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**(Post)colonial Constellations of History, Identity and Space:  
Sikhs and the Royal Canadian Legion**

Margaret Walton-Roberts

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**(Post)colonial Constellations of History, Identity and Space: Sikhs and  
The Royal Canadian Legion.<sup>1</sup>**

Margaret Walton-Roberts  
Department of Geography  
University of British Columbia

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**Abstract**

In this paper I locate the present socio-cultural landscape of Vancouver in a constellation of time and space that recognizes the ways in which the present can be formed and reformed through reinterpretations of the past. I consider the tensions between The Royal Canadian Legion and Sikh veterans now living in Greater Vancouver, as an example of the ways in which identities are reinscribed over time in contradictory and ironic ways. The denial of Sikh Veterans from entering the Newton Legion Hall in Surrey in 1993, is reinterpreted through the historical connections between the British military in India and the ongoing (post)colonial networks of authority that guide The Royal Canadian Legion in maintaining its authority and identity. The paper concludes by arguing that Sikh veterans were active in deploying their own strategies of resistance which, while on the one hand, questions some of the assumptions of postcolonial literature, on the other, reminds us to be sensitive to the many ways immigrant identities are deployed and reformed through processes of public debate and engagement.

## 1. Introduction: Standing on the threshold

On November 11th, 1993, Harbhajan Minhas, a retired Indian Air Force technician, and three companions, were denied entry to The Royal Canadian Legion Hall in Newton, a community in Surrey, British Columbia. As they were poised on the threshold of the club, they were read a 1946 Legion bylaw by Frank Underwood, the branch secretary, that required the removal of all headgear. As orthodox Sikhs, Minhas and his three companions were wearing turbans, unable to remove them or convince the branch secretary of their religious significance, they had no option but to leave, and were joined in protest by several other guests who had been invited to the Remembrance Day ceremony (*Western Reports*, 14 February 1994: 26). Following this incident, a number of reports circulated in the local, national and community media, debating issues of multiculturalism, racism, the turban, tradition, and change (*Canadian Press Newswire*, 11 October 1994). Sikh and Jewish societies in Canada joined forces to encourage the recognition of religious symbols as more than mere headgear, and boycotts of poppy sales from Legions not allowing Sikhs into their halls were launched with limited success (*Canadian Press Newswire*, 7 November 7 1994). Recognizing the potential for serious public relations damage, the Legion's National Executive attempted to change the bylaw in favour of allowing turbaned Sikhs into the halls, but this action met with fierce resistance from the many local branches around the country, who argued they were not against turbans, but against having their autonomy stamped upon by the National Executive (*Western Report*, 20 June 1994: 36–37).

This debate is interesting for a number of different reasons, not only as a sign of the social tension connected with the construction of a “multicultural” Canada, but the manner in which this conflict was situated within a highly selective temporal framework. That framework constructed the presence of Sikhs as something new, something foreign and certainly not of the “tradition” of the legion. In this paper, I hope to show how this represents a partial perspective, which in its eliding of important connections and linkages veils the spaces of colonial contact embedded in the collective histories of both

Indian and Anglo-Canadian subjects. These histories are woven together through the origins and continued attachment of The Royal Canadian Legion to its British colonial past, and in turn the intricate connections between the British military and Punjabi Sikhs in India.

To venture into this story, with a view to reposition and recontextualize it, approaches advanced through postcolonial theory cast a revealing light. In addition to retheorizing colonial relations, postcolonial theory encourages an awareness of the legacy of the colonial, both discursively and materially. The arguments forwarded by theorists often attempt to challenge, de-centre and complicate the foundations of western enlightenment, such as linear time and progression, and artificial binaries such as self/other or centre/periphery etc. However, critical interventions from scholars such as Stuart Hall, (1996) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) have highlighted the problems — indeed impossibilities — inherent in attempting to escape these European discourses. Despite these limitations, there are important material outcomes to an exercise that critically reinterprets the way Sikh veterans were excluded from The Royal Canadian Legion Hall in Surrey. Unveiling the colonial legacy embedded in this one moment is not merely an exercise in historiography; something that is buried in the past and excavated merely to justify one side of a dispute. Instead, it reveals the colonial linkages, developed most thoroughly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which act as the conduits leading to the meeting of Harbhajan Minhas and Frank Underwood on the threshold of the Newton Canadian Legion Hall, not in Britain or India, but in late twentieth-century Canada, itself a space produced through the constellation of the colonial past and the colonial present. Understanding this in relation to the exclusion of these men from the Legion hall, allows us to discuss the reinscriptions of identity, and place it in the interwoven globalizing spaces of the colonial, be it an altered or ongoing present.

