SITUATING SIKH DIASPORIC DUBS: A CASE STUDY FEATURING HUMBLE THE POET AND SIKH KNOWLEDGE

AMRITA KAULDHER

THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTITAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2017

ABSTRACT

The turban and beard has been a focus of Sikh identity in the diaspora and since 2010 has resurged across North American within popular culture and social media. Based on virtual and visual research conducted on social media, qualitative interviews and lyrical analysis, this case study explores the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism and Canadian hip hop in relationship to Punjabi-Sikh identities, articulated and performed by artists Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. This case study addresses a lacuna of scholarship available on Punjabi-Sikh identity and hip hop by providing an analysis of album Turban Sex and book/album campaign for UnLEARN: Butterflies and Lions. I will explore how both artists respectively affirm and destabilize identity politics of popular representations of Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity and heritage. Looking beyond turbans and beards and labels of "ethno hip hop" or "desi rap", this research aims to interrogate the limits of multiculturalism and antiracism.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated with eternal love and appreciation for my Pitaji and Nanaji, who made it a priority to promote higher education to their grandchildren and truly believed that knowledge is power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, this project would not have been possible without the openness from Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini to participate in this research. Thank you for allowing me to *connect* with you, your music is truly inspiring. This is only a perspective of their social movements.

A sincere thank you to my supervisor, Dan, for his continual guidance and patience over the course of this writing process. The process has been real.

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> Is cosmopolitan a quality of individuals? In its aesthetic connotation, the word cosmopolitan evokes a certain kind of familiar cultural image or person. (Werbner 48)

> I should clarify immediately, however, that I do not presume a singular Sikh subject, nor claim to speak about all Sikhs or a Sikh 'community' at large. Rather, I am concerned with the formation of two Sikh subjects. (Axel 413)

This is a story about a friendship, and a series of virtual coincidences that brought two individuals together. This is also a story about identities. Identities that are immersed in and inspired by hip hop culture. More specifically, this is story about the desire to connect. Toronto artist, Humble the Poet (Kanwer Singh), and Montreal-based artist/producer, Sikh Knowledge (Kanwar Anit Singh Saini) have been erupting across social media, and digitizing in cyber space on multiple social media platforms through a purposed "need to connect" since 2010. The research I have conducted in this study is a glimpse into the lives of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge, and how they respectively and collectively affirm and destabilize identity politics, particularly popular representations of Punjabi-Sikh identities and culture. I aim to ethnographically situate them through their social media movements, a study of their performances, a review and analysis of their music and lyrics, and through conversations that I have been privileged to have with them.

The framework of vernacular cosmopolitanism explored throughout this ethnography serves the purpose of interpreting the artists beyond the lens of multiculturalism and antiracism that limit ethnic and cultural identities. There is no singular concept of cosmopolitanism, for its re-emergence and debate in the academy in recent years is best approached and interpreted in the

plural sense, indicating that there are many ways to be cosmopolitan. The discourse of cosmopolitanism presents alternatives to social and political affiliations that can be placed between ethnocentric nationalism and particularistic multiculturalism (Vertovec and Cohen 1). The framework of cosmopolitanism in this case study is not concerned with the image of the elitist traveler, tourist or colonial scientists, but how various spaces are central and important to the exchange, articulation and appropriation of "self" and "other".

Cosmopolitanisms can be discussed as "cosmopolitanism of the above", and "cosmopolitanism from below," where people are driven across borders or obliged to uproot themselves (Werbner 346). Although both are conditioned by globalization and are interconnected, they do not constitute "global citizenship." What then constitutes global citizenship? This research is interested in that question while bringing forth the social media movements of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge as a form of global citizenship, yet considering how the three closely related forces of nationalism, globalism and multiculturalism are at work in their social media campaigns and lyrics. It is my aim in this introduction to emphasize that the cosmopolitan must be rooted for individual and collective identities to develop possible alliances and collaborations. In this case study, Punjabi ethnicity and Sikh heritage serves as rooted identities, and they should not be mistaken for fixed or static identities the politics of multiculturalism operates upon. This research is concerned with the actuality of individuals having multiple affiliations, identities or loyalties and the ability to collaborate with others who belong to different cultures, communities or across political and imaginary borders.

The late Stuart Hall describes vernacular cosmopolitanism as a witnessing of communities that are not simply isolated, atomistic individuals, nor well bounded. "We are in that open space that requires a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism, that is…aware of the

limitations of any one culture, or any one identity and that is radically aware of its insufficiency in governing a wider society, but which nevertheless is not prepared to transcend its claim to the traces of difference, which make its life important" (Hall 30). In other words, local and national attachments remain important to individuals and communities, but are articulated under dynamic conditions in a world that is vastly interconnected and exposed, granting possibilities for new political affiliations based in articulations of difference. Basing this ethnography in the definitions of difference and ethnicity developed by Hall, I emphasize that a singular, political movement referencing an experience based in race, simply disregards different histories, traditions and ethnic identities that often face simplification and stereotypical characterization. I do not argue that there are equal modes of oppression, but am interested in the articulations of marginal "modes of being" that demonstrate an exploration of multiple forms of othering and difference that stem from a shared history of oppressive global forces, like colonialism.

Utilizing Hall's reference to the vernacular requires careful consideration of what is situated, rooted and historically embedded. Language, gender, aesthetics, race and ethnicity all have a trajectory, and that history is surrounded by politics of representation. This research addresses what Hall calls a "contest over politics of representation", which opens up questions of what it means be or look like to be Sikh. Rather than discuss relations of representation, I will demonstrate how these two artists undermine traditional readings of the turban by playing with stereotypes, asserting ambivalent sexuality, and destabilize fetishizations of Punjabi Sikh ethnicity in popular culture. As a result, this research not only explores "difference between", but how it is that "difference within" often decentralizes a concept of solidarity and cohesiveness within communities. By centralizing Hall's arguments in *New Ethnicities*, I have chosen to work with the concept of ethnicity for an analysis of these artists through a historical, cultural and

political lens (446-447). It is the ways politics of ethnicity focuses on *difference* and diversity within a given group that may initiate working beyond limited frameworks of multiculturalism or antiracism, that dangerously rely on a view of culture as bounded or a set of knowable attributes for a given group (Yon, 21).

The concept of heritage has come to play a unique role in this ethnography. It is a unique, self-identifying concept used by both artists to assert the importance, yet normalization of their beard and turban. Heritage, defined by B. Graham and P. Howard (2008) "is often used as a form of collective memory, and a social construct shaped by political, economic and social concerns of the present" (qtd. in Tutchener 96). This ethnography delves into the personal reasoning as to why Kanwer and Kanwar don their turbans, and how this has impacted their perceptions of identity and community. The role of "community" or a collective identity plays a role in the declaration of heritage within Canadian society, as nationally acclaimed heritages look for acknowledgement and credibility for a place in Canadian history. The ability to acknowledge the past is a choice, and relies on relationships of power, thus, Tutchener emphasizes the political nature of heritage and its existence through processes of classification. With classification's main objective being inclusion and exclusion, I am concerned with how heritage and identity mutually inform one another, and experiences of loss or threat among immigrant identity.

The "vernacular" for this case study represents the many identities and locations those identities occupy for Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. Whether those are based on geographic locations (Canada, Toronto, Montreal), their careers or their ethnicity. A particular aspect of this analysis is rooted and embedded in notions of Punjabi-Sikh heritage. To be of Punjabi-Sikh heritage in Canada has been politically constructed and is reified through immigrant histories. This case study specifically explores how and why Humble the Poet and

Sikh Knowledge's craft their identities in efforts to conserve and reinvent this heritage in the diaspora, surrounding representations of the turban (pagh). The turban is an aesthetic symbol for Sikhs culturally, ethnically and religiously. From Werbner's (2015) extensive ethnographic work with South Asian communities across Britain documenting racial and ethnic politics, she has defined "aesthetic communities" as those who share cultural knowledge, passion and creativity (241). With Kanwer and Kanwar active in music and popular culture, this research inquires as to how they have unassumingly played a role in the moral and aesthetic imagining of the turban in Punjabi-Sikh popular culture. Werbner's ideas on aesthetics and ethnic politics are important as they help us to discern and rea immigrant identities, and how social movements based singularly on race often deny the significance of ethnicity, aesthetics and cultural knowledge that concern politics of South Asian communities (Werbner 2015).

Hip hop culture becomes a useful tool for conceptualizing space and identities through shifting attachment and reattachments, especially where art meets activism in popular culture and political spaces. Hip hop's emergence as an interdisciplinary subculture incorporated a reassembling of musical styles, fashion, attitude and language. Hip hop performances, therefore, initiated a social and political dialogue within youth popular culture. Remi Warner explains how it is hip hop's own polyvalent genre rules and "break beat" aesthetic forms that have enabled a rich variety of cultural repertoires and identities to be strategically fashioned, in relation to evolving trans-local spaces defined by borders, identity, ethnicity, nationality, race and community (276). Hip hop grammar, transcribed, applied and appropriated to multiple minority experiences, has had the potential to expand political consciousness and awareness to the very intersections of where racial "othering" meets.

It may be useful to interpret the development of the language and grammar of hip hop music through the cultural and political power embedded within its origins, which is unmistakably historically linked. Sheldon Pollock (2002) argues that a new language for communicating literarily to a community of readers and listeners can consolidate if not create that very community as both a socio-textual and political formation (16). With his research on Sanskrit, cosmopolitan cultures, and languages, he argues that vernacular literary cultures were initiated through conscious decisions in efforts to reshape cultural boundaries of communication. The significance of individuals or groups reshaping language, is the production of local cultures borrowing from larger cosmopolitan forces. His argument, in essence, can be used to explain the development of hip hop from a very specific, marginal and socio-historical place in America, spreading across the world and inspiring a language to communicate global minority experiences through conscious appropriation. As Warner captured conscious South African hip hop beyond that of American mimicry, I intend to join the conversation with the above literature to distinguish how these artists do not mock stereotypes of "blackness" by making hip hop music, nor transcend their ethnic identities, but work within ethnicity and their respective heritage to resist local and national enclosures of identity promoted by Canadian multiculturalism.

In addition, I hope to make a theoretical connection to Natasha Sharma's ethnographic research on desi hip hop and how her informants utilize hip hop through concepts of "global race consciousness" and political blackness. Sharma's research took shape by analyzing social relationships between South Asians and blacks following 9/11, and the black and white binaries of American race relations. Her examination of "hip hop desis" from the California Bay area demonstrates the articulations of immigrant and minority, multiscalar identities that are expressed through hip hop as a means of a political tool (284). I use her research to understand

and engage with discussions of anti-black racism, yet limit this particular scope within my work as I primarily focus on the constructions and deconstructions of Punjabi-Sikh representation in popular culture that these two artists actively play upon. This ethnography aims to theoretically develop the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanisms, specifically for its commitment towards plural politics, rather than politics based on assumptions of cultures, therefore, I affirm Tariq Madood's (2015) argument that "politics that privilege color identities, such as political blackness, although an important constituent of this pluralism, may not be the overarching basis of unity or community (170)." As Sharma's "hip hop desis" transcribe their own marginal experiences in reference to political blackness, Madood proposes the question if "blackness" is really available to Asians when some of the most thoughtful and acclaimed contributions to the development of "blackness" are about increasing references to African roots and the Atlantic experience (170).

Fundamentally, Sharma's framework is useful in analysis of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge by representing how it is that South-Asian performers/artists do not deracialize hip hop to make it their own or perform blackness, but use black music to racialize themselves as minorities, by referencing models of blackness, which is quite different than adopting "blackness" or appropriating it (20). South Asians across North America are easily made visible and invisible. With most academic literature on South Asian identity coming from America, academics such as Vijay Prashad (2001) successfully explain how South Asians are neither viewed as white or black in American politics. Instead the politics constructing South Asian identity across Canada and America are myths of model minorities. However, model minority myths have their far stretching limits in entrapping these specific brown bodies, especially in framing them as models for success, and glossing over marginal experiences of groups facing

religious or caste discrimination within their respective societies. Traits of intelligence or work ethic are distinguished as "cultural" or "genetic" instead of immigration process of selection, known as skilled worker campaigns (Prashad 6). I will not only explore identities informed by black popular culture, and model minority myths, but this research also develops an argument for how Punjabi Sikh identities are produced on the margins of a larger or homogenized representation of South-Asian identity. Therefore, I address where various brown bodies face their limitations within respective ethnic communities, and how 'racial' communities are often divided or categorized in hip hop culture.

Characterizing the anthropology of cosmopolitanisms requires refining displacement, travel, up-rooting and re-rooting of people, but also relationships, identities and communities. In this research I am looking at a diaspora with both an imaginary and tangible concept of a homeland. The basis for my interpretation of vernacular cosmopolitanism develops from Pnina Werbner's navigation of various case studies on social movements and social organization in an anthology where individuals with very rooted interpretations of one's culture, religion and ethnicity seize moments as opportunities to collaborate with others on projects for alliances and collectivities (14-15). More importantly, the case studies themselves present an argument that to be cosmopolitan is not a strictly Western mode or position, but one that has origins in the east and south that existed before the image of the western traveler or scientist. Strategic reattachments and dislocations of trans-local identities are essential to this ethnography, as one of my aims is to consider how literature on vernacular cosmopolitanisms may help engage with everyday attachments and reattachments of multiple identities that are not expressed in depth among multiculturalist discourse. In this case study I will address questions surrounding Humble

the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's identities, and further challenge the very language used to identify them as being of Punjabi ethnicity, Sikh heritage and hip hop artists.

This research is timely due to the increase in youth-centered, popular culture iconography and exploration of Punjabi Sikh identities, and culture that emerged and continues to via social media in Canada since 2010. As a result, there is a lacuna of nuanced work written on cultures of performance – such as hip hop – within the Punjabi Sikh diaspora in Canada. As argued by Gayatri Gopinath, critical scholarship and popular attention to music from the South-Asian diaspora has focused on two popular movements: Bhangra (as emerged in the US and UK in the late 1980's and 1990's) and the UK-based Asian Underground or New Asian Dance Music scene of the late 1990's (30). Gopinath argues that this exclusive focus on Bhangra and Asian dance music replicates a notion of diaspora that depends on dominant gender and sexual ideologies (if not ethnic ones). As a result, South-Asian subjectivities, centered on the soundscapes of only one particular music culture, tell the story of one diaspora and its relation to both economic globalization and the nation (Gopinath 30). I look forward to engaging with her practice of re-conceptualizing diaspora outside of its popular masculine and heterosexual discourse, especially in analyzing queer soundscapes produced by Sikh Knowledge. These sensory techniques call for a consideration beyond Bally Sagoo or Apache Indian, who pioneered the popularization of Bhangra music. Their strong and popular association with Punjabi-Sikhs is noteworthy, but has contributed to a mediation of racialized immigrant masculinity across Britain and into North America.

My critique of multiculturalism begins with Daniel Yon's (2000) research on identity, race and ethnicity within Canada's multiculturalist discourse and how it relies on the notion of difference. There are two definitions of difference that work simultaneously together and are

related to discourses of globalization and diaspora (Yon 18). Difference can be about the similarities attached to different cultures, and multiculturalist discourses that construct ethnic groups. Difference can also be described within groups, interrupting assumptions of sameness or inherent attributes (Yon 18-19). By connecting concepts of 'difference' to Toni Morrison's (67) "economy of stereotypes", didactic practices of quick and easy images can be produced without the responsibility of specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description. As a result, racism can be transcribed through literary descriptions that operate through social constructions of race and ethnicity, and manifest in categories and labels.

As previously mentioned, both artists participate in a recent representational movement in popular culture across North America and among the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora. Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini both claim to be working towards normalizing an image of the turban and beard. I argue that they aim to reframe it by battling model minority myths, skilled worker immigration schemes, stereotypes of taxi cab drivers, and images of religious extremists that surround aftermaths of "1984,"[i] Air India Flight 182, and 9/11. I arguably place Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge in a working social narrative of Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity in Canadian popular culture. This research is part of an attempt to work against and within this economy of stereotypes, with hopes of representing the tensions within an ethnicity that has been configured and fetishized in a strictly religious light far too often.

Research Design & Methods

This ethnography builds upon two research papers written during my undergraduate degree. In exploring masculinity, hip hop, Bhangra music and Punjabi identity, I initially interviewed both artists, among other participants. Driven by a personal interest of mine, this ethnography is a result of revisiting elements of the same discussion on Punjabi-Sikh identities and the limits of

multiculturalism. Since 2010, my ideas and opinions on the music of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge and on social media presence continue to transform, and thus this thesis is a reflection of those evolving ideas.

Considering the analysis and ethnographic data from the first interviews of 2010, I carried out the bulk of this research in Toronto through the months of May-August 2013. This period also marked the launch of Sikh Knowledge's album *Turban Sex* and Humble the Poet's self-published book and album campaign, *UnLEARN: Butterflies and Lions*. Their social media movements, new music, press and interviews spanning from September 2012 - April 2014 have informed and enriched the research. The methodologies utilized for this research were multipronged. I used the classic anthropological method of participant observation – the bulk of which was conducted online through Facebook and YouTube – and attendance at concerts, panels and events. I held semi-structured conversations with both Kanwar and Kanwer, but initially gained access to them through online messages over Facebook.

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) promote the study of cultural difference through multiple "grids" as opposed to a singular grid of cultural difference (20). It is their concept of grids that has allowed me to spatially explore cultures of mass media, as public cultures have vastly changed with onset of social media and its integrated platforms. My research is informed by an analysis multiple identity formation across various grids, especially those that do not fit neatly within the lines. On-line worlds are imaginary, but consist of real-time encounters with individuals who create communities and refashion identities across digital and cultural grids. This case study continuously draws on the term "connect", and my use of the term refers to social connections made over the Internet, that are reflecting a change in communication, but a continuation in individuals expressing human conditions. In an attempt to look beyond culture,

my research is aspiring to frame *connection*s that are socially and spatially interconnected and integrated within social processes.

Fieldwork, and establishing the field, is a unique component of anthropology, defining the discipline and helping to construct a space of possibility, while drawing the lines that confine that space. What are the implications and risks of mapping out difference "at home"? Gupta and Ferguson (1997) argue that ethnography's great strength has always been its explicit and well-developed sense of location (35). This strength becomes liability when notions of here and elsewhere are assumed to be features of geography rather than sites constructed in fields of unequal power relations. Sites and unequal power relations, and debates of post-colonialism, have strong influences in research related to diaspora and studies of popular culture emerging from the 1980's, that particularly engage with appropriation, remixing and hybridity.

In her work *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Smith strongly argues that there is nothing post-colonial about post-colonialism, as indigenous peoples' violent history of colonial rule informs their experiences through encounters with imperialism. Apart from the literature that is written from the indigenous world, there is a specific kind of "talk" which is missing from grand narratives. There are some devices of language that just cannot be translated, such as metaphors or tone, especially within the English language. The talk about our colonial pasts is embedded in our political discourses, humour, poetry, music, storytelling and other common-sense ways of passing on both a narrative and an attitude of history (Smith 20). Understanding talk in this way becomes useful when working with self-narrations, poetry and the origins of hip hop culture. Exercising decolonizing methodologies, such as my emphasis of these artists' lyrics, assists in interpreting multiple minority experiences within hip hop music that are forms of toasting and boasting.

