

REVIEW ARTICLE



Phase two: A review essay on Nicole Ranganath's *women and the Sikh diaspora in California: Singing the seven seas*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Nicole Ranganath's *Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California Singing the Seven Seas* as an occasion to explore the promise of representation and the erasures therein, particularly around capital and race. In attending to the book's limitations, the essay offers a meditation on professionalism, critique, and the contemporary university more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Sikh diaspora; migration; professionalism; Northern California; university

Reviews are essential to the life of an academic book. Especially so since, through a review, a book can marshal the 'gravitas' that 'scholars at the top of their field enjoy,' to borrow language from the American Historical Association (Gibbs et al. 2024). And, once the reviews are published, they come to mark the book's status by interrogating its credibility and importance – an interrogation, if it goes well, that can secure the book's place in a historiography, for example. Critique is necessary but only if it is civil and thoughtful. It must uphold the 'gentlemanly behaviors' that constitute the discipline (Shapin 2011). We are all professionals, not amateurs, here.¹ Recall that professional critique, as Talal Asad writes, 'has less to do with the right of free speech than with the reproduction of intellectual disciplines and the culture of belief that goes with them' (Asad 2009, 53).² Asad presses us to consider how criticism – and intervention, too – is also 'a particular kind of cultivation of the self' that occurs within institutional and disciplinary conditions, which are themselves intimate and affective ones (Asad 2009, 53). Since the life of a book is also a social one, personal networks, institutional affiliations, and a certain sycophancy can go quite far in securing – or weakening – a place in the discipline too.³

How, then, should critique of an academic book proceed (even though, following Latour, critique might have run out of steam, necessitating a shift from matters of fact to matters of concern) (Latour 2004)?⁴ If we heed the American Historical Association, we need 'scholars at the top of their field' to participate: 'the discipline needs to hear critiques informed by those who have achieved the widest recognition in their careers of reading, writing, teaching, and mentoring' (Gibbs et al. 2024). But who has come to achieve recognition and enjoy *gravitas* (which itself shrinks as the lower class of scholars – the minor intellectuals who provide weight by citing, teaching, and engaging those with recognition – recedes due to the loss of tenure-track jobs and security in

academia more broadly)? Can one without such status critique without being labeled boorish, surly, or even unprofessional, especially if one is not included within the social networks that come to constitute a field?

I begin with this set of questions because I want to say that Nicole Ranganath's *Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California: Singing the Seven Seas* shows limited understanding of the Sikh community in California and, more importantly, it struggles to situate claims and arguments in their political specificity (beyond the incessant claim that her metaphors best 'capture' Sikh experiences).⁵ But I am also uncertain if I can make such a critique, since it can always be deemed unfair and, therefore, unprofessional. The author can always respond by saying the book is much more than the review allows for – a problem of 'exactitude in science' since it is impossible to summarize a book on a scale of 1 to 1 (Borges 1998, 325; Eco 1992). I am also uncertain what such a critique does, since, in my very framing, it can appear the goal is to offer a 'more profound knowledge of the object' and, therefore, make claim of the reviewer's sovereignty, my own exactitude (Adorno 1983, 23; Butler 2002). I do not hope to offer a better truth of Ranganath's object of study: Sikhs in Sutter County, California (albeit a place where I grew up and remain attached to in myriad ways). I do not wish to offer evidence of my own experience, an 'insider's' account. Following Joan Scott's caution, I do not want to enlarge the picture and provide 'a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision' with an appeal to experience (Scott 1991, 776).⁶ I want to be alert to 'the lure of a textual beyond' (Hothi 2023, 106). Instead, I engage in this critique to ask how a community becomes circumscribed and minority difference becomes legible in Ranganath's book and, then, at the end, to turn toward that strange form of life that we call academic knowledge production and the professionalism it compels.

