THERE IS NO COLONIAL RELATIONSHIP:
ANTAGONISM, SIKHISM, AND SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies how scholars have displaced antagonism within histories of Sikhism and South Asian Studies more broadly. In contrast to this displacement, this article foregrounds antagonism by taking into account a third element within the presumed colonizer and colonized relationship: a curved space of nonrelation that signals there can be no colonial relationship. By considering the constitutive nature of antagonism within social reality that remains unable to be demarcated, this article examines the generative principles of Sikh practices and concepts that both structure Sikhism's institutions and productively conceptualize this antagonism. Examining these concepts and practices, I consider the possibility of different modes of both historical being and becoming not bound within our current conceptual rubrics. These different possibilities culled through Sikh concepts and theories demand we reflect upon the rabble: those unable to be contained within colonial civil society or within attempts by the colonized for self-determination in political societies. This void then fractured Sikh reform organizations historically, providing multiple avenues for politics unaccountable within our bifurcated and asymmetrical understandings of civil society and political societies and colonizer and colonized.

Keywords: Sikhism, postcolonial theory, Khalsa, South Asia, Punjab, subaltern studies, colonialism, empire

INTRODUCTION

The continual protests by Sikhs in order to articulate political demands both within and outside the structure of the colonial and Indian state reveal what Alain Badiou terms "an unnoticed possibility of the situation" by drawing our attention to what liberal politics seeks to resolve and, thus, annihilate: the dynamic nature of antagonism.[2] But by antagonism, this article does not refer to a mere conflict between two poles, such as the conceptual binary that present-day scholars draw

2. Alain Badiou, "Seminar on Plato at the ENS," February 13, 2008 (unpublished), cited in Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 27. Sikh protests did not begin in the twentieth century, but have been a continual historical occurrence as, for example, Sikhism's relationship to state power—whether Mughal, British, or Indian—reveals.

between tradition and modernity. In contrast, following the work of Slavoj Žižek, this article examines antagonism as constitutive of reality itself.[3] Antagonism is not simply an oppositional conflict between two poles in which colonial modernity is an obstacle to the true expression of tradition. Nor is religion a retrograde remnant preventing modernity from achieving homeostasis, nor can scholars domesticate antagonism by resolving, settling, or comprehending the relation between tradition and modernity from a neutral standpoint, revealing the symbolic richness and/or multiplicity of history. Instead, antagonism is an enduring presence within social reality, a third originary point structuring the very form that both tradition and coloniality inhabit, while rendering the entire structure of that reality an impossibility.

This enduring presence signals that there is no such thing as a colonial relationship.[4] A relationship does not exist between two points as complementary, parallel, or conflictual; instead, an inaccessible and resistant impediment is knotted within the relationship, which not only renders impossible their premised bifurcations, but also opens a terrain for what difference will entail.[5] This is not to say there are no colonial effects that inflect religion or that colonial structures have no effect in the global South, an obviously fallacious claim if we think of the world-historical relations of capitalism. Rather, I argue that we cannot organize colonial relationships in a manner that is not bound to fail, for antagonism is the very impossibility of achieving a structure that can render such relations between two poles resolvable. Or, as Joan Copjec argues, "the generative principle of a society [that is, antagonism] is never statable as such, the way the contents of that society are," and, therefore, conflict, Copjec continues, "does not result from the clash between two different positions but from the fact that no position defines a

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3. I posit that Žižek's theoretical form is of great use, even though Žižek's content is, as numerous scholars have noted, Orientalist and Eurocentric, upholding both Christianity and Europe as key sites for resistance, which denies, as Arvind-Pal Mandair notes, "the full consequences of [Žižek's] own insights," especially for post-colonial peoples. See Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press 2013), 405.

4. Here I follow Jacques Lacan, who argues "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship," and Žižek, who argues "there is no class relationship." Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 57, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 126. For Lacan, "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship" does not mean there are no sexual relations. Rather, with his provocative statement, Lacan signals how, as Žižek explains, "sexual difference is not a firm set of 'static' symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions, but the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question—something that resists every attempt at its symbolizations," thereby rendering relationships, based on symbolic complementary or conflictual oppositions, failures (61). See Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality,* ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

5. For example, in relation to sexual difference, Žižek argues, "Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very 'impossibility' that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what 'sexual difference' will mean." Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," 61. See also Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism?" in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, eds., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 111.

resolute identity."[6] Antagonism thus signals an impossibility, rather than a resolvable or comprehensible conflict between binary classifications.[7]

Highlighting the constitutive nature of antagonism through the injunction that "there is no such thing as a colonial relationship," this article begins to conceptualize the impossibility of fully demarcating historical parameters and horizons, thereby revealing an unaccountable and heterogeneous excess that creates continuous possibilities, rather than deferrals, that can shift the normative coordinates of closure that demarcate our historical analyses. More specifically, this article examines the absence and dislocation of antagonism in studies of the Sikh tradition and South Asian studies more broadly. Rerouting the coordinates of antagonism, I center the impossibility that structured, and structures, both colonialism and Sikhism by emphasizing the importance of Sikhism's foundational interpretive principles, which productively elaborate in the present, and elaborated historically, a way to grapple with antagonism and the inherent limitations of a given historical moment's symbolic registers.

In other words, the generative principles of Sikhism, by theorizing the impossibility and incoherence of society as such, continually articulate and have historically demonstrated the possibility of acts that cannot be assimilated into colonial structures, including history. In this article, I foreground these Sikh theories and concepts and their interplay with Sikhism's practices and institutions in order to consider the possibility of different modes of both Sikh being and becoming that remain irreducible to historical context. I then explore Sikhism's conceptual form by examining relationships among Sikhs, colonial civil society, and their political institutions in the twentieth century, considering the impossible voice of the rabble, the constitutive void, embedded within the necessarily fractured Sikh political societies. By reconsidering the theoretical structure of Sikhism as antagonistic and tracing this recalcitrant surplus conceptual logic of *Sikhi*,[8] this article emphasizes the multiple destabilizing and transformative dynamics of tradition historically in order to disclose the radically unaccountable (im)possibilities for politics in the present.

DISLOCATING ANTAGONISM

Scholars have astutely noted the tension between tradition and colonialism in Sikh studies, but they locate antagonism as occurring largely between these two particular poles. By demarcating antagonism as occurring between coloniality and Sikhism, scholars have then looked to resolve, or at the very least comprehend, this antagonism by: (1) conceptualizing the traumatic encounter as one that led to the formation of an aporetic "*Sikhi*-sm" that needs deconstruction; (2) revealing an authentic Sikhism's resistance to colonialism by emphasizing a singular Sikh identity's historical victories over nefarious Western, Muslim, Hindu,

6. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 10, 18.

7. For more on Copjec and Žižek in postcolonial thought, see Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

8. I use the term *Sikhi* to highlight the tension in the attempt to conscript *Sikhi* into a religion as Sikhism. *Sikhi* remains the common signifier for Sikhs to refer to the corpus of ideas and practices that constitute the Sikh tradition.

and "deviant" Sikh forces; (3) disclosing the transformation of a fluid Sikh tradition into a Western episteme that constructed a Khalsa orthodoxy; or (4) uncovering excess content (*Punjabiyat*) within this divide that challenges the rigidity of both poles.[9] Scholars have continued to locate antagonism between colonial modernity and *Sikhi* in the present by observing how the tension is reproduced in Sikh relationships with the modern Indian nation-state. This relationship is stitched into the partition of the South Asian subcontinent in 1947 and Operation Blue Star, in which the Indian state desecrated one of the holiest Sikh spaces, Darbar Sahib, in 1984.