## 2. The spaces of past and present

To reposition the moment of Minhas' exclusion in order to reveal both the legacy and contradictions of colonialism, I need to disrupt the usual linear, homogeneous temporality of history. To do this, I turn to Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish intellectual born in the late nineteenth century, who was fascinated with the power that processes of modernity and commodity fetishism had over European society (Buck Morss 1989; Gregory 1994). Using techniques of historical materialism and dialectical imagery, Benjamin attempted to revisit and reposition the past in relation to his present in order to make visible new political outcomes and possibilities that were revolutionary in their potential. As Gregory suggests: "Benjamin sought to bring about an explosion that would bring down the Dream House of History by forcing a discarded, forgotten, even repressed past into an unfamiliar, unreconciled constellation with the present" (Gregory 1994, 239).

However, there is a far from simple reading to be made of Benjamin's work and lasting influence. First, Benjamin's approach should not be seen as a well-defined and developed technique, and as Buck Morss argues, his work should be seen as a type of performance, where pieces of image and text are collected and displayed in ways that subvert hegemonic representations of history. His aim was also anchored in the politics of the present – the here and now — and therefore differ from the eternal displacement of more "postmodern" deconstructive approaches (Buck Morss 1994). In acknowledging Benjamin, one obvious problem arises — that is the relocation of Benjamin outside of bourgeois Europe into colonial India and (post)colonial Canada; but as Harootunian argues in his reading of the nineteenth century Japanese Meiji Restoration, "it is possible to read this episode . . . and indeed any comparable one in the history of capitalist modernization, as an effort to 'blast' the continuum by recalling a moment of difference from the past and resituating it in the present to interrupt the chain of signification" (Harootunian 1996, 68).

What I intend to do by rereading the past through this moment in the present, is to follow Benjamin's approach of excavating forgotten and marginalized episodes from the past and repositioning them dialectically with the present: "The true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our own space and not to imagine ourselves in their space" (Benjamin quoted in Harootunian 1996, 75). By imagining the past in our space, we acknowledge that the composition of meanings drawn from history is still ongoing and contested, not a reified trope that once scribed is settled. We can alter our composition of the past in relation to the present, and in so doing reinterpret the present.

These techniques of complicating, representing and activating the past with the specific intent of affecting political impact on the present will be employed in my attempt to interpret the multiple constructions of images of the Sikh soldier, the South Asian "other" and the turban. Through interrogating the relations formed between the British military, and those Sikh males from its main recruiting ground — the Punjab in Northern India — I aim to bring these past "spaces" of contact into the present in order to reposition the Newton Legion incident into the colonial framework by which it is undoubtedly informed.

With the current critical interest in the processes of colonial domination and the manner in which such connections indelibly mark the present and ongoing formation of social, cultural, economic and political power relations, it is surprising that the focus has often overlooked the *particularity* of different methods of control operated within and between places. The seminal text of Said (1978), for example, has been critiqued for its undifferentiated approach to space, overlooking how locality contextualizes the powerful discourse of orientalism. My focus on the relationship between the British military and Sikh men recruited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, locates a particular past time and place in relation to a present that — through this temporal and spatial reinterpretation — can be both exposed and reinscribed. As discussed, such strategies are informed through Benjamin's arguments for materialist history; a critical intervention in historical analysis that inserts political potential into its readings. I must, however, make some comments before reading Benjamin into this project.

Firstly, consideration of colonial *military* connections are bounded by a thickly gendered filter. I am uncomfortable locating this fully within the subaltern nexus since those men who were in the military were themselves imbricated in power relationships outside of the sphere of the British military. Additionally, a focus on the military must not be confused with an uncritical acceptance of the violence and murder this colonial training undoubtedly contributed to in the bloody partition struggle in post-independent India, (Aiyar 1995). The reason for considering the military is in response to the need to interpret colonial relations in a more differentiated and contextualized manner. This allows me to address the particular exclusion that Sikh veterans experienced on that day in 1993 in Newton and how this reveals something about the nature of the colonial imagination, and how spatially localized reinterpretations of the “oriental other” continue to be produced and contested in and through (post)colonial spaces, (also see Walton-Roberts 1998). These spaces are simultaneously embedded in past and present colonial relations, as I aim to unveil.