Ranganath's argument is straightforward: scholars have ignored the lives of Sikh women in California in the postwar period, especially the first wave of Punjabi Sikh women who migrated after World War II and before the 1965 Immigration Act. Their voices have been overlooked and, as Ranganath writes, 'their stories deserve to be narrated and heard; they are worthy of incorporation into the modern global history of migration and music' (Ranganath 2024, 21).⁷ Music needs to be recovered because it, she writes, 'is the tool that renders the otherwise inaccessible accessible' (75). Beyond this recovery, Ranganath looks to understand 'the unique and shifting global circumstances that enabled Punjabi women's songs and speech as windows into the rich cultural history of the modern South Asian diaspora from a gendered perspective' (18). And, to undertake this project, Ranganath interviews thirty select women – whom she calls 'subaltern' – from Yuba City and Live Oak. Some such women were even inaccessible until Ranganath's relentless investigation.⁸ As she claims, 'These women were the most inaccessible members of the local Punjabi community not just to outsiders such as me, but even beyond their family circles. Most stayed at home, exclusively spoke Punjabi, and enjoyed little contact with the world outside the Punjabi community' (33).

To understand these women and their global circumstances, Ranganath employs an oceanic methodology, which she describes in the first chapter as an emphasis on 'fluidity, connections across vast distances, and mobility over stasis' (38). This oceanic

emphasis allows us to destabilize the ‘primacy of the nation-state’ and, in contrast, highlights ‘the heterogeneity of the South Asian diaspora(s)’ (15). So, for example, by foregrounding the oceanic in Chapter 2, Ranganath elucidates ‘alternative fluid identities and water ontologies of diasporic Sikh women’ in the songs of Gadar from 1913 to 1948 (even though ‘water ontologies’ [or even ontologies] does not appear in the text again; ‘water ontology’ does, but only in a later chapter) (22).⁹ Chapter 3 centers the trauma of mobility and critiques the celebratory tone that often accompanies the focus on fluidity and cosmopolitanism. To do so, Ranganath attends to two types of passages that mark a transition for women in her study: marriage and migration. These passages demonstrate that mobility ‘triggered greater efforts to circumscribe women’s movements’ (75). Yet singing, Ranganath claims, is a survival mechanism that allows for the sublimation of ‘powerful yet socially unacceptable emotions (especially women’s) for the greater good of the patriarchal joint family’ (83). Chapter 4 turns to the aftermath of the migration passage and the central role of women in community building in Yuba City within Sikh institutions. Here, Ranganath explicitly centers a Sikh ontology as a decolonial move (134–135). Finally, in Chapter 5, Ranganath explores a new phenomenon: autobiographical songs composed by Sikh women in the last decades of the twentieth century. For Ranganath, these songs demonstrate creative expression in dealing with themes of loss and longing. Through these chapters, the book offers us access to the Sikh community by attuning us to the voices of a select group of Sikh women in late twentieth century Sutter County.

Reviewers often critique books because they want the book to offer something beyond the stated goals of the author. This can be an important task because the stated goals of the author can themselves be misguided and incoherent. So, for example, I could critique the fantasies of the past – such as nostalgia – that mark the interviews that Ranganath astonishingly takes as fact.¹⁰ These present a history of difference such as that critiqued by Joan Scott: ‘what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through?’ (Scott 1991, 776). I could then ask about the archive as ‘a trace of that which necessarily ‘escapes capture,’ as Hoon Song has, to consider negative imprints, shadows (Song 2006, 485). But rather than question the referential premise of Ranganath’s narration and her reach toward plurality, here I want to stay with Ranganath’s own premises in the book – inadequate as they might be – and ask: what are the unique and global circumstances that Ranganath claims are essential to these women’s lives? What were ‘the confluence of influences’ that came to define these women (17)? We rarely learn of them. In Chapter 3, the Partition of 1947 is the main historical event that Ranganath briefly explores. Otherwise, Ranganath does not situate the lives of her interlocutors, even though she claims that that context can explain their behavior.¹¹ Put differently, one will learn little about Sutter County or Northern California from the book, even though the ‘diasporic context’ is supposed to be a critical explanatory mechanism. Instead, we get banal statements about alternatives, connection, fluidity, and the like, authenticated by a discovery of a formerly inaccessible ‘native’ voice.