Work on precolonial Sikh history and literature also locates antagonism between modernity and tradition as scholars seek to recover Sikhism within a prior fluid affective community, in order to avert the discrete rigidity of a modern tradition.[10] Scholars have noted how this fluidity persists as a continuous presence within modernity, thereby conceptually reinforcing the historical bifurcation between tradition and modernity. For example, scholars have described the interactions between colonial modernity and tradition as producing entanglements and hybrid formations through, as Anne Murphy writes, the "dynamic interaction of colonial interests and administration and the preexisting Sikh commitment to the commemoration of the Sikh past."[11] Highlighting the "complex" dynamism of entanglements, Murphy looks to overcome the colonizer–colonized binary with still more hybrid classifications, attempting to delineate the antagonistic element that makes the relation between the two impossible through continual refinement and excavation of the originary binary between colonial modernity and tradition. Through this persistent fine-tuning of the presumed relation between modernity and tradition, Sikh institutions and sites remain ordered, for historians can inscribe Sikh movements and relationships within an episteme, permanently settled in between two poles, though perhaps unevenly distributed, and rendered symbolically coherent and understandable.

The principles of *Sikhi* are one example, however, that demands we reject the coherent and settled construction of historical reality and its hollow promise of a symbolic world that enables us to recover the true (decolonial or authentic) kernel of tradition through our historical categories of analysis. Rather, in contrast to privileging these utopias recovered or discovered, by coupling *Sikhi*'s conceptual form manifested within the continued practices of the population, we can instead revel in possibilities brought forth by tradition's irresolvable form, its governing principles, which, in *Sikhi*'s case, productively foreground antagonism. In other words, once we reject this relationship between colonial officials (armed with their technologies of governance such as translation alongside the

9. For example, see Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West*; Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, *Insights into Sikh Religion and History* (Chandigarh: Singh & Singh, 1992); Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10. Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition*, *1699–1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

11. Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 202.

conceptual framework it entailed) contra the Sikh population (reordered through interpellation, resisting its hailing, or outside its very logic) as the location of antagonism, then within this impossible gap, outside absolute knowledge and utter loss, there emerges the antagonistic and incorporable voice of *Sikhi*, the "rabble" that reveals the incoherence and failure of ideological fantasy and desire.[12] Indeed, just as Hegel encounters his impossibility, as Frank Ruda reveals, in the particularity of the rabble who disclose a latent potential univer- sality that Marx locates within the proletariat, historiography about Sikhism and South Asia encounters its limits in the unaccountable conceptual principles of Sikhism and the politics of antagonism it continuously brings forth.[13]

   This impossibility that structures politics, the space of indeterminacy that Hegel provides within his productive inability to categorize the rabble within the West, is precisely what the Subaltern Studies Collective pinpoints about colonial civil society highlighting this double failure in the colony.[14] With and against Marx, the collective then provides us with a potent methodology to eschew modular formations of the political. The collective has shown how these modular forms not only impoverish the political, but also continually eradicate their own impossibility through the reproduction, for example, of dichotomous histories and politics centered around coloniality and its game of appropriation and coun- ter-appropriation, which compels us to enjoy, for example, postcolonial politics and its nativist past.[15] The danger of subaltern studies then lies not in producing historical narrative while riding two horses (Marxism and deconstruction) at once, as Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook intimate, but the collective's simple "I would prefer not to" to the very question of riding—rendering incoher- ent the very structure of riding, historiography, itself.[16] By locating their analysis within this negative excess element located outside the very categorization and coordinates of conventional historiography based on continuities and ruptures, subaltern studies, under the name of the "subaltern," confronts us, as Ruda writes about the Hegelian rabble, "with a logic of (a different) politics which bursts [below] the philosophical frame of its description."[17]

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12. As Žižek writes, "Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void," masking antagonism. Therefore, fantasy is a necessary corol- lary to antagonism for "fantasy is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked." Fantasy thus creates a vision of society that is not marked by antagonism, creating "a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary" (Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 126). Indeed, the four logics of the colonial relationship create such complementary relations, existing as fantasies masking antagonism. For more, see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*.

13. Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

14. The Subaltern Studies Collective refers to both the intellectual project and editorial collective of the Subaltern Studies series. For an excellent overview on the breadth and influence of subaltern studies, see Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994), 1475-1490.

15. Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambiridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

16. Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (Jan. 1992), 167.

17. Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble,* 168.

However, though providing a name for this indeterminate logic, which—following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—is trapped between the white savior and nativist pride and thus cannot speak, subaltern studies at times does not properly attend to its consequences.[18] Christian Novetzke, in his compelling article "The Subaltern Numen," argues that this flaw emerges due to the "antagonistic dialectic in modern historiography between religion and history" in which religion functions as a mode of rationality that is an antithesis to modern historical thinking.[19] Novetzke posits that though this antagonism between religion and history enables the collective to critique modernity by using the antithetical nature of religion within their historical analyses, it also signals a weakness in their theorization because of, Novetzke argues, religion's "indeterminacy, its 'emptiness' as a category in theorizing about the subaltern, linked with the difficulty for modern history to incorporate a narrative of supernatural agency into historical explanation."[20] I think Novetzke is asking us to consider how subaltern studies' flaws emerge because the collective locates antagonism strictly between the two poles of religion and modernity. In doing so, the collective is not able to properly conceptualize tradition because modern historical writing cannot acknowledge the constitutive nature of antagonism within tradition's form. Since absence within tradition's form is dislocated, religion is then reduced to cultural heritage located within the historical content of the subaltern that is placed as oppositional to modernity, absenting antagonism and its attendant lack within tradition.

Once this absence, or lack, is rendered as a stable cultural heritage, which exists as antithetical to modernity, religion is domesticated into modern historical form. In other words, this heritage becomes an object of desire for the historian that covers the inherent lack revealed by the subaltern. This production of historical coherence and meaning—through, for example, cultural heritage—cultivates an enjoyment that both stifles and assimilates the openness that undergirds the historical process into currently available frameworks, such as the antagonism between tradition and modernity. However, the fact that the void of subalternity is still there, precisely as an absence and resistant to historical form, renders impossible this very binary, continuously revealing the unintelligibility and failure of history and context, rather than their panoptical reach.

It would be quite negligent to ignore that the collective has continuously and brilliantly articulated this very dilemma over the course of the past thirty years. Spivak famously demonstrates this subaltern lack, demanding that we consider "the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject" and its "irretrievable consciousness," which becomes doubled in relation to sexual difference.[21] Gyan Prakash too posits that subalternity signals a lack. He adeptly argues, "we should understand subalternity as an abstraction used in order to identify the intractability that surfaces inside the dominant system—it signifies that which the dominant discourse

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18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

19. Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Subaltern Numen: Making History in the Name of God," *History of Religions* 46, no. 2 (2006), 102.

20. *Ibid*., 122.

21. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 287.

cannot appropriate completely, an otherness that resists containment."[22] Though this intractability, Prakash continues, "fail[s] to satisfy the discipline's desire for completeness and positivist reconstruction," it "opens possibilities for history-writing as a critical practice."[23] Thus, in the collective's work, though subalternity does indeed remain a site for pure heterogeneity, the subaltern, the rabble, also emerges existing as an antagonism itself, for the (im)possible voice of the subaltern exists as a void unable to be adjudicated into modern historical form.

As a consequence, what emerges in the subaltern's indeterminacy is not simply different content, in which the past continuously overlaps, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, "in taste, in practices of embodiment, in the cultural training the senses have received over generations"[24] that can then lead to what Spivak describes as "the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized spaces."[25] Neither does subalternity reveal only, as Chakrabarty writes, a signpost revealing "the limits of the discourse of history."[26] Indeed, subaltern pasts are not simply the numinous, functioning, Novetzske argues, as a "limit point, a vista on the immense space of lifeworlds inaccessible to scholarly inquiry and hence a compelling destination."[27] Instead, rather than simply dwelling in history's heterogeneity and limits, the deadlock signaled by the rabble, this antagonism offers an opportunity to radically transform the structuring principles of historicity itself.

