as Kathleen Stewart (2017: 228) perceptively argues, "thinks and writes at the limit of what it is possible to say." Ethnography, then, as series of theoretical principles, can reorient desire, even though historically ethnography has tried to satisfy desire. Reorienting desire is a process; analysis, Lacan ([1953] 2006: 259) reminds us, must be untimely because chipping stone, one could say, is not timely work.

This article makes a modest attempt to halt while chipping stone, keeping in mind that a limit leads not to a quick movement forward, but its opposite—a hesitation, possibly a refusal but not necessarily. Pausing is difficult, the everyday escapes; it is inaccessible, as Blanchot (1993: 244) teaches. But we try to stall to allow for the nonbecoming of unknown and unanticipated forms—an ethnographic "reaching and un-grasping" in which the future is not fixed as a requirement for thinking (Spivak 1999: 242).⁵ The

pause could also shift the syntax and become a period, an ending. It could become an awkward refusal (Ahmed 2010: 68–69). For what appears unfinished could also be finished—reorientation fails alongside analysis.

Lines thread Dharm Singh's curled arthritic hands. He accumulated these lines in his forty years of work in fields across Central California—lines that have now pressed into the texture of his skin. Ahmed (2006: 17) writes about lines. She notes that “to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life can feel like a physical ‘press’ on the surface of the body, which creates its own impressions. We are pressed into lines, just as lines are the accumulation of such moments of pressure.” Dharm Singh's hands display lines of a certain type of life, accumulated physical pressure etched into his darkened skin, which is now roughly calcified. Accumulated pressures recorded as permanent lines. But how do we read lines on tired hands? A clenched fist and an open palm are legible in our contemporary moment, signaling an opportunity for cathartic anger, solidarity, or reconciliation. They can indicate, after all, the possibility of changing ordered lines, the possibility of new impressions on our social skin. But Dharm Singh's damaged lined hands rest half-open and half-closed, refusing our need for such coherent readability, providing no promised future even while remaining productive. Dharm Singh's hands are decidedly present, still laboring, struggling in a deadlock. We ask him about his hands. He smiles, forming more lines: “One has to work and it is not easy, is it?”

Labor is sold for wages. Wages flow back, Marx tells us, provide subsistence to reproduce oneself, maintain oneself, even while one brings one's “own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding” (Marx 1976: 280). Growing old, though perhaps timidly, one repeats years; labor-power is only a “power of the living individual” and “the seller of labor-power must perpetuate himself” even as one becomes worn and torn (Marx 1976: 274). Aging becomes reproduction, perpetuation. Dharm Singh, we noted, is now eighty. Wages, one could say, have done their work well, much like Dharm Singh. But reproduction is tied not only to labor but also to a social order that has to be reproduced beyond aging (Althusser 1994: 100).

Dharm Singh has no children. The redemptive future signaled by the Child that undergirds archived immigrant life is absent. We could fill these absences with a future or recuperate past dreams with possibilities and hope.

But Dharm Singh is present, subsisting and maintaining without clarity or preserving. Being present means lines do not make a shape; contours are obscured. Being present means living in an impasse, dwelling in the durative present, which, Berlant (2011: 200) writes, is “a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape.” A middle that could also be an end. Dharm Singh was too poor in India to get married, he was at an impasse. He came to the United States through chain migration. But he still remained too poor to get married. He sums up his situation: “There was poverty. We did not have land in India. And I had to work.” We could accumulate more, drive deeper into his symbolic life to extract a future from him, to make sense, through a tense, of his present suffering. But we pause.

He married an elderly widow, Rupinder Kaur, in India a few years back. She works as a maid, and they inhabit an impasse together. Rupinder Kaur works for a wealthy Punjabi family. She gained the job as a favor, once she could no longer work in the vineyard. We ask her about the differences she observes between her life and her work life. “They have good *karam*,” she says. *Karam* in the Sikh tradition is a powerful concept, closely related to the theory of rebirth and transmigration (karma). But it is also tied to the Arabic notion of *karam*, which implies an intervention of generosity (*nadar*, *kirpa*, *huḳam*).⁶ Whereas earlier notions of karma implied a chain of cause and effect that binds an individual self to a known future, the Sikh Gurus challenged this notion and demanded Sikhs consider the impossibility of this futural grammar that binds, rejecting the immutable law that defined karma. We learn from Dharm Singh and Rupinder Kaur that *huḳam* arbitrates the temporal and causal law of karma. It obliterates its currents. *Huḳam* is always present, though untimely, reconfiguring what can appear possible and impossible (Bhagal 2017: 493).⁷ It undoes the very demand for “the impossible object for an authentic self-identity” required by Brahmanical and multicultural domination (Povinelli 2002: 6).

