Sikh Research Journal

The Construction of Dangerous Boundaries[1]

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> "In these times of such unabated contention, is *bravery* the most useful place to end up?"
>
> -Rahuldeep Singh Gill[2]

Questioning the logic of bravery and safety, Rahuldeep Singh Gill asked us to consider danger. The problem with 'safe spaces,' Gill writes, is that the logic of safety "implies that participants in 'safe' space will not be exposed to any level of danger."[3] And yet there *is* danger. In the face of such danger, one could say, as some have, that we need brave spaces rather than safe ones. Yet the exposure to danger is not to be combated by bravery as the platitude "in the face of danger, one must be brave" would have it.[4] Instead Gill insisted that "bravery is certainly not what is lacking and cannot be the final destination for our work" precisely because bravery, too, is marked by danger.[5] How is the integrity of safety and indeed bravery called into question by the "dangerous supplement"?[6] How do we, Gill inquires, absorb "the dangers of bravery?"[7] This is an especially important inquiry when, as Gil Anidjar writes, "you could say that danger befalls us regardless of whatever agency [or bravery] we still believe in. Danger cannot be beaten. We might prevail, sure, even grow stronger for a while. But that is because danger must be fought, or else escaped, and first of all encountered. Fight or flight, but also — lose."[8] Fighting or fleeing, how do we grapple with our loss to danger?

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[1] I would like to thank Harleen Kaur, prabhdeep singh kehal, and Zunaira Komal for comments and suggestions.

[2] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places: A Role for Interfaith Cooperation in Contentious Times," *Journal of College and Character* 18 no. 3 (2017): 203.

[3] Gill, "From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places," 203.

[4] The relation between bravery and danger is a longstanding one. To take one early example, The Iliad states, "The brave meets danger, and the coward flies." *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: H.G. Bohn, 1863).

[5] Gill, "From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places," 204.

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[7] Gill, "From Safe Spaces to Resilient Places," 205.

[8] Gil Anidjar, "That Great Mother of Danger," *Critical Times*, forthcoming.

The encounter with danger is, we must remember, localized and "narrowed down by taboo," writes Franz Steiner.[9] There are, Steiner continues, "social pressures" that regulate danger so that it remains localized: confined to those dangerous—and also brave—spaces. Steiner focuses on two social functions of taboo, one of which is the classification of the dangerous transgression and the other "the institutional localization of danger, both by the specification of the dangerous and by the protection of society endangered, and hence, dangerous persons."[10] For Gill, however, we must question the logic of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, brave and dangerous, that comes to localize danger. "Is this the best we can hope for? Are we to keep just enough distance to not prick each other? That cannot be our highest aspiration" claims Gill.[11] Learning from Gill's capacious enquiries, I, too, want to ask about danger, bravery, safety, historiography, and the university. I turn to Gill's writings on Bhai Gurdas and the question of boundaries to highlight the importance of Gill's historiographical intervention. I then turn to the university as an institution—the site in which these debates about boundaries proliferate. I want to argue that Gill was especially attuned to the question of danger and the social participation within it. He wanted us to grapple with our necessarily dangerous condition.

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Bhai Gurdas, Gill argues, "was a charged and activated writer with a radical vision of Sikh history in the face of persecution and martyrdom who sang of a triumphant Sikh future."[12] To engage with the Sikh tradition, Gill continues, one must engage the work of Bhai Gurdas. To engage in this work could be an act of renewal—"an expanding banyan tree"—rather than a mimetic or mandated reproduction.[13] As Gill writes, "more important than rule-following is the intention and attitude that one brings to one's action."[14] Still, Bhai Gurdas imparts a lesson about the Sikh community: it is a community that is "self-sufficient" but also, in its renewal, never just given, never just a reproduction. Gill thus holds together what appear to be two contradictory premises: (1) renewal in which causality is disrupted and (2) causality as internal to the tradition.[15] For historians,

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[9] Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, [1956] 1967), 146-7.

[10] Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.

[11] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted," *Intersections* No. 42, Article 7 (2014): 20.

[12] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 152.

[13] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 153.

[14] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 153.