Consider her claim that ‘*Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California* uncovers an alternative transoceanic imaginary among Sikhs, emphasizing global belonging, connection, and unity, rather than rupture’ (20). But what does it mean to belong to the globe? Are connection and unity opposed to rupture? After all, the globe itself became a unified and connected entity through a process (*mondialatinisation*) that necessitated ruptures;

consider how, for one, the globe comes to supplant world(s) (Derrida 2002; Mandair 2016). Many have centered accumulation to this unification; it is what scholars have called the emergence of capitalism, a globalizing force that demands belonging.¹² Yet capital is conspicuously absent in Ranganath's book; it does not appear in the analysis at all. Of course, a book is not required to center capital, but to ignore it while making appeals to global circumstances and writing about landowners in California is odd, to say the least. To be fair, Ranganath does acknowledge wealth gaps in the community, but in order to understand them we simply get a narrative that centers hard work and adventure as central to building wealth, a return to narratives of original sin.¹³ For example, in situating one interview, she writes:

The family's prosperity was due to the long-standing labor and sacrifices of her husband's uncle, Munsha Singh Thiara, who was one of the first Punjabi settlers in the area. Arriving in the United States in 1907, Munsha had lived a lean, frugal existence as an itinerant farm worker in the early years but eventually built a successful farming business (151).

It is an oft-repeated story: there are 'two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living' (Marx (1867) 1990, 873).¹⁴

Is that tale of two sorts sufficient (Bracken 2007, 24–27)? Sikh workers came in demand in the early twentieth century because of wage cutting. As growers looked to control their labor supply and 'stop the increasingly assertive Japanese,' they turned to Sikh workers, as Richard Steven Street explains. There was also a racialized backlash in Live Oak as white workers worried about their own security (Singh 2014; Street 2004, 483). Ranganath knows this and frames her narrative in the introduction accordingly. Yet when it comes time to situate her interviewees in that history, Ranganath simply ignores it with an appeal to the subject's own account. But to understand global circumstances as Ranganath wants, it is imperative to examine the accumulation of capital and the various tensions it brought forth.¹⁵ These conflicts were not simply bound to the racial exclusion of the state. Accumulation was also tied to questions of kinship and patriarchal conflict; we cannot take the promises of the family and civil society in liberalism for granted (Brown 1995; Kehal, Chahal, and Malhi 2024). Put differently, it was not that the early period had conflicts tied to property and labor because of state racism, which then, with the gradual fulfillment of liberalism's universalist vision, led to tranquil transfers and sales.¹⁶ Inheritance of that property also constantly created friction. In the case of the Thiaras, legal interventions (that code of capital)¹⁷ were necessary to manage Thiara's estate, of which Harsev Singh Thiara, Mohinderjit's husband, became one beneficiary – but not without challenges from within the family unit.¹⁸

The peculiarity of ignoring accumulation leans into obscenity when Ranganath claims that 'Rather than understanding culture as originating in and bound by (home)lands, this book theorizes migration as more akin to flowing water' (1-2). The unusually phrased claim is true, I suppose, but migration can only be 'akin to flowing water' if one has the correct paperwork and documentation that can signal appropriate belonging.¹⁹ Migration is not simply a matter of overcoming illiberal controls on movement and increasing freedom, a promise that develops with the passage of time, as it appears in Ranganath's book. Instead, as Adam McKeown, Hagar Kotef, and others have demonstrated, as free movement took hold, controls were formulated 'in ways that appeared

nondiscriminatory and accommodating,' but also necessitated 'the standardization of identification procedures and migration norms around the globe, which included an insistence on the sovereign right of a nation to control entry as it pleased' (Brown 2010; Grewal 2005, 167; Kotef 2015; McKeown 2008, 8).²⁰ It should not surprise us then that Ranganath's periodization for exploring the migration flow of elite Sikh women (1945–2010) neatly coincides with the opening and closing of El Centro Immigration Detention Center (1945–2014) (Ordaz 2021). Yet, in Ranganath's analysis, there is no room for these impediments in the migratory flow.

One aspect of this standardization that creates limits does appear in Ranganath's book: the passport.²¹ She mentions passports when examining Swarn Kaur Johl (1929–2015) and provides a 'reading' of a passport photo. Ranganath writes: 'In her Indian passport photo, she is dressed in the simple attire of a devout Sikh. Highly intelligent and dedicated to Sikhi, she was one of the women who played instrumental roles in the revival of the Sikh faith in the local community between the 1950s and 1990s' (101). This is a strange statement. In the photo, Johl is wearing a *dupatta*, I suppose, but that cannot be so quickly equated to devoutness. We have to recall that the state's technologies of surveillance and management – identification photography – do not provide access to a transparent truth of the subject. The photos are staged, after all. And, although the passport photo might not be 'reducible to a mere function of the passport,' as Tina Campt persuasively shows, Ranganath does not attempt to listen to a lower frequency to discern a practice of refusal that is both revealed *and* concealed (Campt 2017, 28). Her project is instead an attempt, as Ranganath says repeatedly, to capture Sikhs and render legible – which is, after all, the operation of governmentality: to burrow within and produce the truth of the modern subject.²²