Dharm Singh and Rupinder Kaur are pious subjects and practicing Sikhs. They recite and listen to *gurbani* continuously. “We all must live within *huḳam*,” they teach us. A neat and well-ordered time centered on origins, futures, and redemption necessarily denies *huḳam* since *huḳam* signals a different type of order, one of submission. Dharm Singh and Rupinder Kaur live within the guidelines of *huḳam*, a pious present, which can also be

untimely. To write an ethnography of our interlocutors would require us to inhabit this time as well. And this is not too arduous a task since ethnography affirms, as Michael Jackson (1996: 4) writes, that “truth must not be seen as an unmasking which eclipses the appearance of the thing unmasked, but a form of disclosure which does it justice.” But then such a reading does not mean, as Jackson (1996: 37) goes on to say, that “subalterns have defined themselves as the subject of their own destiny.” Agency, as Saba Mahmood (2005) has taught us so well, is troubled, requiring us to refuse a binary view in which interlocutors are “subjects of chosen lives or objects of coerced conditions of survival” (Ramberg 2014: 18). We too think and write because of *hukam*, which teaches us that this untimeliness is not ours to mold and, therefore, untimeliness itself could be untimely in our well-ordered punctuated time.

Religion is a vexed category in the PPDA and more broadly. As Gil Anidjar (2013: 17) argues, “to identify religion, or religious factors or objects as religious,” is a Christian division and reorganization. Religion as such becomes a generic problem (Anidjar 2006: 65), which can be overcome by historical conditions of geography—a secular ordering in which Punjabi takes precedence over Sikh. It takes precedence because religion, apparently, withers in a presumed temporal advancement. Punjab, for the PPDA, signals this time and space, presenting a unified community and inclusive multicultural site in which religion is simply a particularity able to be transcended in a more civil form of life. Sikhism, rendered as a religion, is, then, one part of a broader and more heterogeneous Punjabi-American life. And, indeed, as time progresses in the PPDA, religion becomes strictly an identity, a marker for cultural difference subsumed within a universal narrative in which *hukam* is fragmented and, eventually, wanes, becoming a religious artifact in a private realm—an answer to a question: what do you believe?

Our goal, however, is not to decrypt our interlocutor’s understandings and demonstrate how they have a narrow understanding of identity—how they are *religious*, an interiority that violates a more inclusive and outer Punjabiness. As Lalaie Ameeriar (2017: 102,109) argues about the category of South Asian, practices aimed at inclusion can “end up excluding subjects and citizens” and making forms of discrimination invisible by erasing religious difference. That is especially so in a multicultural delirium that

authenticates a proper minoritized difference in which Punjab becomes a mirror for the inclusion promised in the United States. In this sense, to rephrase Saba Mahmood's (2005: 38) poignant questioning, we do not seek to remake the sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments of our interlocutors so that they may be taught to value the principle of Punjabi or South Asian heterogeneity, or multiculturalism, to map them onto ideals of secular progress such as the PPDA does.⁸ Instead, invoking, as Mahmood does, humility, *nimrata*, we recognize we cannot so easily carve, as Ananda Abeysekera (2018: 25–26) argues, a “division between something we understand as ‘regular life’ and religious life—that is, the division between ‘life’ and its ‘form.’”