[15] The question of causality—such as miracles--is tied to the question of God's self-sufficiency. To give one example, Thomas Aquinas wrote, "So, a thing that has a completely hidden cause is

this contradiction can present a problem. Yet, if we think within the tradition, as Gill asserts, our very notions of identity and contradiction might be called into question.[16]

Sikh philosophers have noted this aspect of the Sikh tradition that Gill so aptly captures about the work of Bhai Gurdas, namely that "the community continues the divine revelation: the Guru is the manifestation of an invisible seed (*nirankar ekanker*) and the Sikhs are the fruits from that tree."[17] 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."[18] 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 necessarily produce new and different thoughts and traditions through remaining within its scope.[19] In a similarly evocative language, this is what the Sikh philosopher Jagdish Singh calls *mauldi nischitta*,[20] which translates as a resistance to stabilization through perpetually divergent, yet ultimately unified, rhythms. Or, more simply, "blooming certainty" from *maulna* (blossom, blooming) and *nischit* (definite, fixed, certain).

Here Gill makes an important contribution to a debate that has engulfed Sikh Studies—a debate with no end—the debate about the construction of religious boundaries. Gill makes a strong argument. Boundaries are not constructed in the colonial period. Instead, Gill writes, "In all his poems, Gurdas helped the mainstream Sikh Panth delimit its boundaries, and today no other interpreter of the Sikh religion matches his impact on Sikh life."[21] The boundaries were

wondrous in an unqualified way, and this the name, miracle, suggests; namely, what is of itself filled admirable wonder, not simply in relation to one person or another. Now, absolutely speaking, the cause hidden from every man is God." Thomas Aquinas in Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 122. You could not have a cause that did not emanate from God and the laws of nature.

[16] See Joan Dayan, *History, Haiti and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 33. Also see Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[17] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 152.

[18] Piara Singh Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali* (Patiala: Kalgidhar Kalam Foundation, 2000), 7. Translation is mine. I discuss this in depth in "There is No Colonial Relationship: Antagonism, Sikhism, and South Asian Studies," in *History & Theory* 57, no. 2: 193-215

[19] Padam, *Sikh Sampradavali*, 12.

[20] 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.

[21] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

delimited, Gill contends, through contrasts. Bhai Gurdas's writings "set Sikhs in contrast to the Vaishnava, Shakta, and Shaiva traditions via their strict, anti-iconic monotheism" and, more broadly, "he speaks of various Indian religious practices pejoratively, dismissing them as *tantar-mantar*."[22] In so doing, Bhai Gurdas, Gill insists repeatedly, "helped Sikhs delimit their boundaries."[23] If the questions of boundaries animated Bhai Gurdas's work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then scholars cannot locate the late nineteenth century as critical for the construction of boundaries. Indeed, Gill traces a longer genealogy of exegesis from Bhai Gurdas to Kahn Singh Nabha (1861-1938) to Bhai Jodh Singh (1882-1981) that challenges contemporary scholarly periodizations of the Sikh tradition that locate an epistemological break in the late 19th Century.[24] In rethinking periodization, Gill centers a difficult question that has troubled postcolonial scholars for years: "Where do you begin from and how?"[25]

While working through periodization, Gill asks us to consider the continuity within a tradition, but also how traditions relate to each other. These relations between traditions, however, are not necessarily a mark of continuity such as the continuity of an Indic context–a broader regional context–in which the Sikh tradition can be enveloped amongst others in a broader regional context. When writing about Guru Nanak, to take another example, Gill said, "We could easily misread the inversion that these excerpts speak of as a mainstream 'Indic' view of Kaliyug. But Baba Nanak was no typical thinker, and he did not merely ascribe to the prevalent thought of his day."[26] Instead, for Gill, *Sikhi* is an undoing of that very context. We learn from Gill's translations of Bhai Gurdas that:

> since the Sikh tradition's inception, other religions no longer boast power and authority. The religious practices of others are like stars in the dark night, and the Guru is the sun making the stars vanish, a roaring lion making the deer take cover, and a royal hawk challenging little birds of duality and polytheism (Var 5:12).[27]

The problem-space, to use David Scott's framing, was no longer as such. The "horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological–political stakes)" disappeared as the questions and the answers the questions heralded lost

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[22] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 154.
[23] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 156.
[24] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 2-3.
[25] Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xv.
[26] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment," *Chardi Kala Foundation*, September 11, 2013. http://www.chardikalaa.com/?p=877.
[27] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 154.

their meaning with Guru Nanak..[28] The very integrity of a problem-space, of a context, became a problem.