### **3. British colonialism and military discipline in India**

Tracing the development of the British Army in India and overseas, one can find evidence of not only Indian, particularly Sikh, recruits as far back as the early nineteenth century, but also separate units that fought with the British as allies (Bakshi 1987). Oberoi (1994), details how, after the British annexation of Punjab in 1846, two Sikh regiments were raised. Enlistment in these regiments grew as economic rewards lured rural peasants whose families were struggling to maintain family land holdings. After the 1857 Bengal uprisings,<sup>2</sup> Sikh soldiers — whose lack of empathy for the Mughal dynasty was greater than their dislike for their most recent British occupiers — stood by the British forces. After this, Oberoi argues, no further proof of Sikh valour or fidelity was required: the Raj was convinced that the Sikhs “loved fighting for fighting’s sake” and that they ought to be recruited to the army without inhibition. “Thus was Punjab turned into the army barracks of the Raj, and Sikhs made the most formidable human resource within the imperial fighting machine” (Oberoi 1994, 361).

Both Oberoi and Fox have commented on the processes by which the Punjabi Sikh “militia race” was actively cultivated by the British Army in the proceeding years, and both focus on the particular contribution the military made to enforcing and thereby *defining* a singular Sikh identity — that of the *Singh* clan — over the myriad religious identities and attachments present in the region. As Fox (1985) contends, so influential was the British military’s adherence to a single Sikh identity and its demands that any men claiming to be Sikhs be baptized and accept the bodily symbols of Sikhism, that induction into the Indian army and Sikhism was one and the same for many Punjabi recruits. Oberoi (1994) argues that although the British had a profound effect on Sikh identity, he considers that Fox overstates and homogenizes his case. Instead, Oberoi traces elements of contemporary Sikh religious boundaries to the formation of a powerful Sikh movement in the Punjab that developed in the later part of the nineteenth century. This action he argues was in *reaction to* and not a *result of* colonial forces: the social forces unleashed by British colonial expansion into the Punjab — communications, commercialization, education, and the incorporation of the province into the global economy — brought about radical transformations in Sikh social structure and consciousness. Out of these changes there emerged new social groups and new cultural meanings. One of these groups, the new elites, confronted by alien values and a world in flux, began to invent a sub-culture suitable for the colonial environment (Oberoi 1994, 401).

These new cultural meanings included a powerful new religious doctrine, *Tat Khalsa*, which “reified the outward symbols of the faith by reconceiving of the past” (Oberoi, P. 334). Part of this change was to strengthen the Sikh religion’s control over the body through the symbolism of the five K’s and by developing and strengthening various rituals. To be an orthodox or Khalsa Sikh requires observance of the five K’s; the *kirpan*, a sword or dagger to show the ability to defend oneself and the Sikh faith, the *kartha*, an iron bracelet representing the body’s strength, the *kach*, a pair of underwear that must be worn at all times as a reminder to observe chastity, modesty and sexual restraint, the *kanga*, a small wooden comb worn in the hair at all times and the *kes*, hair tied into a knot on the top of the head and covered with the turban, or *dastar*. Hair is

considered a gift from God, so shaving is forbidden (Minhas 1994). Oberoi contends that this, in combination with the British military's religious enforcement, singularly defined Sikhism through the body's outward appearance.

### *3.1. Disciplining the body*

The type of military discipline Michel Foucault (1977) revealed as a precursor to the disciplinary state, was seen by many British military personnel to be “naturally” possessed by the Sikhs of the Northern Indian State of Punjab, who were disciplined by the rigors of religious observance and a long history of invasions into the region. This experience was considered by some in the British military to have acted as training which “hardened a remnant to tempered steel” (Smith quoted in Heathcote 1995, 84). As Fox argues, this image was constructed and nurtured through filters of biological determinism and an orientalizing process, both of which acted as foundations for the colonial authorities in their quest to control and utilize the colonized population. Such discourse is evidenced in military books and journals produced solely to advise officers on how to handle their Sikh regiments:

The Sikh is a fighting man and his fine qualities are best shown in the army, which is his natural profession. Hardy, brave, and of intelligence; too slow to understand when he is beaten; obedient to discipline; attached to his officers; and careless of caste prohibitions, he is unsurpassed as a soldier in the East . . . The Sikh is always the same, ever genial, good-tempered and uncomplaining; as steady under fire as he is eager for a charge. (Falcon quoted in Fox 1985,144)

This system of classification resonates with the arguments of Foucault and the power of the normalizing gaze to classify and order the subject. Such a hierarchical or classification grid enabled the technologies of disciplinary power to act over the colonial soldier:

For the marks that once indicated status, privilege and affiliation were increasingly replaced — or at least supplemented — by a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchy and the distribution of rank. In a sense the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps,

determine levels, to fix specialties and to render differences useful by fitting them one to another. (Foucault 1977, 184)

In the case of the Sikh soldier both Fox and Oberoi interpret the ascription of Sikh identity in a manner that can be read as supporting the insertion of Foucault's reading of discipline into a dual framework of military and colonial power relations. Fox illuminates the ordering and classification of soldiers within the Indian army:

