

In Flux: Sikh-Punjabi Masculinity in the Diaspora

by

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Keywords

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Heteronormativity
Hip-hop
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North America
Paint
Performance
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Textiles
Trauma
Turban
Video
Xenophobia
Youth

Abstract

In this thesis statement I explore Sikh-Punjabi masculinity in the diaspora. I am concerned with questioning the construction of my identity and the possible impact of new forms of masculinity on the next generation of diasporic Sikh-Punjabi youth. I use found text and video to examine these new identity constructions. As a foundation for these explorations into masculinity, I am concerned with unveiling concealed and erased memories and realities as related to Sikh-Punjabi diasporic communities. This thesis looks at my work along with the work of other artists.

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1: Introduction

1.1 Key Statement

In my thesis and thesis exhibition, I investigate links between cultures: how our underlying perceptions of another's culture become acts of othering, impacting the cultural psyche or cultural self of the 'other'. This is explored through found text- and image-based sources. Much of this found material pertains to and/or is created by contemporary youth and youth-based cultures such as hip-hop and social networking cultures and is dispersed throughout the globe on the internet. This made-for-the-internet material that I source is most often dispersed, processed and understood by viewers through the combination of moving images and accompanying subtext. I explore attitudes, criticisms and stereotypes in the found video and text work. Rooted in experimentation, I take responsibility for the outcome of my work but do not assume an apologetic stance for new hybrids or racialized monsters created in the process of recycling found materials. My experiments may suggest, simultaneously, a number of seemingly contradictory or threatening connections. I present the viewer with troubling or contradictory imagery and text in an attempt to open up a dialogue about the mode of depiction and the subject depicted. In creating this work, it raises the difficulties faced by artists who, in representing diasporic cultures in the North American context, are asked to explain or justify these representations.

This thesis also addresses hip-hop as a highly masculine gendered culture. In the book "Hip-hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap", Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar "...contextualize[s] the social and cultural expression of hip-hop and how women must contend with the overarching themes of masculinity that underpin this art form" (Ogbar

73). Sikh-Punjabi masculinity is explored in relation to Sikh-Punjabi femininity, through new identity formations, as they are negotiated and established in local hip-hop cultures in certain North American cities.

My current body of work questions the construction of my identity and that of the Sikh-Punjabi diasporic community. I am particularly interested in exploring Sikh-Punjabi masculinity and the male body as a site of fetishization, in the Canadian diaspora as well as to an extent, in the North American diaspora. Through the depiction of youth and current constructions of Sikh-Punjabi masculinities, I contest and interrogate the impact these representations can have on other gendered positions, such as my own- as a Sikh-Punjabi female. Using painting, performance, moving images and printing techniques, I transform and subvert notions of gendered, racialized and sexualized identities.

I am especially influenced by an article entitled, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots” by Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai. Their article outlines the ways the post 9/11 era has created new understandings of gender and sexuality in the West about certain ethnic, cultural or religious identities. Puar and Rai employ the turbaned Sikh-Punjabi male to illustrate Foucault’s conceptions of monstrosity and the sexualized monster (Puar and Rai 119; Foucault 52). They focus specifically on how nineteenth and twentieth century racial and sexual imagery and descriptions are co-opted to describe the modern terrorist (Puar and Rai 117). In looking directly at constructions of Sikh-Punjabi masculinity, I explore conceptions of gender as related to aggression, feminization, sexualization, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, cultural appropriation, power and hip hop culture.

The overarching themes in my art practice address issues of gender, race,

perception, collective histories, culture, caste, difference and practices of othering. The desire to unveil complex histories of Sikh-Punjabi diasporic communities, along with concealed and erased memories of shame and collective pain, shapes my practice. I work to render these complexities through examining aggression and the feminization of Sikh-Punjabi masculinity. In turn, I locate myself, as a Canadian and Sikh-Punjabi female in this picture. I draw upon Western and Eastern ideals of vanity around facial hair, as well as hair as a sacred object. I also question racist policies and ideas around gender, faith, agency and nationalism that a number of Western nations have adopted and continue to accept. For example, in 2004, the French government banned the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in schools, including the wearing of the turban (Custos 339).

In my current explorations of manipulating found video and text, my primary focus is to examine how contemporary Sikh-Punjabi youth masculinity in the diaspora is being defined using definitions established in the past during the colonial era in India. The term 'Sikh-Punjabi' is not used exclusively. It is meant to refer to those who understand themselves to be Sikhs and understand Punjab to be a cultural or spiritual homeland. In using this term I do not necessarily imply a direct birth-origin correlation.