Gill wants to consider how polemics is tied to the failure of a problem-space. What are such polemics between traditions? How is there an undoing in polemics? And why does the problem-space fail? The concrete historical answer is this: the dangers that emerge in other traditions—egoism [*haumai*]—are unfastened through the self-effacement of the Gurmukh (pious Sikh).[29] For Bhai Gurdas and Gill, the Gurmukh unravels the very possibilities inhered in a problem-space by effacing themselves. Narration becomes dislocated as the self dissipates. As Bhai Gurdas has it in Gill's exquisite translation, "The Sikh should be like a dead man (murdā hoi murīd), remain engrossed in the shabad (the experience of the divine word), and continue to reflect on it even if trampled underfoot; the heavens will shower grace on him (9.22)."[30] We learn from Gill that this self-effacement offers an antidote to the danger of egoism emergent within other forms of life that define the former problem-space. As Gill contends: "The practices of other religions are rooted in egoism (Var 38:7), but the experience of worshipping with the Gurmukhs is the antidote to this poison (Var 38:16)."[31]

And yet though it is egoism [I am-ness] that emerges as a danger, the self is difficult to escape as is narration. The question is: What does one do when danger is not located in an "out there," but within? How can the self itself become taboo? Can one escape the poison of the self? To limit the danger within, can one just proclaim oneself a Gurmukh? But, in so doing, one would uphold that very self and, therefore, danger. The dangers persist since self-effacement turns out to be an impossibility. One remains exposed to the dangers, the poison, of egotism, which, Gill teaches us, Bhai Gurdas recognizes in his self-deprecating acknowledgements of his own self—a self he cannot escape as a bard, as a narrator. This is especially true, Gill asserts, when Bhai Gurdas recognizes that the effects of his polemics against other traditions reify the very ego that should wither. "The confessing or self- deprecating stanzas seem to function as an apology for the harshness of the polemics, painting the polemicist as the worst offender of all" writes Gill.[32] The polemicist cannot efface themselves and, therefore, are marked by egoism and, in

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[28] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.
[29] I borrow this translation from Rahuldeep Gill.
[30] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 57.
[31] Gill, "The Work of Bhai Gurdas," 155.
[32] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 37.

turn, danger. There cannot be danger outside the tradition without there also being danger within.

To engage in polemics which delimit and construct boundaries is a dangerous activity since it reasserts egoism, the "I am-ness", of the poet. The self and egoism return in demarcating a tradition against another. As the tradition from the outside comes to supplement the tradition that one inhabits then you have both (1) the reassertion of a singular tradition from the locus of the polemicist as that which is outside adds to the plentitude of the tradition one inhabits and, yet, (2) the other tradition becomes necessary for self-definition demonstrating one's own tradition's insufficiency.[33] The other tradition emerges as an adjunct: adding and substituting for what was thought integrative on its own in the polemics. Polemics, therefore, both reify *and* question the integrity of self and boundaries. Bhai Gurdas indeed interrogates the self, his own alongside others; he questions its integrity.

This line of questioning is evident when the poet sings of bravery. Take the example of genre, the vār. For Christopher Shackle and Arvind Mandair, "While the traditional vār composed by the minstrels deals with the battles of tribal chiefs and praise of their bravery, Guru Nanak converted the form to the very different purpose of hymning the greatness of God and the divine organization of the world"[34] Or, as Gill explains, drawing on Piara Singh Padam, one "characteristic of vārs is that they describe war, and include stories about bravery or the accounts of battle," which also become the container from which to understand sacrifice of the self as well as martyrdom in the Sikh tradition more broadly.[35] Although it valorizes bravery against egoism, the genre of the vār also upholds the poet and his dangerous activity in praising bravery. Therefore, Bhai Gurdas concludes that, as a bard who sings of bravery, "there is no greater ingrate than himself, no greater slanderer. Though people call him 'disciple' (murīd, a synonym for dās in the name Gurdas) he does not understand the Guru's shabad."[36] In Bhai Gurdas's polemics and in his vārs, the ego has returned. To sing of bravery also brings forth the dangerous poet as the self appears and disappears in the very genre. There is no localization of danger that neatly divides between an inner and outer as the poet must question the logic of bravery even while singing of it in the vār.