To refuse this division would mean that we would have to foreground *Sikhi* and take *hukam* seriously. In the PPDA's secular ordering, *hukam* does not govern accumulated archived life. But Dharm Singh and Rupinder Kaur provide this different understanding. We ask Dharm Singh about becoming and the future. “What do I know? Days keep on going by. You do have to work,” he says, surprised at our question. We move too quickly to the otherwise, for positing the otherwise would also deny *hukam*. We were supposed to halt in-between. Pausing, we noted, is difficult. Dharm Singh does not demand new chances for a different future. This does not mean conditions are at a close. Instead, *hukam* can be untimely, though not necessarily. For *hukam* both creates and limits possibilities. If *hukam* made it possible, Dharm Singh's and Rupinder Kaur's lives could be otherwise. But until then they simply inhabit the present, abiding by its terms without overvaluing their own desires to accumulate a future. To write about Dharm Singh and Rupinder Kaur through *hukam*, therefore, would mean not reaching toward the otherwise, but ungrasping that otherwise of the present. It would be leaving the displacement of time altogether, perhaps a space of vanishing.⁹

Waiting

Waiting is untimely because time binds. Time binds, Elizabeth Freeman (2010: 3) argues, when “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation.” Binding turns “mere existence

into a form of mastery,” which Freeman refers to as chrononormativity. To be chrononormative is to use “time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” Waiting then is not chrononormative. Bindings to productivity through time can also bind to untimeliness. When one is waiting for a ride to go to work to become productive, during that waiting, one is untimely. The Sikh body, too, can be an untimely embodiment. Jasbir Puar (2007: 198) posits the “becoming of the turbaned Sikh is intricately tied into the temporal logic of preempting his futurity, a deferred death, a becoming that is sutured through its failure, its decay.” A turbaned Sikh body waiting, then, is untimely in the double sense. On December 26, 2015, at 6:30 a.m. in the cold fog in Southwest Fresno, Amrik Singh Bal was waiting for a ride to go to work, to labor in vineyards. Bal was sixty-eight, some would say an untimely age to be working. A black Dodge Challenger came up beside him; Daniel Coronel Wilson Jr., aged twenty-two, and Alexis Mendoza, aged seventeen, got out and attacked Bal. He protected himself with a lunch box and tried to flee; he ran. Wilson and Mendoza got back in their Challenger, made a U-turn, ran him down, and slammed him into the pavement before driving off. Bal was unconscious for six minutes when the friends he was waiting for arrived—a timely arrival, Bal survived (Appleton 2016; Pope 2015).

The PPDA (2016a) notes this violence briefly, “On December 26, 2015, an elderly Punjabi Sikh man wearing a turban was severely beaten by two white men in Fresno, California who yelled at him accusingly, ‘Why are you here?’” Lines drawn can signal a specific investment. Wilson Jr. and Mendoza are not White, but Latino.¹⁰ The graphic footage from the security camera does not show Wilson or Mendoza getting out of the car, only the Challenger running over Bal. Mendoza committed suicide. Wilson was sentenced to four years in prison. Rumors swirl that the assailants were not racist, simply intoxicated. An ethnographic refrain: Mendoza had Punjabi friends.¹¹ A historical rejoinder: violence is not oppositional to friendship. Bal is unnamed in the PPDA, presented, instead, as a generic elderly Sikh man in need of care, but not a care that would render him a burden to a government assistance program such as Medi-Cal. The receding state now has a purpose; it can police.

The militarized state’s retribution brought with it comfort of a secured

future, for an ever-elusive timeliness—a future in which Bal could be on time. Iqbal “Ike” Singh Grewal thanked Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer, who Grewal said was “committed to solving the case and quieting the fear within the Sikh community”—but, fear remained. Grewal continued, “This brings closure, but Sikhs continue to suffer—continue to be mistaken for terrorists and not the hard-working, peace-loving people we are” (Appleton 2016). Grewal’s grammar signals a hope for a future already determined, which legitimates a violent state in the present. The present is not where it should be in its sequential movement and, therefore, needs to be ordered correctly. The police function to discipline time to make present suffering palatable while securing a forthcoming future. But this future is continually deferred, a never-arriving promise for an investment in the nation, its military might, and its vengeance (Ahmed 2004: 196–197). Justice, however, can also be untimely. It is not only located in promising institutions that engulf life, which is why one can wait for justice—another untimely waiting for justice that cannot simply be deferred.