My current project makes use of painting, video, photography, performance, printmaking and installation. These formats allow me to narrate a long, ever-changing story-in-progress, as related to the continuous transmission of history and cultural values. The story uses a multifaceted visual vocabulary that relies on observations of the Sikh-Punjabi male and self-reflectivity to include myself, as much of my encounter with masculinity is rooted in my own understanding of males and masculine behaviour.

1.2 Thesis Installation

My thesis exhibition explores diasporic Sikh-Punjabi male identities in flux, as they are seen to float in and out of relative favour, as a result of shifting cultural and political climates in the West. ‘In flux’ refers to those identities that are fluid and change with different contexts. For example, the various negative shifts in perception that have occurred, for Sikh-Punjabi males, in the post-9/11 period and/or in the post-1984 “Operation Bluestar” period, are examples of this flux; “Operation Bluestar” was an attack on the Sikh people in the Golden Temple, by the Indian army in 1984 (Axel 125). The negative shifts in perception occurred when thresholds, of tolerance of an ‘other’, reached a breaking point and underlying prejudices revealed themselves.

Through the exploration of imagery and text authored under pseudonyms, found on video streaming and social networking websites, I have created works that are based on my perceptions of Sikh-Punjabi males and their own projections about themselves and each other. Hip-hop culture influences some of these Western Sikh-Punjabi male identities. The young Sikh-Punjabi male often depicts himself as modern, aggressive, strong, and desirable, while media representations portray Sikh-Punjabi men as aggressive and threatening. This subject position becomes problematic as it reinforces long-standing stereotypes about Sikh-Punjabi males as rigid, fearsome, militant, patriarchal, traditional and dangerous (Puar 9).

With this thesis exhibition, I am calling attention to such problems associated with the young Western Sikh-Punjabi identity. This identity impacts the next generation of Sikh-Punjabi males and Sikh-Punjabi females. For this reason I position my work in

relation and partial opposition to New Delhi artists Thukral and Tagra¹ who, through paint, depict a slightly ironic, normalizing and partly glorified image of Sikh-Punjabi masculinity in India. Their depictions are playful, quite deliberately making use of Western iconography to counter depictions of the Sikh-Punjabi male as threatening, as opposed to another kind of depiction as seen in my video piece *One Hundred and Fifty One Perversions* (see fig. 5) where the threat of violence is prominently displayed.

As compared to males, Sikh-Punjabi women are visually represented far less often in my work, emblematic of their undiversified and precarious positioning amongst the heightened or celebrated Sikh-Punjabi male position. The heteronormative male bodies I am looking at in my thesis work are seen to associate themselves with a specific kind of Western hypersexualized female body. The Sikh-Punjabi female's body is seen to act as a highly Westernized, commercialized and sexualized female body for the satisfaction of the Sikh-Punjabi male's gaze. I often view the Sikh-Punjabi male body as a kind of stand-in, "puppet" or surface on which my critique of that body takes place. Artist Rajkamal Kahlon² alters colouring book pages to question notions of the pure German body and identity, inserting a fragment of the racialized male body.

Looking through a heterosexual lens, I pose questions that look at my relationship, as a Sikh-Punjabi female, to an entangled Sikh-Punjabi masculinity: Does this identity undermine the Sikh-Punjabi female's identity? Where does it leave her? What is my relationship to this Sikh-Punjabi masculinity? Is this masculinity erasing my own identity, where my choices to identify as Sikh and Punjabi are no longer desirable to him? Is this Sikh-Punjabi masculinity only a façade of power, as a result of the

¹ Thukral and Tagra <thukralandtagra.com>

² Rajkamal Kahlon <rajkamalkahlon.com>

marginalization and scrutiny that he has faced? Where do I stand in relation to this masculine power? Am I advocating for a female identity that is defined by a masculine one?

In the installation of the exhibition, I incorporate a number of media in one space. Painted works on textile and silkscreen works on textile, from the series titled *Hip Hop Boys* (see figs. 1-3), fill the walls in three flat rows from top to bottom, separated by size of text. This layout echoes the sense of excess of words, debate and conversation as seen in the online video comments. Presented co-currently with the exhibition, textile works are wheat-pasted on exterior building walls in the core of the city and on university campus buildings walls (fig. 3). The exhibition space also houses a floor installation of fifty steel bowls (fig. 4) from India, arranged in rows like a free kitchen at a Sikh temple. The free kitchen is a foundation of Sikhism, where there is free food for all, no matter your social status and all are seated at the same level on the ground. Some of the bowls are filled with mixed paint, reflecting the colours and in turn the conversations that occur on the walls, in the textile paintings. Some of the bowls are filled with much less paint than others, colours ranging from pastel colours to neon colours to metallic colours. Like the colours in the textile paintings, the abnormal paint colours loosely representing abnormal, foreign or monstrous people, react variously and strangely according to type: metallics bubbling slightly on the surface and neons appearing quite translucent. Each bowl acts as a body, representing the idea of having more or less than another. The installation is in many ways about the act of mixing paint in steel bowls, which I have done countless times. The bowls also pay homage to the many Indian artists, like Subodh

Gupta³ working in everyday multiples, especially everyday steel utensils, to engage with the lack of or excess of the material. In addition, there are two videos and a self-portrait, discussed in the following chapter.

