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Guru Nanak is not at the White House: An essay on the idea of Sikh-American redemption

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rights-based discourse deployed by Sikh advocacy organizations, the Sikh Coalition and Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund, in order to carve an inclusive space within the United States. We interrogate the deep violence of forgetting embedded within this politics that not only sanctions American values and their regulatory might globally, but also integrates the foundational anti-blackness of Western subjectivity into the conceptual structure of Sikhism. Reconsidering these attachments to the American political project and the white-settler state, we argue Sikh organizations fasten Sikhs to ways of life that are inimical to their own flourishing.

Where there are Slaves it is unethical to be free.

(Frank Wilderson 2010, 49)

1. Introduction

Following the coordinated attacks against the American state on September 11th, 2001, Sikhs in the United States founded varied non-profit organizations in order to combat the increasing bigotry and violence directed toward the Sikh population. These organizations, such as the Sikh Coalition alongside earlier organizations such as Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund (SALDEF), endeavor to carve an inclusive and progressive space for Sikhs to freely practice their religion without discrimination by citing their endowed civil and human rights. Within this rights-based discourse, these organizations articulate a particular vision of Sikh politics that is sutured to an American identity, alongside its concomitant secular values, in order to complete the full flowering of liberal democratic rule within the United States and globally. Indeed, the United States, for these organizations, provides an apposite opportunity to finally escape, what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) terms, ‘the waiting room of history’ that accompanies liberal governance historically (8).

Within this vision, Sikh advocacy organizations foreground the United States, as Shaista Patel (2016) reveals in another context, ‘as a benevolent multicultural haven where people of color (always under strict policing at the border and beyond) can now come in search for better lives (or a life at all) from other destroyed and/or occupied

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lands' while forgetting the underlying genocide, plantation economy, prison industrial complex, and indentured labor that undergirds the United States and its attendant dreams and possibilities. This paper considers the deep violence of forgetting embedded within such politics, which not only sanctions the American regime globally, but also integrates the foundational anti-blackness of Western subjectivity into the conceptual structure of Sikhism by re-routing *Sikhi* as an affirmative political identity that can dream of a future and liberation in an inclusive and plural American landscape.

We interrogate the coupling of Sikh and American through human rights and the attempt to create an ontological capacity for Sikhs to experience freedom in American society, by foregrounding how such capacities can only be coordinated through the 'wasteland of Black incapacity' that legitimates white-settler colonialism and violence (Wilderson 2010, 45). Indeed, to imagine and celebrate American subjectivity and possibility within the epistemic coordinates of capitalist modernity requires the continuous production of black and indigenous death, as well as violence abroad, for such bodies remain ontologically the antithesis to the modern subject. Or, as Frank Wilderson (2010) reminds us, 'without the Negro, capacity [the matrix of possibilities in the liberal imagination] itself is incoherent' (45).¹ Therefore, routing the coordinates of Sikh subjectivity and possibility through an American landscape, organizations, like the Sikh Coalition, locate themselves in whiteness, 'the personification of diversity, of life itself,' becoming junior partners in civil society – a society built upon the bodies of the slave, the dead native, and, today, brutalized Muslim (Wilderson 2010, 43). Through these attachments to the American political project and, thus, to the white-settler state, Sikh organizations cultivate, what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls, cruel optimism, binding Sikhs to ways of life that are inimical to their own flourishing within the structure of the Guru's *hukam* (Will, Command) and outside *haumai* (egotism).

Sikh advocacy organizations become inimical to Sikh life, because their whiteness does not remain tied to the cadre of Sikh elite assembled in these privileged spaces. Instead, in their lobbying, advocating, and public relations efforts that look to secure Sikh and American together, they also fasten *Sikhi* conceptually to whiteness and its violent moorings. Indeed, the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF celebrate this abundant dream of an unsplit Sikh-American future thereby legitimating *haumai* (egotism) within *Sikhi's* conceptual parameters by usurping the presence of *hukam* and its irreconcilable nature in this world in favor of a knowable and enjoyable privatized identity and American political being. This American dream absent wounds, a dream of a reconciled world, disrupts the impossible visions embedded in Sikh concepts such as *panth*, *sangat*, and *seva* that challenge both the movement of capital and the rational and autonomous individual prized within liberal governance, so easily wielded by Sikh advocacy organizations. For example, the conceptual structure of the *sangat* celebrates the antagonistic impossibility of suturing identity in a singular body neatly, which is further highlighted in such ethical practices like *langar* (communal kitchen), which remains open to all, a commons, outside individual identity, provided through *seva* (service), which requires humility, a decentering of the subject – concepts in which a presence (*hukam*), beyond desires for reconciliation within private identity, the autonomous individual, and marketplace, is constitutive. However, by proclaiming a particular dispensation of tolerable individual difference as universal, the affirmative declaration that attaches Sikh to American (rather than leaving it enslaved to *hukam*, unhyphenated, and an

empty space), the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF actively strip these impossible conceptual vantage points from *Sikhi*. And, instead, they buttress the plural and diverse self-regulating marketplace in which an individual's labor as a commodity exchanges freely, owned (and exploited) by the autonomous individual, devoid of antagonism central to Sikh life and politics.