So, capital is missing, and that absence makes it a flawed book. Still, one could argue, despite the absence of capital, that there are other global forces at work that Ranganath does explore. For example, there is a question of race (which is not necessarily separable from capital, as we know).²³ Ranganath indeed elaborates that racism was an issue for Punjabi Sikh migrants. She writes, 'this cohort of women also endured new forms of racial and religious discrimination in American society' (136). This hostility deepened their experience of isolation and, in turn, led the Sikh community to offer 'extensive mutual support to each other' (111). What was this mutual support in response to racism? Ranganath's answer: Sikh women 'transformed the South Asian American community in the 1950s and 1960s, domesticating a male bachelor society and forging faith and cultural institutions in rural California' (11). This transformation reflects a national fantasy premised, to borrow from Lauren Berlant, 'on personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian;' the task of domestication, for example (Berlant 1997, 4). Citizenship is simply 'produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere' rather than 'directed toward public life' (Berlant 1997, 5). In Ranganath's elaboration, the gurdwara is reduced to faith and culture – a categorization that removes the agonistic political contestations central to it that scholars have examined (Hirvi 2014; Hothi 2024).

Citizenship is a private affair in Ranganath's narrative because racial hostilities are overcome by assimilation and progress, displacing any need for a politics that would necessitate disagreement and an analysis that would require a theorization of race beyond racist acts (Berlant 1997, 185). For example, Ranganath writes:

In the sixties and seventies, Sikh women began working in local canneries during the summertime to supplement the family income. For some of the first generation of Sikh women in Yuba City, the cannery was the first space in which they interacted with diverse women outside the community (113).

Yet the paragraph abruptly stops here, without explanation; ‘interactions’ are removed from any political action or organization. Instead, in the very next paragraph, in the opening sentence, Ranganath quickly turns to Sikh desire for home-ownership; the domicile and private take center-stage. This is particularly strange because cannery work was an especially explosive site for labor activism for many women in the latter half of the twentieth century (Cornford 1995; Ruiz 1987).

Our next sustained discussion of labor comes with her interviewee Harbans Kaur Panu. Ranganath tells us that:

Slowly Harbans started enjoying her life in California. She loved wearing American clothes and learned English while watching soap operas. She worked for decades helping her husband on their fifteen-acre peach orchard by pruning, thinning, and irrigating. During her twenty-six years working at the Sunsweet fruit packing house, she created friendships with people of different backgrounds: ‘There were people of all races, and I loved them all’ (144).

In her narration, intimacy is the key to national belonging. Constraints – such as race – dissipate; life becomes unmarked by the contradictions at the heart of the nation. Recall that it is the rhetoric of intimacy that is used to manage economic crisis: personal acts of saving and consumption become the ‘economic,’ for example (Berlant 1997, 8; Grewal 2005, 108). Freedom becomes ‘a matter of consumption, choice, and expression: an individual good, rather than a social and political practice,’ as Wendy Brown has argued (Brown 1995, 13). Tragedy, in this utopia, is merely personal grief – the death of Panu’s son in an accident – rather than the structural conditions of exploitation. And the fact that Panu was a defendant in a lawsuit (Cartas, et. al. v. Harbans Bath, et. al.) that her husband settled with migrant and seasonal farm workers for unpaid wages and substandard housing then is unimportant; if it would even be acknowledged, it would most likely be another occasion for individuals to articulate their universal love for all races (Berlant 1997, 189).

The global circumstances which provide the context for her interviews, thus, are not race, capitalism, or even caste,²⁴ since these all dissipate with progress (although we do need, Ranganath claims, more ‘awareness’ to overcome racism (35)). If not race, capital, or caste, what *is* the unique and global circumstance that explains so much for Ranganath? It is patriarchy. Let us return to the family, which, for Ranganath, in Punjab, constituted women as property to be exchanged in weddings, forcing women to depart from their childhood home. Ranganath contends that this exchange becomes ‘the primal trauma that women returned to throughout their lives’ (98). It is ‘a primal moment of pain in the collective consciousness of the Punjabi people’ (98). As Ranganath writes, ‘There was an undercurrent of anger, betrayal, and bitterness about their families marrying them off as girls when they felt unprepared. It was they who made the largest sacrifices in being deprived of an education, for instance, to maintain family honor’ (84). The women migrants then struggle against this primal patriarchal trauma that structures their Punjabi family life and a trauma that is repeated in their migratory journey.