I believe stories not only are products of moments, but have genealogies. They follow certain routes, imaginaries, themes and plots. Stories have localities that are informed by "geopolitical imaginings" (Zivkovic 53). For this project, these geopolitical imaginings in Canada are informed by familial histories of immigration, and emigrational settling patterns that have informed our identities and affiliations within neighbourhoods, regions, nations, and diasporas. Thus, with these methodologies, I begin addressing Werbner's question of whether you can remain at home and be cosmopolitan. Along with her, I believe, "if you understand your history as a history of movement, migration, conquest, translation, if you don't have some originary conception of your own culture as really always the same…you could become a cosmopolitan at home" (351).

Lastly, I address and criticize the insider-outsider debate within my methodologies. This assumption occupies and debates conducting ethnographic research both within one's own community and in the realm of local research. Kirin Narayan deconstructed this polarizing paradigm that labels native or indigenous anthropologists as those who write about their own cultures. By recognizing shifting identities and the power relations involved when interpreting and conveying occurrences or community stories, she encourages the process of re-thinking insider/outsider knowledge, as the "field" becomes an increasingly flexible concept. "We" do not speak from a position outside "others'" worlds, but are implicated in them, as well as through fieldwork, political relations, and a variety of global flows or frictions (Narayan 676). As a result, I implicate and situate myself within the larger South-Asian diaspora, and specifically of Punjabi-Sikh heritage in North America.

Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity and heritage is a part of my identity, as my experiences are a result of, but not limited to, Punjabi-Sikh immigration to northern British Columbia from the late

1960's to early 1970's. From that history I occupy a genealogy of stories centered upon turbans and beards from small-town lumber mills. These stories are surrounded by the iconography of racism and discrimination, such as the Komagata Maru and Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon. I come from a regional history that has strongly shaped my perceptions of Punjabi-Sikh identity.

My grandfather was one of the first turbaned Sikhs to reside in my hometown, and faced grave discrimination in finding employment within the lumber industry. His strong dedication to his faith, having tolerance towards the ways his children and grandchildren negotiated the faith and culture, in addition to the pride he took in his military career as a Sikh , was my initial interaction with a fundamentally religious, Sikh identity.

My hometown later became the initial post Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon was assigned to after becoming the first RCMP officer granted the right to wear a turban instead of the traditional Stetson. His turban sits in the local museum as an artefact of the politics of this time, and of religious accommodation within policies of multiculturalism in Canada. That historic moment, as well as historical narratives of forced and chosen social assimilation, have shaped my perceptions of heritage, ethnicity and culture in a vernacular scope of northern/coastal Punjabi-Sikh communities in British Columbia. In the vast landscape of Canada, Punjabi-Sikh histories vary generationally, and geographically, thus requiring a call for historical interrogation. In stating that, the focus of this ethnography is not on finding cultural differences within this community or a South-Asian community at large, but on drawing attention to the historical production and ethnographic reproduction of two artists who are surrounded by discourses of the Sikh iconography, and are further limited by cultural productions of this identity under policies of multiculturalism.

Virtual and Visual Methodologies

An important component of my ethnography needing further elaboration is the virtual and visual methodologies, and the Internet-as-field site. The emergence of the multi-sited ethnography is located within new spheres of interdisciplinary work, including media studies, science and technology studies, and cultural studies (Marcus 95). The importance of cyberspace in my research aligns with following these artists through public domain web pages. The music of Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet emerged and still circulates through a largely digitally-integrated movement via Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, and Sound Cloud, as well as Humble the Poet's social blogging site, www.brownppl.com. These are multi media and participatory outlets accessible through the Internet that allow persons to digitally engineer and generate their messages and presence across various outlets/channels, thereby connecting to viewers/listeners from around the world. By clicking "share", or re-pasting hyperlinks, there is no telling where in the world a post could travel. In my theoretical and methodological approaches, I will be analyzing how these artists are able to engineer and craft a public, participatory persona online. My methods are highly synchronized with the operatives of social media, especially Facebook, which functions as a hub of community, always live, and bringing awareness to events, promotions, music or opinions of these artists generated through online conversations.

Elisenda Ardevol's argument for visual and Internet research is built around visual media understood as a study and research tool. What she frames as the "mediation turn" (87) problematizes how we integrate other representational tools and digital technologies in our daily fieldwork practices and knowledge production. The Internet is becoming increasingly visual. Visual content is accompanied by the extension of digital photographic and video technologies

that are commonly entangled with the Internet and mobile devices. Ardevol makes a case for how this has deep implications for visual research considering how "visual cultures" may be interpreted as archives (79). That concept is particularly useful for visual research when analyzing feeds or photographic posts that operate as stories online.

In referencing visual cultures, Ardevol makes a link to Lisa Nakamura's work on race and gender performance online. The focus is the online identity construction that coincides with embodiments of daily life experiences, political constructions and resistance. As argued, the anthropological shift to understanding interdisciplinary art rests in the emphasis of cultural creation (Nakamura 6). Seeing the image as virtual and disembodied rather than material and concrete poses a radical challenge to interpretations of art and the artist. With the onset of Netscape Navigator, new media are produced and consumed differently. Nakamura theorizes that the producer/artist or subject/model dichotomies and structure are now present in different ways, as there is an added layer of performance that comes with the viewer's act of clicking or even engaging in dialogue online.

I can recall the first time I listened to Humble the Poet on YouTube. I caught a glimpse of my younger cousins watching one of his early self-made videos, *Voice for the Voiceless*, which was a compilation of images over a spoken word piece on violence in the Punjabi community. Looking back on that moment, I can reflect on youth consumption of this content, and on the beginnings of a virtual dialogue. Digital media, and the digital camera as a mass tool of representation, become a vehicle for documenting one's condition; they can also be used for creating alternative representations of oneself, or for gaining power over one's image (Ardevol 80). Reflecting on that clip, and the increased visual sophistication of Humble the Poet's YouTube presence, I understand YouTube videos as "mass media products for consumption"

(Ardevol). The producers of these have already thought about uploading them for an Internet audience. This means the content of the video, along with the conversation/views/circulation it will generate, has to be understood in the context of the Internet (Ardevol 80-81). I go back to Nakamura's research questions, "How can and do minorities use their digital visual capital? In what ways are their gendered and racialized bodies a form of new capital?"

This notion of visual capital conducting visual and virtual ethnography is based on understanding the fan base that invests in an image or image maker, both on and off social media. I will further elaborate on this subject in a discussion on a crowd funding campaign launched by Humble the Poet to assist in producing his self-written book and album, as well as Sikh Knowledge's decision to move from free downloads of his music, to publishing an album on iTunes that can be purchased like mainstream media. Sarah Pink describes this as the "multi-sensory" (118) experience of the web and its inter-platform elements that are equally interdependent with what is happening offline. This description applies equally, whether it involves seeing the artist at a local event or receiving purchased promotional material like shirts in the mail. The reach of these artists goes beyond social media or Internet downloads, and is directly an investment in an alternative culture, and images that are not available in popular or mainstream culture.

Participant observation serves as a shorthand for a continuous tacking between the inside and outside of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically; on the other, stepping back to situate these meanings in a wider context (Clifford 34). New media has potentially changed what it means to do "public anthropology" and what is implied by "anthropology in public". When ethnographic research becomes participatory, albeit blogs, or videos, the act of commentating on a digital platform that is always live, insinuates

actively engaging with the fact. Arguably, never before has fieldwork as a "rite of passage" become publicly available (Saka 2008). New subject positions emerge through public/private epistemological moments when researching on social media, as well as within. I am aware that what I interpret through my research will not always be understood as such by readers or fellow participants. Discourse is not always interpreted in the open-ended public way that social texts are read, but let us not forget that new visual practices taking shape due to the Internet further impact how race and gender are read.

Chapter Summary

Wanting to hear and visualize a diaspora differently, this thesis is a glimpse into the lives of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge, and two of their projects from the summer of 2012. I will explore how these two individuals perform and articulate their Punjabi-Sikh heritage through performances of language, aesthetics, race, ethnicity and gender. In addition, I aim to illuminate and elaborate on the ways they participate in affirming and destabilizing identity politics of Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity in hip hop and discourses of multiculturalism.

In chapter two, *The Need to Connect*, I introduce the artists and their involvement and intentions within hip hop culture and music. While elaborating on their unique encounters with hip hop, my ethnography will emphasize the cyber connections that have contributed to the viral and virtual nature of this research. In presenting media interpretations of these artists and interviews shadowed by labels of ethno hip hop or desi hip hop, I interrogate narrations of both artists and engage with dialogue surrounding what Sikh identity has come to represent in the media, especially in the post 9/11 era (Puar). I will explore the significance of the Internet and the evolution of social media blogs by referencing *The Nation's Tortured Body* (Axel), therefore, presenting what I argue has been an articulation of a more nuanced understanding of the

symbolically identified amrtidhari body on the Internet. I will develop an argument for how the music and social activism of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge coincide with, yet complicate discussions surrounding, "1984" and Sikhi. Focusing on where art meets activism, I theoretically position myself by building upon Warner's discussion of vernacular cosmopolitanisms in hip hop and Sharma's concept of global race consciousness. I do so by initiating a lyrical analysis of song *Technorganic*, due to the significance of the lyrics that take a global, social activist tone.

Chapter three, *Son of a Cabbie* is based in hip hop scholarship (Perry, Rose, Gilroy) in an attempt to explore the immigrant experience and identities of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora through the lyricism of Humble the Poet in *Life of an Immigrant* and widely popular song, *Baagi (Rebel) Music.* I continue to discuss Sharma's concept of global race consciousness and challenge the genre of "Desi rap" in relation to the music and opinions of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge, who are positioned in a Punjabi vernacular within Sikh heritage, that they arguably present to be an unprivileged mode of social identity. I constructively compare popular representations of South-Asian and Middle-Eastern identities in hip hop music to propose arguments beyond cultural appropriation and present examples of misappropriation that complicate representations of race and ethnicity for brown bodies within hip hop, that are largely affected by the aftermath of 9/11. That argument is presented using the stereotype of South Asian men as cab drivers, and how Kanwer Singh's *Life of an Immigrant* humanizes that experience through spoken word. This chapter largely focuses on how power differentials and group inequalities are expressed by these two artists through rooted interpretations of their cultural identities and representations surrounding them.

In chapter four, *Turbans Unravelling*, I specify and analyze the core elements of my ethnographic research through the launch of project, *UnLEARN: Butterflies and Lions* and album, *Turban Sex*. By working from and building upon Kalra's, *Locating the Sikh Pagh*, I focus on the elusiveness of ambivalent identities of gender, ethnicity and sexuality that are always in a state of becoming. I expand upon the iconography and the relationship of the turban to Punjabi-Sikh identity in relation to the controversy surrounding Sikh Knowledge's album, *Turban Sex*. I further incorporate this event in relation to a declaration of Sikhi-as-heritage in Humble the Poet's YouTube video, *Baba Nanak* – where a turban becomes a tinderbox for confrontation of tradition and modernity – further engaging with Sikh aesthetics (Kalra 90).

In conclusion, I revisit key arguments and concepts by presenting how vernacular cosmopolitanism may look by means of interpretation and illustration of social media posts, song lyrics, performances and interviews of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. By developing the limits of multiculturalism, antiracism and concepts of community established upon Punjabi-Sikh ethnic identity, these artists challenge, subvert, and interrogate simplified, conservative and fetishized representation of turban-wearing Sikhs through hip hop culture.

The ethnographic descriptions in this research are largely based on the artists' online videos and social media web pages. I highly recommend a multi-media approach to best illustrate the artists' intentions musically and visually. The prime aim of my research is to raise a set of questions on the limits of multiculturalism and antiracism, while magnifying a case study on popular representations of Punjabi-Sikh identity that are simultaneously expressed and repressed through notions of community and diaspora. The following ideas are a platform for what I argue to be a growing need to *connect* locally and globally through experiences that could be forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism.

CHAPTER 2: THE NEED TO *CONNECT*

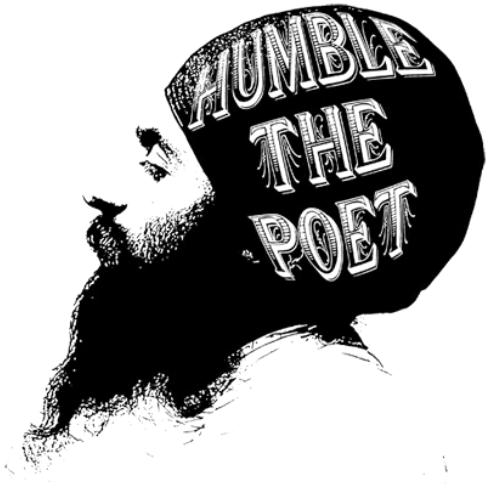

Figure 1. Kanwer Singh- Humble the Poet (Image courtesy of Facebook)

Interview with Humble the Poet

> "Forgot your pin, password, user ID? Know yourself / USB hook up like an IV / Now we feedin' through a YouTube." (Humble the Poet, *Technorganic*)
>
> "I have 10 years to fill a stadium and 2 minutes to fill your cranium: Humble the Poet signing in." (Humble the Poet)

This section of my case study discusses the personal interview I conducted with Kanwer Singh on 12 June, 2013 (Kanwer interview). All of the quotations I include in this section are excerpted from that interview.

It had been about three years since I had last sat down and spoken with Kanwer. Since then, we had gone back and forth for a while trying to schedule an interview. Finding the right questions to ask him was a challenge. I was intrigued by the changes in both of us since our last meeting – my ideas and opinions since my first research project, and his thinking and development as an artist.

The interview was scheduled on a whim. He was close to my neighborhood, picked me up and we sat down to talk over coffee. While driving to the local Tim Hortons, he told me he didn't do interviews anymore. "People always seem to twist it," he said. He described a phone interview he had done with a journalist. In the resulting piece, she spoke to his body gestures, as if she had actually sat with him. He cleared the nervous air by stating that he had new projects on the rise, so was open to interviews again. But his disclaimer spoke to the intentions behind the interviews that twisted his image. What had others written about him? What did they think he was about? Who did they expect?

Humble the Poet, an artist persona created by Kanwer Singh, has an impressive viral and virtual presence. His YouTube videos in the past five years, in which he plays an active role crafting and editing, have reached viewers across the globe, due to the embedded interconnections of social media[ii]. "I thought about it, I could put Humble the Poet on a resume and get a job as a social media manager anywhere. I feel I do it better than most Fortune 500 companies."

Born and raised by immigrant parents that arrived in Canada in 1971, he recalled living in the mixed-income neighborhood of Rexdale. Although he recalled growing up in the come-up house (not the first family apartment), due to the demographic make-up of the area he had been exposed to friends from diverse ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. "I grew up where the city ends pretty much. So what that gave was extremely diverse ethnicities and economics. In high school I had a friend that worked at KFC, and all his money went to his parents to help with the mortgage. I had another friend whose mommy and daddy were lawyers and he had to choose what car he took to school every day…all the schools were in areas you would consider the

‘hood’, such as Jamestown, Mount Olive.” Kanwer did not grow up around very many Punjabi Sikhs, although his childhood consisted of attending Sikh religious summer camps.

Kanwer’s exposure to hip hop was a reflection of the times. He was born and grew up in the 1980’s. Music was never encouraged in the home, and his awareness of the genre developed mostly through his older sisters who watched Much Music and MTV. “The First song I ever had memorized was by Vanilla Ice, so I had ‘Ice Ice’ memorized. The lyrics were on the tape, so you could read along and learn it.” Kanwer grew up during the period of mass hip hop commodification. The hip hop culture phenomenon was travelling the world, and becoming a movement of its own depending on the disenfranchised youth who were identifying with it.

However, he considered himself a late bloomer, and it was not until online niche forums of 2006/07 that he immersed himself in hip hop through a battle rap niche forum. It seems that his continual use of the phrase “need to connect” might have been initiated from these early experiences on Internet forums. When I asked what drew him to them, the answer was mundane. “It was simply finding people that had similar interests, and connecting with them over it.” It was winning a rap battle that inspired the creation of his identity as an artist. “My screen name was ‘Humble’. I said ‘Forget the MCs, forget the rappers, I am Humble the Poet’, and stuck with that. I won that tournament and to rub it in, I changed my screen name to ‘Humble the Poet’. With his inspirations being Lauryn Hill and OutKast, the moment of awakening for him was hearing Toronto artist, Ian Kamau perform at a K-OS concert. That is when he knew he wanted to be a part of slam poetry and spoken word. “After seeing Kamau, well I have seen slam poetry before but, after I saw that, I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of.”

With a name like “Humble the Poet”, I asked him where he fit within poetry. He explained, “Well, Slam Poetry came out of ideas that text poetry reading – such as Edger Allen

Poe – is boring as shit. The poem should be recited by the poet like it was written and meant to be heard and expressed. Every hip hop artist that I initially connected with were the most emotional ones. There aren't many emotional rappers, or they express emotions I can't really connect to. I didn't grow up in the hood. So I don't connect to that type of music. Like when Tupac or DMX came, they were heavily emotional, and people connected to that. I really appreciate word play. I grew up on Outkast. They were very strong lyricists. They weren't trying to make a point about lyricism, it was just there."

Prior to his social media campaigns and music, Kanwer was a grade three schoolteacher. His past career is evident in his posts that share a breadth of knowledge and his life experiences. He took an incredible risk leaving his career for pursuits in music, writing and multi-media projects that are now a full-time job, "I have 10 years to fill a stadium and 2 minutes to fill your cranium," an introduction heard before most of his videos becomes his driving motto and a creative business model, capitalizing on an image not so popular or present in mainstream media.

Interview with Sikh Knowledge

Figure 2. Kanwar Anit Singh Saini- Sikh Knowledge (Image courtesy of Facebook)

> "Sikh (Sick) - Knowledge, it's a play on words." (Kanwar)
>
> "Could you hear the bombs over the DJ? Play the a cappella / My life's music is the sound of the world today / Straight Technorganic." (Sikh Knowledge, *Technorganic*)

This section of my case study discusses the personal interview I conducted with Kanwar on 19 September 2013 (Kanwar interview). Most of the quotations I include in this section are excerpted from that interview. This was actually a second interview conducted with Kanwar, the initial interview having been lost to the flaws of technology. My conversations with him are thus a mix of two interviews. Seen as a setback at first, I strongly feel I would have benefitted from interviewing Kanwer Singh a second time as well. Instead, in the following chapters I will supplement my single interview with him with one conducted by *Know Thy Wootz* podcast in England, perhaps one of the most informative interviews he has done.

"Creativity was always a stabilizer for me. Just cope with not really knowing what I was I doing with my life all the time. I think from the outside in, it looks like I always have a direction. But from the inside out, I am not crazy with a plan, I feel like I am falling apart." With this opening statement of an interview we did, Kanwar revealed some of the most vulnerable and honest truths about himself and his music. Kanwar explained how music had always been an outlet for him growing up in highly-racialized and politicized Quebec, and being raised in Montreal by two immigrant parents who arrived in the early 1970's.

Kanwar Saini's integration into music was very much part of the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). He explained, "I guess you could say all, but ok, many Sikh or South-Asian males take classes at the temple. I did tabla for five years and a little bit of the harmonium – Indian violin.

None of these instruments I would play comfortably on stage. I eventually studied music at the university level, and specialized in classical Western theory."

Curious about his moniker, I asked how and when it came about. Kanwar explained that a friend gave it to him years ago, specifically emphasizing the double-entendre. He started making beats in high school for a local hip hop group. Not having the right equipment at first, he would experiment by sequencing out beats for minutes. Peers around him thought it was cool and were interested in how he was doing it. But it was his passion for creating, and his decision to attend college after high school that further shaped his skills and music.