2. Binding Nanak to Washington

Sikh-American advocacy organizations cultivate this relationship to whiteness by foregrounding the blossoming of Sikh life in the United States. For example, noting they constitute 'the largest Sikh American advocacy and community development organization in the United States,' the Sikh Coalition argues in their Mission & History statement online that they are 'dedicated to promoting civil and human rights for all people and building a nation where Sikhs can freely and fearlessly practice their faith.' SALDEF too posits a similar aim. Functioning as the 'oldest Sikh American civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States,' SALDEF argues in their mission statement that they wish to 'empower Sikh Americans by building dialogue, deepening understanding, promoting civic and political participation, and upholding social justice and religious freedom for all Americans.' Thus, both organizations envision creating a plural and diverse America, in which, as SALDEF posits, 'Sikh Americans are respected and recognized as a vibrant and integral part of the fabric of this nation.'

The Sikh Coalition also gestures toward an international sphere for Sikh rights in their Mission & History statement online, by positing, for example, that they 'work towards a world where Sikhs may freely practice and enjoy their faith while fostering strong relations with their local community wherever they may be.' While the Sikh Coalition speaks globally, all their primary advocacy programs, organizing efforts, and legal aid are intimately bound to the United States and they actively cultivate this attachment to the United States conceptually. For example, during the Sikh Coalition's 10th Anniversary, in an article online entitled 'The Sikh Coalition Turns 10!' Narinder Singh, the Board Chairman, argued:

In the history of America and of the Sikhs, rising from adversity is a core value. From the tragedy that was 9/11 we saw great heroism and caring reveal itself across the country. In the Sikh Coalition we saw a community come together to defend its rights and those of all Americans – honoring the noblest of traditions established by our nation's founders. Ten years later we are proud to be an organization that is positioned to create long term change that helps our nation live up to its potential as the beacon for freedom and opportunity for everyone.

Thus, though the Sikh Coalition employs a broad internationalist rhetoric that speaks to peoples globally, it exists, as Samuel Moyn (2010) argues in another context, 'for sharing techniques and building confidence for national agitation, not making the global forum itself a scene of intervention or reform' (39). Indeed, the global cannot function as a scene for intervention for the Sikh Coalition because the global itself is rendered visible and legible through a particular thematization in which the ideal Western nation-state, the United States, and its attendant liberal values, provide the conditions of possibility for non-Western nation-states to experience political freedom.

These conditions of possibility for both Sikh Coalition and SALDEF are grounded within a rights-based discourse that emphasizes individual autonomous choice and

equal opportunity coupled with religious freedom. For example, in their Equal Opportunity in the US Armed Forces Campaign, the Sikh Coalition released a document in 2015 entitled 'Sikh Coalition's Military Campaign: Frequently Asked Questions.' In this brochure, they argue their goal is 'to end religious discrimination against Sikhs by the nation's largest employer – the U.S. military.' Yet, for the Sikh Coalition, religious discrimination is not generated within the coordinates of secular governance, but in the inability to exchange one's labor value freely. The Sikh Coalition continued:

We believe that the right to serve without compromising the practice of one's faith is a basic constitutional right. If we can clear this obstacle in the military, we will be able to point to the largest employer in America as a resounding example of religious liberty. The domino effect this change would have in other public and private sectors of employment would be enormous. We know Sikhs can serve with their articles of faith without impediment, and we want American employers, especially the largest employer in the country, to recognize this too.

In their Law Enforcement Initiative online, SALDEF as well boasts about their dissemination of awareness, which created conditions in which:

The seventh largest police force in the nation, the Washington Metropolitan Police Department, became the first major police department in the United States to explicitly and voluntarily allow Sikh Americans to serve as full-time, uniformed police officers while keeping their articles of faith. The Riverside (CA) Police Department followed suit becoming the first police department in California, and only the second in the nation, to proactively amend their uniform guidance so Sikh Americans can serve.

The conceptual foundation of both these arguments demands that one's labor circulate devoid of regulation and restriction in which one must be allowed to enjoy one's private religious identity in the marketplace even while on duty as the repressive arm of the state.