The affirmation of subalternity, the rabble, demands that we both construct and examine a different mode of subaltern history—a mode in which the form (*gurmat*) of *Sikhi* can no longer be absented in favor of either secular historicity and its overvaluation of historical context or a numinous history that reveals the limits of understanding.[28] In contrast, this conceptual subaltern history requires us to include and examine such a formal structure of a tradition. For traditions do not simply render antagonism governing social reality as a threshold, leaving it indeterminate, unable to be articulated or analyzed abstractly.[29] Nor do traditions, as Renata Salecl reminds us, simply repeat corresponding parallel understandings of impossibility, for cultural forms deal with and render antagonism in dissimilar ways.[30] Therefore, instead of strictly delineating limits and heterogeneity in relation to historical content, we also need to explore: what constitutes the formal level of a tradition? What are its internal consistencies and logics (such as its

22. Gyan Prakash, "The Impossibility of Subaltern History," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 2 (2000), 288.

23. *Ibid*., 294.

24. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 251.

25. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 310.

26. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 110.

27. Novetzke, "The Subaltern Numen," 125.

28. For the colonial genealogy that inflects into the concept of *gurmat* through the term "theology," see Arvind Mandair, "The Politics of Nonduality: Reassessing the Work of Transcendence in Modern Sikh Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006), 646-673.

29. Achille Mbembe, for example, argues, "Fluctuations and indeterminacy do not necessarily amount to lack of order. Every representation of an unstable world cannot automatically be subsumed under the heading 'chaos'." See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 8.

30. Renata Salecl, *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate* (New York: Verso, 1998), 134.

own rendering of heterogeneity and limit)? How does this form that tradition constructs and inhabits continually articulate and efface the point of its own impossibility, oscillating between its plenitude and loss?

Talal Asad's work productively grapples with these questions by reconsidering the very form of the Islamic tradition, tracing it genealogically through its founding principles.[31] Following Asad, though in the South Asian context, Anand Pandian's work also demands that we couple the persistent conceptual vitality of tradition with the impossibility of coherence while remaining attentive to the continuities of conflict within tradition.[32] In that vein, this article argues that the Sikh tradition considers and provides an opportunity to consider the traumatic presence of antagonism without recourse to our current historical bifurcations. The abstract principles within the Sikh tradition, the parameters of *Sikhi*, provide concepts to theorize "lack" in a manner that does not fill the inaccessible gap introduced by the subaltern with content (cultural heritage) a necessary corollary of secular historicity, nor is it simply numinous, unable to be rendered intelligible. In contrast, these principles—Sikh concepts (which are conjuncturally embodied)—overflow our current historical categories of analysis rather than simply functioning within the parameters of our understanding. Or, to rephrase, Sikh principles, though displaced from the social whole, provide us interpretive tools through which we can conceptualize lack and alterity against heterogeneous content, unspeakable limits, and intelligible wholeness that dominate historical analysis in the present.[33]

This conceptual excess, therefore, reveals there are not only two types of histories, as Chakrabarty details, in which the universality of History 1, "histories posited by capital," is deferred by various History 2s, histories that do not belong to capital's "life process," interrupting its totalizing thrusts and providing an opportunity to claim historical difference. Amy Hollywood asks us a similar question, writing: "if historians pursue alternative histories, taking seriously claims to divine agency within history, to what extent will the emancipatory narratives of what Chakrabarty no doubt too dichotomously refers to as History 1 be disrupted in ways that render it unrecognizable?"[34] This disruption becomes clear through this excess that continually bursts through the gap between the asymmetrical, and ultimately failed, relationship between the too dichotomous History 1 and History 2. In other words, by delineating History into two, Chakrabarty's

31. Talal Asad's understanding of tradition enables us to consider antagonism productively. See Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986). For more on Asad and his relation to antagonism, see Rajbir Singh Judge, "A Sublime Inheritance?: A Review Essay of Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir's Punjab Reconsidered" in *Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World Review*, November 5, 2015. https://sctiw.org/sctiw-review/anshu-malhotra-and-farina-mir-punjab-reconsidered-history-culture-and-practice-reviewed-by-rajbir-singh-judge (accessed March 16, 2018).

32. Anand Pandian, "Tradition in Fragments: Inherited Forms and Fractures in the Ethics of South India," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 3 (2008), 470. Pandian does, however, in contrast, call our attention to tradition's plurality.

33. I follow Stefania Pandolfo, who questions "whether to restore intelligibility is necessary to postulate coherence." Stefania Pandolfo, "'The Burning': Finitude and the Politico-Theological Imagination of Illegal Migration," *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 3 (2007), 331.

34. Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 127.

conceptualization continues the tendencies historians have in which modernity and tradition exist in conflict with each other, revising each other in an unequal war. In contrast, what emerges through the subaltern is not the inflection into History 1 by History 2, enabling us to recover a plural historical content, but a third, unrecognizable nonplace: antagonism. This antagonistic void shifts Chakrabarty's bifurcation and reveals the structural impossibility of historicity altogether. Indeed, Chakrabarty's bifurcation between History 1 and its partial object, the cultural heritage embedded within History 2, though subsumed under the history of capital, does not reveal multiplicity of time or, as he writes later, "an irreducible plurality," but the antagonistic deadlock that structures, surrounds, and gives rise to the failed two, not incorporable in secular historicity.[35]

Rethinking the form of the Sikh tradition through subalternity also requires us to reconsider the recent trend in South Asian studies highlighted by the work of Andrew Sartori, which similarly calls for a return to thinking about historical forms without reproducing the colonizer/colonized binary. Seeking to respect the specificity of the colonial context while still locating "that specificity within a historically determinate form of conceptual universality," Sartori provides a framework that reveals how tradition and the "continuity of [its] transmission has been necessarily fractured by its incorporation into capitalist structures of social interdependency."[36] This incorporation occurs through an autonomous "singular, broadly pan-European modern culture concept" that is "a historically specific form of semantic universality, contingent upon the operation of capitalist social forms that at once reconstitute the preconditions for the continuance of everyday life."[37] By working within this global cultural concept and its multiple registers, Sartori argues that Bengalis were not "stupid or duped," rather, they misrecognized "the global structures of capitalist society" that rendered "the culturalist imagination meaningful as a lens for thinking about self and society."[38] This culturalist form, however, Sartori argues, does not render historical subjects "abject flotsam of an economic infrastructure," but led to "distinct and even potentially contradictory political and ethical projects (for example, liberal reform and cultural renewal) that draws upon the potentialities of different moments of the total social process."[39]

Though recognizing the importance of form that cannot be divided into a colonizer and colonized binary, Sartori nevertheless eliminates the constitutive role of antagonism that underlies the colonial project and capitalist development. Or, as Žižek diligently reveals, ideological critique is a two-part process. So although Sartori does ably "discern in an apparently universal, unchangeable limitation the ideological 'reification' and absolutization of a certain contingent historical constellation," he neglects to acknowledge the very failure of this absolutization: that there remains something that "cannot be interpreted away as the outcome of ideological manipulation, of the 'false consciousness' due to the social situation of

35. Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe*, 108.

36. Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 21.

37. *Ibid.*, 47.

38. *Ibid.*, 5.

39. *Ibid.*, 232.

the subject."[40] This second move—to decontextualize through the impossibility of the context—takes into account what is conspicuously absent in Sartori's work: an antagonism that renders impossible the "deep coherence of the culture concept."[41] That is to say, ideology is not simply removing tradition from all historical contexts and then delineating a continuous pure history by tracing "indigenous" continuities; ideology is also that which can explain away a structural obstacle within tradition's form as the result of historical circumstances and context.