"So you can go to college in different locations around Montreal, and I opted to go to one downtown, instead of the suburbs, unlike most of my peers. That was amazing, because downtown you meet a variety of people, and, low and behold, there are people that are listening to the same music as me, but teaching me about other types, or making me appreciate other type of beat-orientated music. Then I started participating in a radio show in college, and it was amazing because I got to play my own stuff on the radio."

A defining moment for him was when his beat-making was critically received by a popular DJ known around Montreal. "I remember I took a beat to him, to the record store that we all used to shop at. And he's like 'that's pretty good, but you should sample your drums, it's like you are using stalk drums'. I was like only 17, and this was terminology I didn't know. He probably thinks 'this is sounding keyboardy'. I bought magazine to read up on everything. I saved up for an MPC 2000, and the pads on that are actually one of my tattoos."

After purchasing his first piece of professional beat equipment, he built his own snares, kicks, hats, sequences and patterns. Coming up in what he called the computer age, his first beats were with Windows Wave Editor. He would later acquire the nickname, *Floppy Disk Bandit*.

With a playful smile, he laughed, “Around school I would steal floppy disks. I would go to different labs, especially McGill, and I bugged people in the labs for them. I probably still have a box at my dad’s house. Like one beat would be across like seven floppy disks. I would tape it up and call it a name.”

Considering himself a child of Wu-Tang, his musical influences can be considered one of the pioneers and self-acclaimed savers of hip hop. From unpredictable arrangements, MCing, soulful sung hooks, Kanwar was influenced by the beat production of RZA and Fourth Disciple. He was also drawn into the “hood” content of their music that told a particular story. Sikh Knowledge can be found attending, or spinning beats at annuals parties in the months of November that commemorate Wu-Tang’s iconic album from 1993.

Narrations

Narrated mostly by South-Asian or Sikh organizations and cultural magazines/blogs, Humble the Poet has been featured on MTV Iggy, the CBC, Rolling Stone India, and by www.worldstarhiphop.com as “Poet of the Week”. Maybe one of the problematic results of this media attention is how he has been framed as the brown, Punjabi, desi or Sikh poster boy of hip hop. In a recent CBC music blog in celebration of May 2014 South-Asian Heritage month, Humble was featured as one of the top 10

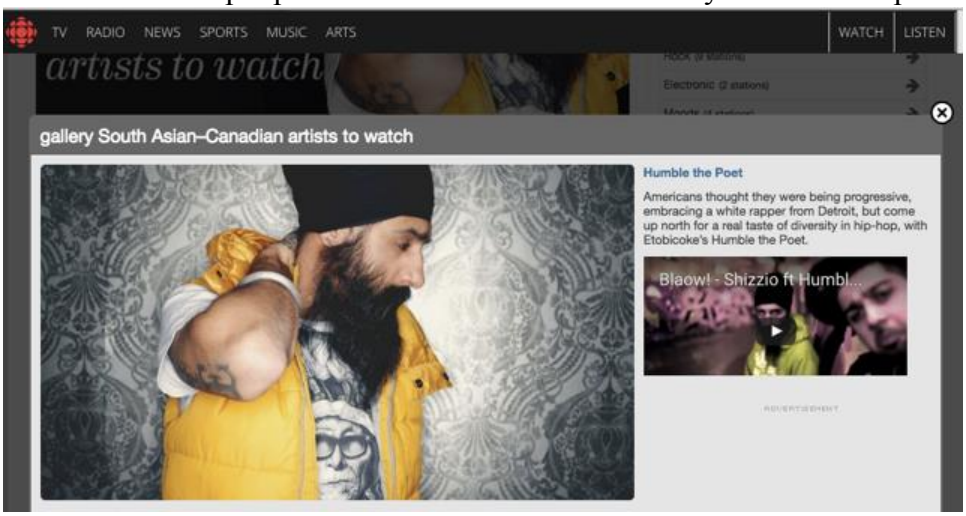

Figure 3. Humble the Poet- an artist to watch, CBC music blog (Image courtesy of CBC)

Canadian-South Asian artists to look out for. Among the images of the featured artists, his image was accompanied by the caption, "Americans thought they were being progressive embracing a White rapper from Detroit, but come up north for a real taste of diversity in hip hop" (CBC.ca). Rolling Stone India, in a rather condensed and confusing manner, misrepresented Humble the Poet by narrating him as a "Gursikh" rapper and MC in "Punjabi Hip Hop", as well as a "Canadian-Desi, hip hop artist" recreating a hybrid of immigrant hip hop not just about hot chicks and gang wars (rollingstoneindia.com).

MTV Iggy, an extension of MTV, originally featured Humble the Poet in both a well-informed article (Mitter, "Better than Jay-Z") and a shorter artist profile, promoting music video, *Baagi Music,* which is no longer available online. The artist profile page introduced him as "straight from the multicultural crucible of Toronto" and adorning "unorthodox hip hop swag", essentially framing his turban and long beard. It is clear that a language of multiculturalism and ethnic garb attracts Kanwer's body and talent. Regardless, to be featured on MTV Iggy was a success for both Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. Website desihiphop.com reported: "…excited about the feature, the song's producer Sikh Knowledge tells DesiHipHop.com "WE'RE ON MTV!!! No, not MTV Desi, or MTV Turban, or Queer TV, or mobile MTV, or MTV Pakistan…….but the legit capitalist kaa kaa MTV :)".

"Better than Jay Z and Bigger then Osama…" (Mitter) was the headline for the article that critically unfolded into a useful piece about who Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are, along with their aims in hip hop. Without debate, it can be said that it was *Baagi Music* – a song released in 2010 by Humble the Poet and produced by Sikh Knowledge – that became an instant party anthem, and to some, an anthem for Punjabi pride in Toronto. This was the song and music video that brought mass attention to Humble the Poet as it sparked the interest of fans, music

critics and journalists. It also sparked a larger online following and emphasized how viral this duo is, a fact that is confirmed by how many YouTube clicks this video continues to draw. Aiming to set the record straight, Mitter (2011) interrogates the perceptions listeners and viewers may have of Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini; how it is that Humble the Poet wants to be seen as part of the global family of hip hop, and not a niche artist making music for and about a specific ethnicity. In the article, Humble alludes to the fact that he aims to be bigger than Jay Z one day. "I hope one day Jay Z will be the next black Humble the Poet", said with much sarcasm, of course. As the article unfolded, it also touched on the social difficulties of donning a turban, whether those difficulties are labeled as bullying or racism. Kanwer stated, "If my competition now for a "beard and turban" is Osama. I will keep working until they say, wow that guy looks like Humble." (Mitter 2011)

This statement by Kanwer reflects a representational work that could normalize an image, but he is also aiming to normalize an image with a controversial collaborator and mentor. As for Sikh Knowledge, most articles on him are presented in an interview-like style. Journalists make little assumptions about Kanwar Saini, often portraying him as a well-rounded individual who has many ideas and thoughts. More open about sharing details of his personal life than Kanwer Singh, Kanwar often welcomes questions to discuss personal perspectives concerning homosexuality, religion, and even sexual abuse. Perhaps Sikh Knowledge becomes a novelty of sorts, as stated by th Torontoist during his feature on the Pride Stage in 2012, he is "As far as anyone knows, the world's only openly-gay Sikh producer and rapper" (Dart 2012). With that title, he interrogates people defining him as an ambassador for the Sikh religion or Sikh culture. Interviewed by an organization for LGBT Sikhs, he states, "People often approach me, thinking I know a lot of Sikhism. I don't" (Kanwar Interview). His even bolder statements, such as

"Punjabi-Sikh culture is hetero-normative and too macho for its own good" (Kanwar Interview) reflect how his own sexuality influences his work. Although accused by some of cultural appropriation, especially when he rhymes in Jamaican patois, his profession and talent as a bilingual speech language pathologist is often overlooked. Perhaps the more intriguing element of Kanwar's work is his skilled attention to word play and linguistic expertise.

It is evident that there are both limiting and complex statements being made in these interviews. But what does it say about the Sikh, male body in post-9/11 times? Is the Sikh terrorist seen only through an American lens, or can it also be found in Canadian narrations? In what respects is a beard and turban unorthodox within hip hop culture? In what ways can a turban be both hyper-masculinized and emasculated? Is there a difference in musical legitimacy in being categorized as part of the so-called "global hip hop family" by the MTV Iggy correspondent, and the genre of "Punjabi hip hop" mentioned by Rolling Stone India? Lastly, what does the term ethnic hip hop signify? This thesis aims to put a microscope on the messiness and entanglements of performances and representations of race, gender and ethnicity based on those very questions.

(Image)ining Sikh Online

Scholars of Sikh history (with exceptions, see Axel) use the generic terms Sikh and Sikhs loosely to indicate their focus. However, this focus often misses an important critique, namely, the colonial construction of the Sikh body, as it is often collapsed with the images of the *amritdhari* (baptized) Sikh man, popularized with the beard and turban. "Within a peculiar, yet seemingly banal logic of signification, Sikh and Sikhs have come to signify Sikh men, and the visual image of the (ideal) Sikh man has come to signify all Sikhs" (Axel 45). Hetero-normative signification that Axel speaks of is based out of the chapter titled, *The Maharaja's Glorious*

Body (76), and it has come to play an interesting role in my approach to analyzing how Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's bodies are misidentified, read and understood online.

Both artists have a component to their online activity called *Ask Me Anything*. Humble the Poet usually does sessions through his Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/HumbleThePoet), and Sikh Knowledge has a link on his Tumblr page (http://realistan.tumblr.com/), where one can submit a question or comment. Both of their platforms are publically accessible. Almost anything is up for debate or questioning – music, sexuality, personal advice, religion, culture etc. I asked both artists how they felt about this, and if people have mistaken them as ambassadors for the Sikh religion or Punjabi culture. "…I can't be anyone's ambassador. I cannot be my white colleagues' ambassador to Sikh heritage and Punjabi culture, or homosexuality. I can't even be my Sikh friends' ambassador to homosexuality, or what it's like to be clinician in bell curve, North American life. I can't do that anymore" (Kanwar interview). As for Humble the Poet, he finds people's perceptions of him can fit across the spectrum. "I think people think I am there to destroy Sikhism and promote individuality, or that I am there to promote sin, and all kind of shit. Other people are like 'no, he is only here for Sikhism and promote the Khalistan movement'" (Kanwer interview).

Here is an example. An anonymous individual posted a question on May 17, 2013 asking, "Are you open to working with Sikh organizations for youth empowerment?" (http://realistan.tumblr.com/) He replied: "Youth empowerment, when so biased, is abstract at best…I work with ALL kids professionally at the level of health in school as a speech-language pathologist. Furthermore, the Sikh community is not interested in sustaining me as an artist but often want artists to perform at every event for minimum/no pay under the tacit of *Seva* (community work) . . . Seva is nice, but never paid my bills. I'm an artist and deserve more

respect than that . . . therefore I work and favor my own biases when I want, as I feel. Sikh youth will be OK. Consider me having Sikh-Punjabi heritage, but not exclusive to one community" (Kanwar interview). Pollok argued in his examination of the cosmopolitan and vernacular in history that vernacularism should be understood as an "action" rather than "idea". It should be something people do, rather than something they declare, and practice rather than proposition (17). Kanwar's commitment to youth and language education across communities is evident in many ways: his employment with the Toronto School Board; his personal endeavors and community initiatives that address his passion for literacy; his participation in protests that bring awareness to LGBTQ issues; and his openness in publicly addressing Islamophobia and racism[iii]. His efforts go beyond statuses and opinions to be liked on social media. His opinions and cross-community involvement are driven by his passions and his ability to be part of multiple communities and affiliations, while resonating his experiences and heritage as a Punjabi-Sikh.

I, too, have wondered how Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet have been slumped into some sort of Sikh imaginary or stand-ins for the religion or a Khalistani movement. Prior to starting my research, I made the incorrect assumption that they were involved in the work of the Sikh Activist Network. The pair did perform at the network's first event *When Lions Roar* in 2009. I was interested in the artists' reflection on that, as it might have been that performance that triggered a misunderstanding of their intentions in art, activism and Punjabi-Sikh community. Humble reflected, "I learned a lot, and they do a great job. Again, educating people on the situation of '84…it's just that they are very specific on one or two things. They have an agenda…like looking back we were debating it. I see their point, like we need to make a space for our people to have art. I tend to shut down when I hear concepts of art. Again, I do understand the concept of niche. But my fear was you can have your Mandeep Sethi, your Saint

Soldier [other artists of Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity in hip hop, who are also activists on social issues affecting the diaspora][iv], but what are you going to do when those five guys are done. Who's going to come up next? It's like creating that pond that is going to validate talent in a way it should not be validated" (Kanwer interview).

When he speaks about validation, Kanwer is referring to validation across the spectrum as a custodian of desi art, Sikh heritage and understandings of Sikhi. Is there a race to validate art in the Sikh diaspora, based on how frequently 1984 is mentioned, or even how high or creatively a turban is tied? Bridging on Gopinath's framework (31), Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge can be seen as (partially) dis-identificatory subjects, as they tactically and simultaneously work off, with, and against dominant cultural forms and markers. They are not taking cultural ownership of Sikhi or Sikh heritage, but are tactically working in/out of it. It can be said that Sikh Knowledge, more than Humble the Poet, has been open to mass criticism from orthodox Sikhs and religious extremists for his queer sexuality. He is also the most provocative of the two when it comes to representational tactics, which will be explored with album *Turban Sex*.

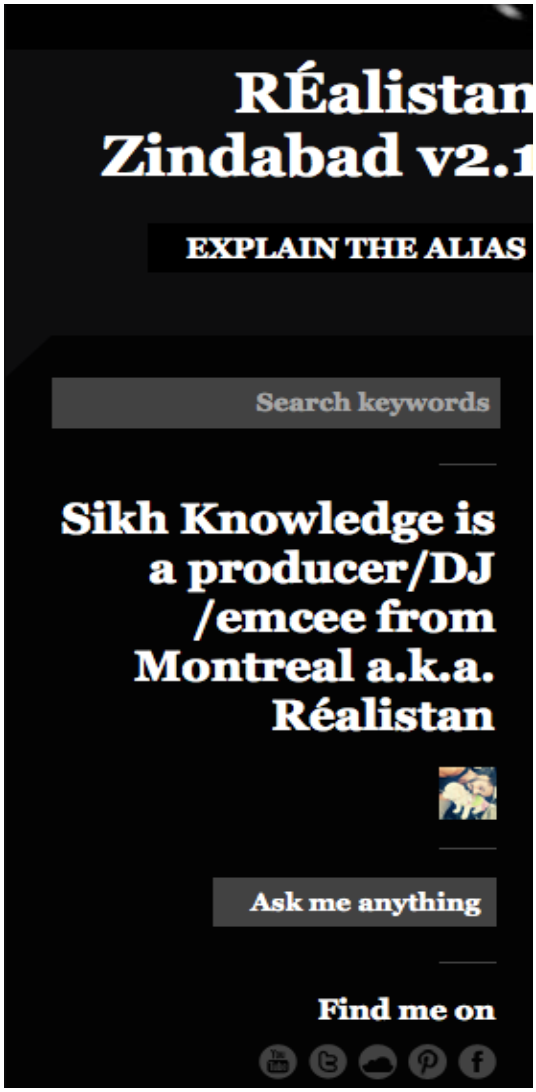

Figure 4. The interface of Sikh Knowlegde's blog, www.realistan.tumblr.com has since changed

It seems that most Sikhs or Punjabis within the diaspora are drawn to these two individuals, either for their love of what they do, or for showing support for,

or identifying with, representations that are not present in mass media. Even today, seeing a person with a turban in mainstream media is rare, so an artist having a stage name with the word 'Sikh' in it does draw curiosity. This curiosity, in fact, is what Kanwar Saini believes brings people to his Facebook page. Intrigued by his look, and maybe even his political stance in regards to 1984, there is an immediate and hateful reaction by some when his sexual orientation is revealed. Often, there is a demand that he change his name, based on the belief that being Sikh should have nothing to do with sexual expression, especially of a homosexual nature.

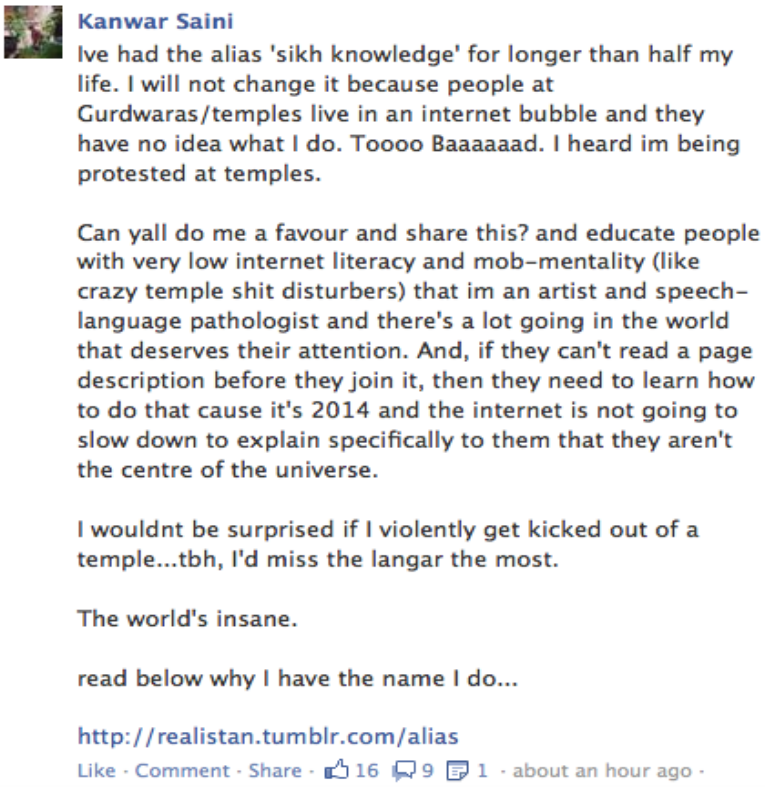

Figure 5. Sikh Knowledge explaining his alias on Facebook (Image courtesy of Facebook)

In a Facebook status posted on February 2, 2014, Kanwar states, "I've had the alias 'Sikh Knowledge' for longer than half my life (see fig. 4). I will not change it because people at the *gurdwara* (temple) live in an Internet bubble and they have no idea what I do. Toooo Baaaaaad. I heard I'm being protested at temples." The Internet bubble he refers to is viewers blindly

following his social media blogging sites, thinking his work is a reflection or promotion of the Sikh religion.

His blog site goes by the name "RÉALISTAN ZINDABAD V2.3". Most likely a play on 'Khalistan', 'Réalistan' stands for Montreal, and a creative name used by him and his collaborators. Montreal is his home, as well as his creative base as part of a collective of beat builders for ArtBeat Montreal. His tactical play on *Khalistan Zindabad* (long live Khalistan) becomes 'long live to be real' and 'being from the "Réal"'. This bricolage is what Jaspal Naveel Singh describes as "blending the utopian concept of Khalistan with the lived reality of his hometown" (355). What he exactly means can be interpreted in so many ways. Some of us might be over-thinking it, and perhaps leaving it open to interpretation and expression is what keeps Sikh Knowledge in a unique position of curiously provoking thought.