Parminder Kaur is also used to waiting.¹² When she moved to Yuba City at the age of twenty-seven in 1987, she would have to turn the stove on and wait for cockroaches to leave their crevices. Waiting is not capitulating. Waiting is inhabiting a durative present (Bandak and Janeja 2018: 3). The stove heated up and the cockroaches scattered, and the stove became productive. Parminder Kaur could undertake her domestic work. Before her husband left to work at 5:00 a.m., she made his breakfast and packed his lunch. He worked in tomato fields and would not be home until 8:00 p.m. Waiting does not necessarily mean things will change. Parminder Kaur yielded while waiting too. She conceded the kitchen cabinets to the cockroaches. But she did not only wait. The multiple cans of Raid failed at that juncture, she says. We wonder, however, whether their treasonous victories will come later. Having failed, she stored the dishes on a large Coca-Cola display rack, borrowed from a convenience store. Cockroaches, she notes, are like dark spaces, and they have to scatter somewhere. Eventually, the one bedroom became infested too. The family moved the bed into the small living room, where they all slept—the mother with daughter and son on the bed, the father on the couch. Sleeping too can be a form of waiting, a brief waiting

when you wake up at 4:00 a.m. to drive out cockroaches. As we know, the next day is not necessarily different.

But the waiting can also lead to an actuality. Parminder Kaur's family ultimately moved to Sacramento into low-income housing funded by the state, before President Bill Clinton's reforms decimated welfare programs. Parminder Kaur found a job in a tomato-packing cannery. She cleans the cannery, which, she points out, requires walking. You walk with a pressure hose and clean the belts and floors. Production is messy. Sanitation codes require order. Parminder Kaur works so the cannery is ordered and up to code. She likes working in sanitation because she likes walking. "By walking, working goes by more quickly," she adds. "By walking, time passes."¹³ Waiting is not oppositional to walking. People can often walk while they wait. Both working and waiting can occur while walking, which can transform the very disciplinary space of the cannery. We know walking, as Michel de Certeau (1984: 98) famously argues, resists conscription. Walking then to make time pass is not only work but also an untimely waiting. But continuously walking while you are waiting or working destroys your knees. The body does not wait for time to pass. It ages on time; it does not stay fresh. Parminder Kaur rubs her knee. It hurts, she says. The body is destroyed. She laughs and announces she is going to start waddling like a duck soon.

The sanitation crew works to make sure the cannery is clean and neat while supervisors, mostly white, work to make sure the laborers are working. Parminder Kaur remembers a complaint. Someone complained to the supervisors she smelled. She assures us that she did not. Smells can trouble because they signal something different, something not tolerable. One is ready to love one's neighbors, provided they do not smell too awful (Žižek 2008: 680). Smelling difference, then, as Ahmed (2000: 55) writes, is "a way of knowing that establishes the border between the familiar and the strange: do you smell like a friend or stranger?" In this logic, certain smells, such as the smells of an exoticized Indian cooking, become favorable, a cultural commodity, and not a liability, such as "a repugnant South Asian body on the job market" (Ameeriari 2017: 99). Parminder Kaur smelled like a stranger because she got a promotion that was reserved for someone else; her

body became unsanitary. This is how the cannery works. You must network properly. By disrupting the network, the immigrant cleaner was strange and disorderly. She was different in an ordered network.

Still, complaints hurt, and Parminder Kaur is visibly frustrated. She asks us if she smells. Her son told her she did not smell bad. She looks to her daughter for confirmation. We do not tell her that Ahmed (2000: 56) perceptively notes “the difference which is cast as strange, the smell then of strangeness itself, is only smellable from within that nose.” Only in that ordered network she disrupted did Parminder Kaur smell different. But she cannot prove that she did not smell bad or that she is sanitary. There is no archive that can reveal that this complaint, which is archivable, was only smelled in that context. The smell is thus both present and absent in the archive, but not ordered in a way that foregrounds Parminder Kaur. They told her she needed to wash regularly and placed her back into her old position. Her daughter teases her and divulges her mom purchased Avon products after the complaint. The mother also laughs and says, “Are people ever going to stop?” She is annoyed at the complaint, but she inhabits a present with her daughter. In an impasse, waiting for the other shoe to drop, as Berlant (2011: 266) demonstrates, also allows “for some healing and resting, waiting for it not to drop.” There is repair while waiting, though not necessarily any change.