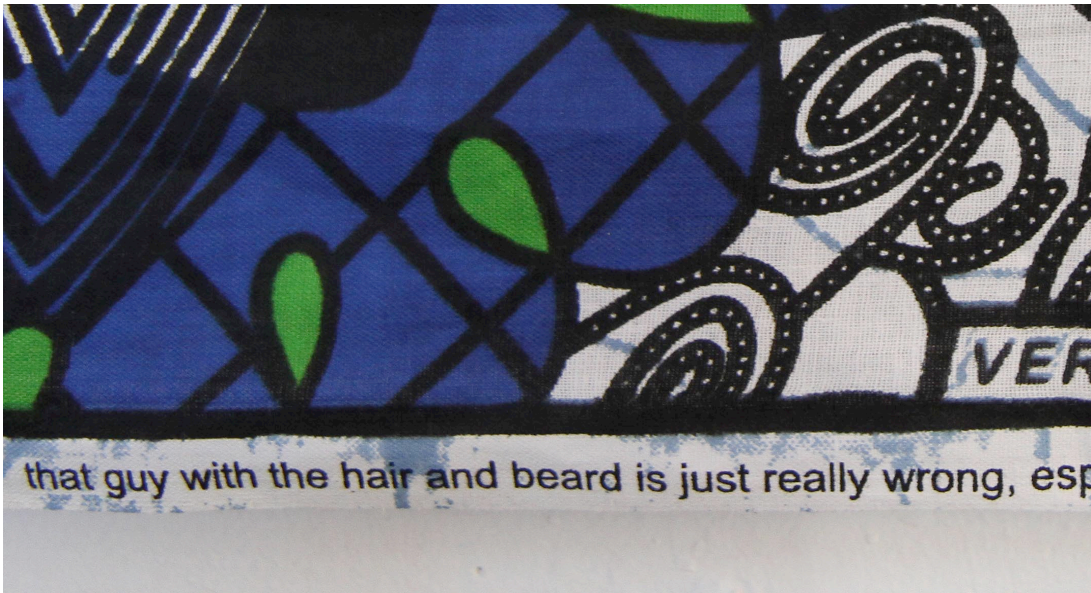


Fig 1. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series (detail), Silkscreen on textile (2012).



Fig 2. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series, Acrylic on textile (2012).

³ Subodh Gupta <saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/subodh_gupta.htm>