Thus far, intersecting with Axel's work, I argue that the social media design of Kanwer and Kanwar represent only a fraction of the new wave and emergence of the Sikh body online. What they are producing, in my opinion, is critical to representations of Sikh identity, and their efforts can be coined by the social media term, image-makers. Their online presence is a progression of web sites created in 1996, used by most Khalistani activists to record and showcase practices of torture acted upon Sikh bodies. These sites generate a visual and narrative of past atrocities against Sikhs (Axel 127). It is likely that their political views of 1984 as genocide, along with their acknowledgement and commemorations of the anniversary of Operation Blue Star via social media, have conglomerated their efforts in popular culture, into discourses of Khalistan. There is an inter-articulation taking place when Sikh bodies framed by turbans and beards become interpreted solely as religious bodies. In turn, these individuals are joined to a narrative of genocide from 1984, to which their Sikh subjectivity becomes relational

to place (Canada, diaspora), space (Internet) and limits of religion. By entering the domain of computer technology and commodity circulation, the image of the gendered body (specifically, the amritdhari Sikh), initiates processes or varied mediations of interpretation. This process constitutes supposed relationships, or even ideas of assumed collective opinions between bodies and populations of all Sikhs living around the globe (Axel 146). Axel makes a crucial point that has been emphasized by social theorists of Sikh Studies (Arora and Nijhawan 2013). He theorizes that, since the 1980's, the fight for Khalistan, or ideas of what a fight for Khalistan would look like and result in, has transformed ideas of what it means to be Sikh. Ideas of what it means to be Sikh have been heavily influenced by what a Sikh is to look like, and highly-gendered interpretations of this have silenced Sikh women and made them invisible. My case study aims to unfold some of these gender exclusions and incorporate sexuality when discussing Sikh identity by representing how Kanwar negotiates his queer sexuality and this Sikh heritage.

Considering the diaspora as something that creates the homeland, Jasbir Puar suggests that Axel's concept of homeland (Khalistan) should be understood as an affective and temporal process rather than a place. The same can be said for the artists in Sharma's ethnography, where the word desi becomes central to a collective imaginary in relation to *desha* (homeland), but for the importance of this research, there is an emphasis on Punjabi identity versus a broad Indian (desi) identity. This subjectification of homeland/diaspora pulls homeland into relation with other kinds of images, processes and their historical formations, all of which will be explored further in the next chapter, particularly with the song, *Baagi Music*.

Connecting

By calling this chapter *The Need to Connect*, I aim to dissect the themes of connecting over

social issues and over the Internet, and identifying with others through music, poetry, blogs or status updates. More than ever, people on social media sites are looking to be heard and seen. They are looking to connect with others over the things they have to say, or to simply have their presence acknowledged. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's collaborations work within and play off this ever-growing need, but are also a product of it.

Hearing these two artists create music together makes me think about how this connection came about. Their meeting may seem surprising, yet it is a product of this digital time. Sikh Knowledge explains, "Humble and I met five and a half years ago over Facebook. He messaged me because we have the same first name, but he spells it differently. It's a funny story the way it goes. He messaged me saying, 'You're spelling your name wrong'. That's all I got. I thought that was pretty bold. 'Who is this being all cute and funny?' One thing led to another and he found out that I was already a MC/producer out in Montreal and I didn't fuck around with the desi scene. I don't give a fuck, right? He was a spoken word artist, so he just became more comfortable with becoming an MC when he found out I was an MC. That's the way it popped off" (Kanwar interview).

When I asked Humble the Poet if he would describe working with Sikh Knowledge as a creative bond, he responded, "We do not have a creative bond. We have a very, very, good personal bond. In the beginning when we didn't know each other we were working through email. We didn't know each other. We didn't particularly care for each other. We were both trying to prove ourselves . . . me probably more so, because he had already released two of his albums and worked with artists. My mind set was, 'I am better than these rappers', even though I wasn't. From there we developed a personal relationship. When my last girlfriend dumped me, he was my shoulder. So what ends up happening is, well what's funny is, our productivity is so

low. When I go over there, he will tell me all the tracks we need to do. But we just end up chilling and cracking jokes until it's time to go" (Kanwer interview).

Figure 6. Kanwer and Kanwar have a personal relationship as a result of their online encounter (Image courtesy of Facebook)

Kanwer Singh stumbled upon Kanwar Saini from a desire to know how many people on Facebook shared his name. A common interest of hip hop, and perhaps seeing a familiar look , or someone that looked like him caught his attention. By sending a single message, and Kanwar replying, there was a connection. My use of the word *connect*, comes form Kanwer's use of the world 'connect' multiple times throughout his interview. He explained his intentions of connecting in the following way, "When I talk about the racism of wearing a head wrap, I can immediately connect with a hijabi girl. We both get it. We get it more than a Punjabi guy that doesn't keep his hair. Right? So for me it's always been about connecting. That is how I started my career. With *Voice for the Voiceless*, problems can't be addressed with people that do not connect to the problems. People don't need an after school special; they need to hear it the way it needs to be said – realistically and honestly, and non-judgmentally. Put it out there for people to hear, so they can connect with it" (Kanwar interview).

Voice for the Voiceless was Humble the Poet's first attempt at connecting with the Punjabi-Sikh community, from discussing gang violence, to caste discrimination and sexual violence, he

strung together well-known stories, and actual experiences of individuals affected by the mentioned issues. Kanwer began presenting his music and poetry with an idealistic approach towards "community", which he later drew away from. When I began my research I was drawn to the following song, *Technorganic*, for it served the basis of analyzing vernacular cosmopolitanisms, and the social activism that is largely present in their collaborations. It further allowed me to contextualize, compare and contrast the intentions of both artists through the conceptual frameworks of "Black Globality" used by Warner, and "global race consciousness" by Sharma. Both frameworks aided in identifying racial and ethnic connections being made on a socially conscious level. In addition, I have explored and developed this ethnography on the notions of globalization, largely linked to the development of technology, and as a result, has created multiple possibilities to connect across media, bringing into question virtual cosmopolitanisms.

What is fascinating about virtual and real connections being made in the global era of social media, is the volume of encounters between racialized groups, which is further shaping local racial processes and multiple modes of marginality. In recent years, hashtags (#), a metadata tag attached social networks and microblogging platforms that makes it easy to find messages or content associated to the subject, have bombarded social media sites Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, impacting and initiating conversations on an instant scale. For example, #blacklivesmatter or #refugeecrisis has infiltrated debates across the Internet and helped spread awareness for protests and rallies, if not counter movements.

Warner's use of the concept globality, signifies "the intensification of more-or-less worldwide connectivity and increasingly reflexive global consciousness" (Robertson 2002). The everyday life of people all over the world is becoming global, by the "increasing inter-

relatedness of cultural identities and representations…as individuals and communities increasingly construct individual and collective identities, and direct local actions, in relationship to distant "Others", elsewhere, in what is being grasped as a "world society" (Warner 286). By adding the adjective "Black" to the theory, he utilizes "Black Globality" to foreground ways the consciousness of underclass black and Latino youth experiences from the onset of hip hop culture have been drawn upon by individuals across the globe. The core of his work lies in the invitation to hip hop cultural theorists to ask how and why certain chains of equivalence (as well as un-equivalences) between minority locations are established, produced and contested within the Hip Hop Nation. He is specifically interested in the context of trans-local hierarchies of power that may constitute individuals or groups as black in one region, and grey or white or brown in others. He urges for an examination of how identifications with blackness configure with other social identifications, and how these signifiers slide into one another in articulations of power and politics (269).

Warner argues that the dialectical movements of vernacular cosmopolitan hip hop thought and praxis can be graphically illustrated. In other words, it can be verbally illustrative by bringing trans-local experiences into critical dialogue with one another. It is the circulation of hip hop grammar that can be applied to multiple minority experiences that could potentially expand political consciousness and awareness of social exclusions (295). The following lyrics from *Technorganic* can be interpreted using Warner's theoretical framework of "Black Globality", and provide insight into the connections being made across social media, that mainly emphasize social conditions of marginal experiences shaped by race and ethnicity. The following lyrics were sampled onto a beat made by American producer, Flying Lotus.

No need to panic, we be spitting Technorganic

and it makes so much logic, that I'm fuckin' with Sikh Knowledge

Cuz we do to tracks like the Tutsi do the Congolese

Janjaweed to Sudanese

U.S to the world, please

Take it back to Africa like sincere

Half of ya'll in one ear, out the other, unclear

Like those bloody diamonds from Sierra Leone

Chop a rhyme, or chop a bone for a gem and I'm gone

Some turn their back, some of them rally back

Sikh Knowledge must keep my mental pon' lock

Balance the jungle and city limits like Jakarta

Children built immunities to the gunfire

Rounds sound like hi-hats flakin' off an empire

Turnin' war to profit like Blitzer. Do my dance for Sabra and Shatila

The dance of the marginalized till my feet bleed like Rekha.

Play Ribs like xylophones, balancin' music and hunger

I dance for '84, I dance for Darfur

While they dance to duck ammunition during war *(Technorganic)*

Acknowledgement of official and unofficial genocide travels throughout the lyrics, as if a road map for genocidal tourism. From Rwanda to Lebanon, Darfur, and Operation Blue Star of 1984, racialized and ethnicized bodies take shape. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge almost collapse literal space within these lyrics to highlight violent marginalization everywhere. Yet,

they begin by saying “take it back to Africa like sincere,” whether in part acknowledging the origins of hip hop culture or mass violence that has devastated the continent. Ironically, listeners are left to assume. What exactly can be accomplished with lyrics like these, which simultaneously gloss over ethnic cleansing, yet provocatively play with the concept of a war dance? Is this a form of social activism?

Humble the Poet might be known for having the most songs that probe and interrogate perceptions of 1984. As for Sikh Knowledge’s take on 1984, I will touch upon that in chapter four. Kanwer explained his work on '84 in the following way. “I can connect with what is happening in Palestine or Darfur, and I can connect with what is happening in Sri Lanka, because I can connect with what happened in ’84. My motive in particular with ’84 is, ‘yes it is done and happened, but it is still happening’. And every track we do, we continue to say’ this stuff is still happening’. These people may not look like you, or sound like you, or share your beliefs, but it is happening. And if you don’t give a shit, then that is something you need to look at…when shit happens in Iraq or Boston you don’t give a shit, but when it happens in Wisconsin[v]- you need to realize that this shit happens because of people like you that just give a shit about their own people” (Kanwer interview).

Foremost, I do not think it is enough to say that these artists have cosmopolitan qualities due to the places their lyrics go, or even the depths or spans reached globally by their music, videos and statuses on the Internet. But the achievement of their music in terms of art meeting activism emphasizes ways racialized and ethnicized bodies are separated in political spaces. Warner’s use of the concept vernacular cosmopolitan throughout his research graphically emphasizes and geographically illustrates trans-local experiences in hip hop culture outside of New York. That said, in the political space of hip hop, the creation of categories like desi hip hop

or South-Asian music restricts brown bodies to certain places and dialogues. These two categories and similar terms overlook the diverse, shifting, and contingent uses and appropriations of hip hop culture. However, it is this lyrical dialogue that makes the vernacular accountable. Their discussion of "genocide everywhere" (*Technorganic*) is based on a local and global understanding of violence in the diaspora.

This case study of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge is not the first and is unlikely to be the last ethnographic exploration of the ways the physical body, and the ethnicized and gendered signifiers and stereotypes that accompany it, react in highly-contested political and cultural spaces, such as that of hip hop. I cannot argue that the lyrics from *Technorganic* claim or emphasize that we can overcome these divisions, for it is these physical locations – whether related to body, aesthetics or geography – play an essential role in utilizing discourses of difference in hopes of sparking a connection. "It is precisely the connecting of people separated by politics, race, ethnicity, geography and history depicted as the most exciting and promising about Hip Hop" (Warner 305). Intentionally, and as a result, most powerfully, Warner gave the last words of his dissertation to one of his informants, Rozzano, "There's a bigger level hip hop shit that people are not taking note of…It's about connecting the way we are right now (Ibid)." It is based on Rozzano's words that I hope to continue this conversation, and illuminate this notion of *connecting.*

Globalization signals the internationalization of capitalism and the rapid circulation and flow of information, commodities, and visual images. While globalization may erode national identities, these and other identities are also being strengthened as resistance (Yon 15). One can begin to see globalization at work with how these artists strategize within the operatives of the Internet to produce and sell their music, and to use social media to make an under-represented

image accessible in popular culture. The framework of vernacular cosmopolitanism should be conceived as a means of coming from a specific place and history, but not being limited by that identity in connecting with individuals or other ethnicities in socially-conscious ways. To be situated and rooted, but be anywhere or everywhere simultaneously, provides an alternative way to understanding how identity and ethnicity function in the framework of vernacular cosmopolitanisms, yet dysfunction in formal policies of multiculturalism.

By basing this research within available hip hop scholarship, the contestation of black cultural politics and identifications plays a central role alongside cultural politics of Sikh identity, and identifications of ethno hip hop and desi hip hop. The next chapter compares and develops the framework of vernacular cosmopolitanism to Nitasha Sharma's concept of global race consciousness, and how the notion of "differences within", and "differences between" (Hall 447) operate in hip hop culture through discourses of race and ethnicity.

CHAPTER 3: SON OF A CABBIE

> I was one of the people who thought 9/11 was an opportunity to rethink our character as a nation. (Jay Z, *Decoded*)

> . . . all of us knew that hip-hop credibility had little to do with the quality of your boast, the intensity of your critique or the passion of your confessional. Really, it was all rooted in your hip hop aesthetic. And that aesthetic seemed to be rooted in geography. (Kiese Laymon, *Hip Hop Stole my Southern Black Boy*)[vi]

> . . . we got one, I can listen to rap again. (*Know Thy Wootz* Podcast)

The appropriation of black popular culture has been argued and contested by hip hop pioneers, theorists and historians. I cannot deny the history of lost profits, or recognition robbed from African-American singers, musicians, producers and songwriters. However, the concept of appropriation cannot be discussed to any great length in this case study. The argument does not assist in developing ideas of community, or elaborate on identities Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini articulate. My intentions for this chapter are to recognize misappropriations and representations of race, gender and ethnicity that frame how we have come to recognize both black and brown bodies in hip hop culture, and how this recognition takes place through vernacular storytelling.

It is not difficult to speak about appropriation within music, because the classifying and labeling it requires is drawn from the bank of stereotypes manufactured by categorizing systems like multiculturalism. It is a processing system that makes people believe that culture, race and ethnicity can be authentically packaged and sold in predictable sound bites and images. Nonetheless, what is present in the process of appropriation is the vernacular. The vernacular recognizes where specific sounds, words and language originate and are interpreted. Imani

Perry's use of the vernacular in her critically-acclaimed book, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop,* argues for hip hop as black American music, based in the African oral tradition, despite the consistent contributions from non-black artists and the borrowings from other communities (Perry 10). I understand the significance of Perry's argument, especially her example of hip hop from the south emerging in the vernacular of the southern drawl, for even the southern drawl received the cold shoulder from the hip hop industry with the onset of OutKast's success. However, oral folk traditions across the globe share that same characteristic of boasting and toasting that are evident in hip hop.

In recalling Kanwar speak about Akhenaton and Khéops, producer and rapper from Marseille, France, who ignited the French hip hop scene, he explained that hip hop culture was travelling beyond Brooklyn from its early days. IAM's music was influenced by the sounds and culture of hip hop coming from Brooklyn, all the while focusing on the turmoil of Arab identity and North African conflicts, yet having a local focus on their city and immigrant experiences. Kanwar's intent on explaining this exemplifies the vernacular storytelling he takes part in being of Punjabi-Sikh heritage, and growing up in Montreal. IAM's music has inspired the music he produces. Not only had hip hop culture reached Europe in the onset of its early days, but it influenced global minority groups of various descents on other continents. French hip hop developed from a vernacular of its own, was inspired by the marginal experiences of African Americans, and in doing so paralleled the uncertainty of immigrant identity across Europe.

Brooklyn is the birthplace of hip hop, a post-industrial, urban culture created by African-American, Caribbean and Latino communities. Hip hop, along with many other African-American musical forms such as blues and jazz, also emerged in relation to significant historical conditions and relationships between black Americans and the larger political and social

character of America (Rose). Birthed in the late 70's amongst urban decay and social disenfranchisement, hip hop was framed on the backdrop of abandoned buildings, graffiti-tagged trains and youth culture. Its technologically sophisticated sound consists of beats selected by hip hop producers and DJs who have always come from, and continue to come from, an extraordinary range of musical arrangements (53). This array of arrangements and transformations expresses the larger spirit of rap and hip hop as an experimental, collective space where contemporary issues and ancestral traditions are configured in a musical bricolage.

Rose argues the inventive force behind hip hop emerged from a complex exchange and larger social and political conditions of disillusionment and alienation among African-American, Caribbean and Latino youth in the South Bronx (59). That said, hip hop culture emerged from a political atmosphere where both the racial and the aesthetic is contested. What the racial and aesthetic element presumes to be is the authenticating device of realism or keeping it real. The real or realism in hip hop as a movement takes on two perspectives of telling narratives and being narratives (Perry 91). It is through this element of realism that Humble the Poet projects his skill and authenticity, embedding himself in the immigrant experience of Canada. That is the narrative he begins with and continually challenges.

The video to spoken word, *Life of an Immigrant*, begins with Kanwer sitting in the front seat of a cab. It is a quiet evening, as the silence focuses on the surroundings of the cab, specifically the driver's seat and dash. Pulling down the visor, Kanwer opens up a map to check a route. He then picks up the radio and, with vigor, recites his father's story.

> Told him the grass was greener
> With an endless flood of possibilities, Katrina
> Watch him drown in debt

Land confiscated by the local government

So he flies high in a jet

Plane, plain clothes just exposed him

To the harsh winters of life

And his wife won't know

‘Bout the sweat soaked in the bank notes

Sent home, boy getting grown, now he starts to groan

Stomachs rumbling

Hungry for a better life now he's stumbling

Over foreign phonetics and verb tenses

laughing at his accent

It's not an accident

That his masters in economics isn't honoured

Most economic for a father

is to hop his ass in a cab,

And never bother

Getting out that car or his dreams

Memorize the route

and collect the fare

It isn't fair

When they say "you don't belong here"

With your long beard

And that towel round your head

Hear what was said?

Soak up the hate

Can you relate?

Life of an immigrant. (Kanwer)

This poetry speaks volumes about the myth of opportunity abroad: articulating economic and racial inequalities, by paralleling property and economic devastation from Hurricane Katrina to measures taken by the Indian government to confiscate land from Sikh farmers; and invoking the infamous racist slur, "towel head". Replacing his father as the son of a cabbie, he recounts a story familiar to many cab drivers in Canada from all ethnicities, but heavily prevalent among South Asians – a story of violence, as well as educational and economic sacrifice. "I remember seeing him once when I was little after being jumped. I remember him being bruised and battered. Then you go to India and you see how people treat cab drivers like shit, and I think I would never treat my dad like shit (Kanwer interview)." In retrospect, *Life of an Immigrant* was Kanwer's attempt to tell a particular story of the realities of immigration. It is a story made to connect within the diaspora and across it. However, what Kanwer unintentionally did is interrupt the stereotype of the cabbie.