The symbolic reinforcement of Singh identity and the syncretism of military and Sikh ritual worked "downward" to separate Singhs from Hindus and Muslims, but it also worked "upward" to separate them from Britishers. This symbolic boundary helped legitimate the inequality in pay and conditions suffered by Indian troops in comparison to British enlisted men of equivalent rank who were stationed in India. It also supported the reservation of all higher ranks in an Indian regiment for British officers. (Fox 1985, 143)

Oberoi reveals the symbolic power of the normalizing gaze and in this case, its ramifications in disciplining the body:

Unmindful of the complex nature of Sikh tradition and the immense spectrum of doctrines and practices among the Sikh public, philistine army commanders enforced an extremely narrow, functional and mechanistic definition of the Sikh faith. Only those who carried the five symbols were deemed genuine Sikhs. (Oberoi 1994, 361)

Oberoi discusses the deep conviction held by many British officers that the "martial prowess of the Sikhs flowed mystically out of their religious observances and beliefs" (1994, 361). As such, many administrative and military officials were dismayed when they perceived what they thought were contaminants of the Sikh religion through idol worship, smoking or visiting Hindu or Muslim places of worship. Oberoi makes the point that such melding of religious activities was not interpreted by many Punjabis to change their status as "Sikhs." The colonial authorities, however, enforced a stricter definition of Sikhism, and this was transmuted through government resource allocation on the basis of religious affiliation. If Punjabi Sikhs wanted to benefit from government jobs and resources, they had to become "true" Sikhs, and thus support the bodily symbols of Sikhism. The census was used as a measure of the "success" of the colonial authority

to bolster the number of Sikhs in the Punjab after 1850, even though they themselves had a hand in creating the “Sikh” identity they measured. As Oberoi argues:

British misconceptions concerning Indian religious traditions led to the birth of a powerful colonial myth that predicated a decline in Sikh population. This myth exercised an enormous influence on sections of the colonial administration, particularly the British Army, which now projected itself as the savior and guardian of the Sikh ‘martial race.’ (Oberoi 1994, 212)

It is difficult to say whether certain members of the military administration were primarily motivated by a desire to “save” the Sikhs, or whether the prime motivation was to develop an economic but formidable army in which the essentialized and mythologized Sikhs could play a central role. Fox argues that this approach to recruiting local soldiers was based on the objective of colonialism “on the cheap,” and by the outbreak of World War I, Sikhs accounted for 39.6 percent of the colonial Indian army’s combat troops. This resulted in the proportion of Sikh troops in the army being over three times the proportion of Sikhs in the Punjab’s population, twenty times their representation in the Indian population as a whole (Fox 1985, 143). The reliance on Sikhs was significant, and as such any interpretation of colonial processes in the Punjab without consideration of the military is certainly insufficient.

The impact of the colonial/military nexus of power on Sikh identity certainly illuminates contemporary debates about turbans and other symbols of Sikhism. But, before we can reposition these debates, we have to understand how colonial connections led to the creation and maintenance of significant and enduring spatial interconnections.

#### **4. Travelling Tales I: Exhibiting the colonial soldier**

Until the end of the nineteenth century, assignment opportunities for Indian soldiers under British military command were mostly confined to the Indian sub-continent. On a few occasions soldiers travelled across India to participate in colonial state events, and Bernard Cohn elaborates on one of the most spectacular in India — the 1877 Assemblage to recognize Queen Victoria as Empress of India (Cohn 1983). This event saw all of

India's rulers and their entourages (84,000 people) housed outside Delhi in over 8,000 tents. Cohn highlights the uniqueness of such a gathering since the colonial authorities were careful to meet with rulers individually in order to garner their loyalty and support through appropriate *nazar* or gift giving/exchange. Having many rulers together was considered imprudent, since rivalries could complicate the colonial state's actions. But the desire to represent India and Indian rulers in subservience to the Empire was significant. This can be usefully interpreted through Timothy Mitchell's (1992) notion of the world-as-exhibition:

This world-as-exhibition was a place where the artificial, the model, and the plan were employed to generate an unprecedented effect of order and certainty. It is not the artificiality of the exhibitionary order that matters, however, so much as the contrasting effect of an external reality that the artificial and the model create — a reality characterized, like Orientalism's Orient, by essentialism, otherness, and absence. (P. 290)

Such order and certainty guided colonial officials in their attempts to present the “reality” of India at the ceremony, and the right for British authority over it. Beset by the problems of recognizing all of India's indigenous rulers en masse, officials were specific in setting guidelines regarding such things as the number of gun salutes for each ruler; sizes of entourages; number of weapons permitted; *nazar*, and location of camps in regard to the overall event structure. Rulers were ranked through a criterion based on the importance of each state head, the size of territory their kingdom presented, its revenue potential, and their loyalty to the British. To reduce the potential rivalry between rulers over *nazar*, the Government decided to present the ninety most important rulers with large European style banners and heraldic crests representing the history of each ruling family; “The representations of ‘history’ on the crests included the mythic origin of the families. . . and, particularly, aspects of the past which tied the Indian princes and chiefs to English rule” (Cohn 1983, 191).