Possibly then the most radical aspect of tradition is precisely that it can appear "stupid" within the existing global order. Or, against Sartori's terms, tradition's great power is that it can remain illegible even as the scholar's desire for context strives to make it comprehensible. Indeed, there remains an inexplicable impediment embedded within social reality, rather than a recoverable object, that renders impossible not only liberal politics, but our attempts to master ideological forms. The very questions we ask then shift, forcing us to ask, as Judith Butler writes in another context, how these "enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form" provide the possibility for thinking outside the very contours of the global order?[42] Perhaps we can do this by foregrounding and embracing the impossibility of antagonism—offering what appears to be incoherent historically by embracing Hegel's wager "to reintroduce the openness of the future into the past" in which the past "persist[s] in a spectral form" revealing "the ontological openness of the historical process" closed in our desire for coherent, structuring, global concepts as well as in our attempt to stop at what appear to be our historical limits.[43]

THE ANTAGONISTIC FORM OF *SIKHI*

Sikhism as a tradition is precisely such an inexplicable excess that persists because it not only refuses to abolish antagonism, but embraces it within an unstable form in which *Sikhi* exists as both a positive fullness and an emptiness, a radical negativity. This embrace of antagonism reveals that Sikhism's form is not as opposed to Hegel as might seem at first glance, for following Žižek away from ossified conceptions of Hegelian logic, "what we find in Hegel is the strongest affirmation yet of difference and contingency—'absolute knowledge' itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgement of a certain radical loss."[44] To clarify, however, my argument is not that Sikhism functions as a vulgar

40. Slavoj Žižek, "'There Is No Sexual Relationship': Wagner as a Lacanian," *New German Critique* no. 69 (Autumn 1996), 22.

41. Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 67.

42. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 64.

43. Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 464. Or, as Ashis Nandy writes about the South Asian context, "the little cultures of India" try "to expand human options by reconfiguring the past and transcending it through creative improvisations. For such cultures, the past shapes the present and future, but the present and the future also shape the past." See Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles," *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (May 1995), 66.

44. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 7. Mandair notes this very point. He argues, "virtually all the categories Žižek attributes to the 'real' Hegel are uncomfortably close to the very categories that Hegel had attributed to Hindus and that Indologists such as Trumpp had given to Sikhs." See Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West,* 404.

Hegelian Spirit that incorporates every oppositional force that appears through dialectical becoming, nor is it to legitimate Sikhism by showing its resonances with psychoanalytic thought.[45] Rather, I am suggesting that using psychoanalysis as a heuristic device, we can conceptualize how in its very form, Sikhism is continually pulsating, unable to be bound: an antagonistic tradition that can only be unresolved, recognizing the traumatic yet singular nature of being. Thus, within its formative principles, there can be no dominant terms that are led into crisis because Sikhism accounts for this very crisis through what Jagdish Singh terms its *mauldi nischitta*: the resistance to stabilization through perpetually divergent, yet ultimately unified, rhythms.[46]

This resistance to stabilization within Sikhism's conceptual form signals that there cannot be a moment where one no longer knows what to include, where "the opposition brings to paralysis the incorporative movement of dominance" because concepts within Sikhism cannot be organized hierarchically, as dominant, because they continually recount to each other their varied contingencies, impossibilities, and failures.[47] Sikhism's universality is continually constituted through the recognition of its synchronic failures, thereby recurrently offering politics outside the dominant ideological structure. Hegel's perceptive recognition of absolute knowledge's failure, the radical negation that constitutes social reality, reverberates throughout Sikh thought. Guru Nanak's oft-cited "*na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman*" (no one is Hindu, no one is Muslim), for example, rejects the possibility of achieving wholeness within the coordinates of tradition and instead signals the failure of representation.[48] Guru Nanak overcomes religious divides not by pointing to something beyond nor to an enemy, but by revealing how there is nothing beyond. Pointing to this void, Guru Nanak discloses the failure of positive representation and instead emphasizes negation and impossibility of pure knowledge as a central teaching in which annihilation creates fullness.

This rejection, coupled with the refusal to articulate a whole circumscribed tradition, highlights *Sikhi*'s continual demand to recognize its, and one's own, incompleteness. For example, *Sikhi* locates itself within concepts that resist the bonds of language and practice, such as *naam*'s (divine name/Supreme Reality) multiplicity, though still placed in Guru Nanak's unity.[49] Such concepts,

45. This is not to say there are no resonances between Sikhism and psychoanalysis and that Sikhism is hermetically sealed. For more on such echoes between religion and psychoanalysis, see Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 257-265, and Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

46. Jagdish Singh, quoted in Jaswinder Singh, "'Shabad' de Vyakhya-Gyan di Anubhav-Pargāsi Jugti (Ek Onkar de Sandarbh Vich)" in *National Seminar on Socio-Spiritual Concerns of Religion: March 9–10, 2015*, ed. Paramvir Singh and Jaspreet Kaur Sandhu (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2015), 112. Translation is mine. From *maulna* (blossom, blooming) and *nischit* (definite, fixed, certain).

47. Judith Butler, "Competing Universalities," in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, eds., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 174.

48. *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures*, ed. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair and Christopher Shackle (New York: Routledge, 2005), xiv. See also the *Guru Granth Sahib*, 1136.

49. Here I am in indebted to G. S. Sahota, who writes: "The original apostasy was universal negation, the negation of all, which has implicit within it the insight into negation itself as the necessary

therefore, like *nimrata* (humbleness/meekness), *nimana* (lowered mind/without pride), *nitana* (frail/powerless) not only reveal an ideal position that the human subject strives for within *Sikhi* in relation to the Absolute that can never be achieved, but the ontological condition of Sikhism itself—its structuring knowledge as an impossibility. Or, to attempt to think through *Sikhi* on Sikh terms, as Bhai Gurdas relays in his *Vaars*, the formation of being occurs when four elements (air, water, fire, earth) are coupled with the fifth, *aakas* (the sky and heavens, an emptiness/void) that mediates the necessary relationship with the sixth, *karta* (the creator, the universal), that permeates all.[50] It is this emptiness or void that structures the striving for knowledge that reveals Sikhism's structural *nimrata*.

The numerous *sampradayas* and *panths* (traditions and paths/ways) that constitute Sikhism's singular unity are another example of Sikhism's resistant principles. For many scholars, however, multiple *panths* in Sikhism reveal its inherent plural, not singular, nature that becomes distorted under colonial rule.[51] For example, Harjot Oberoi argues that even with the emergence of a Khalsa episteme, "its constituents did not seek to abolish other modes of identity within the Sikh tradition" and continued to exist as a "plurality of religious identities."[52] Therefore, for Oberoi, this plurality reveals an "extraordinary fusion of Khalsa and non-Khalsa identities" in which multiple identities coexisted, which differentiates the earlier period from the colonial period.[53]

More recently, scholars have located this pluralism as constitutive of the Khalsa itself. Purnima Dhavan, against arguments that locate Guru Gobind Singh's inauguration of the Khalsa on Baisakhi as an internal singular moment within the Sikh tradition, argues that the Khalsa not only drew upon earlier warrior traditions embedded within a vast military labor market constituted by peasants, but also for a "transformative period that lasted decades" through dialogic encounters with other polarities.[54] This transformative period occurred because the Khalsa, Dhavan posits, remained unfinished and in relation to other identities. As Dhavan writes, "the assassination of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, less than a decade after the creation of the Khalsa, occurred at a time when the transition between the older Sikh identity and the new Khalsa identity was still incomplete," and had to contend with, Dhavan argues, "several panths with competing notions of *dharam*, loyalties, rituals, and identities."[55] For Dhavan and Oberoi, the emphasis on Sikhism's singularity, such as the Khalsa form, elides the shared historical roots of heterodox religious communities in Punjab that require us to recover pluralism,

path to the universal." See G. S. Sahota, "Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology," *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 2 (2011), 137. Guru Nanak's negation, however, is not simply the path toward the universal, but the recognition of the universal's impossibility. Guru Nanak's message, thus, is the excess present within the religious landscape of Punjab.

50. Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, *Vaaran Bhai Gurdas*, ed. Hazara Singh and Vir Singh (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1962), 1:2.

51. For example, see Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, and Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005).

52. Harjot Oberoi, "The Making of a Religious Paradox: Sikh Khalsa, Sahajdhari as Modes of Early Sikh Identity," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David N. Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 61.

53. *Ibid*.

54. Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks,* 7.

55. *Ibid*., 171.

fluidity, and cosmopolitanism—what Russell McCutcheon terms in another context "a no cost Other"—for the Punjab.[56]

Against this overvaluation of context, antagonism requires that we not worry about erased historical context, as Oberoi and Dhavan seek to recover, which generates, as Žižek writes, "an endless process of discovering a secret behind a secret" inciting a "hermeneutic delirium."[57] We can avoid this endless delirium by foregrounding antagonism, which forces us to consider the indefinable struggles within an always already incomplete history. In this history, our guiding principle is not to unearth secret or lost meaning through context, such as pluralism and fluidity, but to consider the impossibility of such coherence altogether. In other words, perhaps the key is not to resolve conflict and difference through narratives of historical plurality, which articulate, as Anne Murphy suggests, the "multiple visions of the past that must inform our understanding of the production of historical representations."[58] Providing resolution, such visions remain bound to locating and settling a supposed authenticity, albeit a complex one, which historians decode by reducing Sikhism to its historical and political context.

But moving away from this airtight history does not reduce *Sikhi* to an incoherent chatter of multiple voices. Rather we also need to examine how Sikh concepts render the antagonistic nature of reality—the colonized do not simply await the arrival of psychoanalysis to articulate impossibility, as we have seen above. Therefore, we need to examine how this impossibility within historicity, which is reduced to pluralism in our delirium, is articulated through concepts and principles revealed within a recalcitrantly vibrant *Sikhi* defined by its *mauldi nischitta*. Or, by returning antagonism to our understandings of a Sikh conceptual history, we can reveal how there is no authentic or whole precolonial sum, no matter how composite, hybrid, or plural we render it. For within such a completed history, a mastered history that is reversible into the past and future through a contextual schema, *Sikhi* can endure only absent its irreducible antagonism and the conceptual framework it entails, becoming secondarily Sikh, waiting within the frame of a particular historical constellation for the next onslaught and transition.

In contrast to this waiting, which defines colonized being, by taking seriously *Sikhi* and its arsenal of concepts such as *panth,* we reroute the coordinates of both our historical understanding and context. Such concepts peel away the historian's demarcation of contextual horizons, the permanence and coherence of historical narrative, and welcome an undulating and immeasurable time, one open to continual outbursts, emerging as an impediment to the very logic of temporality in which the past, present, and future proceed as systemized from one point. Within this time, historical material is no longer reducible to its context and setting. And, as a consequence, it cultivates a necessary anxiety by dispelling notions of mastery that enable historians to declare their categories are not the presupposed ones.[59] As

56. Russell T. McCutcheon, "'It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It! It's a Sin!': On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006), 733.

57. Slavoj Žižek, "Psychoanalysis this Side of the Hermeneutic Delirium," *Lacanian Ink* 34 (Fall 2009), 139.

58. Anne Murphy, "History in the Sikh Past," *History and Theory* 46, no. 3 (2007), 348.

59. For example, Dhavan argues that scholars presuppose "discrete 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' traditions,

Ranajit Guha notes in another situation, unless the historian's "material relates to a context, it is difficult for the historian to know what to do with it."[60] Dwelling in this collective difficulty, scholarly endeavors, as Talal Asad argues, must remain open "to ending up in unanticipated places—whether these produce satisfaction or desire, discomfort or horror."[61]

Against the anticipated space of historical plurality (which neatly coincides with liberal multicultural sensibilities) that emerges once Sikhism is satisfactorily demarcated through historical context, I want to examine the constitution of Sikh *panths* on its own unsettling terms.[62] In other words, how can we consider a Sikh history by taking seriously Sikh contentions that Sikhism is constituted through a singular truth (*naam*) that remains impossible to demarcate as a closed or resolved sign, forcing us to forgo our desires for secular mastery grounded in *haumai* (ego) and *hankaar* (pride) in favor of conceptual *nimrata*? This conceptual *nimrata* requires us to consider, as Piara Singh Padam writes, "though one truth is explained through different representations and logics (*nirupan*) [that construct different *panths*], it remains a singular truth."[63] Padam goes on to describe, using naturalistic metaphors, how this singularity manifests itself: as a large tree that creates conditions such as seeds, shade, and roots that then necessarily produce new and different thoughts and traditions though remaining within its scope.[64] Following Padam, the different *panths* within Sikhism then do not reveal a pluralism or composite identity; rather, they bare the continual struggle and contestations within a singular tradition.

The Khalsa, therefore, is conceptually grounded in incompleteness, instead of being historically incomplete. Using a hermeneutic logic such as secular historicity to demarcate and organize the *panths* within Sikhism, then, is a project bound to fail. Moving away from this hermeneutic project, by taking into account the struggle and impossibility that structures each *panth* conceptually, which does not allow us to properly organize the *panths* broadly, we can consider the simultaneity of unity in *naam* and its impossibility in the lived world. Working within *Sikhi's* theoretical apparatus, we can conceptualize the antagonistic impossibility of society to be representative of *naam*, but still bound in its unity—an impossibility that stands in sharp contrast to the injunctions to fortify multicultural liberal pluralism historically or the desire for a fully autonomous and resolved identity.

The impossibility of the *panths* reaching a resolution is precisely what Guru Gobind Singh embeds within the Khalsa, thereby continuing the process of negation constituted by Guru Nanak—a process scholars misread as a sign of

whereas her work overcomes such presuppositions by historicizing "the affective claims of *gurbilas* texts." See Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*, 150.

60. Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 138.

61. Talal Asad, "Reply to Judith Butler," in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Berkeley: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2007), 139.

62. This context determines the different *panths* as a sign of pluralism that is destroyed in later iterations of Sikh orthodoxy or of the Khalsa *panth* as a historical composite.

63. Piara Singh Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali* (Patiala: Kalgidhar Kalam Foundation, 2000), 7. Translation is mine.

64. *Ibid*., 12.

continuous nascency.[65] For example, one of the earliest sources of Guru Gobind Singh's inauguration of the *Khalsa* written in the eighteenth century, Sainapati's *Sri Gursobha*, relays that the Guru taught:

> The Khalsa is my form (*rup*), [Guru Gobind Singh] explained.
> Within the Khalsa is my creative labor, embodying my adoration
> I bestow my robe (symbol of authority/physical form) upon the Khalsa.
> The Khalsa is my form (*rup)*; my form is within the Khalsa,
> From the beginning (of time and space) to the end, my divine radiance has been and will be in the Khalsa.[66]

The Khalsa is the universal form, unbounded and infinite, that constitutes the entire *sangat* (community) and beyond. Or as Ami Shah argues, "Khalsa is the name of the entire community bound in their loyalty to the one true Guru, Guru Gobind Singh."[67] However, just as Guru Gobind Singh's body and form is singular yet simultaneously constituted through all ten different Gurus, the Khalsa too remains unstable in its form, which Dhavan reads as incomplete. In contrast, the Guru grants the Khalsa a singularity constituted by multiple rhythms making unity ultimately impossible to fully articulate or resolve as singular or pluralist, defying the historian's need for mastery through context.[68]

But unlike Shah, who still strives for resolution within the fundamental unity of Khalsa, what emerges in this unity of the Khalsa is difference: the impossibility of the unity being expressed singularly. Puran Singh, referencing the formation of the Khalsa at Anandpur in 1699, points toward this logic as well. Singh argues: "The human spirit at Anandpur manifested its joyous spiritual energy in many ways. On every day that dawned there were new ideas in the very air, and the *Khalsa* crystallized in many shapes. The *Sevapanthis*, the *Nirmalas*, the *Sahajdharis* set forth new shining resolutions; and last but not least, came the *Akali*.[69] Kapur Singh, as well, admonishes those who argue that Sikhism is structured as a hierarchy in which the *Khalsa* Sikh is the highest form against the lowest, the *Sahajdhari* (Sikh-becoming). Instead, Singh argues that a Sikh who "does not voluntarily enlist in the Order of the Khalsa [*Akali*], remains a Sikh nevertheless," and the designation of *Sahajdhari*, used to imply "slow adopter," is "a mistaken notion" because "throughout the Sikh literature, before the dawn of the twentieth century, the word *Sahajdhari* has always been used for a genuine Sikh by faith and conviction, and never for a malingerer, as the term 'slow adopter' insinuates."[70] Thus, the different *panths* in Sikhism emerge as nonhierarchical

65. Ami Praful Shah, "In Praise of the Guru: A Translation and Study of Sainapati's Sri Gursobha," PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010, 69.