Misappropriating the Cabbie

Understanding the misappropriation of the cabbie requires looking at how *Life of an Immigrant* intersects with the presence of South Asians in popular hip hop, especially through sampling. Most hip hop critics view sampling as cultural appropriation, but scholars and music journalists dissecting cultural appropriation, know that it is not a one-way flow (Sharma, Nair, Balaji). Working from Sharma's theoretical framework, I begin to explore how representations of the East become a conflation of South Asian and Middle Eastern, resulting in misinforming how

Figure 7. Humble the Poet, opening scene of Life of an Immigrant (Image courtesy of YouTube)

brown bodies are recognized within hip hop culture. By comparing Humble the Poet's use of the cab (see fig. 7), to the cab driver and Raje Shwari's role (see fig. 8) in Slum Village's song (see fig. 9), *Disco*, I will explore some of the ways misappropriations can be a violent form of representation. Sharma convincingly argues that there is a difference between "appropriation as othering" and "appropriation as identification", and not all appropriation equates to stealing (237-38). It is with this indication I offer an example of a performance of orientalism that can be compared to that of black face as a timeless stereotype.

Figure 8. Raje Shwari singing in the backseat of the cab. (Image courtesy of YouTube)

Although Slum Village can be categorized amongst the conscience of music makers of mainstream hip hop, their feel-good song, *Disco,* features a troubling representation. The song was released in 2002, a year following 9/11 – a time when the image of the turban had become a target for terrorist allegations across North America (Puar 2008). Events like 9/11 can drastically alter groups' perceived social

distance. There is mass confusion as to identification. Curiously, while many Americans, including minority groups, distanced themselves from “Muslim-looking” others, it was also the time when mainstream hip hop culture produced by black artists incorporated South-Asian styles and sounds (Sharma 243).

Figure 9. "Disco", song by Slum Village, portrays a cab driver with a turban and "red dot" (Image courtesy of YouTube)

The chorus of *Disco* is enhanced with Raje Shwari singing a sampled Indian song. The video takes place in an urban environment, with cars full of people trying to get to a party. Raje, dressed entirely in Indian garb, sings out the rear window of the cab. Her interaction in the video is completely situated within the cab. I would like to make Raje and the cab driver a point of discussion because their role within this music video, including the Indian sample, gives visibility and representation to South-Asian Americans in hip hop, yet it confines them to stereotypical roles and the politics of sampling. Mainstream hip hop in the early 2000’s heavily featured harems, belly dancing, snake charmers and men in turbans, along the backdrop of classical Bollywood samples. Being South Asian or Indian in main-stream hip hop revolved around a hyper-visibility, characterization and near invisibility as to origin. There was no

distinction between South Asian or Middle Eastern or even Native American, as illustrated by the classic line from a Jay Z song, "Asked her what tribe she with, red dot or feather…" (Jay Z).

By contrast, *Life of an Immigrant*, gives a voice to the Other by allowing the subject to speak words other than a Bollywood sample. It also initiates a moment where the turban can be humanized, and not characterized or terrorized. Lastly, whereas, in *Disco*, viewers are confused about whether the cabdriver is Hindu or Sikh, Humble the Poet locates an identity, but more importantly disrupts and plays with the conflation of it in *Baagi Music*. The party anthem, *Baagi Music*, discussed below challenges perceptions of "Indianness" and what it means to be distinctly Punjabi.

Baagi (Rebel) Music

> I made a beat called Fuck the Homophobes, and I put it up. Like minutes after I put it up, he [Kanwer Singh] asked me for that beat. That summer, me, Humble, Hoodini and Baagi spent two weeks in New York, and he wrote *Baagi*. He turned it into a Punjabi anthem. The concept of *Baagi* was an important one to highlight at the time, because it meant sovereign rebel. It was just Humble's way to break free. He is his own person, and is not defined by his look. He is a human being. (Kanwar interview)

As Kanwar described it, that was the beginning of *Baagi Music*, and the rest is what people interpreted from it. One could use Paul Gilroy's popular phrase, "affiliation and affect" (16) to describe the outcome of creativity and discontinuous histories of the diaspora that create a new topography of loyalty and identity. Often mistaken as Sikh Knowledge's coming out song, there were many influences that went into the song and its viral video launch. Kanwer explained, "When the song got done, I had a rough version that I recorded in my bedroom and I put a

sample out and people were like, 'Oh shit, Humble is making catchy music', that I was making sell-out music. When the song came out and they saw the lyrical content, it was by no means a sell-out song. It was probably the most disrespectful song I've written in terms of the things I said" (Kanwer interview). Kanwer described, "With *Baagi Music* I was able to say what I want to say, and attract people. People took it from: this is detrimental to Sikh people, to, this is the anthem for Khalistan; this guy hates Hindus; this guy hates India. It was a million and one things, and it was hilarious!" (Kanwer interview).

The song was released in 2010, was uploaded onto YouTube and has since accumulated well over 800,000 views. The song attracted much attention from music journalists, South-Asian culture magazines, and a large youth following. Most of Humble the Poet's publicity came from this song, but also threw him into the categories of ethnic, Khalistani and Sikh rap.

Throw your deuce in the sky

Five river flow, beautiful butterfly

Big nose, big eyes

Lids stay heavy like lines in my rhymes

Our girls so fly

Lovely Punjabis oh my

Our guys stay live

Peacock tattoos on the thigh

This is Baagi music

Get nice, spit tight, vibe right to it

Straight lighter fluid

Spark from the heart

Make it fire, do it

Move it, it's a grove for the mind

Shake your behind

Feel it in your spine

So we walk with an arch

and fuck Bollywood

We aint messing with y'all

We Punjabi

Feel the five river flow, all in your veins we baagi go!

….

Some sucka ass sucka stepped up to me

Not a real fan, just a male groupie

Didn't know my rhymes, but stilled called me

His favourite Indian MC

I tried to reply very politely

‘Cause really at the end we all family so

Listen little bro, let me break it down for you

We 100 million strong, the “P” in Pakistan

You know where I'm from, smell that rosewood son

Home of Bhangra and Jay Sean’s mom

Toronto my heart, Punjab in my blood

This tunes in your ear, Hip Hop I love

Sweet chocolate skin, I'm not Indian

4 knuckles to your eye, if you call me that again

I'm Punjabi (*Baagi Music*)

The song is loaded with word play, metaphors, historical and pop culture references, but also stereotypes. It is what Perry refers to as exploiting the stereotype while simultaneously expressing literary skill – an important component in the black literary tradition (64). The music video adds another dimension to the lyrics. Taking place at a concert, it includes a scene where the stage is full of mostly Punjabi-Sikh artists jamming with each other and the music. In terms of visibility and stage presence, that scene speaks volumes. It is probably the first mainstream exposure of Punjabi-Sikh MCs and producers from across North America on one stage with their own individual styles – turbans or not. The location of the video then switches between a music studio and a tattoo parlor, where Humble the Poet is getting a tattoo. The visual close-up of the tattoo is thematically important to Punjabi identity in this video because of what the tattoo represents. Along with many others, I was curious to know the significance.

"It's just Punjab before Partition. That is when they used to call it a butterfly because its shape. What it was, I had just got back from New York, and I was heavily influenced by all that 'I'm an African', the murals and all. And I'm like, 'I want to create a knowledge of self kind of track'. Again, this is nothing new, when people say I am not an African-American, I am an African. People don't want to be called Greek when they are Macedonian. What the Africa pendant is, I said I wanted a Punjab one. I had the map; I was going to use it for the [album] cover art…so I got the tattoo and then faked it for the video" (Kanwer interview).

The lyrics, 'five river flow, beautiful butterfly' speaks directly to the nostalgic geography of Punjab, which Kanwer then conflates with the stereotype of Punjabi facial features of big

nose, big eyes. He then brings that line back to himself as the next line states 'lids stay heavy like lines in my rhymes'. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to see from the lyrics why some people may have assumed *Baagi Music* was an anthem for Punjabis. By analyzing the lyrics, the music video and the social media commentary that followed, I found most useful and informed conceptualizing Stuart Hall's work on *New Ethnicities.*

According to Hall, there was a political moment when the term 'black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain. 'Black' provided a means of organizing around a category of new politics of resistance among groups and communities with very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. As the black experience became a singular, unifying framework, other ethnic/racial identities did not disappear, but, instead, worked alongside the black experience. The danger, though, was the ability of the black experience to become hegemonic over the other ethnic/racial identities (Hall 441).

That Kanwer and his production team could spend time in the birth place of hip hop culture and walk away with a refined sense of consciousness for nationality, ethnicity and heritage as Punjabis and Sikhs, speaks volumes not only about the absence of a critical dialogue of Sikh identity, but also its simplification and stereotypical characterization. Although race and ethnicity in the US, Canada and Britain emerged under different historical and lawful circumstances, Kanwer Singh is still able to draw unique parallels. A lyric to one of his rap songs, *Voice for the Voiceless II* begins with a revolutionary tune, repeating the phrase, "Bhagat Singh, Dudley George, Malcolm X, I Fucken' Rep". With this phrase, Kanwer parallels a Sikh revolutionary fighting British colonial oppression, an unarmed Ojibwa man shot to death by an OPP sniper during the Ipperwash crisis, and an African American Black Power movement icon.

This is not just a random compilation trumping so-called revolutionary thought, rather it is a socio-political strategy of representation and solidarity. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are working within multiple systems of representation. Its in their ability to draw parallels between ethnic and racial difference, but begin this work by placing themseleves within Punjabi-Sikh iconography and stereotypes, as seen with *Baagi Music*. What is occurring is a shift from a struggle over relations of representation to the politics of representation (Hall 442). The most powerful element here is having the ability to choose political affiliations and crafting ones self over social media how it is you want to be seen.

The politics of representation in *Life of an Immigrant* and *Baagi Music* develops in a contestation of the fetishized image of Punjabi Sikh, including counter-positions of a positive imagery based in model minority discourse. The cultural thesis of the model minority myth plays a central role in the hegemonic desi-ness that hip hoppers in Sharma's ethnography contest. This myth is an ahistorical form of cultural racism that explains the economic and educational success of Asians in America as a result of Asian traits identified in strong family and cultural values (Sharma 14). This myth magnifies South-Asian identity in ethnic analysis rather than in racial terms, whether related to notions of Brown, Indian or Punjabi, or a variety of ethnicities that fall within those categories. An attempt to emphasize what it is to be distinctly Punjabi, as opposed to Indian, tacks in and out of a vernacular of constructions of Punjabi-Sikh identity in popular culture, and new formations of it in the diaspora. As Stuart Hall stated, we are beginning to see constructions of a new conception of ethnicity: a cultural politics that engages rather than suppresses difference (446).

Humble The Poet works with difference and concepts of what it means to not be Indian, all the while informing a representation of Punjabi outside of popular and stereotypical images,

as heard in *Baagi Music* "…fuck Bollywood we aint messing with y'all" (Kanwer). Kanwer emphasizes throughout the song that he is not Indian, or should not be considered someone's favorite MC because of the mere fact of his ethnicity. This is his attempt to regain access to stereotypes produced by mass media that convey Punjabi Sikhs in strictly comedic, religious or militant roles, or that he has a fan base due to his Indian face in hip hop culture. He consciously negotiates the politics of representation by drawing on the origins and histories of Punjabi identity, taking it back to Pakistan, as opposed to an imaginary Khalistan, or conglomerate notions of India. Therefore, the representational practices in this song are better understood outside of antiracism and multiculturalism by taking us inside the notion of ethnicity itself. Similarly, where black is recognized as a politically and culturally constructed category, so should Punjabi and Indian.

Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are not actively involved in politics of anti-black racism. They are also not motivated to celebrate any aspect of multi-ethnicity or multiculturalism. Instead, they represent Punjabi-Sikh heritage in popular culture, and their music and art are not exclusive to the experiences of that so-called community. As Gopinath (46) has argued, the danger of privileging antiracism as a singular political project relies on conventional articulations of gendered and sexual subjectivity. For representations of Punjabi-Sikh, which is often hyper-masculinized or desexualized, the original beat produced by Sikh Knowledge's *Fuck the Homophobes* shifts to a whole new dimension of representing ethnicity, especially concerning discursive strategies of representation that cross racism with sexuality (Hall 445).

A song by Sikh Knowledge that particularly crosses racism and sexuality is *Kala Shah Kala*. His ability to manipulate the lyrics and historical context to tell a story of a queer love

affair complicates the argument of anti-racism. Kanwar takes an old Punjabi folk song and recreates it as if his partner at the time, who was white, dedicated it to him. Building the beat on a reggae riff and soulful backup vocals, the song opens up to Kanwar stating "SK say love who you love and be who you be" (Kanwar), followed by Punjabi lyrics sung by himself. A fiery yet poetic tune, it leaves his listeners with the message "fuck your views on my cocky . . . mind your own sex life, my new thug life is my kala by my side with fear out of sight" (Kanwar).

Equally important in choosing this song is the translation of the original folk song. As Kanwar described it to me in an earlier interview, *Kala Shah Kala* speaks as a prenuptial song where a woman is declaring longing for her dark-skinned lover. She prefers him and his dark skin, to *gora* or fair skinned men, who seem preferable based on that attribute. The larger historical context of this folk song can be traced back to the preference for fair-skinned men and women across India, as opposed to the darker shades of brown that represented people who worked in the sun and performed hard labor. To have fair complexion spoke to class and caste, and colonial influences of beauty.

Kanwar was able to take an old folk song and deliver a message about his sexuality that speaks volumes about the subject of race. The word *kala* translates as black or dark, but, when spoken in derogatory terms, that blackness would translate as 'less desirable'. There is a peculiarity about a prenuptial song conveying sexual preferences or desire, but it is even more powerful to hear another version of the same song pursue and translate that same desire complicated with undertones of inter-racial relationships and homosexuality.

It is more comprehensive to understand their efforts of working "inside the notion of ethnicity itself" (Hall 447), because of the dynamic positions through which ethnicity acknowledges place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and

identity. Both Kanwer and Kanwar successfully tack in and out of elements of ethnicity, complicating and confusing it, while being limited by the position of "ethnic" artists (Ibid). I, therefore, argue that Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet create music based in Sikh heritage and represent them to mainstream popular culture in ways that do not result in absorption or appropriation. With consideration to Gopinath's work, they create a counter-narrative that exists beyond culture clash or remix and hybridity. Sharma also looked to a concept other than "cut n' mix" identities, and utilized sampling as a metaphor for music, identity and community formation that is anti-essentialist and dialogic. She summarizes, that it is never created in a vacuum, but always in dialogue with multiple influences (12-13). That said, could there ever be a single word to define this complex performance that proposes to remake a national identity or normalize an image through a claim of diaspora or transnational affiliations?

Desi Rap

Nitasha Sharma's work is critical to my case study as a thoroughly researched ethnography on South-Asian identity and hip hop music. Although she does not have informants from a Sikh background, that very gap creates an urgency for this research and allows a space for this case study to develop and initiate a discussion on Punjabi Sikh ethnicity within hip hop culture, whether that's in post 9/11 Canada or North America. Sharma works within a larger concept of desi, that comes from the Sanskrit word *desha*, meaning land, and advocates for a shared homeland experience amongst her informants. The concept and idea of desi erases difference, and conveys a compassion for other South-Asian members – a slippery concept rather than a problematic one for Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. Yet, Sharma claims that there is no tangible genre of desi hip hop because the sounds of the artists in her research and their roles in hip hop culture are too diverse (Sharma 6), nonetheless the concept of "desi" becomes a tool to

begin analyzing identities that have developed from diverse histories and ethnic enclaves even among a given group. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge do not refer to themselves as desis or even evoke a strong pride in a shared homeland experience as Indians. As previously stated, I see these artists tacking in and out of distinct Punjab-Sikh identity claimed upon notions of heritage that is too important to transcend.

Sharma's informants take up hip hop to challenge the model minority myth and issues concerning less fortunate South Asians, and specifically to resist South Asian anti-black racism (Sharma 15). Aware they are participating in an African American musical culture, the opinions of her informants are focused on the complications of inter-community relations. However, Kanwar and Kanwer question the very notion of community whether that is Punjabi, Sikh or South Asian, and are not in an active pursuit of inter-community harmony, although Kanwar actively advocates for awareness surrounding Islamophobia. In addition, Queer identity adds another layer of complication not only for the "Punjabi Sikh community" but also hip hop culture, issues often discussed by Kanwar. One of my concerns in regards to anti-black racism is that ethnic or nationalist discourse in Canada is not as front-and-center along black and white color lines as present in the USA. The examples given from MTV Iggy and CBC both produce counter-narratives immersed in ethnic emphasis, for which I argue keep artists ethnically separated with the aim of masking racism while celebrating "successes" of multiculturalism.

Baagi Music, the song and music video, was not designed by Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge to deracialize hip hop to make it their own, or to make a song about some abstract idea of Punjabi rap. Using Sharma's analysis, this song is inspired by African-American musical tradition and prompted an ethnicization of Punjabi-Sikh identity largely misunderstood and misrepresented within the larger Indian diaspora, while drawing on a model of blackness to

frame the concept of marginality from a political origin (22). After all, the song was inspired shortly after their summer in Brooklyn. Visually and lyrically, it claimed space for Punjabi-Sikh identities rarely depicted in Hollywood, and not popularly visible outside of religious associations or comedic Bollywood representations. If hip hop as black music inspires a claiming of political space, then this song did just that. However, that political moment captured in *Baagi Music* was a local effort that became phenomenon for a diaspora spanning North America and the UK, anxiously yearning for representation like that which was experienced in the clubs by most Punjabis seven years earlier.

Some of the earlier examples in this chapter discussed misrepresentations of both South Asia and the Middle East in mainstream hip hop. By contrast, rapper Jay Z co-produced a moment where Punjabi identity was given acknowledgment, especially within the scope of remixing and the long history of remixing Bhangra beats with popular music present in the Punjabi diaspora. As Jay Z wrote in his biography, *Decoded*, "I was in a London night club when I first heard Panjabi MC's *Mundian to Bach Ke* (Beware of the Boys). It wasn't like anything else playing…it took me a second to realize it was from the theme song of *Knight Rider*...On top of the crazy, driving bass line were fluttering drums, and…high-pitched, rhythmic strumming…from a tumbi, a traditional South Asian instrument" (Jay Z). It was early 2003 when Jay Z decided to connect with Punjabi MC, but also reflected on the Iraq war and the perceptions most Americans had of the East. Jay Z's main intention was to make it a party song, which it already was for Punjabis.

It was his intention behind the song that placed him in a political role, interrogating race and ethnicity for South Asians and Middle Easterners in hip hop, and bringing more awareness to remixing talents inspired by hip hop culture. As he explained, "…the international feeling –

which some people thought was Arabic – moved me into a different direction. So I dropped the lines against the Iraq War" (Jay Z). I am not stating that Jay Z eradicated any racial or ethnic divisions within hip hop music. He did state that hearing *Mundian to Bach Ke* was "world music at its finest," and not "remixing" at its finest (Jay Z). Perhaps Jay Z can be given credit for his sincerity and activist-like approach to the song, or even for igniting a renowned sense of self-confidence, given 9/11's racist backlash against brown bodies.