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[33] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 145.

[34] Arvind Mandair and Christopher Shackle cited in Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 42.

[35] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 45.

[36] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, 16.

There is a question here of historiography in Sikh Studies—a question that Gill dwelled upon in his talk entitled "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."[37] He situates that "controversial book" by Harjot Oberoi—*The Construction of Religious Boundaries*—in its own, and his own, history. Gill tells us he "struggled with this book as an undergrad." He "defended the book even though [he] disagreed with it."[38] He defended the book even to those he respected. Still, he understood their important question: "Who speaks for us?" and "Who speaks for the tradition?"[39] In his own self-deprecating answer, Gill emphasizes he has not navigated these tensions particularly well.[40] By showing, however, how the question of boundaries and their delimitation is a question of danger (following, of course, a wide traversed field), Gill demonstrates how *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* was always already the construction of a dangerous situation. Where was danger located? Who was considered dangerous? And, even more importantly, Gill asks us to consider how Bhai Gurdas himself centered these questions. Bhai Gudas understood how polemics created a dangerous situation by upholding the self and its identity.

It is the latter remarks Gill makes that require attention; how is this dangerous situation constructed? Summarizing *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Gill stated that Oberoi was asking a question of Sikh identity and Oberoi's answer to his own question was, in Gill's short summary, "not much."[41] Though hyperbolic, there is truth in Gill's assessment. In the book, for example, Oberoi writes, "The category, 'Sikh', was still flexible, problematic, and substantially empty [and] a long historical intervention was needed before it was saturated with signs, icons, and narratives, and made fairly rigid by the early decades of the twentieth century"[42] There is "not much" there. Oberoi does, however, concede ground, particularly to our bard, to Bhai Gurdas. Oberoi writes that:

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[37] It is an understatement to say that this historiography is vast. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood situates Oberoi's work more broadly in *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues With Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). For a recent analysis of the controversy, see Laurie Patton, *Who Owns Religion?: Scholars and Their Publics in the Late Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Nirvikar Singh has situated Patton's work in Sikh Studies more broadly. Nirvikar Singh, "Who Owns Religion? Scholars, Sikhs and Squaring the Circle," Working Paper, University of California, Santa Cruz, September 2022.

[38] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition," YouTube, uploaded by the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, November 14, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR5k-cw44nI.

[39] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."

[40] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."

[41] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."

[42] Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 53.

> Bhai Gurdas is not completely unaware of boundaries. Frequently in his verse he labours the point that Muslims are missing the correct path, and Hindus are caught in the snare of empty rituals and social inequalities. The solution for him is the Sikh way of life, a distinctive third path to human problems, and the ideal man is a gursikh, a follower of the Sikh gurus and their doctrines. These are not merely metaphysical differences but suggest a new idiom, a separate community of believers, and the reworking of the social order.[43]

For Oberoi, however, Bhai Gurdas does not teach us much about the Sikh community because "having said all this, it must be stated categorically that the Sikhs were still in the process of evolution and growth. There was still critical space at the centre and periphery of the community that had not been appropriated and shaded in the colours of a dominant ideology."[44] But we also see, in Gill's work, that the solution for Bhai Gurdas was not just a Sikh way of life as Oberoi has it—the distinction that marks the Sikh community—but also self-effacement. We have a paradox: the Sikh form of life requires an annulling of one's location in that form of life. It is an aporia that emerges from within the Sikh tradition, as theorized by Bhai Gurdas, rather than one that awaits scholarly discovery. And, importantly, it is a theorization that defies the desire to find and locate both identity and heterogeneity within the Sikh tradition.[45]

In Oberoi's argument, however, it was, in fact, no longer the self that was dangerous. There was no self-deprecation of the bard who engages in polemics. Instead, with the passage of time, certain Sikhs were dangerous because they impinged upon the "ontology of the self" of the writer. It was no longer the case that danger appeared and reappeared as the self, in its recitations and arguments, came and went. Instead, in scholarship, danger became localized in the community against scholarship and the gentlemanly practices that come to define the production of truth.[46] One must be amenable to persuasion through these

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[43] Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 51.