This presentation of India as a “living museum” became centrally important in attempts to construct its social, political and economic basis as Britain's past, i.e. frozen, ancient and mythic, and as such, validated Britain's authority to rule over India. Anne McClintock's (1995) notion of “anachronistic space” illuminates this idea well, where:

“Geographical difference across space is figured as a historical difference across time” (p. 40). This boundary, McClintock argues, allowed differences between the colonies and Europe to be framed as “temporally different and thus irrevocably superannuated by history ” (1994, 40). Here time, in the guise of history, ensnares India as past, allowing Britain to justifiably shape itself as the present and future. Cohn reveals how these representations and emblems of India as the past can be seen through the ceremonial exhibition of military soldiers:

The British rulers were increasingly defining what was Indian in an official and ‘objective’ sense. Indians had to look like Indians: before 1860 Indian soldiers as well as their European officers wore western-style uniforms; now the dress uniforms of Indians and English included turbans, sashes and tunics thought to be Mughal or Indian. (Cohn 1983, 183)

Here the dress uniform highlights the need to create a “reality,” as Mitchell sees it, based on the essentialism and otherness of India, and as McClintock considers, through incarcerating India into a historical, anachronistic space of the past; purified and policed through removing any evidence of “western” influences or change.

This example of the 1877 Royal Assemblage as an exercise in the power of modern systems of ordering and “truth” occurred within India, but by the turn of the century Indian troops had the opportunity to travel overseas and experience the spectacle of the Empire at its heart, while simultaneously being exhibited themselves. Indians were travelling to Britain by the late nineteenth century and writing travel guides for an Indian market (Burton 1996). Though these were probably members of the cultural elite, soldiers also travelled around the Empire to fight on foreign fields and to be paraded for various Royal Coronations and Jubilees. Khan (1991) suggests this is how the first South Asians came to British Columbia — during a trip from India to Britain for Edward VII’s coronation. Those travelling through were colonial Sikh soldiers who were “well-received in Canada and admired for their exotic costumes and their military prowess for which their British medals offered evidence” (Khan 1991). Jagpal (1994) suggests Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee was the earliest journey for Sikh soldiers through

British Columbia. In addition to these Royal expeditions, soldiers who served in World War I also travelled to Europe.

## 5. Travelling Tales II: Punjabi Soldiers and World War I

At the outbreak of World War I, the demand for manpower far exceeded the forces under arms in Britain, and the government turned to the extensive army set up in India to contribute to the fighting effort in France and Mesopotamia. Ellinwood (1976) considers the role of the military as a social institution, and the impact it may have had on Punjabi soldiers, especially after they returned to the Punjab from the war. He uses the censor's record to search for the comments Punjabi soldiers made in their letters home. Several Punjabi soldiers were injured during the war, many of them Sikhs, and some spent time in hospitals where their letters suggest they were treated as war heroes by many members of the public, and visited by the King and Queen. This is tempered however, by Ellinwood's comments that certain restrictions were placed on their movement, but despite these attempts at separation, he suggests that, "there are a few intriguing references to the friendliness of young ladies." (P. 357)



Viceroy Commissioned Officers of the Indian Corps and English woman offering flowers, England 1914. Imperial War Museum.

Soldiers who spent time in various urban centers made several comments about their experiences in letters home:

The most enthusiastic notes were reserved for London . . . They were amazed, for instance, at subways and cigarette lighters . . . Punjabi soldiers admired Cairo, Baghdad, and Istanbul, a few fortunate Muslim soldiers were thrilled with an opportunity to visit Mecca (Ellinwood, 358).