66. Sainapati, *Sri Gur Sobha*, ed. Ganda Singh. 2nd ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University, Patiala Publication Bureau, 1980), 170. Translation is mine.

67. Shah, "In Praise of the Guru," 79.

68. In another context, Pandian similarly argues, "The point I mean to emphasize with respect to these plural forms is that they render a narrative coherence or unity of the self both unlikely and undesirable, even as they carry forward a moral tradition." See Pandian, "Tradition in Fragments," 474.

69. Puran Singh, *The Book of Ten Masters* (Patiala: Punjabi University, Patiala Publication Bureau, 1981), 117.

70. Kapur Singh, *Sikhism for Modern Man*, ed. Madanjit Kaur and Piar Singh (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1992), 69-70.

and as an unstable multiplicity, yet still constituted as a sovereign singularity, the Khalsa.

Puran Singh, Kapur Singh, and Padam compel us to consider how the Sikh *panth* continuously remains blocked, structurally unable to create a resolved tradition because the struggles constitutive of Sikhism's singularity cannot be stabilized into one reified path or as pluralist, but, in contrast, must continuously remain inconsistent and vertiginous. Or, returning to Guru Nanak, it is precisely the structure of the various *sampradayas* and *panths*, the various crystalizations of the Khalsa, that acknowledge the necessity of a radical loss. This radical loss is continuously inscribed onto the Khalsa *panth*, revealing the contingency and impossibility of absolute knowledge within a singularity, though still being structured around its unity within unbounded universal concepts such as *naam, seva* (service, attending upon others), *nimrata* (humility, meekness), and so on.

The very body of the *Sahajdhari* (Sikh-becoming, without *kes* [unshorn hair]), therefore, creatively marks the limits and loss for the Khalsa *panth*, forcing the *amritdhari* to refuse *haumai*/ego in his own being. The *Sahajdhari* exists as an internal antagonistic limit for the Khalsa *panth* that is persistent in its refusal to be sutured. The *Sahajdhari*, then, signals the Khalsa *panth's* impossibility, that which prevents the Khalsa *panth's* symbolic field from realizing a full and whole identity that demarcates the infinite. Yet it is through this refusal that both remain Sikh, as Sikhism does not seek to resolve this antagonism by hierarchically ordering the *panths*. Accordingly, this internal limit does not bring forth epistemic crisis or foreclosure into different identities because *Sikhi* accounts for this failure of symbolization and, in turn, offers the knowledge that the subject itself is this incoherent impossibility—that the Khalsa Sikh can neither fully represent Sikhism or itself.[71]

In other words, the Khalsa is continually forced to recognize the constraints put forth by the presence of the *Sahajdhari's* Sikh body. But rather than constructing the *Sahajdhari* as an external body to be eliminated, Sikhism provides an alternative position. Here is the truly radical nature of Sikhism—it can account for the Khalsa and *Sahajdhari* as well as the other *panths* such as the *Udasis, Nirmalas, Sevapanthis*, for Sikhism's universality is continually constituted through its recognition of each *panth's* impossibility of resolving, mastering, or obfuscating antagonism within itself.[72] That is, Sikhism conceptually recognizes that the gap between Sikhism's form and each *panth's* content must remain open, but not as a harmonious, fluid multiplicity, which, for example, legitimates the continuous movement of commodities. Instead, it exists as an unresolved, antagonistic unity. Again, we can think about the relationship between bodies: both *Sahajdhari* and *Khalsa* reflecting back to each other their own failure to universalize Sikhism, but bound within Sikhism's unified, but never whole, form.[73]

71. I am grateful to Muneeza Rizvi for sharing her work on *fitna* in the Islamic tradition, which was formative in helping me conceptualize the foreclosures of crisis as a heuristic device.

72. Piara Singh Padam notes this antagonistic impossibility of the *sahajdhari*, recognizing the dangers in the evil gaze that emerges today against the *sahajdhari* highlighted by the approach that demands the completion of an *amritdhari* body universally. See Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali*, 120.

73. Sahota astutely notes this openness from the time of Guru Nanak. He argues, "Early Sikhism thus centralizes not a fully formed doctrine or fixed articles of faith so much as an openness to the

Yet the organizational structure of the *panths* alongside Guru Nanak's injunction is not a postmodern rendition of *Sikhi*, highlighting the existence of multiple unbounded identities. In contrast, this multiple is a unity grounded within the universal, *karta*, that though mediated through the void, *aakas*, binds the various *panths* together through *shabad* (divine utterance/hymns).[74] Bhai Gurdas chides those who, in an attempt to affirm this unity, look toward an external enemy and obstacle in order to construct the wholeness of their own tradition as Hindu and Muslim.[75] The well-known *sakhi* of Bhai Kanhaiya continues this long refusal to recognize an external enemy to bind one's own identity, thereby sustaining Sikhism's incompleteness and its continuous possibility of rerouting political coordinates, the symbolic order, of a time period.[76] The *sakhi* relays how during the Battle of Anandpur in 1704, Bhai Kanhaiya served the precious water supply to all soldiers in the battlefield without distinction between enemy (Mughal and Rajput) and Sikh. When Guru Gobind Singh questioned Bhai Kanhaiya about his actions, Bhai Kanhaiya responded that he could not tell the difference between enemy soldiers and Sikhs since he only recognized the Divine in all.

What emerges, however, is in sharp contrast to the simple humanist renderings attached to this *sakhi* today. Alternatively, Bhai Kanhaiya highlights the very impossibility of wholeness: the external enemy is incorporated within the logic of Sikhism itself not by annihilating an enemy by making it Sikh or human, for Bhai Kanhaiya does not prevent combat. The battle continues. Rather, Bhai Kanhaiya recognizes the impossibility of closure or victory within *Sikhi*—the impossible question he cannot answer about who is a Sikh—a recognition of pure antagonism. That is to say, as Žižek elucidates, in contrast to an antagonism between two poles that can be rendered neutral through wholeness:

> What is at stake in pure antagonism is no longer the fact that—as in an antagonistic fight with an external adversary—all the positivity, all the consistency of our position lies in the negation of the adversary's position and vice versa; what is at stake is the fact that the negativity of the other which is preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself is just an externalization of my own auto-negativity, of my self-hindering.[77]

Forgoing the external Muslim enemy and recognizing his own impossibility, his auto-negativity, Bhai Kanhaiya becomes situated within an unbounded and limitless concept, *seva* (service) that he then extends upon the battlefield. Bhai Kanhaiya, therefore, paradoxically, produces difference, not universality. For

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course of historical movement itself," which allowed for the "continuous reconceptualization of the mind and the spirit according to the circumstances at hand and according to the scope of possibility for reconciliation between self and other, the particular and the universal, afforded by ever new historical horizons, illuminated by providential wisdom." See Sahota, "Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology," 136. Yet, unlike Sahota's, my argument is that Sikhism recognizes the impossibility of reconciliation remaining productively antagonistic.

74. Asad terms this in another context "a discursive tradition." Yet within Sikhism, contestations emerge through *naam's* universality expressed in *shabad*. This universality is continually glimpsed though mediated, which creates an irresolvable position, the recognition of *naam*, but its impossibility requires continuous striving for its becoming. I owe this understanding to Jagdish Singh.