But the logic of poverty that coils around workers means shoes are always dropping. This entrapment meant Parminder Kaur was unable to provide visas to her extended family in Punjab. She is not an originary point. “They refuse to talk to me now,” she remarks, “but what could I have done?” Her two brothers live in immense poverty in a devastated Punjab. Most recently, her niece Anand Kaur married a divorced British citizen in 2011. But she remains in Punjab unable to procure the correct documentation. Parminder tries to trace what actually happened, to fill a gap—even personal archives vex. She suspects Anand Kaur’s husband only married for licentious reasons and has now abandoned her. Parminder Kaur mentions Anand Kaur’s reassurances: “Anand Kaur tells me, her husband is a surgeon in a major London hospital, an American and British citizen, and, of course, quite wealthy.” Parminder Kaur asks that we contact him at jeet@doctor.com. It is a domain where one can register for free at mail.com. He

does not respond; he is absent. The last time Parminder Kaur visited her niece, Anand Kaur stayed inside watching a television show about children, at times offering advice on child-rearing to others—cultivating an intimate capacity for the requirements of contemporary reproduction that remain an inclusive spectacle though authorized for only a legible few.

Parminder Kaur shakes her head, exhausted. “They have ruined her [Anand’s] life.” There flows a series of questions in which answers are implied: “Does anyone listen to me? Have they ever listened to me? What can I possibly do?” A statement: “My legs barely even work.” Another sigh. She ends by saying, “No one asks about you in this world.” At this point, we could look for a future redemption. Her daughter is doing well at school. But by being focused on such a relationship in the future, rather than on repair and relief in the present, Parminder Kaur’s suffering itself can create redemption. As Povinelli (2011a: 3) notes, “suffering disappears when seen from the perspective of what it will have been or been for,” such as the becoming of a child obtained through sacrificial love. Is it possible, instead, to pause within an impasse, struggle within a deadlock, without undoing these familial knots and setting them in narrative sequence—past siblings, a present mother, a future daughter?

In these knots, in between decay and reproduction, we are grappling with another intractable question: what grammar articulates within such tensions between racist immigration law, patriarchal sexual violence, and neoliberalism’s disproportionate income distribution? A desire for order structures our question. How else can we respond? Should we tell Parminder Kaur that she is creative? Should we foreground hope in her children, in new forms of familial relations, or, perhaps, in her aspirations? We can trace strength and sacrificial love. Or, maybe, we should accumulate more narratives, ethnography as accumulation, and foreground different stakes and possibilities, revealing the multiplicity of temporal experiences? Multiplicity is an accumulation. Unsure ourselves, we ask Parminder Kaur what she recommends one should do, what kind of ethical responsibility exists? To which she gives a brief and puzzled response: “Make prayers. We must live in *hukam*. What else is there?” *Hukam*, we recall, is a different ordering; our questions are not Parminder’s. We tell her about the archive. She laughs. “That’s not for people like me.”

Conclusion

In our analysis, we did not look to articulate absences in the PPDA by tracing different origins, to make pioneer life symbolically richer. Instead, we tried to note how the PPDA uses reproductivity to make life coherent as well as how this narrative sequence does not succeed. We noted erased lines pressed into the PPDA. But we did not recover the content behind these erasures. Instead, we considered how the archive requires such erasures in the first place. We then tied these lines together, not to provide a different shape to the PPDA, but to dwell in its very contingency and production. Our goal, however, was not to foreground death of immigrant life, the failure of migration. Instead, we considered the dangers of such an attachment to both past recovery and futural hope that can function to celebrate death and suffering. By hesitating within immigrant life, we have tried to forestall a logic in which, as Povinelli (2011a: 185) argues, “suffering and dying can be referred to a horizon of time where they are transformed into thriving and birthing.” This, after all, is the project of the PPDA in which pioneer suffering creates present-day thriving. Against this approach, we centered what we hope was an interrogative archival approach that functioned against the promise of recovery while remaining attentive to the stakes of archiving, especially at our historical juncture, which requires the subjugation of difference (Arondekar 2009: 4–5).