How do they struggle against patriarchy? It is combated by a female essence imbued in music. Ranganath holds that music and singing are bound to a feminine creative expression, ‘a collective voice of Punjabi women.’ Singing, Ranganath writes, ‘acts as a collective process of healing for women and their relatives about a female relatives’ departure after marriage’ (98). What this means is not quite clear. Consider her claim: ‘Music and nature, especially water, are imbued with a feminine essence in Punjabi culture’ – a strange claim indeed.²⁵ So, how do we determine what that ‘feminine essence in Punjabi culture’ is? We could follow Anshu Malhotra, as Ranganath does, and capture this essence by recording diverse experiences. As Malhotra writes, and Ranganath approvingly cites, ‘The famed fertile land of Punjab had proven to be singularly barren in fructifying its women’s expressions in written and published forms, and I had to strain to read a few discordant notes’ (Malhotra cited in Ranganath 2024, 16–17). For Ranganath, the key is to root out music in a fertile land ‘barren in fructifying’ the songs of women. In this difficult project of recovery, Ranganath discovers that essence to be fluid, as women asserted forms of flexible selfhood, bound to female affinities, which she hears and records (108, 143). It is an undifferentiated ‘woman,’ then, without contradictions, without tensions.

In her analysis, moreover, patriarchy itself becomes timeless and bound to Punjab. It is a wound that marks Punjabi women as such and creates inner emotional turmoil or a traumatic loss. It is no surprise then that life in the United States comes to dissolve these patriarchal norms by allowing women to enter the public sphere as autonomous and independent subjects, rather than as property.²⁶ However, when did the family become a site for ‘dependency’, in contrast to the individual’s independence – especially since, historically, dependence marked all relations (Rose 2023, 90)? When did the family become private in contrast to the individual’s public? Considering these questions would again require us to confront private property and capital, but not through the familiar liberal narrative of a disembedding function that destroys ‘traditional’ forms and opens onto modern subjectivity. Instead, we have to consider, as Melinda Cooper and others have, how capital ‘reassert[s] the reproductive institutions of race, family, and nation as a way of ensuring the unequal distribution of wealth and income across time’ (Cooper 2017, 16). How, then, is the family reinvented – even when it might seem to be against patriarchy – to maintain inequalities? Perhaps cultural institutions are not so innocent, community is not so undifferentiated, the wound is not so internal.²⁷

To answer these questions, we would need to rethink the transparency and presence of the subject that marks Ranganath’s project. We would have to work beyond an analysis that foregrounds the impressibility of the ethnographer that gives them unmediated access to the ‘real’.²⁸ This access is precisely what Ranganath promises. Although Ranganath says that she does not approach ‘this research as an objective interpreter of an official archive,’ she still claims that she has the capacity to think about the work in terms of her ‘role as an interlocuter with female performers of a repertoire,’ which then helped her ‘to identify and counteract the biases, ethics, and power dynamics raised by [her] positionality’ as ‘an outsider and a *gorī*, a white woman’ (43).²⁹ The capacity for transcendence – the ability to think otherwise, overcome the self in a reflexive manner – is always available to some and marks what becomes a biological inheritance (Schuller 2018, 9).³⁰ That is, Ranganath’s claim that she has the ability to counteract whiteness through identification and interpretation rehearses the very logic

of whiteness she claims to overcome. The capacity for transcendence is not distributed equally across the archive and its keeper.