[44] Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 53.

[45] Oberoi gives his argument as such: "In grappling with these issues I proposed that historically there had never been a monolithic Sikh discourse and that Sikh tradition had been constantly reformulated. In the absence of a centralized church and religious hierarchy, there existed a heterogeneity in religious beliefs, rituals, and lifestyles. Most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities grounded in local, regional, religious and secular loyalties. Consequently, religious identities were highly blurred and several competing definitions of who constituted a Sikh were possible" (198). See Harjot Oberoi, "What Has a Whale Got to Do With It? A Tale of Pogroms and Biblical Allegories," *Sikh Religion, Culture and Ethnicity*, eds. Christopher Shackle, Gurharpal Singh and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair (London: Routledge, 2013).

[46] For gentlemanly practices, see Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

practices and "trustworthy sources."[47] But when the community came to assess Oberoi's work, they " were not persuaded by [Oberoi's] historicist account."[48] Now the danger was that Oberoi's "individual self was totally overlooked and misrepresented" since Oberoi did not conform, he writes, "to the Sikh community, or at least in the form of a good/proper/ authentic/militant Sikh."[49] It was a case, now, of a brave and rational scholar standing up to a dangerous community.

Polemics, then, is no longer a dangerous activity that leads to a certain reification of the self as Gill shows in Bhai Gurdas's work. Instead, danger comes to lie with Sikhs who do not understand historicist arguments; there is a construction of a dangerous community. The dangerous community mirrors the state itself. Oberoi writes:

> Although each of these communities in their normative universe regularly invokes the discourse of collective rights, moral justice, and ethical action, yet - not unlike the state they despise in cultural practices - these communities regularly collude in suppressing rights, disrupting lives, stigmatizing bodies, and inflicting pain.[50]

Here, one could pause and ask, after Anidjar, "But which image, which minority, does the state want? Which does it choose?"[51] The state narrows down and localizes danger by marking taboos. As Steiner writes, "Taboo gives notice that danger lies not in the whole situation, but only in certain specified actions concerning it."[52] As we saw earlier, though taboo classifies and identifies transgressions, there is also, "the institutional localization of danger" which seeks to protect society from dangerous individuals and, now, also communalized communities.[53] For Oberoi, the dangerous persons and communities are not tied to state power, but instead are those with "absolutist rhetoric."[54] Danger is localized in a particular rhetoric. To Oberoi, the danger was localized amongst both Hindu *and* Sikh, both, to borrow from sociological analysis, state and non-state actors.

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[47] Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 21.
[48] Oberoi, "What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?," 200.
[49] Oberoi, "What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?," 200.
[50] Oberoi, "What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?," 204.
     Oberoi places the polemics against his book in conjunction with the state's targeted attacks against Sikhs in 1984. There was danger, then, too, since the state was demarcating dangerous individuals. And, in that danger, Oberoi writes, "To be out on the road in the middle of the night was even more dangerous than being at home" (204). What we learn from Gill and Bhai Gurdas, however, is that home and world are both dangerous.
[51] Gil Anidjar, "Legal Age," *The Immanent Frame*, February 16, 2016. https://tif.ssrc.org/2016/02/16/legal-age.
[52] Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.
[53] Steiner, *Taboo*, 147.
[54] Oberoi, What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?," 194.

And the danger of this rhetoric lay in subverting a previously non-contradictory society—a society in which identity was formerly unimportant and, therefore, not dangerous.[55]

If we work within Oberoi's argument, to be brave is to stand against "absolutist rhetoric" that "commodifies" a "diverse population" into a "religious minority."[56] The safety of one's home—a home that includes the self and identity—then comes under *attack* by a dangerous and unpersuadable rhetoric that comes from elsewhere—the colonized mind as the argument tends to go. As Oberoi laments: "Henceforth, I was not going to be read for my own moral ontology. A theological vocabulary and ethnic paranoia that I had always disfavoured was permanently attached to my identity, for I had been commodified as a Sikh and inserted into a new exchange of (human) goods."[57] What is in question is not the state and its violence but the "state of the soul." Indeed, to trace a genealogy of the social sciences and the production of knowledge requires we consider how a persuasive polemics came to require a commitment to God in the West. "The authentic Christian gentleman was reminded of the verbal commitments he had made to God…legitimate reputation in gentlemanly society could not be secured if one was seen to break one's holy vows."[58] Identity becomes a crucial resource in making credible knowledge in the social sciences,[59] rather than an impediment that emerges within polemics in the Sikh tradition as we learn from Gill.