But the questions our encounters demand that we consider can be perplexing ones, especially given investments today. For if an archive is the preservation of particular norms, such as the PPDA reveals in its reproductive logic, how do we archive the failure of presences to inhabit their norms without deferring them to a future? How do we trace disorderly lines without providing them a shape? Uncertainty reigns. Within this impasse, we tried to hesitate at a point of wavering in the present, without any assurances of a future, to inhabit halting and unordered immigrant lives. Within our reaching and un-grasping, we did not find easily traceable heroic actions in a politics of refusal signaling a different possibility (Berlant 2011: 259). We did not grasp creativity or discover false consciousness. Ordinary life does not necessarily lead to an event and its obliteration (Das 2007: 6–7). Instead, they remain enfolded, possibly at a pause, but no, not at all. Still, the con-

cluding syntax vanishes as we approach, eluding the catachresis called Time (Spivak 1999: 53). Perhaps it vanishes because such lives demand we inhabit this vanishing as well; we must live within both the timely and the untimely parameters of *hukam*, which we are always already inhabiting in our interlocutors' terms—parameters that are not archived, but given.

Notes

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- 1 The public launch of the archive occurred on October 8, 2016, at UC Davis. The public event honored the community leaders, including Didar Singh Bains, Dr. Jasbir Singh Kang, and Dr. Gurdev Khush. The PPDA draws on collections from Ted Sibia, a former UC Davis librarian, and donations from various families; it is curated by Nicole Ranganath. If one were to trace a longer genealogy of the project, we would draw five interlocking lines: (1) the desire for the Sikh Punjabi community to establish a Punjabi/Sikh studies chair at UC Davis; (2) a class of second-generation Punjabi Sikhs in the Sacramento Valley looking to preserve heritage and archive their parents' work to both celebrate their forebears as well as carve a space in the national imaginary of the United States; (3) the desire to show the conceptual linkage between Sikhism and American values—a project taken up by multiple Sikh organizations in the wake of 9/11; (4) the further fracturing of the Middle East/South Asia Department at UC Davis into smaller spheres as funding became tied to community outreach (indeed, the PPDA was considered the first step to engage other South Asian communities); and (5) the desire to instill a Punjab-Sikh identity in children in the present. In our present saturated with history, the goal is to master the past.
- 2 We borrow “vexed archive” from El Shakry 2015.
- 3 This future is not through dialectical change but through reproduction of sameness. For more on this, see Edelman, *No Future*, 60.
- 4 Names and biographical details have been changed to protect the interlocutor. Conversations took place in Punjabi.
- 5 We broadly follow Anjali Arondekar's analysis, who argues that we need to “interrogate, without paralysis, to challenge, without ending the promise of a future” (2009: 4). We wonder whether it could induce incapacity, however, if we were also to demand the promise of a future.
- 6 For explanations of Sikh notions of *karam*, see Singh 2011: 443–44; and Mandair 2013: 145–48.
- 7 In this sense, we are not tracing a utopic theological principle but perhaps a “messianic-

- ity without messianism” (Derrida 2005: 92), which is, as Jacques Derrida writes, “always, im-possibility—the possible as impossible— . . . linked to an irreducible divisibility that affects the very essence of the possible” (88).
- 8 Talal Asad (1993: 264) notes this problem by asking, “How can South Asian immigrants in Britain defend, develop, and elaborate their collective and historical difference if neither their traditions nor their selves can be identified as aspirations to integrity?”
- 9 We do not have the scope to fully develop this point here, but for more on displacement and vanishing in relation to time, see Pandolfo 1997: 275–79.
- 10 Though the lines between white and Latino have historically been permeable, it is important to note this discrepancy since initial reports indicated the assailants were white. For an overview about the relation between these racial categories in the United States, see Gomez 2007.
- 11 Multiple Punjabis in Fresno County mentioned this to us during our interviews.
- 12 Name and identities have been changed to protect the family. The conversations occurred in Punjabi.
- 13 “Timepass” is a South Asian expression in English used about the passing of time in an aimless or unproductive way.

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