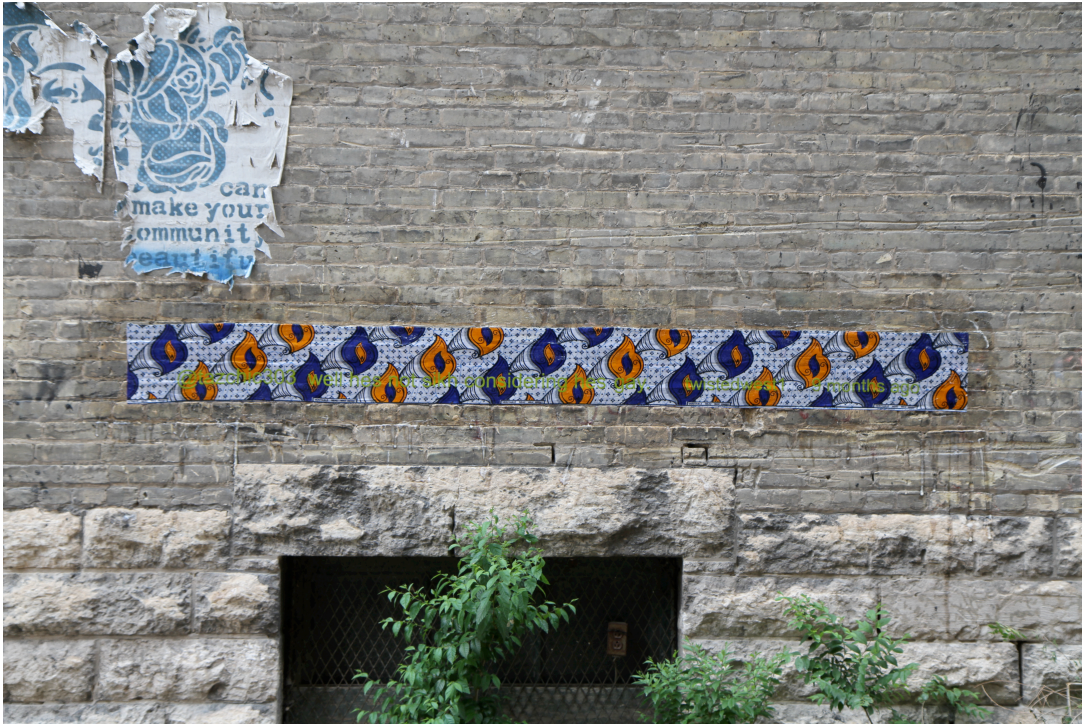


Fig 3. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series, Acrylic on textile (2012).



Figure 4. Gurpreet Sehra, *Free Kitchen* (detail), Installation (2012).

2: Textiles and Copying

2.1 Textile as Painting Surface

In my thesis work I reject canvas as a painting surface and the stretching of canvas onto a wooden frame in an effort to acknowledge a different lineage. I challenge the historically traditional painting surface, although I still engage with Western painting techniques. In my early paintings, the use of a scroll-like painting format was a conscious choice; one that asserted my desire to converse with Eastern modes and aesthetics, as well as my desire to refute dominant Western modes.

This has further led to casting off stretched canvas and wall scrolls, in an attempt to acknowledge another pedigree, that of street culture. My textile paintings are pasted onto white gallery walls with an acrylic medium, in the way that a poster is wheat-pasted onto a street pole. They have the flat appearance of wallpaper pasted on a wall. Using this approach, similar to what happens to posters pasted on the street, the paintings become more closely integrated with the white wall in the gallery environment.

Referencing street and Do It Yourself (DIY) culture, I am also interested in engaging with the transience of a painting and disrupting the preciousness of the painted object and the white wall. With this work I denounce the painting as a muscular three-dimensional object. The equilibrium created by leveling the wall with the painting strikes me as a necessary step in reconciling my desire to break from the stretched canvas format. A number of artists have broken out of the canvas in various ways. For example, Katharina Grosse⁴ uses the wall, architectural elements, building exteriors and other objects as her surface to create large-scale graffiti-like paintings. Her work is often space-

⁴ Katharina Grosse <katharinagrosse.com>

specific and temporal, whereas my work confronts painting as a semi-temporal object that flattens against a wall and can be removed from the wall and re-pasted on another wall for any number of times.

The use of unstretched textile as a painting surface allows me to use the existing colour and pattern of the textile to create connections and a dialogue with the text that is painted or silkscreened onto the surface of the textile. Grace Ndiritu⁵ makes use of African textiles to create ‘video paintings’ where the textile is used to wrap and unwrap her body. I make use of African textiles and traditional Western patterned textiles, such as those with polka dots. The use of Dutch wax prints, popularly called ‘African textiles’ are of particular importance as I use the semi-vague forms depicted on the textiles to my advantage. A dialogue begins as my text interferences are inserted on the surface of the patterned textiles. The African textiles also echo a postcolonial history as seen on a number of the borders of the textiles I have used, “Holland Innovation” brings to my attention the history of textile designers from Holland appropriating, designing and selling African patterns to Africans. These textiles also recall the African routes of migration of many Sikhs before they were forced out of Africa, moving further West to the U.K. and North America (Bachu 10). In my paintings, the text as a source from the internet, reflects the interweave of the fabric, just as the pixels of the text and conversations that occur, are woven together.

2.2 Copying: Found Text and Video

In my work I address this geographical space and the people located in this geographical space. I explicitly locate my work in the West as I am primarily addressing this context and my geographical location. Within this context, I imagine the audience to

⁵ Grace Ndiritu <axisweb.org/artist/gracendiritu>

be those living in the West. Without separating or delineating my audience further, I include the various Sikh-Punjabi diasporic communities as part of this Western audience. My current body of work looks at masculinities in the West rather than masculinities in India. There is a constant negotiation between the narrative, the ideas and the materials where the work often functions to pose more questions than it answers, and/or only questions. In looking at Sikh-Punjabi youth masculinity through popular assumptions and stereotypes and through my imaginings and perceptions, which are in part based on experience, I speak to the fluctuating nature of identity in the diaspora.