The ethnographical approach in this case study would not frame Punjabi MC and Jay Z's collaboration as that of vernacular cosmopolitanism, although the song and its effect definitely portrays cosmopolitan qualities and is largely a product of globalization. When that song was heard across the Punjabi diaspora it ignited a sense of pride for Bhangra music to be acknowledged by a hip hop mogul. It was Humble the Poet's intention with *Baagi Music* to create that same sense of pride in a party track that too could be recognized. The word "baagi" itself is not a commonly used one, and therefore it had to be traced back to this track. Sharma argues that the desis in her research create inclusive communities of "resemblance", and these resemblances are formed through "cut n' mix" formations, sampling numerous influences in hip hop production (Sharma 24). This contests the claims of sole authorship and ideas that cultures are static and self-contained. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's music collaborations may very well fit this concept, given their music that has been lyrically discussed thus far. These songs are comprised of reworked sound bites of historical references, and a borrowing of gender, sexual and racial expressions that are inspired by the heritage and origins of hip hop.

It is evident that Kanwar and Kanwer are contesting representation and discussing cultural identities through the specific lens of Punjabi-Sikh identity-as-heritage, instead of one based in the larger concepts of South-Asian or desi ethnicity. A constant emphasis on Sikh

heritage expresses the limits of the above ethnic identities. Kanwar and Kanwer's music works inside structures of ethnicity, but borrows larger ideas of gender, sexual and racial expressions popular in black musical traditions of hip hop culture. This creates what Sharma calls inclusive "communities of resemblance" (23).

Central to Sharma's argument is that, to be inspired by hip hop culture derives from an understanding that identities are produced by the political, and by how power-holding groups have created conceptions of group difference that exploit others for self-gain. This framework is a key concept of "global race consciousness" (1), and it develops an historical context as to how and why western Europeans created categories that impact inter-minority relations. The lyrics to the song *Security Shuffle* by Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet discuss heightened security for Muslims and Sikhs after 9/11. By calling out American imperialism, the discriminatory no-fly list, and controversial racial slur "sand nigger," I argue for an analysis of racial categories placed on black and brown bodies, not only in relation to whiteness but also in comparison to one another (Kanwer & Kanwar).

The use of the word "nigger" requires an understanding of designation, and who it is that assigns it. As Prashad explains, the word "nigger" originally never exclusively or directly referred to Africans but to those who are seen to be black in skin color or demeanor. The point being, "black" and its affiliation with the n-word is contingent to place and time, but crucially relational to whiteness (159).

Sharma's discussion of the use of the n-word with Che from the Himalayan Project developed around the following lyrics: "The first son of some/ immigrants who ain't learn quicker/ This land and all in it/ ain't for niggas, spics, gooks, kikes and sand niggas." Chee's choice to strategically use it in a list of derogative words represents discriminatory practices in

the US. By including "sand nigger"- a racist terms used against people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, he connects experiences of his family to other oppressed groups (243). As Sharma's ethnographic work argues, and this case study has reflected, events like 9/11 alter perceived racial and ethnic differences. *Security Shuffle* is a response to those alterations and resuting altercations that affect Sikhs and Muslims alike following 9/11. The use of "sand nigger" in the song creates a resemblance to a history of racism present in minority histories stemming from colonialism to imperialism, but also the mass conflation of gender, race, sexuality and tribalism that has fuelled social relations following 9/11.

The rap ends with the phrase "so gully" – a term that derives from the word 'street' in Punjabi, instead of common words one would expect, such as "hood" or "ghetto." Using "gully" vernacularly defines a marginal place in society, therefore, creating multiple sites of resemblance to minority experiences across race and ethnicity. Furthermore, these lyrics denote resemblances between Muslim and Sikh identities which Puar (2007) argues were distinguished between, yet collapsed following 9/11 (185-6). In summary, it is not solely race that has claimed the attention of scholarship concerning South-Asian identity. Those asserting this association do not view themselves in racial terms, nor the representational terms of multiculturalism. The ethnicity model presented in *Hip Hop Desis,* emphasizes how immigrants retain culture and negotiate its loss, emphasizing identities based in ethnic heritage. As a result, the stories Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge tell are vernacularly based in discussions of power difference, and group inequality embedded in the immigrant experience in Canada.

> Do you have your ID Ms. Hijab?
>
> You make me nervous, I can't see what your doing with your hands
>
> If I had a choice I would de-cloak you…

and rob you of your modesty like Americans

What you got under there? What you got under there? I need to see your face

So I can validate my own fear, that you a sand nigger

I remember we gave you syphilis and homophobia

And made all the Sunni hate the Shia and vice versa

Someone call 9-1-1 'cause after 911 they been fuckin' with your boy

Like he was the only son of Osama…sniffing out different threats to the West

They just west creeping

…pat my ass like I'm their bitch, spread my legs like I'm their bitch

I am not a terrorist; I write terror from my wrist

Middle finger from my fist…

Do you have your passport Mr. Singh?

'Cause I'm authorized to keep you from flying

Singh is listed here as well as Jeet, Inder, and Deep

…the criteria for me to run up on your hairy ass and harass your family

and undermine your self-respect like national security

If you resist, I'll insist you step out of line

and treat you like shit and claim its my job on the line

So gully (Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge)

Intersections with the Vernacular

My research is an attempt to build upon available research by focusing my lens on two Canadian artists and bringing their music and stories into a curious dialogue with the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanisms. Although Perry would strongly disagree with the notion of a cosmopolitan

approach to hip hop culture, she does acknowledge that any project that considers the global influence and presence of hip hop would rely on Afro-Atlantic theory. This mode of analysis emphasizes the importance of Tony Morrison's statement, that the unifying force in hip hop throughout the world has been its emergence from "Others" within empire (qtd. in Perry 20). In this case study, the emergence of these others requires a strong acknowledgment of marginal identities that do not share the exact experiences of Afro-Atlantic history, but find resemblances in their own histories that have produced modes of marginality nonetheless. Perry argues that a mischaracterization of hip hop occurs when postcolonial critics concern themselves with international and transnational identities from the "so called postcolonial condition", forgetting that hip hop is more concerned with region and local specificity (20). This ethnographic work is not void of specifying region and locality, but it is the very concept of vernacular cosmopolitanisms that allows for a navigation of what is deeply influenced by global forces, but remains local through lived experiences of ethnicity and heritage.

Imani Perry's concern with regional and local specificity in hip hop advocates for the vernacular as a bounded experience. Similarly, Sheldon Pollok's (2000) work on the cosmopolitan and vernacular in history develops it as a very particular and unprivileged mode of social identity (20). The socio-political crisis from which hip hop was born was informed from a place of unprivileged identity. As a result, the stories that emerged from the oral nature of hip hop culture unfolded a visual text. Early rap songs, such as Grand Master Flash's *The Message*, described the aesthetics of place and the geography of marginal identity in New York. The "vernacular chronotype" consists of aesthetics of place, balancing and borrowing local forms, while at the same time producing new projects of spatiality (Pollok 31). Arguably, this is the formula of hip hop culture, regardless of where it emerged across North America or globally.

Kanwer and Kanwar's music and identities of Sikh heritage in hip hop culture and interpretations of race and ethnicity in multicultural Canada urges a reflection on Kiese Laymon's words quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that hip hop credibility has little to do with skill, but more so rooted in a hip hop aesthetic, and it is an aesthetic deeply rooted in geography. Does that mean that that Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet are less credible in hip hop because of their beards and turbans that are quite "unorthodox" for what might be a traditional "hip hop" look? In terms of geography, they are not that far from the birthplace of hip hop, being from Montreal and Toronto. As for being black or Latino, and having a direct connection to New York or Afro-Atlantic experience, no, they have no affiliation. But what they do bring to the forefront is the social history of inequality surrounding the Canadian immigration experience. By belonging to Punjabi-Sikh heritage, they also participate in a geography that is politicized, imagined and nostalgic. There is a historicity in their aesthetic that is deeply embedded in a human geography and spans back to a diaspora coming out of Punjab.

The music of both artists, and the frameworks available to explore them as artists differs from existing work on "Khalistani" rap or Dawson's digital border crossings of ethnicity and race. The lyrics from "Baagi Music", "Life of an Immigrant" and "Security Shuffle" are informed from personal and lived experiences, that portray identities that are pushing up against the forces of globalization, nationalism and multiculturalism. For example, Jaspal Naveel Singh's article on Sikh rappers and the imagery of Khalistan serves as an ideological grid for masculinity and militancy (347). Whereas the music of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge cannot be situated in this particular grid because their music is not solely based upon aspects of Sikhi, or even Khalistan, widely popular and historical identifiers surrounding the Sikh diaspora.

Dawson takes the music of a UK South-Asian band – the Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) – and describes a "digital underclass" whose music online crosses multiple borders and, with sweeping motions of incorporation and appropriation, emerges with a style that reflects what he argues as a new globalized sphere of consumer identity (42). The band's transnational address develops within the social and economic conditions of London's East End, and draws on Saskia Sassen's notion of "global cities" (qtd. in Gopinath 43-44). However, I believe it is not the concept of global cities that applies to Kanwer and Kanwar's cosmopolitan tendencies online. But there is something definite to be said about the dynamic spatial scales of cyberspace. Especially since Kanwer has described the content on the Internet as almost timeless; he explained it as if someone is always discovering something new every day. One always has the ability to stay relevant, as songs or videos by Sikh Knowledge and Humble the Poet can be discovered and rediscovered every day. Both artists also manage their own content and curate their image as artists, without relying on a publicity team. They are their own social media managers, and therefore, image-makers.

Although both artists are heavily influenced by the history from which hip hop culture and reggae emerged, they are not immersed in the canonization of a so-called Sikh militancy, as a form of creative retaliation Singh speaks of with underground Khalistani rap (351). Nor do their lyrics reflect articulations of Black Nationalism that Dawson speaks of with British hip hop Asian groups (32). Adopting it would heavily limit Sikh Knowledge because Sikh or black nationalist militancy would restrict expressions of a homosexual identity. Both hip hop culture and reggae have made little space for expressions of queer identity, whether it be underground or main stream.

The cosmopolitan appeal of ADF for Dawson is in the way that youth culture can shift fluently across spatial scales, and it is that aspect which initiates the ultimate appeal of a global identity (42). He argues that these spatial scales – from the internet to ADF's concerts – attract a global audience because of diversified and connecting lyrics, hybrid musical mixes, and a mixed-race audience. It is evident that previous ethnographic research within academia indicates researchers are looking for a language to describe the manifestation and materialization of racial and ethnic identities within youth culture, such as hip hop. In addition to citing and configuring the political importance of Sikh identity by both Kanwar and Kanwer as heritage, like Dawson, I too am drawn to the idea of spatial scales – especially those of the Internet– and I am interested in making connections to the political identities being crafted and represented on social media, to the appeal of political identities produced within hip hop culture. However, what further complicates Kanwer and Kanwar's music, style, and identities are interpretations of race and ethnicity that limit them or are perceived, especially due to the presence of turbans and beards.

Pioneer artists within the South-Asian diaspora such as Bally Sagoo and Apache Indian have influenced both Kanwer and Kanwar, and perhaps paved the way for what they are doing in popular culture. As they too have challenged ethnic and racial essentialisms. During my interview with Kanwar, he made distinct connections to the rhythms of Bhangra and Reggae, and explained how they are closely linked in sound. This is exemplified by the many remixes of bhangra and reggae that emerged out of the UK in the 90s, including Bally Sagoo's *Mera Lang Gawacha*, a remixed folk song that featured a white reggae artist called Cheshire Cat. Gopinath's notion of "hearing diaspora differently" resonates from Bally Sagoo and Apache Indian portraying images and perceptions of dominant masculinity, genealogical descent and reproduction (32). These are characteristics that have been dominant elements of bhangra, hip

hop and reggae. With that said, this research comes form a place of dismantling traditional readings of Punjabi-Sikh masculinity and ethnicity.

Thus far, I have developed my case study on the important role social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have played in giving Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge the tools to be viewed as image makers. They have both utilized social media as the medium to share their music and videos in an active response to challenge racism, homophobia and Islamophobia by deconstructing the essentialism surrounding Punjabi-Sikh identities in both hip hop and popular culture. This chapter engaged with spoken word, *Life of an Immigrant* and party anthem *Baagi (Rebel) Music* to further develop Sharma's argument that to be inspired by hip hop culture derives from an understanding that identities are produced by the political. Punjabi-Sikh identity in hip hop culture has often been constructed as a parody of "blackness", written off as cultural appropriation all together, or a homogenous ethnicity comprised of Indian and Middle Eastern stereotypes.

In concluding this chapter, I briefly introduce an interview by Humble the Poet on a UK radio show, *Know Thy Wootz,* where he is highlighted as a creative member of the Punjabi-Sikh community. I believe this is one of the most informed interviews Kanwer has given, where he welcomed listeners to hear his opinions on community, what it means for him to be a Sikh, and what he wants fans to understand about his message and music. To most it was not what they had hoped to hear. I mention this interview in hopes of resonating two ideas that will be developed more so in the next chapter: the interviewer stating, "we got one, I can listen to rap again"; and Kanwer asserting, "I reference Sikhi but I am not selling it…when people think Sikhi, they think turbans and beards" (Know thy Wootz).

With this invitation to appear on a radio show geared towards youth exploring art, culture and heritage in the Punjabi-Sikh community, the noteworthy and challenging ideas Kanwer declares are: he does not believe in the idea of a common community, or is yet trying to understand the concept based on perceptions of him as a "Punjabi-Sikh artist"; he does not condone that his presence within hip hop specifically grants Punjabi Sikhs permission to listen or identify with rap or hip hop. It is not difficult to realize there is a faith-based investment in Kanwer as a visible Punjabi Sikh in the mass media. However, it may be too much of an investment for an individual, who along with friend and producer, Kanwar, seeks to actively and aesthetically challenges perceptions of community, ethnicity, race, gender and culture.

CHAPTER 4: TURBANS UNRAVELING

> Is it not a strange thing to be so marked by an object which is limited in temporal terms, requires recreating on a daily basis and outside of the body of the wearer is simply three to five meters of cotton cloth, dyed in various shades.
> (Kalra, *Locating the Sikh Pagh*)

Figure 10. Kanwar's hair and an appreciation for what is enclosed in a turban. (Image courtesy of Facebook)

The summer of 2013 served as the climax of my research with the launch of album *Turban Sex*, and Humble the Poet's project and self-published book *UnLEARN: Butterflies and Lions*. I consider these two events pivotal to the research, for notions of Sikhi and Punjabi were articulated and digitally engineered through these two defining projects. This is also where I began hearing the concept of heritage more frequently, as opposed to culture or religion. Both Kanwar and Kanwer refer to the intertwined nature of Punjabi-Sikh identity as heritage. I, therefore, use that concept throughout this research, aiming not to fix these two individuals within the matrices of race, but within that of ethnicity, to help develop the thought that identities are historically situated and informed. Once again, I will make connections to the conceptual idea of them as image- makers, which begins with them deconstructing how their own bodies are read, and utilizing the Internet and social media to foster this play on, and interruption of, identities normally fixed exclusively in religious curiosity.

Kalra argues that wearing a *pagh* (turban) does not enable a reading that is privileged in terms of authenticity, or is an act of representative knowledge, but, rather, is inseparable from that of the social and political (76). By creating the video, Kanwer is not coming forward as a representative for Sikhi; he is installing a vantage point given his interest and occupation in education. Applying Kalra's argument to the video *Baba Nanak* that Kanwer created for promotional use, Humble the Poet disfigures the act of donning a turban as a sole symbol of representative knowledge for mainstream Sikhi. Because wearing a turban has come to stand for an authentic Sikh sense of self, Humble the Poet attempts to undo what most people think of these dimensions by focusing on the basic teachings which developed what is popularly known as Sikhism. This three-minute, narrated video shows various representations of Baba Nanak from contemporary depictions of him to paintings developed during the reign of the Mughal Empire. All these images are stitched together with an aim to create a visual tool, showcasing that throughout history we have had different representations and interpretations of Baba Nanak, and although his teachings have been institutionalized, there are basic ideals within Sikh heritage based on the guru/teacher and student relationship that were originally, and continue to be, channeled through verse or poetry.

This narrative of Baba Nanak begins to function as a new myth drawn from subsequent narratives informed by representational and dialectical practices. Such practices might include stories/teachings Kanwer was raised with and/or taught during religious summer camps. The video clip involves a historicity, which, no doubt, has gaps, but from one image of Baba Nanak to the next, he is morphed into a performance of an iconic Sikh body (see fig. 11). This body is not religious, as it is not Humble the Poet's purpose to build on religious elements commonly associated with this figure, or to advocate for Sikhi through some sort of viral animation. Some

of the nuanced statements in this video include: “An interpretation of guru that I like is *gu*, meaning dark and *ru*, meaning light…he did a lot to flip light switches on in people’s heads, travelling ridiculous distances by foot…Many of the ideas he mocked have become daily practices in mainstream Sikhi...The ideas Guru Nanak Devji presented to other people of his time and geography were not common” (Kanwer). Based on these statements, Humble the Poet is helping viewers discover Baba Nanak as an individual who had unconventional ideas for his time, but was nonetheless collaborating with other teachers and was enlightened by those learning experiences.

Figure 11. Images from YouTube video "Baba Nanak"

The varied stylization and repetition of Baba Nanak throughout the video is arguably an attempt to demonstrate representational practices that promote performances of a discontinuous Sikh-male body, ever-changing and constantly open to interpretation. Considering that this body is not singularly religious, the following statement made by Humble the Poet in the clip emphasizes this point: “I am grateful for being part of a heritage that places learning above all; Sikh by definition means student, and I love the fact I can fill my head to learn, unlearn and relearn every day”. The description for Kanwer’s self-published book, *UNLEARN: 101 Truths for a Better Life*[vii], states Kanwer’s previous profession as an elementary school teacher, and that he is an “MC/Spoken Word Artist with an aura that embodies the diversity and resiliency of one of the world’s most unique cities”. It is not difficult to see him channeling his skills as an

educator and implementing what he knows about discursive learning strategies in enhancing his career as an artist. His compilation of ideas, inserted with images he personally collected, consolidates into digestible lyricism and advice which is a reflection of his aim to challenge his own biases and be a "life-long learner". Particularly in chapter ten, he challenges how the content in his early poetry was too ideal, and how he adopted an approach of realism inspired by rapper 50 Cent to understand the reason for how and why things are (51).

Kanwer's spoken word and social media endeavors initiate a process of normalizing Sikh identity as heritage, and not as religion or culture. In emphasizing the notion of heritage, Kanwer looks to distance the turban and a beard away from religion and aims to define it as something heavily negotiated in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora. In a personal statement made for a promotional video during his Indigogo campaign, he sincerely stated, "On a personal level, I want to continue to promote this image. The image of beard and turban in a positive light, and what better way to do it but simply normalize it. Put it out there for people to see. This could be one of the easiest ways to kill racism and prejudice" (UnLEARN Indigogo Campaign Video). Humble the Poet's campaign was a success raising about $26,000 in two months, exceeding his monetary goal to fund both his book and album from the wide spread support of his fans. *UNLEARN* is a documentation of his perspectives and experiences that he had posted online regarding relationships, life advice and his take on the nature of things (see fig. 12).