75. For example, see Bhai Gurdas, *Vaaran Bhai Gurdas*, 1:29.

76. Lal Chand, *Sri Sant Ratan Mala* (Patiala: National Printing Press, 1954). http://www.panjab-digilib.org/ (accessed March 8, 2018).

77. Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (New York: Continuum, 2006), 253.

instead of reifying a universal category, such as human, a new *panth* emerges (*sevapanthis*) beyond the concept of the political at the time centered on imperial persecution and territorial sovereignty.

Sikhi, however, does not exist as a pure entity outside the logic of ideology—context does indeed matter, especially when we consider how different discursive formations order the world. For example, within the traumatic colonial encounter, as Arvind-Pal Mandair details quite well, British rule inaugurated Sikhism into a colonial schema, which looked to dislocate *Sikhi's* own antagonistic form within itself to between *Sikhi* and the civilizing mission, between tradition and modernity, in which modernity could render tradition knowable and ostensibly secular. However, colonialism too remained embedded within the very same antagonistic social reality that Sikhism interprets through difference. Yet, in opposition to *Sikhi*, colonial logic sutures its gap. In other words, antagonism, within colonial logic, does not foreground the impossibility of its totality and the contingency of being, but becomes distorted and represented positively rather than through loss and negation. Ideological fantasy masks the inherent failure of closure, structuring society by constructing an external obstacle, a positive entity that can be mastered through the colonized subject: a universal and complete modernity once the Other is civilized. The production and inculcation of encyclopedic knowledge about and to the Other through various political technologies and strategies of governance that seek to carnivorously consume the entirety of tradition and decree it whole and knowable is precisely the externality that guarantees the consistency of ideological fantasy to which, for example, *seva* continually remains in excess.

SIKHISM'S HISTORICAL EXCESSES

This presence of *Sikhi's* form requires we take into account what Kapur Singh reminds us about *Sikhi's* relationship to modernity: that "the over-developed society and a centralized state are a prison in which the Sikh soul withers and against which it is in perpetual revolt."[78] It is this perpetual revolt embedded within the structure of *Sikhi* that continually remains present through the colonial period up to today, offering politics outside the restraints of liberal democratic governance. This perpetual revolt embedded within *Sikhi's* form, its soul, functions to keep open a contrasting global alternative even if the form remains empty awaiting the content to fill it in. Yet this content does not simply remain wholly imaginary in which the colonial subject is always confined to the waiting room of history.[79] Rather, we see this historical excess burst through in what Partha Chatterjee terms, contra civil society, "political societies." Chatterjee argues that the formation of the Indian nation-state does not follow the chronological sequence of the West, for the antinomous relationship between political sovereignty and the administrative reality of governmentality within India was produced by first constructing a heterogeneous social realm that then led to the notion of popular sovereignty located within a nation-state. This inversion led to a civil society in

78. Singh, *Sikhism for Modern Man*, 143.
79. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

India that is demographically limited because, Chatterjee argues, it is "restricted to a small section of culturally equipped citizens" who "are sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law."[80] However, because those outside this enclave also live within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, "they have a political relationship with the state"—a governmental relationship that often transgresses and exceeds law, a site of negotiation and contestation, what Chatterjee labels "political society."[81]

This site of contestation, however, remains oddly limited for Chatterjee. For example, he argues that the ideals of popular sovereignty and equal citizenship (civil society), though recognized as fictive to many, must be mediated to the population by the notions of property ("regulation by law of relations between individuals in civil society") and community.[82] Though Chatterjee notes that property leads to a paradoxical situation where the fiction must be affirmed as a reality, thus enabling political societies to produce change in the already existing modern state, community remains legitimate only in the form of the nation. Accordingly, Chatterjee argues that "other solidarities that could potentially come into conflict with the political community of the nation are subject to a great deal of suspicion."[83] Historically, too, Chatterjee limits community in the emergence of political societies, arguing that they appeared "within the spectrum of nationalist political mobilizations in the colonial period."[84] Tying political society to the nation, Chatterjee creates an intricate, deep web of governmentality bound to the Indian nation-state. As Nivedita Menon shows, in Chatterjee's work the addressee remains Indian civil society, the community of the nation, with Chatterjee advising it on its conduct and how to better incorporate political societies in order to create a truly democratic, putatively Indian, nation-state.[85] By locating political society within the contours of civil society, Chatterjee only leaves the possibility of an act that legitimates itself through a reference to a point of fullness of a given assemblage such as the nation-state of India—the only hope for political societies, in Chatterjee's understanding.

In contrast to Chatterjee, what if we conceptualize civil society as a social edifice that ultimately seeks to displace and domesticate antagonism—attempting to create, for example, a pure, full, democratic national politics while also providing an inherent transgression in political societies—that must ultimately fail? From within the inherent antagonistic impossibility—the point of civil society's failure, those unable to be incorporated within the nation—emerge not political societies, but the rabble within political societies that contest the very vision of community espoused in both civil society and political societies. Menon points to this very conclusion, arguing that political society functions as, borrowing Chatterjee's language, "a thicket of contestations" creating an

80. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 41 and 4.

81. *Ibid*., 38.

82. *Ibid*., 74.

83. *Ibid*., 75.

84. *Ibid*., 47.

85. Nivedita Menon, "Introduction," in Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 13.

uncomfortable space of politics that, escaping governmentality, provides the opportunity "for thinking the unthinkable."[86] Following Menon, the key seems to be to foreground the thicket of continuous contestations, the antagonism that structures the asymmetrical relation between civil society and political society, against resolutions in either.

Yet, as Menon rightfully posits, these political societies might "not conform to our understanding of what is progressive or emancipatory," for they can create new political elites and power-(re)producing conditions of horror that defy our desires for progressive political hope.[87] What emerges in Sikh history, however, in the everyday practices negotiated through the conceptual form of *Sikhi*, are these unthinkable and unanticipated demands against resolution that remain unable to be mediated by the modern state's conceptions of a national community, while also resisting the construction of a new political elite. The form of *Sikhi*, as we have seen, struggles against stabilizations, such as the notion of a political elite, though continually conscripted to do so in capitalist modernity. Though Sikh political societies produce new elites (as well as reifying old ones) that rely on tropes of cultural heritage to reaffirm their positions producing horror, there also simultaneously exist voices that render incoherent the entire structure of both civil and political societies and concepts such as nation and its infrastructure upheld within them. Sikh political societies thus emerge as necessarily fractured, antagonistic, and open processes of contestation that destroy their very being.

For example, as numerous scholars have detailed, an elite class centered within reform organizations such as the Chief Khalsa Diwan (CKD), which acted as an umbrella organization for the various Singh Sabhas across India, further cemented a certain form of religiosity.[88] But these organizations—the early beginnings of political societies that looked to redress the failure of colonial governmentality—could not function only as mouthpieces for the elite; rather, embedded within them is also the unstable trace of the rabble, the incorporable and unacceptable voice of *Sikhi* revealing the impossibility of the colonial relationship altogether. Indeed, the CKD and Singh Sabha do not disclose simply the colonial effects on the Sikh tradition, nor does the CKD function as an anticolonial force looking to recapture an authentic Sikhism against missionary and colonial forces. Instead, the CKD and other Sikh societies emerge as always partial, revealing the failure of both the colonial project and authenticity of tradition. This failure appears through traces, revealing the contested, antagonistic form of the Sikh tradition giving an unarticulated, but present, voice to the constitutive void: those who remain outside the very parameters of the CKD and the colonial project.

We can glimpse this incorporable and unacceptable trace of *Sikhi* offering the possibility of an act outside the horizon of what is possible.[89] This voided subaltern

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86. *Ibid.*, 14.

87. *Ibid.*, 13.