In my work I maintain a level of conceptual framing that remains unresolved. This is especially evident in much of the painting, video and performance work where I often take on the physical identity of a Sikh-Punjabi male or a male monster. This act of a female performing a constructed male identity that is seen to hold power (superficial or real) is part of my desire to understand its allure and what makes it desirable to me. This performance references sexual desire, bodily transformation, drag culture, practices of cross-dressing and subjective imaginings about being in the sexualized body of the opposite gender.

In choosing to perform and represent myself in my work, I work under the premise of being an outsider or an outsider-insider. I do not participate in the online realm where my text- and video-based sources come from. I remain on the outside. In this way, I am able to collect the information and then proceed to manipulate and insert my interferences. Most of the information I collect has been created by Sikh-Punjabi males and it has likely been created largely for Sikh-Punjabi males. In considering this, I perform and comment on Sikh-Punjabi masculinity realizing my limitations as a Sikh-

Punjabi female. In this case, I am a cultural insider but my gender puts me on the outside and I therefore do not speak from an authoritative position.

Appropriation, repetition and recontextualization of information are a large part of my practice. “Difference manifests itself in repetition and marks a transformation that happens within repetition” (Boon 91). In *One Hundred and Fifty One Perversions* (see fig. 5), I use appropriated audio and video materials to address underlying homoerotic violence as seen in made-for-web videos. The found video is visually and audibly altered giving it a fluid and repetitive sense, where one’s ears must adjust to the audio of a man speaking about the relationship between being Sikh and being gay. His voice echoes, as if the contradictory nature of his words are revealed in the continual overlapping of his words; alongside this is the dot-pattern which masks the movements in the video, emphasizing the slow-moving violence that is seen to occur between three young men.

In *King Kong* (see fig. 6), three different videos are juxtaposed against each other. The first is a music video and accompanying audio from a 1960s Bollywood film, called *Inteqam*. The second are snippets of myself imitating King Kong’s gestural performance, as seen in the various versions of the film, *King Kong*. Photo- and video-based artist 2Fik⁶ performs various gendered identities in different geographical and political locations, using himself to represent each character portrayed – this is similar to my imitation of King Kong. The third video is sourced from a contemporary diasporic music video by Preet Mani. My video highlights the story of King Kong, a beast who was lifted from his native land and flown to America to serve as a spectacle for American consumers. When he desires the blonde-haired white American woman, he is thought to be a threat to American masculinity. His desires had to be suppressed. He represented the

⁶ 2Fik <2fikornot2fik.com>

beast, the intruder, the foreigner, the monster and the other. In this triple collage video, I, the female artist, become the beast, alongside a contemporary Punjabi man who has supposedly overcome his monstrous existence as he is seen surrounded by beautiful Westernized women from all ethnicities and alongside this is an Indian woman pretending to be a white blonde woman and teasing a caged black-faced Indian man, the beast. This tangled narrative confuses past and present notions of representation of the other and questions the authenticity of the contemporary Sikh-Punjabi man's newly acquired freedom.

As an extension of video appropriation, I read and reproduce online comments as paintings (see figs. 7-9). The comments are made by viewers, found beneath local, limited to North America, hip-hop music videos made by young turbaned Sikh-Punjabi males. The space below the videos becomes a highly politicized and contested space for debate about an endless array of subjects, especially for critique of the turbaned male body, which acts as a kind of endless subtitling for the video. This raw language found in the comments of these videos is similar to the rawness of the text and application of text found in Glenn Ligon's work⁷. The comments cover the following broad topics as related specifically to the individual male rappers: the level of hip-hop and rap, hair, beards, removal of hair or lack of removal of hair, type of turban worn, style of turban, the turban's relationship to the specific kinds of beards worn or not worn by the rappers, genocide and the 1984 attack on the Sikh people in the Golden Temple, terrorism, Sikhs likened or thought to be Muslims, being a proper Sikh, disgracing Sikhism, 'acting black', Hindus verses Sikhs, Partition, sexual orientation and geographical locationing. The hip-hop artists being commented on develop a kind of celebrity status as the nature

⁷ Glenn Ligon <museomagazine.com/glenn-ligon>

of their highly racialized and sexualized identities are contested in a public forum.

The found text and found video work is highly reflective of myself, as the Sikh-Punjabi diasporic female artist. Youssef Nabil's hand-tinted photographs interest me because of the heightened atmosphere that he creates in his work⁸ and the strange sense of nostalgia that is tied to black and white photographs and carefully coloured black and white photographs. In *Self-portrait* (see fig. 10) I aim to evoke a nostalgic response by depicting myself as a person seemingly from a different time, to imagine the collective memories of the Sikh community that have been passed down to me as a postmemory but also to contextualize the entire exhibition as a reflection of myself.