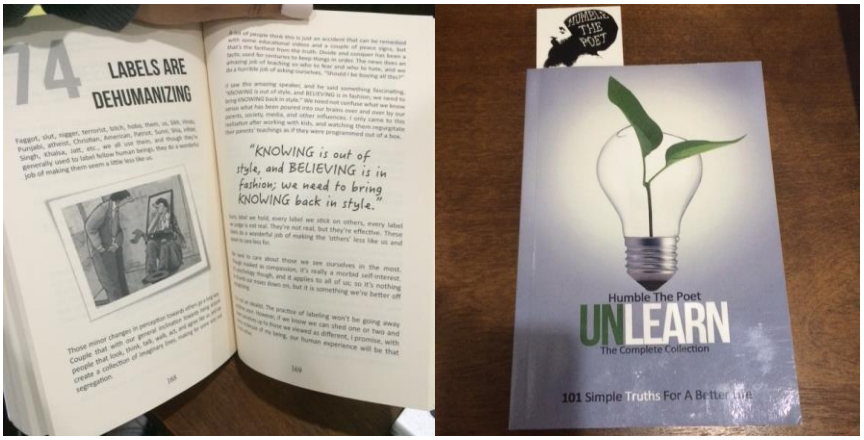

Figure 12. Humble the Poet's published book, UNLEARN. (Image by Kauldher)

Turban Sex

> So one of my sister's is like, "How can you name your album 'Turban Sex?"' I just hate that question. I said, "Did you read the narrative for the album? No you didn't. You didn't even listen to the album". She is just as informed as the most hateful person. (Kanwar Interview)

These were some of the thoughts shared by Sikh Knowledge when asked during our interview how he was coping with the social backlash from naming his album *Turban Sex* (see fig. 14). This backlash included death threats and persons angrily invading his profile on Facebook, wanting him to change his name, and accusing him of disgracing the Sikh religion. He further states his opinion that "There is a lot of undefined morality which kills everyone . . . It's funny . . . putting those two words together, people are saying is disrespect to the turban, and I'm like 'Why? Why, because you are supposed to be "modest" if you wear a turban?'" (Kanwar Interview).

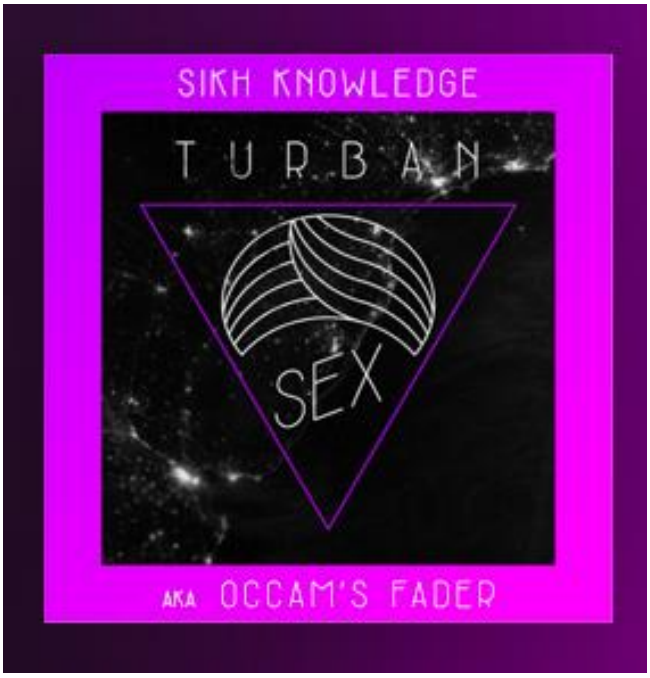

Figure 13. Cover of album, "Turban Sex". (Image courtesy of iTunes)

I believe Sikh Knowledge is grappling with what Kalra argues to be the turban's place "in some halfway house between tradition and modernity" (77). Can the *pagh* potentially articulate to an accepted dress of a modern person, or become another fashion accessory? What

was Kanwar envisioning when he created *Turban Sex*? On 13 July he shared the intent of his album (see fig. 14).

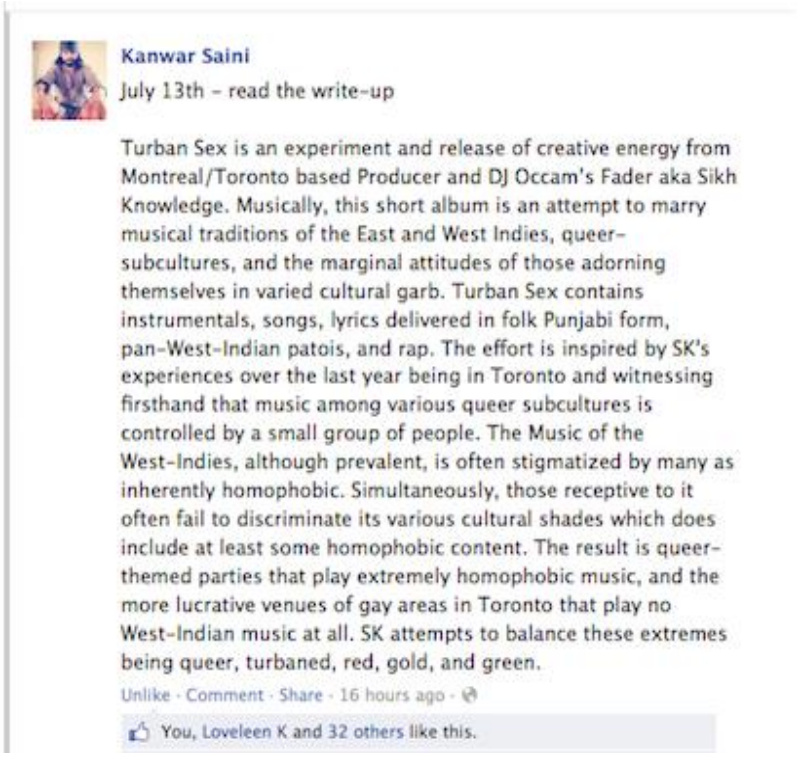

Figure 14. Facebook post explaining his album. (Image courtesy of Facebook)

Based on the creative ways Kanwar wears his turban, I was curious about the meaning his hair and turban held for him, and why he never had the urge to cut his hair. He shared that it was his mother who, when he was a young child, instilled a fear in him about cutting his hair; that it was a "bad thing". As a result, he just never did. He described this fear as "fear as love," perhaps a manifestation of the fear of losing traces of an inherent heritage when his parents immigrated to Quebec (Kanwer interview). His fear as love resonates with Harjant Gill's film, *Roots of Love*, a film about masculinity, community, and importance of hair and Sikh identity. He asks whether to be Sikh is identified by the turban, and if, by law, it is defined by un-shorn hair, then we may have limited the visibility of this religion. The turban has tended to fall in the realm of showmanship. Whether implied as a crown or part of the body, the turban also symbolizes upholding the basic teachings of Sikhism, and, therefore, upholding of responsibility.

Nonetheless, its significance and symbolisms are developed around lineages and heritages, varying across regions. It also reflects the values of the individual who wears it. These values can be perceived differently depending on the relationship and cultural investment with unshorn hair of the person viewing the turban. In the film, the audience experiences familial and community pressures surrounding decisions of one's hair, specifically around the role of mothers, as they normally take the custodial role of setting standards of cleanliness or aesthetics, such as washing the hair, brushing it, or tying turbans for their young sons. What is not discussed extensively is the decisions women and young girls make that affect Punjabi-Sikh women's identities: whether to don *dastars*; the keeping of long hair in braids; and the social significance of shorn hair. The near absence of a discussion of these women's issues adds to the lack of identity of women in Punjabi-Sikh culture.

Despite the fear of cutting his hair instilled in Kanwar by his mother, it has not stopped him from removing or unraveling his turban for Facebook viewers to gaze upon. By doing so, he silently answers questions and addresses curiosities of what exactly is under the turban. As a result of wearing it in stylistically different ways, incorporating various patterns and fabrics, Kanwar almost curates the erotic imagery inspiring not only the title of *Turban Sex,* but also the sounds of the album itself. On the cover of the album, the turban is placed in an inverted triangle, imprinting it at the junction of gender and sex, and masculine and feminine desires, while at the same time internalizing self-as-other, a topic which will be further analyzed in the song, *More than Aware*. Sikh Knowledge has demonstrated how the symbolic marker of the turban can be, and is, misread and misidentified in politics of race, ethnicity, religiosity and sexuality. As for exploring some of the backlash following the release of *Turban Sex,* I return to Hall and the

complexities that arise when the politics of representation are "crossing the questions of racism irrevocably with questions of sexuality" (445).

According to Hall, a great deal of black politics, which is constructed on race and ethnicity, has been predicated on the assumption that the categories of gender and sexuality would stay the same or fixed (445). If a person was searching on the Internet for affiliations and information based on Sikhism and came across an artist named Sikh Knowledge, they might assume he was an individual strictly promoting religious content. This would mute all the other aspects or identities that have influenced him or contribute to his individuality. Kanwar by no means represents that being of Sikh heritage and queer is an easy presence to assert. However, he is vocal in expressing his identities and sexuality in ways that challenge the heterosexual biases that limit presumed identities of those who are Punjabi or practice Sikhi, or the sexist undertones of reggae and hip hop music. Kanwar's music and patois are often mistaken for cultural appropriation, especially when his intentions are not understood on a level of creative beat building and his vast linguistic abilities. Understanding his inability to relate to or promote any singular political project of antiracism just because he is producing black music, follows a realization that antiracism developed within a conventional, heterosexual articulation of gendered and sexual subjectivity (Gopinath 46). For Kanwar, who feels ostracized by his community because of his sexuality, yet accused of cultural appropriation as a Punjabi-Sikh artist in hip hop culture, a project of anti-black racism not only seems limited, but also an irrelevant tool for addressing immediate conditions of difference within one's own community or ethnic group.

On January 1, 2014, Kanwar was invited to *Live with Kevin Newman* to discuss homosexuality and Section 377, following a Facebook ban that resulted from posting a picture of

him kissing another man at a rally. This picture also made headlines on social blogging site *Buzzfeed*. Section 377 rallies protested India's implementation of a colonial era law that made same-sex intercourse illegal. Kanwar's post on Facebook was reported as inappropriate, and, based on the number of these reports, his account was disabled for sixteen hours. In the interview with Newman, Kanwar states that the image of him kissing another man was important for debate and discussion on the issue of homosexuality. Kevin Newman followed up by asking how important the image was for his community, to which Kanwar responded that it was important for all small communities (Kanwar). This response emphasized that those who are LGBTQ fall within a small community, and, furthermore, to be LGBTQ and of South-Asian ethnicity, represents an even smaller community. In the interview he placed himself in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in Canada and argued that this is a community that rallies for 1984, and for an acknowledgement that Sikh riots be considered genocide. Why then, he poses, should it not rally for sexual minorities or in solidarity with other minorities in general? Kanwar further stated, "I stand at an apex quite naturally, where I have sexual minorities on one side, and a very small community on the other side, which are in my opinion very underexposed to life in North America being a sexual minority" (ibid). The interview concludes with the idea that exposure of this incident, and an interview on this issue, and the picture reposted on Facebook is a win towards normalizing an image of two South-Asian men kissing one another, and moving towards normalizing images of homosexuality.

A sample of the controversy that Kanwar's views flamed is an online comment made by Lavinder Shergill (see fig. 15): "Wtf (what the fuck). There are real Sikhs protesting by doing hunger strikes for political prisoners to be released and then there's you protesting for your own selfish lust and you call yourself Sikh Knowledge. What a fucking twat you are."

Kanwar's act of posting the picture and advocating for homosexual rights is also one step towards normalizing the image of a Sikh man advocating for human rights besides issues of 1984; it is also a sexualized image of Sikh men in general. Since moving to Toronto, Kanwar has been an advocate for not only LGBTQ issues, but also the xenophobia against Muslims and Sikhs that followed Quebec's proposal for a Charter of Values that would ban religious symbols for persons employed in the public sector. He is vocal in bringing awareness to Islamophobia,

Figure 15. Facebook comments following Sikh Knowledge advocating for homosexual rights. (Image courtesy of Facebook)

whereas most Sikhs would distinguish themselves from Muslims, further perpetuating ethnic difference and religious fear.

The *Turban Sex* launch party was a low-key event in the Cabbagetown-Regent Park neighborhood at a trendy café. Sikh Knowledge played his album and introduced each song while he hosted friends and fans from many networks. The evening featured samosas, beer and dancing. He passed out condoms with a digital barcode – an appropriate act, given the name of the album and the digital nature of him as an artist. In doing so, he connected everyone to his musical press kit (see fig. 16) A song on the album that I feel resonates with the launch of

Turban Sex, the Facebook ban and Kanwar's overall feelings of being from small communities, whether ethnic or LGBTQ, is *More Than Aware*. This multi-dimensional song is electronically crafted through a mesh of lyrical sounds, including beautifully sung Punjabi folk, yet strings together a strong tone and bass. Ultimately, the song projects heartfelt lyrics of angst and desire and a tune for the lovers caught in the intersections of race and love. The chorus, sung in Punjabi, stands for emotions that cannot be conveyed or translated to English with the same depth of conviction or purpose as their original form.

Figure 16. Turban Sex musical press kit on a condom. (Image by Kauldher)

…Do you know what love means to a fag like me?

It's an intersection between race and sexuality

I was too scared to cross it, fucken' look at me

I can never be free, I just want to be

My community is fucked up

I get ostracized

All they see is my big turban and a middle finger in their eye

Look at a taste of their own medicine that they have ostracized

But they love me when I'm a '84 whore in their eyes

Were you cognoscente of this that the more out that I live

The more in my family is

And the more I have to balance

Of course you weren't

My otherness is meta-social

Like how I get love for my beard but death threats for my love for you

…Turban pon my head like a king…I nah fi give a fuck what you think

Coolie boy fucken' skankin'…

Now do you really know what love meant to a fag like me?

I was able to break free from these margins like Humble's poetry

Didn't come free, it came with anxiety

That's entropy

I was fucked from jump, like an '89

Jordan was defending me

Balanced in multiple worlds like Shiva's trident

The kid ain't Hindu but speaks in allegory like Nanak

I confused being underexposed for smart choices

It's funny how the sum of us made for many differences

I like to see you fly, I like to see you fly

'Cause in my eyes baby you have everything that I

Never really had, and you better feel me

But you never know how I feel, I can only say it in Punjabi…

Unraveling

In the closing remarks of Kalra's article, titled *Last Fold,* he proposes the grand question of whether a Sikh modernity is at all possible considering that the Sikh *pagh* is so easily confused

in the diaspora (89). Perhaps that says something about the close link of the turban to a sense of Sikh identity; perhaps it argues that Sikh identity is not necessarily in a state of confusion, but always in the process of becoming. I, too, have attempted to illustrate this argument in respect to video, *Baba Nanak*, the gendered and political statements made in *Turban Sex*, and controversy following its debut. What I find most encouraging about Humble the Poet's social media campaigns, and the courage of Sikh Knowledge to be creative with such representations, is that these two individuals have inspired debates and dialogues on the significance and social life of the turban in the North American diaspora.

In developing a theory of the many "becomings" of the turban, Jasbir Puar wants to restructure Kalra's argument by thinking of turbans, not through the binaries of tradition and modernity, but through abstractions and assemblages (174). She looks to inspire new temporal and spatial possibilities that I found useful when thinking about representations of Kanwer and Kanwar online, and also the ways in which they wear their turbans.

Drawing theoretical inspiration from Judith Butler, Puar imagines the daily ritual of tying a turban and places an importance on the selections that take place: tying, binding, pinning, folding; winding amounts of cloth; altering on a rhythmic basis the color, form and context in which it is wrapped (65). She argues that it is the daily temporal frame that is actually operating differently in its relation to limits. The limits on how the turban is tied in practice every day is due to variants like how one is feeling, personal abilities, career and even special occasions. That idea is key to looking at the images of Kanwer and Kanwar and their daily repetitions. We do not actually see them tie their turbans every day, but the various photographs of them that create an archive of how the artists have changed their turbans over time, inform us that the repetition is never the same. Their turbans are never the same. They also never reveal to fans how they tie

them (a question frequently asked), encouraging them to find their own look that is representative of lifestyle.

To rethink the turban through Puar's interpretations of becomings, there is a continual process not only of the person wearing the turban, but also how the turban is worn, and her aims for interpretation go beyond the ocular. It prompts us to go beyond what we see, and to think about what the turban makes us feel. The same can be applied to the hijab or kippah. It calls for a reflection of the perceptions and conditions placed by the viewer on the individual wearing any of the above. Assemblage comprises of two segments. It is a mechanic assemblage of bodies, actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another. On the other hand, it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements not attributed or transformative to bodies (Puar 66). Therefore, seeing the words "turban" and "sex" together, or seeing a man in a turban kissing another man, is an individual reaction that is to be assessed on levels of exposure, acceptance and tolerance of the turban in respective communities.

Whether it is argued that the turban is not a hat, or part of the body, or a crown, Puar argues that the turban has qualities separate from the body upon which it sits. The fusion of hair, oil, dirt, sweat, cloth and skin are intensified in an acculturated intertwining of "body" and "thing" (66). The question she purposes is, "What if, in the midst of reconstructing and contextualizing what has become such an intricate and fetishized assemblage, there are tangible efforts of understanding being made at the sensory, cognitive and personal level?" (66).

Puar's question deeply resonates with me and has driven and inspired this ethnography. I remember as a child looking up to my grandfather's dresser and seeing turbans lined up in a row – the same turbans my grandmother and he hand washed, rung out and pinned on a line to dry. He would tie these turbans years later with his trembling hands, and as he lay on his deathbed, he

would adjust repeatedly the same yards of cloth to secure a sense of modesty and pride. I now think back with new perspective when, at seventeen and working a summer job at my hometown museum, I rearranged and cleaned the display case that held Constable Dhillon's turban. There it sat, lifeless without its crisp folds, or a stand to prop it. Now an artifact nestled away in time, heritage and geography, it serves as a representative object of multicultural policy and religious accommodation. I often wondered what made Punjab from the film *Annie* seem so magical with his turban and name, because, between my fingers, the turban and cloth of Constable Dhillon seemed incredibly ordinary – one tug could collapse or unravel it all.

My hope for this research is to initiate a dialogue on nuanced identities based in Punjabi Sikh heritage and inspired by mediums of hip hop culture and social media – identities that are politically redefining themselves within and against the ethnic confinements of multiculturalism. I see two artists who are educators in profession and intention, whose social media performance is a representation that promotes learning by means of unlearning. This case study provides a window into looking at the ways two individuals of Punjabi Sikh heritage are asserting their identities in tangible efforts to normalize, yet disrupt, the stereotypical image of a turban and beard in popular culture through sensory, cognitive and personal means.

CONCLUSION: BECAUSE OF THE INTERNET?

> Because [of] the Internet I'm here, because of the Internet we're all here…the Internet is already a language we are all connected to… (Childish Gambino, Time Magazine)[viii]

Inspired by the subject matter of Sharma's ethnography, this research began with exploring her concept, "global race consciousness" in an attempt understand the scope and limits of this case study. Attracted to the advocating motives of global race consciousness, I would often think of Humble the Poet's lyrics in the ways Sharma introduced those of her informants. Upon reflection, my approach was idealistic. Kanwer would agree that he was also was idealistic with his early work. He reminded me that hip hop music is not an inclusive space of belonging, although it has spanned across the world. This research has been about locating and recognizing identities informed by politics of multiculturalism and antiracism, and how one can begin thinking outside of those definitions. Merging Sharma's concept, with limits, to vernacular cosmopolitanisms and actively implementing Stuart Hall's framework from *New Ethnicities* (1996), I have explored the ways that two individuals actively negotiate ideas of community, ethnicity, and gender to illuminate the nuances of Punjabi Sikh heritage in popular culture. I have presented a case study on ways their social media presence and role as image makers drive extensive dialogue on the aesthetics of Sikh identities in popular culture, and contribute to a debate on ethnicity and race that is still present in hip hop scholarship and Sikh studies. With great emphasis, this research is timely; particularly considering the recent emergence of Sikh identities across social media and the need for this analysis within Canadian hip hop studies.