88. For example, see Nina Puri, *Political Elite and Society in the Punjab* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1985), and Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

89. Žižek defines an act as something that "does not simply occur within the given horizon of what appears to be 'possible,' it redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible,' yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility)." See Slavoj Žižek, "Holding the Place" in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, eds., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 121.

trace redefines the very contours of the political in Sikh protests against the dissemination of Ernest Trumpp's translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, while remaining outside the nation-state rubric or the emergence of a new colonized elite. In 1933, after the High Commissioner of India noted that fifty copies of the 1877 edition remained in his office, and the Controller of Printing and Stationery suggested that Trumpp's translation "may be of interest to students of comparative religion and others interested in India," the Government of India obtained ten copies of the 1877 edition of the translation and advertised them for sale in newspapers and the Catalogue of Government Publications. However, on March 8, 1935, Hari Sagar Singh, the General Secretary of the United Provinces Central Sikh Diwan, sent a letter to the Home Department protesting the advertisement and sale of Trumpp's translation. He argued that the translation was "an insidious and mischievous attempt to misrepresent the Sikh religion before the English-knowing public" that "caused nothing but indignation in the hearts of Sikhs." Singh posited, "The public has all along been under the impression that the Government will not publish this book again." Singh continued, "to avoid further trouble and agitation my Diwan suggests to the Government to withdraw the book from further sale in the market and order its destruction immediately."[90]

Yet the Diwan offered its full support, assuring the Government of India of "its help and cooperation in all matters that the Government may seek it and shall always be pleased to render such help as is necessary in all just causes."[91] Moreover, Singh argued that these advertisements had only led to a "feeling of resentment against this action of the Government," for Sikhs "always look to the Government for the protection of our rights."[92] Thus, the Sikh elite of the Diwan looked to the infrastructure of colonial civil society and its bureaucratic machinations to address what was, for them, simply this one instance of hurt sentiments that the state could cull by stopping the redistribution of Trumpp's text. The trust in the state is palpable, as Singh even argues Trumpp's text could only have emerged through a "mistake that seems to have been committed by some in your department."[93] The United Provinces Chief Sikh Diwan is the sequestered elite that Chatterjee reproaches in his understanding of political society's emergence, who, appealing to the rationality of law, look to displace the antagonism embedded within Trumpp's attempt to create encyclopedic knowledge about Sikhs within the broader framework of comparative religion.

Sikh protest, however, also exceeded this colonial civil society, its law, and these new elites, revealing the thicket of contestations within political societies and the perpetual revolt in *Sikhi* without reference to the nation or civil society. For example, Singh revealed, "If the news of this book reaches the ears of the non-English knowing Sikhs an uncontrollable situation will arise."[94] It is precisely this uncontrollable situation and revolt brought forth by non-English-knowing Sikhs that signals the potential of *Sikhi* against the colonial state and the new

90. National Archives of India [NAI], Home Dept. Political, 37/6/35, 1935.
91. *Ibid.*
92. *Ibid.*
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*

political elite in this emerging political society. Yet this political society does not remain within the contours of governmentality but brings forth the antagonistic and impossible voice of the rabble without a reference point—an incorporable voice of those who remained unaccountable, a subaltern, as Spivak writes, that cannot speak. That is, civil society could not, through the modification of law or bureaucracy, satisfy this antagonism constituted by Sikhs. The key for the colonial state and its attendant political society, therefore, was to elide Trumpp's translation, keep it occulted so as not to bring forth concepts that could provide an unthinkable politics. This eclipsed trace within the UPCSD's letter, outside the logic of the culturally equipped and English-speaking Sikh elite, reveals itself as a site of political universality: Sikhs without proper place, those who are "out of joint," the subaltern, are located against those who do have a grammar within the colonial order revealing *Sikhi's* (im)possible politics that keep open a global alternative outside the structuring limits of the colonizer and colonized.[95]

CONCLUSION

In 2015, Sikhs expressed similarly justified outrage, this time about the physical desecration of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in villages throughout Punjab. These protests were not confined simply to state apparatuses and civil society, but were expressed in Sikh concepts, such as the *Sarbat Khalsa* (assembly of all Khalsa as a political body), which took place November 10, 2015 at Chabba village in Punjab's Amritsar district.[96] The *Sarbat Khalsa* became a venue to articulate Sikh demands against the corrupt regime in Punjab headed by then Chief Minister Parkash Badal, as well Sikh grievances against the Indian state wherein the central mode of resistance rested in emphasizing Sikh sovereignty globally. However, though the *Sarbat Khalsa* conceptually foregrounded antagonism, the impossibility of *Sikhi* in a sutured modernity, Sikh political societies were forced to invoke liberal terms of justification in defense of the institution. Against critiques that looked to map the coordinates, past and future, of the *Sarbat Khalsa* as regressive and totalitarian, the standard justification for the *Sarbat Khalsa* emerged through a fixation over numbers: the desire to prove that the institution reflected a majority that revealed Sikhism's inclusive and democratic nature. Yet the debate itself refused to allow the event to exist as an ongoing dynamic struggle against oppression, revealing a pernicious underside to how we conceptualize political revolution inhibiting its very potential. That is to say, rather than dwell on the unthinkable antagonistic element embedded within the *Sarbat Khalsa* against our symbolic universe, the event came to represent, most notably in diasporic renderings, that Sikhs too have the capacity for liberal civil society though it is located within their own particular understanding of democracy.

95. Žižek, "Holding the Place," 313.

96. For an important and detailed historical and political account of the *sarbat khalsa* institution, see Prabhsharanbir Singh and Jasleen Singh, "Sarbat Khalsa: Historical Context and Contemporary Framing," *Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age*. November 17, 2015. http://round-tableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8404:sarbat-khalsa-historical-context-and-contemporary-framing&catid=129:events-and-activism&Itemid=195 (accessed March 8, 2018).

However, against these liberal justifications of Sikh concepts, the affirmation of concepts within *Sikhi* remains a distinct feature of the Punjab landscape as well. For example, in a much less publicized event in early January, Guru Nanak Dev University student Gurpreet Singh was arrested and detained, as the *Hindustan Times* reported, for "damaging the reputation of the university."[97] Yet the damage caused to the university consisted of hosting lectures at the university's *gurdwara* (temple) as well taking care of the grounds: all of which fall under the broader scope of *seva* (service), not simply to the university or the students, but to the larger *sangat*. For university officials, however, the presence of *seva* outside the control of the secular university constituted a threat, for, as the registrar Sharanjit Singh Dhillon remarked on Singh's arrest, "universities are for research and academics, not for addressing religious issues."[98] Gurpreet Singh's affirmation of the ethical practice of *seva* against the secular demands of the university led to the administration's "attempt to hijack the gurdwara's *golak* (donation box)" and create a university-approved advisory committee that would endorse acceptable events.[99] When such tactics failed, the former Vice Chancellor A.S. Brar and his contingent of faculty attempted to desecrate the continued presence of *Sikhi's* surplus, *seva*, embodied by Gurpreet Singh, through the dominant hand of the state, the police.

Yet Singh's adamant refusal to define his activities through anything but *seva* reveals the possibilities embedded within *Sikhi* against, for example, the demands of the liberal-secular university that seeks to conceptualize religion as a private mode of belief or as an object of inquiry that is resolvable, thus rendering it obsolete within the public sphere, if not outright annihilating it. *Seva*, however, is the excess to the situation that *Sikhi* structurally presents, rather than a conflict between Singh and the university as presented by the media. *Seva*, therefore, not Singh, forces us to acknowledge the failed attempt to separate spheres—the impossibility that structures the supposed existence of a public and private sphere. Perhaps then, by foregrounding this impossibility, the confirmation of *seva* against both the demands of civil society and in the face of brutal repression forces us to consider that the object of the scholar is not to regulate orthodoxy, to deny Hegelian dynamism for a flattened authoritative historical narrative, which can then be accepted and made universal. Instead, perhaps, we should avoid delineating the symbolic richness of this world and allow the illegibility of demands in our world to flourish, thereby changing the very terrain of signification.

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97. Usmeet Kaur, "Controversy over Control of University Gurdwara Intensifies," *Hindustan Times*, January 7, 2016.
98. *Ibid*.
99. *Ibid*.