Such rehearsals are evident elsewhere, too. Consider this insistence on her work's own groundbreaking nature: 'With the support of a California Humanities grant, SikhLens and other community organizations, we created a documentary that ultimately aired on PBS called "Jutti Kasoori (Walking into the Unknown)," the first film about women's history in California's Punjabi community' – an assertion she has made numerous times in multiple venues (33). But already in 1992, a documentary was made by Joyce Middlebrook, entitled 'Two Homes, One Heart,' that showcased Punjabi Sikh women song and dance in Sacramento and Sutter County. One could argue that that film was not a history and, therefore, Ranganath's claim is ostensibly true. But claims to novelty and discovery – the first to capture Sikh women's history in film form – are strange on their own especially when we know that performative acts of white possession – declarations of the 'first' – in the colonies were often accompanied by 'voyeurism, pleasure, and pride' (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 36). Yet the claim to novelty, the 'charm of novelty,' does help explain what we find in Ranganath's book (Carter 1988). For novelty only remains novel – that is, it does not become familiar – because each Punjabi woman presents a new story, a possible difference to be captured, which compels further exploration. As Paul Carter writes about European travel literature, the claim to novelty helped provide 'narrative coherence and structure' to the journey, in our case a scholarly one (Carter 1988, 81). 'The mystery is of his own making, a resistance dialectically constructed in order to give his own passage historical meaning,' argues Carter. Yet, in this passage, there is not an imposition of rigid preconceptions such as European categories and standards. Rather, the explorer comes to inhabit the world in which 'the charm of exploring lies not in discovery, but in the act of exploring' (Carter 1988, 81). More 'firsts' always beckon – a task our intrepid explorer takes with reverie.

What to make of this book's project in relation to the production of knowledge, as opened this review essay? As Roderick Ferguson has brilliantly demonstrated, privileged minorities have facilitated the identification, regulation, and incorporation of minority difference in the university while the state has disinvested from it (Ferguson 2012, 190; Reddy 2011, 146). Ranganath acknowledges she came upon this book project after she was placed in charge of the Punjabi Pioneers Digital Archive, now called the Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive at UC Davis (Judge and Brar 2021). The project celebrated minority difference, elite Sikh farm owners and professionals in the Central Valley who funded the archive – an especially important task as funding recedes and donors become more prevalent, especially in area studies. We see this in the book too, as Ranganath stays with a particular class to celebrate their lives.³¹

When she was placed to head the UC Davis archive, Ranganath was not a scholar of Sikh or Punjab Studies. I myself had met with her, at her behest, in 2016 to discuss the archive and Sutter County more broadly. She learned then of my mother, who is a Sikh cannery worker and lives in Sutter County. At the time, Ranganath expressed wonder. She had not met any working-class Sikhs, since her entry point were the donors, who presented themselves as model minorities. She asked me to facilitate a meeting with my

mom and her friends. But when I asked about the structure of the archive, the law that would facilitate its ordering of captured voices, Ranganath told me that the donors had to come first. And, they were celebrated lavishly in the opening of the archive (Zaveri 2016). Still, Ranganath promised to address my concerns later in the project. As Ranganath wrote to me in an email after our meeting: ‘As I mentioned when we met, the model minority narrative will [be] complicated in phase 2.’³² Alas, the poor did not have the gravitas to demand respect, to be included in the first phase. They were thoughtfully, with civility and professionalism, deferred to a time to come.³³

Perhaps divulging this story in a book review is unprofessional, which returns us to the question of professional critique and the culture it looks to maintain.³⁴ But whereas professionalism used to mark the status and content of work, it now signals a ‘style, affect, and attitude’ toward work – a different type of self-cultivation. One must have a ‘subjective investment in and identification with work, but also a kind of affective distancing from it’ is how Kathi Weeks puts it (Weeks 2011, 74). A professional is one who does not take ideas and arguments too seriously. The claims and rigors of expertise are buckling in the face of institutional stresses, but the key to professionalism in this setting – with the decline of tenure-track jobs, the loss of public funds, and the need to celebrate minority difference – will be to have the right attitude toward work. The new professional will break ground by heeding donor priorities, capturing voices presumed forgotten and inaccessible, curating them in an institutional setting, and incorporating them into the future of our university, if we can still call it that.³⁵