If an underlying theme has emerged from this research, it is that there is a longing – perhaps a demand – to be known, seen and understood. In a time of intensified social media, individuals like Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge may find that they are increasingly known

and seen, but easily misunderstood. Because of the Internet's far-reaching, global interconnections, there is a void looking to be filled by those actively creating social lives online or creating images of self that are not present in mainstream media. That void is an overwhelming need to connect.

I began by situating my ethnographic findings in relationship to the few existing studies of hip hop and South-Asian identity, and even fewer works related to Punjabi-Sikh identity and youth culture. I then proceeded to examine the relationship among Sikh heritage and Sikh aesthetics, such as the turban, and articulations of authenticity within hip hop. There are multiple fragmentations of brownness in relationship to blackness, but an additional element to this case study was exploring and emphasizing the difference of Punjabi-Sikh identities in comparison to a larger identity of desi. This research has become an analysis of the ways both artists have been confined and defined by the interchangeable categories of South Asian, desi, Punjabi and Sikh. Kanwar and Kanwer are contesting representation and discussing cultural identities through the specific lens of Punjabi Sikh identity as heritage, instead of one based in the larger concepts of South Asian culture or desi ethnicity. A constant emphasis on Sikh heritage expresses rootedness and a vernacular of language and culture that can be traced back to a time and place in history. Thus, Kanwar and Kanwer's music works inside structures of ethnicity, but borrows larger ideas of gender, sexual and racial expressions popular in black musical traditions of hip hop culture.

I introduced and elaborated upon Sharma's concept, global race consciousness, in an effort to argue for marginal experiences among South Asians who look to produce conscious, racialized hip hop instead of ethnic hip hop, to address broader political issues and utilize black popular culture to interrogate race relations. However, I want to offer an alternative reading of hip hop and activism in the Sikh diaspora, especially by providing an argument that goes beyond

the scope of anti-black racism and cultural appropriation. By discussing these identities with an emphasis of ethnicity rather than race or hybridity, and illuminating where South Asian diasporic music scholarship has yet to expand upon, I initiate a conversation on the recent emergence of a youth culture movement in the Punjabi Sikh diaspora in Canada through contemporary, vernacular cosmopolitanism. Sharma's framework is useful to this analysis of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge by representing how it is that South Asian performers/artists do not deracialize hip hop to make it their own or perform blackness, but use black music to racialize themselves as minorities, which is quite different than adopting "blackness" or appropriating it (20). In addition, both artists' collaborations, lyrics and social media endeavors initiate a process of normalizing Sikh identity as heritage, and not as religion or culture.

Heritage, defined by B. Graham and P. Howard (2008), "…a form of collective memory, and a social construct shaped by political, economic and social concerns of the present" (qtd. in Tutchener 96) has occupied a unique role in this ethnography. My own family history of white lumber towns, my grandfather, and the racist attitudes surrounding the turban and immigration have shaped this research and the passion I bring to deconstructing discourses of race and ethnicity. Therefore, my historical understandings have been both enriched and challenged by the concept of "heritage" I have been able to explore through Kanwer and Kanwar personal experiences and family histories. This research is inspired by Humble the Poet and his ability to activate a knowledge-of-self movement that continues to impact youth culture. This impact is based on his belief that, "You need to have a mind and need to use it. That comes from the Sikh heritage. Sikh means student. That is how I interpret it. If you are not learning then you are dead." (Kanwer Interview).

An assignment I completed over five years ago required I give an example of something considered to be cosmopolitan and to explain why. This ethnography is a reflection of that complex question as I continued to be intrigued by Sikh Knowledge's constant play on identity with race, ethnicity and sexuality, and Humble the Poet's invitation to join his movement, with the simple words, "Humble the Poet signing in." I do not aim to place the collaborations of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge into a neat box of cosmopolitan discourse, as there are varying degrees of cosmopolitanisms. Nor do I attempt to liberate hip hop of its racial and gendered enclaves, for those serve a purpose in articulating stories from the margins. With that being said, there are three closely related forces at work when considering cosmopolitanisms, and those being globalization, nationalism and multiculturalism. In conversation with Stuart Hall in 2006, Pnina Werbner discussed the misconceptions of this concept as "world citizenship" or utopian. With a concept that is incredibly, and closely linked to globalization, there is acknowledgement of contradictions and unequal relationships of power. Globalization represents interconnectedness. However, the realities of interconnectedness are detachments and "disjunctive histories…the developed, the developing, and the underdeveloped, the colonized and the colonizers, the pre- and the post colonial, etc." (Werbner 345). Cosmopolitanisms may convey conceptions of one globe, one citizenship or unified human morality, but realizing that it is also as a force of interconnectedness bringing multiple disjunctive identities together, represents a new moment, and that moment is now. Therefore, I emphasize Rozzano's words once again, "There's a bigger level hip hop shit that people are *not* (emphasis added) taking note of…It's about connecting the way we are right now" (Warner 305). For this case study, the "now" is understanding how and where multiculturalism has failed and the limits of antiracism for those whose identities are articulated by ethnicity and not race. Furthermore, acknowledging

the "now" for hip hop does not strictly call for a post-colonial analysis, rather, how that analysis is incomplete and the ways local stories of marginalization find power in the political identities hip hop culture evokes.

Applying contemporary vernacular cosmopolitanism requires centralizing Hall's argument that is to be "aware of the limitations of any one culture, or any one identity and that is radically aware of its insufficiency in governing a wider society, but which nevertheless is not prepared to transcend its claim to the traces of difference, which make its life important (30)." Those traces of difference and histories that drive this ethnography develop the constructions of ethnicity needed for an analysis based in the Canadian context that are largely perpetuated in the name of multiculturalism –profiles made by MTV Iggy, or headlines promoting diversity in Canadian hip hop go beyond white rappers from the USA. Hip hop provides a political language that appeals to the inequality and systemic forms of oppression faced by immigrant youth identities despite efforts of ethnic inclusion or celebration. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge utilize hip hop culture to inform their ethnicity and heritage as Punjabi-Sikhs, and explicitly address difference and diversity within this heritage, but not outside the context of history and unequal power relations (Sharma 85). Humble the Poet's spoken word piece, *Life of an Immigrant,* and lyrics in collaborative song, *Technorganic,* address unequal power relations that have made the social life of ethnic and racial difference important and real. Although *Technorganic* conflates genocide in time and place around the globe, *Life of an Immigrant* localizes an experience of immigration through forces of globalization that can uproot, uplift and neglect individuals.

I began this case study by stating that this is a story about a friendship that developed from a series of coincidences and a love for hip hop, which is reflective of a social media age

driven by virtual connections. Kanwer and Kanwar met online and grew closer through personal bonds and a passion for creating music. Humble the Poet gained his confidence as a rapper and spoken word artist through online battle rap forums that gave him space to explore a skill and gain confidence in it. His online presence alongside producer and collaborator Sikh Knowledge is renowned with thousands of followers or fans; their music is easily accessed on iTunes and YouTube. Both have actively participated in an Internet information phenomenon, especially in the representational appeal of social media that has diversified the interactive user experience. My initial exposure to them and to research methods were based in social media platforms that I believe enhanced, rather than hindered, this ethnography's creative approach to conceptualizing the fieldwork experience at home, as well as in the non-tangible, socially-constructed space of the Internet.

Donna Haraway has suggested that it is by the impact of the social relations mediated and enforced by new technologies that we can learn how to read webs of power and social life (Haraway 170). We might even learn new couplings, new coalitions through issue of dispersion, as the task is to survive in the diaspora. In developing the virtual and visual arguments of this case study, I propose that perhaps the task is not only to survive in the diaspora, but also to find techniques of reinvention and relevance. The Internet can be a fearful place saturated with information. With social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, there is no shortage of mundane or vain representations. However, Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge create social events and moments of re-presentation that are driven by a passion for a re-education and deconstruction of Punjabi Sikh stereotypes. I initially presented two of Nakamura's (2008) research questions in my introduction: How can and do minorities use their digital visual capital? And in what ways are their gendered and racialized bodies a form of new capital?

Participating in what Ardevol (2012) and Nakamura (2008) individually argue to be visual cultures of race and gender performance online, new media are produced and consumed for a specific Internet audience. The content of the video or a status update initiate dialogue among users and result in digital visual capital. Humble the Poet's book, *Un-LEARN: Butterflies and Lions*, and Sikh Knowledge's album, *Turban Sex*, are examples of visual capital. They are projects that document personal conditions in an appealing enough way that it attracts a fan base, and inspires other individuals to create or relate to images of oneself that are not otherwise available in mainstream media. As a result, since 2010 there has been a surge of Punjabi Sikh identities across social media that participate in nuanced practices of representation in an attempt to claim both heritage and ethnic difference.

Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge aim to normalize the image of a turban and beard, and that is how they arguably capitalize on narratives of ethnic difference to initiate social change among post-9/11, anti-Muslim and Sikh militant sentiments. Their gendered and racialized bodies have become a "new capital" of the Punjabi-Sikh image online. Axel's ethnography on the amritdhari Sikh body, following Operation Blue Star, explored the popularization of the Sikh man with a beard and turban, and the ways this image further developed the imaginary of Khalistan across the diaspora. From 1984-1996 Khalistani activists, who advocated for human rights issues affecting Sikhs and promoted images of the Sikh body online, were identified as terrorists by the Indian government. Kanwar's blog, *Realistan Zindabad V2.3*, is a linguistic play on both Khalistan and Montreal and replicates a creative diasporic imaginary. Images and narratives of Sikh heritage informed by popular culture that have emerged are determining not only what it means to be Sikh but what is produced as the Sikh aesthetic. If anything, this case study has illustrated and argued for the messiness of aiming

to normalize an image that has always been marginal, historically in North America and India. These are the same differences that are contested within Punjabi communities, and otherwise disappear when reduced to labels of desi or Indian in popular culture.

Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are not looking to transcend their Sikh heritage while advocating for marginal experiences through the medium of hip hop culture. For them, it is important to acknowledge the place of blackness amidst hip hop's creation, because its trajectory and historical relevance are embedded within the disenfranchisement of black and brown bodies from New York. Hip hop culture is inherently based in vernaculars, or unprivileged modes of social identity, reiterated from specifics of a place and time and crafted in storytelling. The language and aesthetics of hip hop may offer an alternative space for identity formation, but these same languages and aesthetics become grounds for debating authenticity and belonging or appropriations. For example, video for *Life of an Immigrant,* in contrast to *Disco* by Slum Village, contains multiple flows of cultural appropriation, and even misrepresentation, and stereotypes of Indian identity. *Baagi Music* disrupts representational strategies of popular culture, as Humble the Poet takes ownership over stereotypical images by boasting Punjabi identity from the diaspora. Perry argues that the element of keeping it real in a hip hop movement derives from "telling narratives" and "being narratives" (91). This is the very element of the vernacular that makes the work of these two artists significant.

It is not enough to say these artists are cosmopolitan because of the global reach of their lyrics, videos or songs. The vernacular cosmopolitan quality of their music aims to emphasize that racialized and ethnicized bodies are separated in political spaces, and the nature of these political differences exists within and between communities. The music they create is set in marginality and an appreciation for black popular culture, and more importantly Punjabi folk

culture. *Baagi Music*, a beat originally called *Fuck the Homophones* and produced by Sikh Knowledge, represents keeping it real for two individuals who are rooted in multiple identities and communities but not limited to them, and make conscious efforts to declare that. It is in this desire and want to connect and collaborate through their music, that Kanwar has continually explained, "When I make art I don't belong to any community, those are my heritages" (Kanwar Interview).

Choosing to engage with the concept of ethnicity rather than race, allows for the exploration of socially-constructed identities based in heritage, language, gender, and engage with various locations of difference within a given group. Ethnicity does not operate hegemonically, but inside the notion of itself, and is predicated on differences and diversity within (Hall 447). Hall explained "films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily 'right-on' by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience" (443-444). There is no simple strategy that everything Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge produce will be accepted by a Punjabi-Sikh community simply based on the fact that they are of Sikh heritage or Punjabi ethnicity. Is some of their fanfare based on that fact? Yes, but when both individuals produce music or embark on projects outside of Punjabi-Sikh themes, they do attract criticism from those who do not see them as the artists and individuals they are. The song *Baagi Music* stirred debate among Punjabi Hindus and the album *Turban Sex* resulted in death threats towards Kanwar because his sexuality as a Sikh supposedly disrespects the turban.

The "vernacular" for this case study represents the many identities and locations those identities occupy for Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. In centralizing Hall's arguments from *New Ethnicities*, I chose to work with the concept of ethnicity for an analysis of these artists

through an historical, cultural and political lens (446-447). It is the ways politics of ethnicity focuses on *difference* and diversity within a given group that has allowed for me to analyze strategic plays on stereotypes, assertions of difference through sexuality and the unfulfilled promises of multiculturalism or antiracism. Hip hop provides a language that can articulate inequality and systematic forms of oppression that have shaped a majority of youth immigrant identities. As Sharma demonstrated in her research, Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge have used black popular culture and elements of storytelling from their Sikh heritage to display their ethnicity as one that places diversity and difference within, not outside of their respective history. Research such as this pushes for an understanding "that despite the logic of multiculturalism, difference makes a difference" (Sharma 85).

Thus far, I have illuminated how categories of South Asian, desi, ethno hip hop, Punjabi and Sikh are created and lived through the concept of difference. The following categories impact Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's social relations, especially in how media outlets often perpetuate their ethnic and racial difference. Simultaneously, both artists challenge, create and curate their ethnicity and heritage through their social media platforms. From lyricism in songs *More than Aware* to *Security Shuffle*, intersections of race, ethnicity and sexuality express messages that have not been articulated in Canadian hip hop before. It is time that musicology and cultural studies look beyond hyper-masculinized, cut-and-mix identities of Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo, Bollywood and Bhangra. The appeal of these artists goes beyond their attempts to normalize the image of a turban and beard. It is in their abilities to participate at the intersection of art and activism, and aesthetically articulate Sikh heritage to their creative advantage, that defines their skills as educators. In participating in hip hop culture and being part of an inherently diasporic heritage, Kanwar and Kanwer display a cosmopolitan quality rooted in

their heritage as Sikhs, but seize moments of strategic reattachments and, that is not discussed in multiculturalist discourse.

Whether it is the nature of the Internet and its ability to be an extension of livelihoods that have become vastly interconnected by the circulation and flow of information and images known as globalization, or what Warner describes as the break beat aesthetic of hip hop that enables identities to be strategically re-fashioned in attempts to draw upon a political consciousness (276), hip hop music alongside social media platforms represents the possibilities of forming vernacular cosmopolitan routes. By utilizing the interconnected structure of social media and the world wide web, Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge do not transcend their ethnicity or heritage as Sikhs, but utilize that identity to engage in public netscapes. The political projects they utilize are entangled within issues affecting realities or racism lived by immigrants in a multiculturalist state, and particularly refashion the aesthetics of a beard and turban that fetishize brown bodies in the post-9/11 era. As Humble the Poet stated, "If my competition now for beard and turban is Osama…then I will keep working until they say, wow, that guy over there looks just like Humble the Poet." (siddharthamitter.com).

Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are working within multiple systems of representation. They exercise this ability by drawing attention to the tensions between ethnic and racial difference, and disrupting their place within Punjabi-Sikh popular culture and stereotypes. What is occurring is a shift from a struggle over relations of representation to the politics of representation (Hall 442). The most powerful element here is having the ability to choose political affiliations and crafting one's self over social media how it is you want to be seen. An attempt to emphasize what it is to be distinctly Punjabi, as opposed to Indian, tacks in and out of a vernacular of constructions of Punjabi Sikh identity in popular culture, and new formations of

it in the diaspora. As Stuart Hall stated, we are beginning to see constructions of a new conception of ethnicity: a cultural politics that engages rather than suppresses difference (446).

The topics explored in this case study are bigger than hip hop, challenge models of antiracism and multiculturalism, and confront the successes and failures of globalization. The representational practices in their lyrics are powerful outside of the folklorization of antiracism and multiculturalism, by taking the listener inside the notion of ethnicity itself. Similarly, where black is recognized as a politically and culturally constructed category, so should Punjabi and Indian. Rooted in ethnicity and heritage, Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge embark on a task to normalize the image of turban and beard, and craft moments of representational learning and unlearning that foster a deeper connection among those willing to listen and look. Both tell stories from a Punjabi Sikh heritage, through a northern vernacular, with a hip hop sound. Most importantly, both Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are artists hoping to *connect.*

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NOTES

[i] Michael Nijhawan and Kamal Arora's research (2013) within Sikh Studies brings attention to youth identities and diasporic citizenship articulated by Sikh youth in Canada through creative means, especially during events sponsored by the Sikh Activist Network. References made to '84 or "1984" throughout this research are a reference to the anti-Sikh riots that took place in Delhi, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards and the Indian Army attack on the Golden Temple, at Amritsar that same year. These events have sparked Sikh separatist movements, but also contributed to negative public image of Sikhs as a threat to national security as terrorists.

[ii] In terms of Humble the Poet's YouTube presence he can be found making video series and launching independent music. As for popular social media appearances he is largely featured in Lilly Singh's (IISuperwomanII) comedic videos, and film, *A Trip to Unicorn Island.* Both of their social media successes are acknowledged by YouTube Red, whereas, ten years ago it would have taken a talent scout or auditions to bring about the fame and attention YouTubers have created for themselves. Both Kanwer and Lilly are driven on social media to create content that diversifies representations of Punjabis.

[iii] In November 2015, Kanwar and Mita Hans created a Facebook group called BuddyUpTO, to connect individuals with "buddies" around the city, following the violent assault of a Muslim woman on her way to pick her child up from school in the Flemingdon Park area.

[iv] Originally my research included Mandeep Sethi & Saint Soldier. I was concerned with how these artists collectively articulated Punjabi Sikh identities through hip hop culture across North America. Mandeep Sethi is a well-known hip hop artist from the California Bay area, and a member of the Universal Zulu Nation (hip hop awareness group founded by NY artist Afrika

Bambaataa). Saint Soldier made his mark as a Punjabi-Sikh hip hop artist from British Columbia with song, *Farmer Suicide.*

[v] Sikh Temple massacre that took place 5 August 2012 in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six. The murders reflect Islamophobia and crimes against both Sikhs and Muslims following 9/11 as gunman was targeting Muslims.

[vi] A particular discussion that stood out from my interview with Humble the Poet was his retelling of how Outkast was booed at the Source Awards in 1995, for Best New Rap Group. Their sound was specifically southern rap, and not reflective of the popular west or east coast hip hop sound. It was a time when the American south was given their moment in American hip hop to represent themselves. Laymon's portrayal of how New York and California hip hop initially overshadowed regional pride in hip hop for areas outside of that emphasizes the importance of the vernacular in hip hop culture.

[vii]December 2015, Humble the Poet independently published *UNLEARN: Beneath the Surface.* It is not a sequel to his first book, but further reflects on experiences of self-awareness.

[viii] Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) released an album in 2013, titled *Because the Internet.* The album name intrigued me enough, where I wanted to know the other half of the sentence. It essentially stood for the ways information and how we communicate with one another is vastly changing. From musicians to social movements, almost anyone can participate in image-making and events of cultural production because of the operative social media platforms deeply embedded in the Internet.