In this exhibition I have represented myself in more than one way, in *Self-portrait* (see fig. 10) as a modest woman from another time and in *King Kong* (see fig. 6) as a masculine, beast-like figure. These representations differ greatly from one another. The first is an effort to remember and acknowledge the present as a memory and a reflection or extension of past events and tragedies. The latter representation is an effort to imagine my place as the threatening male beast or the Sikh-Punjabi male, simultaneously with the visualizing of myself as the newly formed beast, an image of a female that is perhaps no longer desirable to the Sikh-Punjabi male. The representations are simultaneously reflections of me and reflections of my performed imaginings of various othered identities.

⁸ Youssef Nabil <youssefnabil.com>



Figure 5. Gurpreet Sehra, *One Hundred and Fifty One Perversions*, Video Still (2012).



Figure 6. Gurpreet Sehra, *King Kong*, Video Still (2012).



Figure 7. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series (detail), Acrylic on textile (2012).



Fig 8. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series, Acrylic on textile (2012).



Figure 9. Gurpreet Sehra, From the *Hip Hop Boys* series, Silkscreen on textile (2012).



Fig. 10. Gurpreet Sehra, *Self-portrait*, Photograph (2012).

3: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

3.1 Past and Present Definitions of Masculinity

I am influenced by certain historical and postcolonial writers, as well as sociologists, feminists and gender theorists, like Judith Butler. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler addresses the body in relation to cultural and gendered constructions (Butler 12) whereas Brian Keith Axel talks more specifically about the male gendered body. In Axel's *The Nation's Tortured Body*, a gendered Sikh male body is subject to shifting political identities and fetishization (Axel 161).

This desire to mark the Sikh body is not new. During the colonial era, a multitude of colonial-influenced political and religious practices have played upon the Sikh male body. The British had specific definitions about what a man should be, and advocated mimicking "Christian manliness"; the British civilizing mission in India was less about giving the people of India a Western mode of social and political existence, but rather sharing British Imperial power through an image of hegemonic masculinity coupled with new ideas surrounding nation-building (Banerjee 8).

Definitions of masculine conduct or behaviour are paired with nationalist ideals. For example, Sikata Banerjee outlines how the Irish develop the highly gendered concept of "muscular Catholicism", which allows the Irish to defend themselves from criticism from the British. It not only conforms to "muscular Christianity" but reverses the stereotypical definitions onto the British (Banerjee 9). As an extension to this point, G.L. Mosse argues that nineteenth century nationalist movements in India, and in a number of other nations, serve as the origins of modern masculinity (Mosse 7).

The 'Manly Sikh' possesses raw, hard and desirable masculine qualities, such as

strength, bravery, loyalty and discipline; his qualities juxtapose the urban Hindu, who is represented as the effeminate Bengali man (Banerjee 31). According to the British, Bengali men did not possess manly characteristics whatsoever. In this way, types of Indian ethnicities and castes are pitted against each other through gendered norms.

3.2 Conclusion

Many ongoing questions arise including questioning how one could retain a cultural or religious identity that is not simply a 'post-memory' or metaphor for a remembered or imagined distant geographical space. The visible marking of Sikh identity through the turban or dastar does not adequately represent the complex set of plural understandings of Sikh history, migration and religious practices.

As the desire to return home fades, contemporary Sikh identity appears to change its focus to ask the question: where does one call home, instead of when will one return? Some contemporary struggles in Punjab surface with youth drug abuse, contaminated water supply for drinking and agriculture (Dhawan 2398), female foeticide and female infanticide (Snehi 4303) and farmer suicide as a result of the green revolution and large debts farmers owe to seed-owning corporations of the west and the increasingly marginalized position of Sikh-Punjabis (Satish 2754). Although these struggles are not faced by diasporic Sikh-Punjabis, they continue to impact the collective psyche of the diasporic Sikh community as a result of the past and continued inflictions of pain and injustice against the community.

The instability of diasporic Sikh-Punjabi male identities can be attributed to the residual effects of colonialism and caste systems, and their correlative underpinning to Sikh masculinity. The remnants of the colonial era, shifting caste relations, formative and

varied religious identities and gendered religious and national identities, are all issues that have been prominent since the colonial era. Fine fragmentary traces of these histories persist, alongside unanswered questions. These unresolved dilemmas burden the Sikh psyche, both as a collective fight against grander forces such as the Indian government, in the diasporas and within Punjab, as well as against an individual understanding of what it means to call oneself a Sikh today. The only constant to this subject position is that Sikh Punjabi identity remains in flux.