Many Punjabi soldiers, while posted in France, lived with French families, and their view of these relationships contrasted with those of the British, who were often described as aloof and distant:

The Punjabi's observation of French women represents a very special aspect of this easy association with the French people. Apparently most soldiers found that the French women were able to accept them on a footing that was friendly and, in most cases, dignified. They commented on the natural openness of French women, both with French men and Indian men. Some associations naturally become more intimate, though the picture is tantalizingly obscure. Some men said that French women readily fell in love with them, and there were a few marriages . . . There are fewer references to prostitution; both the soldiers and the censor seemed to slur over such matters (Ellinwood, 356)

This brief, but insightful look at the Punjabi/Sikh soldier's relations with Europeans complicates the singular readings I offered earlier in regard to colonial relations and the power to normalize or order the Sikh soldier. Whereas in India, the British were able to police the identity and relations between Indian and British soldiers and officers —most directly through separate Indian and British units — once those soldiers were transported away from India, different relationships developed. The British military, disciplined by the tradition of separateness, found such discipline was ruptured once the colonial Indian soldier was relocated from the “east” into the “heart” of the Empire. This suggests we should be more attuned to the complications diasporic movements had on both European and colonized subjects who were inserted into global colonial networks.

The movement of Sikh soldiers is only one aspect of a broader spatial network that was forming with the impacts of colonialism. Discussing the presence of the Sikh soldier in either the “heart” of the Empire or the Punjab, is only one side of a complexly interwoven diasporic story that needs to be inserted into the rapidly globalizing colonial commodity market. In the next tale, we return to the Punjab to make the connection between colonialism and the Punjabi diaspora more explicit, a tale that will eventually enable us to return to our present moment, “as an effort to ‘blast’ the continuum by recalling a moment of difference from the past and resituating it in the present to interrupt the chain of signification” (Harootunian 1996, 168)

## **6. Travelling tales III: Farmers, fighters and global networks**

The attraction of the Punjab for the British was not only its strategic location as a political buffer between British India and Afghanistan, but its economic potential in the form of agricultural land for the production of wheat and cotton. The most productive agricultural areas were in the central region, ruled by the Sikh Singhs, and consequentially the British focused their earliest attentions on this region. British involvement in agricultural production in the area led to a number of canals being constructed to improve yield. By the turn of the century, colonial mismanagement had led to the usual catalogue of problems including unequal exchange and market competition between the developed and underdeveloped regions, and social and economic polarization between land owners who prospered through colonial attachments and those who suffered and became severely indebted (Fox 1985). Such indebtedness became an overburdening problem to families in the region and led to a number of tactics on the part of men to address the situation. This involved searching-out paid labour overseas — an old coping method, this time channeled by British colonial conduits — and colonial postings as policemen in Hong Kong, Burma and Southeast Asia. Many emigrated to other British Colonies, including Canada, where — partly due to institutional discrimination and exclusion from public office, as well as organized labour’s attempts to exclude non-Europeans — they found work in the resource

industries (Jagpal 1994). These men, initially sojourners, sent remittances home to keep family holdings intact or to extend them. This early Punjabi diaspora must not be viewed outside the wider context of colonialism and its effects:

Their commitment to labour in foreign fields or to manoeuvres in faraway lands was simply an extension of petty commodity production at home since all these undertakings went on within the capitalist world economy. Over time it became impossible to determine if petty commodity cultivation, military service, or overseas wage labour was the primary employment; they formed an ensemble, each part of which bolstered the other. (Fox 1985)

This intertwining of actions on the part of Punjabis was clearly set in motion by the commercial networks into which colonialism plunged the region. As obvious as it appears, tracing these chains of movement exposes the intricate and enduring connections between immigration and colonialism. As others have argued: “It is increasingly evident that emigration policy is one of the strongest legacies of British rule in India” (Ray 1993, 284). This action of locating the causes of immigration in complex colonially informed networks is significant not only for comprehending and linking the impacts of such movements on both receiving and sending nations, but it stresses the endurance, and therefore the continuation of colonial power relations. It is this type of connection that McClintock critiques much post-colonial theory for eliding;

I wish to question the orientation of the emerging discipline and its concomitant theories and curricula changes around a singular, monolithic term, organized around a binary axis of time rather than power, and which, in its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power. (McClintock 1994, 274)

The actions of the British in the Punjab certainly contributed to the pressures on farming families, resulting in migratory networks that are still contested today. Dusting off these past episodes and hauling them into the space of our present allows the moment of November 11, 1993 at Legion branch number 175 in Surrey, to be inserted into a very different continuum. Before returning to the moment, we need to locate the origins of the Royal Canadian Legion.