Within this logic, the internal dynamics of *Sikhi* are annihilated and then re-stitched as appropriate difference signified by the Sikh-American who has the capacity to fully assimilate into a secular society. For, within liberal secular governance, as Karl Marx (1978) notes, though 'man emancipates himself politically from religion by banishing it from the sphere of public law to that of private law,' religion persists and, though displaced, 'become[s] the spirit of civil society, of the sphere of egoism' emerging as a sign for a naturalized differentiation and separation outside the realm of politics (39).² The fear, however, remains that a religious identity, such as Jewishness, could possibly, as Wendy Brown (2008) writes, 'leak into the domain where the abstract and universal equality, liberty, and community of man are held to reign' (67). Striving to avoid such fears and receive a conclusion of pure recognition, Sikh Advocacy organizations continually enunciate Sikhism's assimilative capacities in order to overcome this ever-present anxiety within liberal secular governance. Thus, a central point for the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF is to reconcile, what they argue is, *Sikhi's* ability to function as a privatized religious identity alongside its commensurability with abstract citizenship endowed by the state, which requires the purchasing and selling of one's labor freely within the marketplace, no matter what one's private religious affiliation is. Indeed, the key for such organizations remains to become included into the American landscape, by revealing *Sikhi's* capacity to reach, what Uday Singh Mehta (1999) calls, liberalism's 'anthropological minimum', which, in turn, reduces *Sikhi* to its conceptual antithesis: egotism (52).

Therefore, uncertainties and impossibilities, which, for example, *hukam* brings forth, remain absent because rights are abstracted as always already providing possibilities for emancipation. This conception of rights elides how they are not objective and rational processes devoid of historicity, but rather deeply intertwined with Christian and secular sensibilities of redemption within the particular historical constellation of capitalist modernity. Or, as Eve Darian-Smith (2010) argues, ‘we cannot understand the enduring political, economic and social inequality that plague our so-called democratic systems if we do not confront the question of how legal rights relate to religious and racist discourse at any one moment in time’ (1). Many scholars have begun to trace these formations of human rights historically. For example, Samuel Moyn (2010) argues, existing as a minimalist moral project that claimed to transcend politics, human rights in the 1970s became ‘preferable because they were strategically necessary and practically feasible, but also because they were morally pure’ and, thus, outside the emergent ruins of political utopias (171).

These morally pure politics emerged in the United States, when Jimmy Carter invoked human rights, not to afford, as Moyn explains, a ‘substitute utopia’, but to provide ‘a sense of collective national recovery’ which reestablished ‘the country’s moral and missionary credentials in the world’ (159). These credentials further legitimated a prophetic language, what Talal Asad (2003) terms, the ‘American secular language of redemption’ which, though existing as a particularity, ‘works as a force in the field of foreign relations to globalize human rights’ (147). This coupling, between human rights and the American prophetic language, functioned to create ‘the idea that “freedom” and “America” are virtually interchangeable – that American political culture is “a light unto the nations”’ – an idea that became hegemonic in which the secular prophecy for global redemption represented the teleological end of political history (147).

Ignoring Darian-Smith’s invocation to question conceptual historicity of rights and its varied relations to racism and religion that Moyn, Asad, and numerous others reveal, Sikh advocacy organizations trace a stable and unified discursive formation of rights from Nanak to Washington creating a new lineage of Gurus that is amenable to an American redemption. For example, Simran Jeet Singh, Senior Religion Fellow at the Sikh Coalition, locates *Sikhi* and American values together. In a keynote speech entitled ‘Guru Nanak at the White House’ to commemorate the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji organized by the Obama administration, Singh (2014) argued:

The values that Guru Nanak imparted closely mirror some of our most basic American values. Sikhism, like America, places immense emphasis on freedom, equal opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness. They are founded on principles of social equality and justice. Both also benefit from holding worldviews that prioritize acceptance, and the outlook of pluralism has helped both communities thrive in contexts of diversity and difference. Sikhism and America share the fundamental principles of integrity, hard work, and service, and both seek to uphold righteousness in the face of injustice.

Utilizing the prophetic language of America and human rights, Singh both naturalizes and depoliticizes American rights discourse and its moorings in fundamental principles of white supremacy and anti-Blackness.³ Within this logic, the American Dream and its conceptual mirror, freedom, become timeless phenomena, interchangeable with revelatory teachings of Guru Nanak. In doing so, Singh echoes, what Wilderson (2010) deems, the

fundamental antagonism for the Western Subject into *Sikhi* itself, for *Sikhi* too becomes a thriving positive possibility, rather than an impossibility (a negation), within a murderous and unjust American history (26).