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Appendix: Thesis Exhibition Images

In Flux

June 22-29, 2012.

The School of Art Gallery

University of Manitoba

Photo credit for all images in Appendix: Larry Glawson



Installation view – east wall



Installation view – west wall



Video (*One Hundred and Fifty Perversions and King Kong*, 2012) installation view – north wall



Video and floor installation (*Free Kitchen*, 2012) view – north wall and gallery centre



Detail of *Free Kitchen*



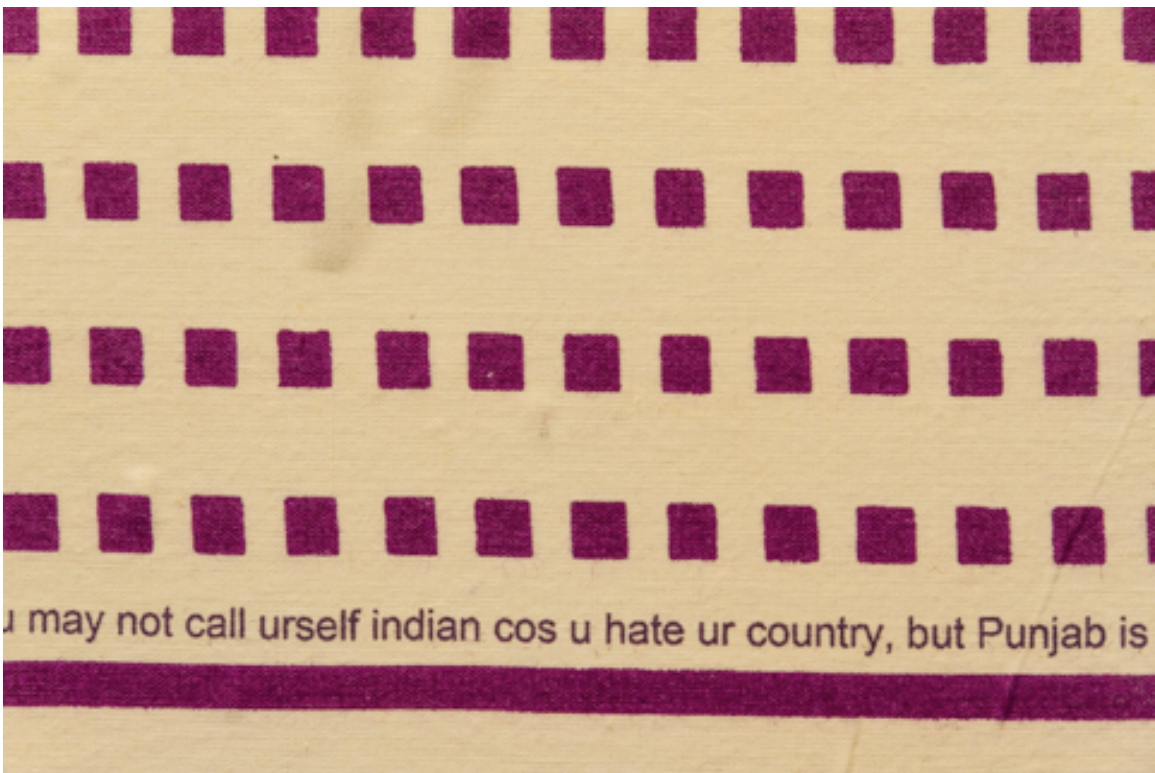
Self-Portrait, 2012, black and white photograph, compact – north wall