Gill's historiographical intervention should be clear: to engage in polemics about boundaries and their construction is to bring danger within rather than locate it somewhere else. Danger cannot be localized into a community outside, preserving one's own moral ontology tied to a Christian notion of selfhood. Instead, danger is and must be absorbed [*absorbere* is "to swallow up, devour,"] to follow Gill. To be absorbed, however, also means that the danger cannot be located in Oberoi and his book. Gill recognized this point and, thus, took the danger within. Remember

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[55] As Oberoi writes, "I had grown up in a milieu where there was simply no contradiction between being Sikh and being Indian" (191). See Oberoi, What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?"

[56] The use of the passive voice here in Oberoi's writing does quite a bit of conceptual work as it places Sikhs on par with the Indian State. "A semantic unit - the Sikhs - *had been* unleashed through organized violence that rapidly gathered in a new collectivity and vocabulary, for manipulation and control, for intimidation and violence, imperiously ignoring historical descriptions; innumerable contemporary alignments; substantive internal differences; and the question of individual biographies. I allude here to a diverse population being violently commodified into a religious minority" (194-5). See Oberoi, What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?"

[57] Oberoi, What Has a Whale Got to Do With It?," 195.

[58] Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 82.

[59] Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 66 and 177.

what he tells us: He defended the book even when he disagreed with it.[60] He defended it against those who castigated it and had not even read it. He stood up for a book he disagreed with against those he respected within the tradition.[61] In other words, Oberoi could not become, for Gill, an antagonist to which one responded with hostility; this would be a polemics that would reintroduce egoism by reifying inside and outside, bravery and danger. Instead, Gill wanted us to consider how one cannot escape danger; there is danger. To escape it, by locating danger solely in Oberoi, would be to construct the very boundaries that produce the problems in the first place: a clear home and self without the self-deprecation of *nimrata* (loweredness). To make Oberoi dangerous then would be to mark danger as against bravery rather than that which contaminates bravery. It would be to deny, as Gill says, *begumpura*, since egoism would create a dangerous outside—such as Oberoi—that never was as such.[62]

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We know the rise of the dangerous individual is imbricated in the rise of institutions to manage them: the asylum is but one example. And, today, Anidjar writes, "as a society as a 'public culture of danger,' we do very much expect to be protected from it and from its, presumably collateral, carriers. We loudly clamor (those among us whose voice can be heard, that is) for protection, for safety and security."[63] The university is, of course, an institution, tied to the language of biology.[64] As Jacques Derrida asks: "How are we to explain that the biological or organicist metaphor…so often serve to describe institutions, the institution of the university in particular, and this just as much on the side of those who defend that institution as those who attack it."[65] The question is about reproduction, Derrida clarifies. For those who want to preserve and defend, "the necessity of the program and of reproduction is a condition of life, a condition of development and of production" whereas for those who want to attack and destroy the institution, "the program and reproduction are bearers of death" in that there is a "rigidifying the living being in death."[66] It is a question of the state, we know, since it is the state which "whispers in your ear through its educational apparatuses, which are

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[60] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[61] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[62] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[63] Gil Anidjar, "That Great Mother of Danger," *Critical Times*, forthcoming.
[64] Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[65] Derrida, *Life Death*, 7.
[66] Derrida, *Life Death*, 7-8.

in fact acoustic or acroamatic apparatuses."[67] Again, reproduction comes to the fore through a certain kind of listening.

Yet reproduction does not abide by the easy oppositions such as life against death even though we imagine reproduction as a simple endeavor: as if there could be pure and replicable models. Natality becomes tied to the joys of reproduction. In this reproductive celebration, we could construct a fable of, to use Derrida's example, "*the* bacterium [la *bactérie*] as pure and purely a-sexual re-producibility."[68] It would allow for the isolation of one model that is reproduced; it "would allow one to use with confidence a binary of dialectical logic, that is, that would facilitate the mastery of certain programs that are impervious, in the end, to the supplement, or in which the supplement itself is incorporated into the program."[69] Danger, then, would be eliminated with purification, as *the* Sikh emerges as a reproducible object without contaminations, without mutations. Those dangers could be cordoned off to secure reproduction.