Singh's logic, however, does not simply absent or ignore the genocidal brutalization of black and indigenous bodies in the United States that thrives to this day through the very discourse of freedom invoked by Singh. Rather, it also necessitates such violence upon populations not considered to possess these capacities for freedom, hard work, and integrity – the rude parts of the population, dark Others, that need to be forcibly democratized (or removed) and, thus, converted as Americans (or existing outside its walls). In other words, instead of considering how *Sikhi* and Guru Nanak call into question the very categories deployed within American politics such as freedom, Capitalism, and majoritarian democracy, Singh binds *Sikhi* to the violent American settler colonial project historically through Nanak, creating a conceptual Manifest Destiny that devours all in its path. By doing so, Singh dissociates *Sikhi* from the messy, but necessary, present terrain of politics outside an American thematic that can radically disrupt the circulation and exploitation of peoples globally by questioning both the conceptual and material conditions within our particular arrangement of liberal-democratic Capitalism. Instead, Singh and the Sikh Coalition render it a stable past dogmatic moral vision and social order that is refracted universally as American in a continually emancipating future, represented, in 2017, by Donald Trump. Indeed, by creating this perverse Nanak-American conceptual structure, Singh righteously confirms the white-settler nation-state's post-racial façade, which allows 'some bodies of color to make claims for justice as long as they fit within the narrative of the progressive and post-racial state' while excluding those deemed outside the contours of abstract citizenship through walls and registries (Patel 2016).

3. Sanitation, regulation, and turbans

This redemptive moral vision dependent upon secularity and the slave does not simply thrive in ahistorical philosophical contexts of diversity and differences that Singh alludes to, but continually produces conditions for the celebration of a particular kind of human ontological capacity within the global marketplace. For human rights are, as Asad (2003) posits, 'floating signifiers that can be attached to or detached from various subjects and classes constituted by the market principle and by the most powerful nation-states' (158). Thus, though proclaiming a pure vision outside historicity, in their implementation, rights are cultivated within market principles, political agendas and programmatic vision, implemented differentially globally, which effectively remove the contingency and minimalist early constraints that Moyn identifies with human rights. Indeed, within these new schemes today, as Amélie Barras (2009) argues, 'although human rights seem to give a certain political agency to the religious subject, it also links to the greater regulation and control of the religious' (1251).

The law and its ideological apparatus is central to this transformation and regulation of the moral vision of human rights, for as Asad (2000) reminds us, 'human rights discourse is also about undermining styles of life by means of the law as well as by means of a wider culture that sustains and motivates the law.' That is to say, by privileging human rights identified with individual autonomy and sovereignty through the law, piety and belief are reduced, and must, as Asad (2003) argues, 'either have no direct connection to the

way one lives, or be held so lightly that they can easily be changed' (115). Therefore, while Sikh Coalition notes the political significance of *Sikhi* physically embodied with the *Panj Kakaar* in an article online entitled 'A Discourse on the Sikh Articles of Faith,' where they argue one is compelled to stand 'firm against all forms of oppression, speaking for the justice for all human beings irrespective of their faith, color, ethnicity or background and always helping and defending the downtrodden,' when encountering this injustice within American jurisdiction, the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF suggest taking upon a deferential tone to the regulations imposed by the American criminal justice system – a system that upholds, as Michelle Alexander (2010) reveals, a 'racial caste system' (12).

For example, rather than critique the mechanisms and technologies of security within an airport that always already produces Sikhs as an abnormal population, the Sikh Coalition regulates Sikh hygiene in which the irregularity of the Sikh turban is overcome by cleansing one's body, creating an optimal experience of security and regulation that cannot be escaped. Indeed, the Sikh body remains recalcitrant to the logic of regulation so carefully imposed by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The Sikh Coalition explains in an advisory posted online entitled Sikh Air Travelers Guide and Bill of Rights that this recalcitrance signals that the Sikh turbaned body 'should always expect to undergo secondary screening,' because 'AIT machines cannot see through the layers of a standard Sikh turban' and, thus, requires, as Jasbir Puar (2007) details, 'the joint operations of ocular, affective, and informational profiling' of turban scanning (198). In order to render the turban legible within this additional stage of security and surveillance that accuses prior to subject formation, the Sikh Coalition suggests four times in their four-page advisory that 'to avoid false alarms, we [strongly] recommend that you wash your hands before entering the screening area.' However, for the Sikh Coalition, if the perpetual and continuous cleansing of the Sikh body fails to provide adequate entrance into the non-place of the airport in which symbolic expressions of the turban are negated, then the Sikh Coalition recommends to contact them so they can go through proper channels to achieve secular justice and resolution available to particular minority communities (Bauman 2000, 102). The key to addressing these concerns of violation and oppression thus are not through the moral and political vision of *Sikhi* that, at times, requires violence, but the legal mechanisms of the American state, tied tactically to a particular rehabilitated dispensation of Sikhism in order to sustain the regulatory power of the secular, upholding the racial caste structure in the United States.