Notes

1. Of course, such a line is difficult to hold (Dinshaw 2012; Levine 1986).
2. Although about literary criticism, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith too centers ‘the considerable social force and significant social functions of all forms of evaluative behavior’ (Smith 1988, 13). Evaluation is, she writes, ‘a form of *social* behavior’ (Smith 1988, 14).
3. This leads to a reproduction of the status quo. As Theodor Adorno wrote long ago: ‘Not only does the mind mould itself for the sake of its marketability, and thus, reproduce the socially prevalent categories. Rather, it grows to resemble ever more closely the *status quo* even where it subjectively refrains from making a commodity of itself’ (Adorno 1983, 21).
4. I want to avoid this question, although it is pertinent for the book under question. That is, Ranganath could have set out to explore the limits of critique in the experience of music, for example.
5. Ranganath says her goal is ‘to *capture* the role of women’s songs in shaping the modern Sikh diaspora’ (19); she has ‘reflected on how to best *capture* the expansiveness of these women’s lives traversing great oceanic distances, as well as the nuanced shifts in their subjective worlds resulting from their local and transoceanic mobilities’ (31); she says her ocean metaphors ‘best *capture* the modern Sikh diaspora, especially women’s agency and vocality’ (32); her methodology allows her to ‘*capture* the personal and the intimate together with the collective history of the first generation of South Asian women who arrived in California after World War II’ (32); her concept of anchoring helps ‘to *capture* the place-making strategies of this hypermobile community’ (46); she claims that ‘For the women featured in this book, the pearl metaphor *captures* their resilience, agency, and creativity through their musical expressions’ (47); The metaphor ‘river of a nationalist zeal’ flowing into an ocean best ‘*captures* the fluidity of belonging and identity in Sikh worldview’ (52); songs are popular because they ‘*capture* the collective voice of Punjabi women’ (89), and so on (emphases added).

6. I too do not want to rest my 'claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts' (Scott 1991, 776).
7. For an important critique of this constant question in Sikh Studies – what about women? What about gender? – see manmit singh's work (singh 2025).
8. The inaccessible Oriental woman is, of course, a trope that scholars have long challenged. I borrow relentless investigation from Meyda Yeğenoğlu. As she writes, 'Frustrated with the invisibility and inaccessibility of this mysterious, fantasmatic figure, disappointed with the veiled figure's refusal to be gazed at, Western desire subjects this enigmatic, in Copjec's terms, 'sartorial matter,' to a relentless investigation' (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 39).
9. The plural is hardly a remedy it is presented in its constant invocation (Anidjar 2014).
10. I have critiqued such attempts that look to secure the past in my work (Judge 2024). The work of Kaur and Kehal is also of note (2023).
11. For example, with Harbans Kaur Panu and Mohinderjit Thiara, Ranganath claims 'the diasporic context is essential for understanding the motivations and conditions behind the musical poetry these women created' (156). We must, of course, be careful of context and its promises of capture (Derrida 1988).
12. These are, of course, the famous transition debates. But this is not to say that there is a thing called Capitalism which then has effects; it does not have as Hannah Appel writes, 'a singular, intrinsic systematicity on the one hand, or an endlessly varied, specific, and fractured form on the other' but the 'concrete outcome of layers of work and history through which specific and far-reaching coherences ... become robust and durable, despite the contingencies of their making processes' (Appel 2019, 28–29).
13. Ranganath, for example, writes: 'Her father, Udham Pal Singh, loved adventure. During World War I, he served as a railway station master in Iraq. In the 1930s, he moved his family to Burma to work as a lineman for the Burmah Oil Company' (150).
14. Although Munsha Singh, Live Oak farmer, was arrested 'on a charge of driving a motor vehicle while under the influence of liquor,' so perhaps there was some riotous living. See *Sacramento Bee*, 5 March 1926.
15. For example, consider how, as Hardeep Dhillon writes, 'Indian and other Asian activists won naturalization reforms on the basis of arguments rooted in racial capital. They insisted that their ancestral homelands were critical to US war efforts and markets. Asian immigrant organizations dedicated to reforming naturalization and immigration law, including the India Welfare League, Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion, Japanese American Citizenship League, and India League of America, pointed to their members' status as successful immigrants who excelled in educational pursuits, financial prosperity, and military patriotism, beyond that of most Americans' (Dhillon 2023, 40).
16. The state, of course, does not disappear. One could consider, too, the state's intervention to protect certain assets via subsidies. At least two of Ranganath's interlocutor families are in the top ten for the Crop Disaster Assistance Program from 1995-2024. See the Environmental Working Group's Database for the Crop Disaster Assistance Program in Sutter County, California, 1995–2024 https://farm.ewg.org/top_recips.php?fips=06101&progcode=tot_cropd®ionname=SutterCounty, California
17. I borrow 'code of capital' from Katharina Pistor, who brilliantly excavates the tensions between property rights (assets), the state, and the law in which all asset holders need today 'is the right lawyers on their side who code their assets in law' (Pistor 2019, 22).
18. For example, see 'Suit Filed in Dispute Over Estate,' *Appeal Democrat*, Thursday, Sept. 23, 1976 B-10. The disputes had existed for years.
19. We must put 'belonging' itself under question, as Harleen Kaur has demonstrated (Kaur 2020).
20. Or, as Gil Anidjar writes, 'The erection of walls ... does not contradict the logic of flows' (Anidjar 2014, 18).
21. For the passport in the South Asian context, see Mongia 2018.