For Gill, one could not purify community or study in such a manner because one had to expose oneself to danger; one could try to escape it, but danger remains. To make his argument, Gill draws upon the Janam Sakhis. He writes:

> In the Puratan Janam Sakhi, Baba Nanak is constantly inverting Mardana's expectations. In their travels, after they are turned away from a particular village where they have been paid no attention, Baba Ji and Mardana travel to a town where they are very well regarded, all their needs are met, and the townsfolk are attentive to their message. Baba shocks Mardana by seemingly cursing the whole town by saying, "May this place be uprooted and destroyed." You could imagine Mardana's shock. "Some justice you're advocating here, Babaji. We just came from a place that paid us no heed. Arriving at this caring place, you're cursing it?" Baba's wisdom has a perfect opening now: "If these townsfolk are forced to scatter," he explains, "they will take their good ways with them. Let those other folks stay put."[70]

The goal could not be mere reproduction, mere replication, which would be a mark of egoism. In this egoism, the self becomes protected, replicated as "the Good" across time. Gill argued instead that there must be contamination. The goal must be to absorb danger by scattering *into* danger itself rather than cordoning

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[67] Derrida, *Life Death*, 48. Also see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 15.
[68] Derrida, *Life Death*, 112.
[69] Derrida, *Life Death*, 112.
[70] Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment."

from it. There must be scattering. "Otherwise, who is there to blame when we return to our homes and abodes unchanged, unaltered, uninspired? Those, indeed, would be dark days," Gill concludes.[71] The home must scatter as must the self.

When asking about danger, Gill also wondered about the university and reproduction. To continue with his talk, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition," the end goal for Sikhs, Gill argues, cannot be to reproduce the institution, and it certainly was not the end, Gill contends, for Guru Nanak. Yet Gill remarked that Sikhs enter the university to represent themselves, to enter the game of reproduction, so as to say Sikhs have made it: to reproduce themselves in the institution and, therefore, reproduce the institution itself. *The* Sikh emerges as a representable and fortified object. In this endeavor, the university, Gill said, is "a trap because once you enter that discourse and see it as supreme, then it's playing you."[72] To reproduce the university becomes a problem since then one is reproducing the program of the university and the tradition is lost. The university provides a certain mimesis of a pre-determined program. "Critical formations are vulnerable to becoming disciplinary apparatuses" that then enter through our ear to produce consensus as Roderick Ferguson has written.[73] To use Gill's example: universities are themselves implicated, and reproduce the logics of slavery, Jim Crow, and dispossession. Sikh Studies is no exception.[74] It is a study for and by, Gill says, "rich, Sikh men."[75] This reproduces the Brahmanical society that was subject to Guru Nanak's critique. Sikh Studies then would reproduce a Brahmanical society in which "there are rules to follow in that system; rules upon rules. Only certain segments of society – male society, that is – can participate. "[76] If this is the case, the Gill asks: "Is Guru Nanak, then, to be found in the institution? Is it best done in the Ivory Tower? Where should Sikh Studies happen?"[77]

Gill knew these dangers of the program intimately as he became dangerous in his local institution at Cal Lutheran. "Donors may call," Gill wrote, "in to endowment offices to complain that the Religion Department is full of non-Lutherans, or that interfaith understanding is watering down a proper Christian ethos."[78] But not just phone calls. His office was ransacked in 2019. When returning from a speaking engagement, he found "his office in the Soiland Humanities Building in

[71] Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment."
[72] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[73] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 18.
[74] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[75] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[76] Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment."
[77] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[78] Gill, "Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted," 19.