The Sikh Coalition and SALDEF replicate this programmatic and panoptic vision of human rights and mobilize the United States as a paragon of secular progress in order to reveal Sikh-Americans' exceptional temporal advancement, their sovereignty and capacity to regenerate the American through Nanak, contra their non-Western and minority counterparts. Indeed, this Sikh-American exceptionalism which disavows white-settler colonial, anti-Black and casteist logics is legitimated through the construction of human rights and secularism as the key ethical standards of communities, which serve as a strategic and effective means of furthering violence against postcolonial populations. It is precisely these secularist values that Sikh Coalition and SALDEF locate within both Nanak and American that makes the Sikh-American population more 'progressive,' and, thus, more deserving of biopolitical preservation through recognition from various

police forces and security administration than certain ethnic and religious minorities within and outside Sikh-American borders.

For example, in 2015 in relation to Sikh protests against *beadbi* committed in Faridkot, Simran Jeet Singh in an article on the Sikh Coalition website entitled Current Situation in Punjab argued that 'as religious intolerance increases in modern India' creating communal conditions and state intervention, it was necessary for Sikh-Americans to intervene in the situation. He continued, 'as people who enjoy the basic human rights and privileges, it is our responsibility to speak out and to help ensure that civil liberties are not compromised in Punjab.' Effacing the possibilities and contestations about what constituted politics in Punjab, Singh argued, 'until and unless we are able to secure these rights, the situation for minorities in India will continue to worsen and the stage will be set for hateful violence beyond our control.' Therefore, within Singh's logic, the moral vision of human rights flowering in the coupling of Sikhism and United States negates the need for the political through the declarations of friend and enemy in Punjab and globally (Schmitt 2007). And, instead, redemption is located within the universalization of rights and all the regulatory might it entails, which is disproportionately distributed upon black, indigenous, and post-colonial bodies, who are rendered, once again, without a future, trapped within a caste hierarchy.⁴

The Sikh Coalition and SALDEF, however, do not simply legitimate this caste system alongside the regulatory and repressive apparatuses of the state, the police and military, by tracing historical continuities between *Sikhi* and the American project. They also disseminate a proper mode of subjectivity through the circulating image of the camouflaged turbaned Sikh-American soldier. This image, shared relentlessly, (re)produces a legible Sikh body that ties *Sikhi* to martiality and heteronormativity mobilized to protect values dear to the American state built through settlements, plantations, and drones. Numerous scholars have traced the genealogy of this Sikh legibility to the colonial period where Sikhs were designated as a martial race through colonial ethnographic and anthropological studies that sought to determine the essential character of colonized populations (Fox 1985; Oberoi 1994; Sinha 1995; McLeod 2001). Scholars have noted how such efforts bound Sikhs to not only a dangerous masculinity and a redemptive martiality, but a singular and homogenous identity further culled by the Singh Sabha reform movement (Oberoi 1994; Mandair 2009).

Colonial technologies of knowledge production, functioning as visual modes of surveillance, such as photography, were central in cementing this colonial certainty and authority while quelling the anxiety and fear produced by a contagious Other (Cohn 1996; Pinney 1997; Puar 2007). Within the pictorial logic of colonial modernity, the turban appeared as the key permeable feature of Sikhs during the nineteenth century that rendered legible what appeared to be their inscrutable character. Indeed, the external sign of the turban could be read as a signifier of knowable and understandable collective Sikh behavior that was ritually embodied (Pinney 1997). However, visibility failed, for photographing and documenting the turban could neither account for the individual becoming of each turban (signaling the impossibility of a whole and pure *Sikhi*) nor its theo-political and ethical meaning (readily immanent through the Guru's *hukam*). Therefore, the paradoxically permeable and opaque nature of this blurred and askew turban, as Varinder Kalra (2005) argues, 'renders Sikhs in some halfway house between tradition and modernity or modernities in postcolonial frame' (77).

Today, as Jasbir Puar (2007) notes, the turban remains a “sticky” signifier, operating as a fetish object of fear,’ in which ‘the ontological 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’ (187). However, the image of the turbaned soldier within SALDEF’s and the Sikh Coalition’s array of public relations efforts functions to reinvigorate the turban as a signifier for a flourishing Sikh capacity within an American future by rendering Sikhs as a metonym for an American population who are not only devoid of belief, but readily deployable and disposable militarily. Therefore, looking to quell the ‘resistant anti-assimilationist stance’ proffered by the Sikh turban, the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF use the very same colonial techniques and technologies to render this resistance mute in which the staging of the Sikh capacity and agency through the image of the Sikh soldier become more real than the precarious reality of migrant and immigrant Sikh soldiers (Puar 2007, 175). Indeed, by suturing together Sikh, American, and soldier, Sikh soldiers are revealed to have capacities and freedom in the triple sense – one is free to demonstrate an acceptable form of difference through a privatized religious identity, free to dispose of one’s labor as a commodity, all the while remaining free of any other commodity to sell (Marx 1981, 272).