22. We must be especially cautious in ethnography, as Harleen Kaur has taught us. As Kaur writes: 'Conceptualizing surveillance as a forced intimacy with the state and its formal and informal actors, I argue that ethnographers must better contend with how power, violence, and the belief of a world beyond them manifest in already-surveilled communities and their 'spiritual homes and community centers', as phrased by Hundle' (Kaur 2023, 230).
23. Ranganath does not provide any theorization of race.
24. Ranganath does not delve into caste. She even states, '*Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California* uncovers an alternative transoceanic imaginary among Sikhs emphasizing global belonging, connection, and unity rather than rupture. Absent are the caste concerns about ritual impurity beyond India' (19). In her ethnography of a region similar to Yuba City – entitled Valleyville – Margaret A. Gibson notes a different tale, that there was anger that Jats had to now 'run around like chamars' (Gibson 1988, 54–56).
25. It should go without saying that an appeal to a gendered essence is strange, as numerous scholars have demonstrated (Scott 1986). For example, as Saidiya Hartman has written, 'By assuming that "woman" designates a known referent, an *a priori* unity, a precise bundle of easily recognizable characteristics, traits, and dispositions, we fail to attend to the contingent and disjunctive production of the category. In other words, "woman" must be disassociated from the white middle-class female subject who norms the category' (Hartman 1997, 99–100).
26. One wonders, in particular, at the claims of inaccessibility when we learn of only a certain class of Punjabi Sikhs who are, it turns out, quite accessible.
27. This is not to privilege one perspective over another, to oppose the view from above against the view from below, to posit the outside against the inside. These can be considered relationally as Faranak Miraftab does. As she writes, '*Weaving political, economic, and ethnographic insights is not easy*. But I am convinced what this constitutes the only way to braid together the threads that make for the complex story of globalization in an industrial town in the rural heartland – a global heartland' (Miraftab 2016, 14). Emphasis mine.
28. Impressibility is not impressionability. For the distinction and its relation to race, see Schuller 2018.
29. There is a question of the work such positionality statements do. As Jasmine K. Gani and Rabea M. Khan write, 'Our core argument here, therefore, is that you cannot easily abstract the methodology of reflexive positionality from the colonial context in which both its core principles and its epistemology were conceived. To sum up, this means positionality is tied to: (i) the historical assumption that *the researcher must be white, both in the capacity to be rational and in the need for self-accountability*; (ii) that it was designed to help *the researcher identify and research the 'other'*; and (iii) it emerged to counter colonial ethnographic practices, which served to 'other' the non-white object of analysis, and therefore takes as a given that *the colonial encounter (and the colonial researcher) is the starting point*' (Gani and Khan 2024, 6). Emphases are mine.
30. That is to say, this is not a call for more self-reflexivity, that is, more contextualization, but for an ethics that reckons with the non-coincidence of 'seeing' and 'being-seen.' As Hoon Song writes, 'Anthropological reflexivity leaves the principle of the Panoptic gaze unthought precisely to the extent that it renders its own gaze an object of inquiry; historicizing itself, anthropological reflexivity fails to theorize the very (Panoptic) 'point of exception' from which the coincidence between 'seeing' and 'being-seen' is rendered visible (Song 2006, 481).
31. As Aneeth Kaur Hundle rightly notes: 'White-identified scholars might also replicate some of the problematic tendencies of dialectical antiracist activist work in the university (i.e. engaging in liberal allyship practices) by uncritically promoting hegemonic WOC or POC essentialisms' (Hundle 2019, 294).
32. Nicole Ranganath, e-mail message to author, 16th October 2016.
33. One must thus ask about representation, curation, and their limits as Bakirathi Mani has (Mani 2020).

34. In the Sikh Studies context, Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal have asked these questions for scholarship (Kaur and Kehal 2022).
35. I might be too pessimistic here and there are, as Hundle writes, ‘practical, everyday interventions in the liberal university’ (Hundle 2019, 300).

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