a state of disarray—a lamp on the floor, a chair misplaced, a note on his wall and a book left open."[79] Sikhs are marked as dangerous subjects as we learned in Oberoi's demarcations. As Gill explained, "Sikhs are a thousand times more likely to suffer hate crimes than the typical U.S. citizen, and at least nine Sikh Americans have been killed in hate violence since 2001."[80] Gill had these experiences. "Growing up in America and having experienced enough trauma, teasing, bullying, and even hatred for my own turban, I wonder how I can subject my bright-eyed baby boy to future difficulty."[81] This marking of Sikhs as dangerous individuals had consequences in fixing Sikhs as specimens; Gill remarked: "The whole thing immobilized me for a long time—I have been frozen."[82]

Yet Gill did not remain frozen. Instead, Gill argued one has to be both institutional and anti-institutional.[83] He asked for a dynamism that was—similar to Ferguson—not tied to "minority affirmation to rebuttress institutional power," but a practice that did not "yield to the institutionalized systems of dominant legibility, valorization and recognition—that they can create themselves in ways the institutions did not intend"[84] What we might need are what Gill calls flipped institutions. As he writes, "The world is not flipped, and maybe our institutions need flipping. Maybe by attending to Baba Nanak's message, we realize that our core institution needs flipping."[85] How does one flip the institution? For Gill, it would be by not reproducing a program. It would be to refuse to institutionalize Sikh Studies. This refusal was necessary because study itself was a danger.

But again, we cannot merely say that Gill was a brave scholar who stood up to danger in how he construed the objects he studied and the vantage points he centered. As we know from Mimi Thi Nguyen "there is no particular reason to assume that the minor object is always an aperture for disruption; it does not and

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[79] Isabella Breda, "'Inconclusive Evidence' One Year After Professor's Office was Vandalized," *The Echo*, March 23, 2020. https://cluecho.com/13260/news/inconclusive-evidence-one-year-after-professors-office-is-vandalized/

[80] Upali Sraman, Rahuldeep Singh Gill, and Varun Soni, "Understanding Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu Students on Camps, in *Educating About Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook to Student Affairs,* eds. Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess and Eboo Patel (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2019), 281.

[81] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Finding a Way Forward," *Patheos* August 14, 2012. patheos.com/articles/finding-way-forward-rahuldeep-gill-08-14-2012

[82] Breda, "'Inconclusive Evidence.'"

[83] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."

[84] Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 178-179.

[85] Gill, "Guru Nanak And This American Moment."

cannot deliver transgression at every turn."[86] Transgression is not merely located in the correct scholarly posture or drawn from the transgressive object they investigate. That is why Gill argues *we should not trust what Gill himself says*.[87] We should not reproduce what Gill teaches. We must not trust him, he said, because study must be under threat; there is "no subjective, objective dichotomy; we are in it."[88] We are in the dangerous situation when we study—a dangerous situation Gill embodied.

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"Ultimately," Rahuldeep Singh Gill wrote, "we will all leave this broken world through our own deaths; but until then, how are we to face the world?"[89] We must, Gill insisted, participate in the world. We must be exposed to danger; we must encounter it as Gill always did: without the promise of replication and reproduction of a program. The goal, Gill taught us, was not to be brave and protect one's self and community, creating, to give one example, safe spaces. Instead, one must be exposed to danger; it must be taken within. In taking dangers within to disrupt reproduction, conclusions are rendered difficult. They might even appear abrupt—no longer following a programmatic logic we are accustomed to; the relation to a reproductive time goes astray. The conclusion escapes as dangerous supplements proliferate, challenging the integrity of what we took for granted: boundaries, study, and life. There are, however, returns and repetitions. Gill told us that he came to Bhai Gurdas when J.S. Grewal gave him direction; "Have a look at Gurdas," Grewal said.[90] At a time when it appears we experienced an abrupt and sudden conclusion, a possible end, that leaves us in despair, we must remember that one day, someone will advise, as Nirvikar Singh already has, "Have a look at Rahuldeep."[91]

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[86] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Getting Over Ourselves," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 348.
[87] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[88] Gill, "Ante-Colonial Anti-Imperial Sikh Tradition."
[89] Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "The Call of Death and the Depth of Our Callings: The Quality of Vocational Discernment" in *Hearing vocation Differently : Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 67.
[90] Gill, *Drinking From Love's Cup*, x.
[91] Nirvikar Singh, "Rahuldeep Singh Gill and Sikh Studies: A Reflection," *Sikh Research Journal.* Forthcoming.

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