4. Camouflaging Sikh futures

It is precisely these capacities of the Sikh soldier that the Sikh Coalition utilizes in order to dream of a whole Sikh-American future removed from the circulatory fears of the terrorist. The US Army, however, distances itself from such hyphenated Sikh capacities, for the turban is not so easily redeemed, remaining an infectious reminder of the enemy. As the Sikh Coalition notes online in a document entitled ‘Know Your Rights: Sikhs in the U.S. Army,’ that even with all the Coalition’s attempts to visually camouflage the turban for American consumption, Army ‘regulations do not allow soldiers, officers, or other Service members to wear turbans or keep unshorn hair and beards.’ Thus, not able to obtain an accommodation through legal channels and having to follow state regulations in order to dispose of the only commodity he was endowed with, Captain Simratpal Singh cut his hair and shaved his beard. That is to say, Singh was required to propagate an optimal American body by submitting to the demands of the Armed Forces and eliminating the possibility of a Sikh capacity to infect the American military through an embodied unacceptable form of difference, the decayed and deferred Sikh turban that had to be excised.

However, after what the Sikh Coalition, in an article posted online entitled ‘CPT Singh Receives Long-Term Accommodation in U.S. Army,’ deemed a ‘hard-won legal victory,’ Captain Singh was allowed to wear a turban and, thus, ‘finally realized his dream of becoming spiritually whole.’ Even though Singh’s dream and Sikh futurity could not exist without taking for granted the binding of Nanak to the determinations of the American state, which created a complete and unsplit subjectivity, Captain Singh continued and relayed his happiness, saying ‘I am thankful that I no longer have to make the choice between faith and service to our nation.’ Though presenting the decision as an autonomous one, the choice was always already for the American nation-state, because if *Sikhi* was not deemed able to regenerate American values then it could effect fear, requiring its removal. Thus, only once the secular regime and military industrial complex

rehabilitated and discriminated between the exceptional and hygienic turban through the law, further justifying the sovereign reach of the American state to determine acceptable difference, did a future for a particular class of turbaned Sikh-American soldiers become a possibility.

By producing this legible and hygienic turbaned military class with all its capacities intact within an American future, the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF not only absent the brutal massacre and disfiguration of Muslim bodies globally today, but also sanction the accompanying psychic and physical vulnerabilities such devastation entails within the underclass of Sikh soldiers who remain un-turbaned (members of the *sehajdhari* panth). Indeed, according to the Sikh Coalition, *sehajdharis* face no obstacles to service and, thus, remain outside the scope of the Sikh Coalition. In a document entitled 'Know Your Rights: Sikhs in the U.S. Army,' the Sikh Coalition argues:

Sikhs who serve in the military without turbans currently have no obstacles to service. Nonetheless, we absolutely recognize and honor all Sikhs who serve in the military, and we believe that we must all work together to change hearts and minds on the issue of religious discrimination.

However, against this sanitized conception of war marked by honor, recognition, and autonomous choice, Aimé Césaire (2000) argues, colonialism and its attendant war machine does not simply brutalize the colonized population, but works to 'decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him' (35). This degradation of both the soldiers and the population at home is compounded within the mercenary Sikh soldiers. For Sikh soldiers are doubly bound and suspended within time: both dominated and dominator at a permanent impasse delimited within the accompanying aspirations of hope emboldened by white supremacy within the Sikh Coalition's decidedly Sikh-American future.

The precarious and alienated conditions that *sehajdhari* Sikh soldiers face require we consider the attrition and compromised state of possibilities that constitutes the Sikh-American attachment in the United States. These conditions exist in sharp contrast to the narratives of the continual betterment of life and removal of obstacles advocated by Sikh advocacy organizations. For the Sikh Coalition's absencing of obstacles ignores how, as Lauren Berlant (2011) argues, 'the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject' even while the subject remains cruelly bound through optimism to exhaustive modes of life that are inimical to 'the good life' (28). For Sikh soldiers, these promises include not only the G.I. Bill, the option to travel and experience life abroad, but also the continual proclamations by organizations like the Sikh Coalition that claim to provide soldiers entry into the futural domain of a benumbed white American society. Though Sikh soldiers remain outside the contours of white American society, as constant fears of contagions that can destroy life, these attachments cultivated by the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF provide assurances, in which 'what seems like threat or static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world' (Berlant 2011, 28)