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, acrylic on textile



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, acrylic on textile



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, silkscreen on textile



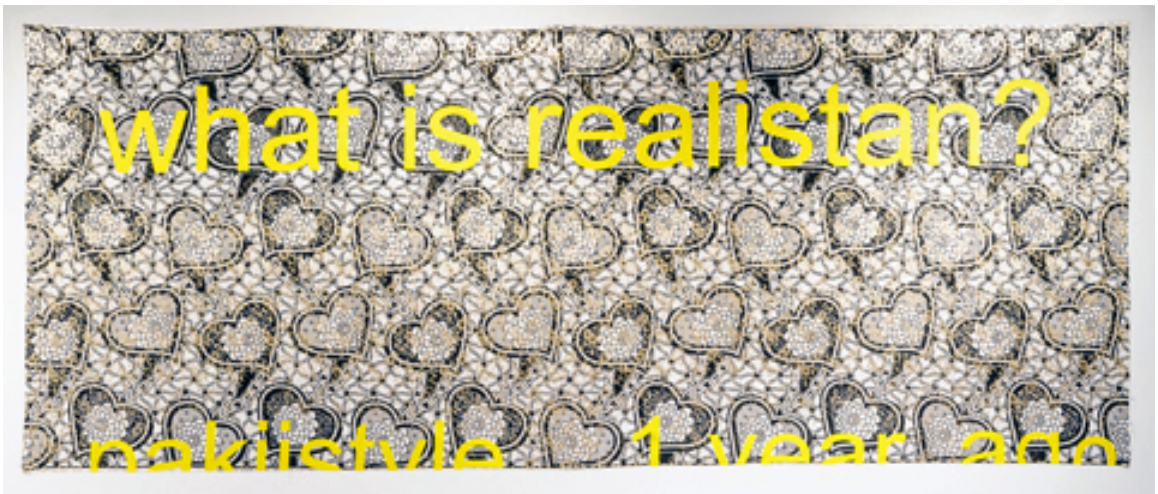
From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, acrylic on textile



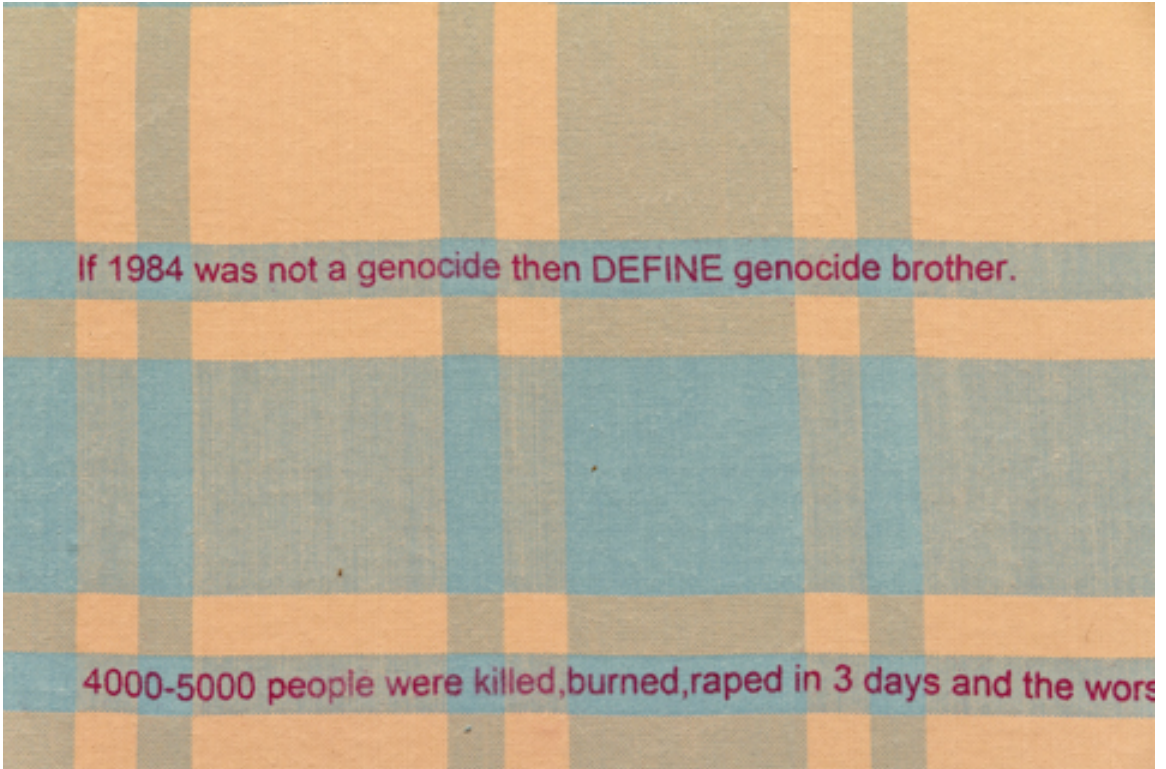
From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, silkscreen on textile



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, acrylic on textile



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, acrylic on textile



From series *Hip Hop Boys*, 2012, silkscreen on textile



Installation view

**MASTER
OF FINE
ART
THESIS EXHIBITIONS**

**MONICA MERCEDES
MARTINEZ everyone is
fallen except for us fallen...**

GURPREET SEHRA in flux

**OPENING JUNE 22, 4-7PM
SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY
EXHIBITIONS CLOSE JUNE 29 at 4PM
GALLERY HOURS MONDAY-FRIDAY 9AM-4PM
255 ARTlab, 180 DAFOE ROAD, 204-474-9367**