## **7. War veterans of the Empire: The fight for recognition and restitution**

After WWI, mass demobilization and economic hardship hit many of the soldiers who survived. Ex-soldiers around the Empire faced hardships in varying degrees. In India, 100,000 of the 152,000 Indian combat troops of WWI had been recruited from the Punjab, and in order to encourage greater enlistment military recruiters often made promises of land grants. After the war, it was acknowledged by the British military that these promises had been exaggerated by overzealous local recruiters. Since much enlistment was focused in particular villages, the failure to receive land or remittances from the army was acutely felt. In 1929, Anup Singh, a former cavalryman, led a group of 2,000 ex-soldiers, many of them from central Punjab, to demand that the government live up to its promises (Fox 1985). The demands for some type of recognition for the contribution and sacrifice of Sikh soldiers encouraged the British to award medals for bravery — including three Victoria Crosses and twenty-two Military Crosses — and a limited number of distinguished Indian soldiers were sent to Sandhurst, the officer training school in Britain. Various other measures were put in place during and after the war, from free military clothing, bonuses for soldiers sent to Europe and pensions for soldiers and their widows (Ellinwood 1976). Similar struggles were launched by veterans in Canada, with greater success.

The Great Veterans War Association was established in Canada in 1917 to allow different groups to come together and work for better resources and support for ex-servicemen. Several veterans groups existed, and were reluctant to join at first because of internal class differences between officers and servicemen. Under the guidance of Field Marshall Earl Haig and the British Empire Service League (the forerunner of the British Legion), the various veterans' groups in Canada were encouraged to join together, and in 1926 most groups joined to form the Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League (Hale 1995). The Canadian Royal Legion, as it came to be called in 1960, was encouraged by Lord Mountbatten, to connect and assist other British Commonwealth ex-service leagues, and most of this assistance went to Caribbean groups.

At this point in the paper, it would seem logical to describe how Sikhs in Canada contributed to the war effort. Such an exercise is complicated by the position of Sikhs in Canada at this time. During World War I, Sikhs in Canada were subject to intense security surveillance under British and Canadian authorities in reaction to fears that Indians overseas would take the opportunity of the war to overthrow the British in India. These fears were partly justified as the Ghadar Party did succeed in encouraging some Sikhs overseas to return to India to support a revolt in Punjab. Yet, as Hugh Johnston (1988) has suggested, the intensity of this surveillance on Sikhs in Canada tended to encourage them into political action, whereas left alone they would have probably been more inclined to concentrate on consolidating their economic position. The surveillance, therefore, set in motion a feedback mechanism that contributed to creating a threat to the Empire in the form of Canadian Sikhs. By 1939 however, Sikhs and other South Asians residing in Canada were seen as potential army recruits and were called in the draft for WWII. The reaction to this demand was not immediate, but after those drafted sought advice from community leaders, the collective response was refusal on the grounds that they were denied the franchise, and therefore could not be expected to support a state that did not recognize their rights.<sup>3</sup> Forces in India, however, fought alongside the allies during WWII, and the pressure to recognize such contributions was a factor in the eventual independence of India in 1947.

## **8. Bringing the past into the space of the present**

We now come full circle in our temporal and spatial journey to arrive, once again, at the door of branch 175 of The Royal Canadian Legion in November 1993. Indo-Canadian veterans had been invited to the Remembrance Day celebrations by the Legion branch itself, and local Indo-Canadian papers made it front page news:

A Press release issued by The Royal Canadian Legion Newton Branch 175 acknowledges that there are tens of thousands of immigrants in B.C. from other parts of the former British Empire, among whom are many who fought in the service of the King and who valiantly played their part in the victory. “They got sick, tired and wounded just

as did the Canadians and considered themselves fortunate if they survived to go home to their families” (*The Link*, 3 November 1993).

The parade was presented as a moment of pride and recognition for the Sikh veterans, and the Indo-Canadian community as a whole. This welcome was short-lived as four Sikhs following the procession were not admitted into the legion hall:

Instead, the officials of the Legion asked them to proceed to a separate room where they could drink coffee by themselves! “Two gentlemen at the entrance said I couldn’t go inside,” said Harbhajan Singh Minhas, one of the Sikhs who served as an airplane technician with The Royal Indian Air Force during the Second World War. “I looked at him and he said I couldn’t go inside with the headgear.” (*The Link*, 13 November 1993)

One of those denied entry was veteran Col. Jauhal, and the local Indo-Canadian newspaper, *The Link*, highlighted his war record — 38 years in the army, including service in North Africa during WWII under field Marshall Montgomery — juxtaposing this to the humiliation he endured:

I was seventh in the marching line. At the front door of the building attendant officials stopped me and said I cannot go in because of my turban. I told them I had been invited as a guest and they have to respect my religion. The president of the Newton Legion, Frank Underwood . . . said the same (*Ibid.*).