But, at times, the psychical and physical degradation of Sikh soldier life, alongside its cluster of promises, can no longer be endured or maintained within the particular

coordinates of white supremacy that Sikh Coalition and SALDEF desperately seek to make inclusive. Indeed, the proximity between Sikhs and terrorists conceptually and Sikhs and Americans physically, coupled with psychic and physical vulnerabilities of the soldier, dismantle the very suturing of Sikh-American that Sikh advocacy organizations wish to uphold. For example, on 25 January 2014, Corporal Scott Bratton and Officer Adam Lockie, officers from the Lodi Police Department, shot and killed Parminder Singh Shergill, a veteran of the US Army. Shergill suffered from numerous mental health issues stemming from his service including post-traumatic stress disorder. On that morning, Shergill's family reported that Shergill was not on his medications at the time and in an agitated state that required treatment. However, when Shergill refused to engage with the repressive apparatus of the American state, which Sikh advocacy organizations hold in high esteem, existing as a body that could only be aggressively passive, the officers deemed him a threat and killed him.⁵

Reversing the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF logic in which the *kesdhari* Sikh is the only Sikh body that encounters difficulties in his/her entry into American society, Shergill's dead body bears witness to not only the destruction of life, but the conceptual imaginaries of an enduring hyphenated Nanak-Washington that Sikh Coalition and SALDEF arm themselves with. It may be the impossibility of a hyphenated existence to account for the dead and displaced black and brown bodies upholding the United States that compelled the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF to remain largely silent on the whole affair. Indeed, within their logic, there is no space between the hyphenated past (Nanak) and future (American) to burrow into an impasse, displace this hyphenated non-existence and, thus, suspend 'ordinary notions of repair and flourishing' in order to 'ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place' (Berlant 2011, 49). Instead, for the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF, Shergill represented the ideal subject – an autonomous rational being without obstacles endowed with the capacity to sell his labor as well as wear a turban – existing as a proud representation of our collective future as Sikh-Americans.

Against this politics of *haumai* that affirms itself and dreams of an autonomous Sikh-American subjectivity by denying the Guru's *hukam* through accumulated and fungible black, indigenous, and postcolonial bodies, we want to end by briefly considering a politics that annihilates the *haunkari* subject cemented within Western political and economic structures. However, this annihilation cannot occur through the imagining of positive content such as an indigenous landscape. Rather, re-conceptualizing subjectivity and politics must avoid 'the psychic grounding wires of postcolonial restorations, fantasies anchored by cartography' alongside 'positive registers of lost or threatened cultural identity,' all of which remain firmly grounded in the conditions of possibility within capitalist modernity built upon the Black Slave (Wilderson 2010, 123, 10). Yet even Sikh Studies remain mired within these seductive possibilities. For example, Balbinder Singh Bhogal (2014), noting the pernicious effects of colonial rule on *Sikhi* alongside the possibility for decolonial thinking, posits precisely such a recovery wherein scholars are compelled to 'listen to, engage with, if not resurrect, subjugated and aporetic knowledges and epistemologies from their enforced sleep to make them politically active again' (295). Beyond the Orientalist logic that posits the colonized as dormant within the present, there also is no point of entry for the Black body in this 'pluraliversal' in which *Sikhi* is voiced through 'many tongues and

traditions,' for Blackness does not have an articulation or voice, it has no decoloniality or encounter, only death.

In contrast to such decolonial visions of plurality or hyphenated glory, we want to end by gesturing toward a different kind of politics – one that considers the impossibility of subjectivity and freedom altogether contra the desire to re-enter and secure *Sikhi* in the marketplace of references and identities. Certainly, *Sikhi* asks us to consider this possibility rather than revel within the injunction to enjoy subjectivity and identity. For rather than engage in a search for affirmation of a sovereign subject, the Guru Granth Sahib continually threatens the stability of the subject position and what we hold dear. For example, the Guru Granth Sahib demands:

ਜਿਨਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਉਮਰਥਲ ਸੇਈ ਜਾਣਨਿ ਸੂਲੀਆ ॥

ਹਰਿ ਜਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਈ ਬਿਰਹੁ ਹਉ ਤਿਨ ਵਿਟਹੁ ਸਦ ਘੁਮਿ ਘੋਲੀਆ ॥

ਹਰਿ ਮੇਲਹੁ ਸਜਣੁ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਮੇਰਾ ਸਿਰੁ ਤਿਨ ਵਿਟਹੁ ਤਲ ਰੋਲੀਆ ॥

ਜੇ ਸਿਖ ਗੁਰ ਕਾਰ ਕਮਾਵਹਿ ਹਉ ਗੁਲਮੁ ਤਿਨਾ ਕਾ ਗੋਲੀਆ ॥

(Guru Granth Sahib, 311)

Whoever cultivates an inner desert, only they can understand the pain of the desert's becoming within the thorns of cactus

Those who realize the depth of this pain, who know the profundity of *Hari*, I can only continually encircle them, reveling in their unending depth

Those who recognize this perpetual pain, only they can enjoin me to *Hari*, I can only hope my ego (subjectivity) wallows within their dust

Those Sikhs who are intertwined within this non-alienated labor of the Guru, I want to remain their Slave, a non-autonomous being.⁶

It is precisely this suffering and enslaved subject within *gurbani*, who can neither be whole nor autonomous, that can undo the unity and *haumai* created by the coupling of Sikh and the Black Slave that both Sikh-American and even potential Sikh identities enunciate. For, as Wilderson (2010) argues, one cannot bring about a shift within 'structural relation between the living and the dead' through, for example, outreach and legal aid, the continual refinement of the human subject and his/her identity (142). Instead, another possibility remains. A possibility that demands Americans, in all their hyphenated glory, consider whether the enslaved will 'pretend to join the living or will they make us [Americans] join the dead' (142)? Perhaps the answer to this question requires Sikhs abandon the coordinates of the autonomous subject central to identity and rights altogether and, alternatively, foreground the possibilities within *Sikhi* that dwell within the destruction of the human subject – ending the infinite circulation of life essential to *kalyug*, the American landscape, and capitalist modernity.

5. Conclusion

However, instead of dismantling these coordinates of autonomy, Sikh advocacy organizations look to extend them indefinitely seeking redemption in modern time and space.

For example, Prabhjot Singh, a founder of the Sikh Coalition proudly argued in an article online entitled ‘The Sikh Coalition Turns 10!’ ‘I really believe that the magnitude of change that we can create towards Sarbat da Bhalla is limitless. Let’s take the game to the next level. Raj Karega Khalsa!’ But is it possible to reduce Khalsa Raj to American values and the dead and disfigured bodies that accompany those said values? Is it possible to promote *chardi kala* (eternal/rising optimism) if it is attached to cruelty? Is it possible to promote *sarbat da bhalla* (kindness to all subjects), if subjectivity remains intimately bound to autonomy? In contrast, perhaps, we should seriously rethink stagist understandings of historical becoming, which continuously demand progressing ‘the game to the next level’ in order to offer the world a more vigorous and healthy America – a game that also can purport to ‘Make America Great Again.’ Instead, moving beyond continual American progress, we can consider the possibility of ending this game and its accompanying repository of regulations and rights altogether. For within this game that never ends, the poignant and visceral question, ‘Doesn’t my brother’s life mean anything?’ asked by Kulbinder Sohota, Parminder Singh Shergill’s sister, when the District Attorney refused to press charges – a question that also stains the soil of American history – can only be met with an unnerving silence (*The Sacramento Bee*, 30 December 2014).

Notes

1. This is the case historically. Wilderson (2010) argues ‘The circulation of Blackness as metaphor and image at the most politically volatile and progressive moments in history (e.g., the French, English, and American revolutions) produces dreams of liberation which are more inessential to and more parasitic on the Black, and more emphatic in their guarantee of Black suffering, than any dream of human liberation in any era heretofore’ (22).
2. Following Saba Mahmood (2016), we invoke Marx not to question, as she writes, ‘how modern society can expunge religion from social life (as Marx envisioned) but how to account for its ongoing power and productivity in material and discursive terms’ (15).
3. The Sikh Coalition’s conceptual footing, attempting to bind Nanak to America, grows ever weaker, for if Guru Nanak is at the White House, as Simran Jeet Singh attests, he now resides with Donald Trump. Or, perhaps, Guru Nanak left the White House and now awaits the 2020 election?
4. Our point, however, is not to argue that violence against Sikhs does not exist within the Indian nation-state formation. Rather, we want to interrogate why violence against minority Sikhs within Western nation-states is considered an anomalous and ‘unfortunate’ occurrence within secular governance that can be accommodated, but constitutive of the postcolonial state formation. For example, Amandeep Singh Sidhu, founder and Chair, Sikh Coalition Advisory Committee and Member, Board of Advisors argues that

The Sikh Coalition was born out of a need to support the Sikh American community and educate our fellow citizens in response to the unfortunate backlash that followed the September 11th attacks. While as Americans we mourned with our fellow citizens after our country was attacked, we also gained strength from the unity, tolerance and fundamental rights that define our nation’s core values.

5. *The Sacramento Bee* reported: ‘One witness said he saw Shergill raise his right hand and take “three or four steps quickly toward” the officers. At least two others said Shergill never lunged at police’ (30 December 2014).
6. We owe this translation to Dr Jaswinder Singh in Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies at Punjabi University, Patiala.

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