The denial of entry to Sikh veterans was certainly not supported by all of those attending the Remembrance Day celebrations. *The Link* carried comments from provincial and municipal politicians, and Surrey Councillor Marvin Hunt — who motioned an apology which was carried unanimously — decried the hypocrisy implied in this action:

It was not an issue when they fought in North Africa or Germany, it was not an issue when they were decorated by the Queen for their bravery and heroism in the midst of all the battles and all the wars they fought. (*The Link*, 17 November 1993)

The debate became a complex and multiple one, which involved various issues of tradition, exclusion, respect and racism. On the matter of tradition, Greg Hogan,

spokesman for the Legion's Executive Council offered the following explanation: "It's been characterized by the media as being racist, but I don't think that's true . . . I think that for the most part members view it as an attack on Canadian traditions" (*Western Reports*, 14 February 1994). This, however, was certainly not the view of Jeanne Eddington, a resident of Surrey who was present at the legion:

These men were invited to participate in the ceremony yet were not welcome to join in the festivities. I heard comments of "we didn't invite you to participate – the local papers did." "When in Canada, obey our rules – not yours." "There is no room – people are still lining up." "You only came to make trouble." I went into the lounge where there was "no room." . . . people were sitting at tables with as many as eight chairs saved for their friends. Women were sitting around tables wearing hats and berets – they were not refused entry. . . I did not sit with the legion members – I left – ashamed of the humiliation these elderly former soldiers were subjected to. (*The Link*, 1 December 1993)

Issues of racism and discrimination became paramount, especially in the media. Yet even as the Legion Executive attempted to adorn this dispute in the clothes of "tradition," simultaneously some of its own members were busy de-robing it for all to see:

Meanwhile, the openly racist sentiments of some of the members of the Newton branch appalled many viewers of the CTV national news on Monday night. One member went so far as to say that the Sikh members should be "shipped back." When the CTV reporter asked, "Where?" He snapped back, "Wherever they came from." (*The Link*, 1 December 1993)

It is clear here that issues of immigration inform the refusal of some members of the Newton Legion to accept Sikh veterans, and these connections, while embedded in the colonial past, actively shape societal debate in the present. Immigration is constructed by the Legion member quoted above, as a reversible flow, one which is only caused by the desires of the migrant. Saskia Sassen's (1995) interpretations challenges this view:

Commentators who speak of an immigrant "influx" or "invasion" treat the receiving country as passive: immigration is unconnected to the past or current actions of receiving countries, and immigration policy is portrayed as more or less benevolent toward immigrants. Absent is any awareness that the international activities of the governments or firms of countries

receiving immigrants may have contributed to the formation of economic links with emigration countries, links that may invite the movement of people as well as capital. (P.84)

By bringing the space of the past into the present, the denials and exclusions proffered from the Newton Legion are inserted into a different continuum, one which exposes the contradictory nature of colonial “traditions,” as well as offering in its place a subversive reading of history that releases other potential outcomes.

## 9. Reinterpreting resistance

My exercise in discursively articulating and reordering this event by exposing the contradictory nature of (post)colonial relations is one approach to challenge the present. But others — Sikh veterans included — have contested this exclusion by remaining within the dominant discourse of colonialism and turning the Legion’s own values onto itself:

Orthodox Sikhs never remove their turbans in public, not even before the Queen. It is the ultimate insult to ask them to do so. These Sikhs fought alongside the Queen’s forces all over the world and thousands lost their lives. By their action the Legion has not only disgraced the brave Sikh veterans but has brought shame on itself by its behaviour on this Remembrance Day. What a way to show respect to the Queen and the war dead by disgracing fellow Sikh veterans both alive and dead, and that too on Remembrance Day . . . When will this Legion treat all veterans in a brotherly fashion and with dignity? Or is that too much to ask? May God give them the wisdom and courage to take the right action in this matter and redeem the good name of all Legionnaires! (*The Link*, 17 November 1993)

This retort allows me to resist ending the story with the usual suspects of racism, bigotry, social distance, invented traditions, and enduring oppressive colonial power relations. I want to consider some of the responses Sikh veterans themselves proffered to this moment of humiliation and exclusion; how did they riposte? I would argue that they used those same systems of colonial power relations to displace the action of the Newton Legion and display how it offended its own “traditional” associations with the British Royal Family and the honour of those who died in battle. Their resistance was not outside the realm of the colonial, indeed they actively and strategically placed themselves

at its centre to justify their right to be included. *The Link* reported the story of one Sikh veteran who was a welcome member at the Richmond Legion Hall. His service record was presented as ample justification of his right to be included within the space of the Legion; “the senior citizen had been in the defence service of British India for over 18 years and was the bodyguard for three British Lords in India — The Viceroy Of India, Lord Linlithgow (1936–1943), Field Marshall Lord Vevil and the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten” (*The Link*, 15 December 1993). Not only did veterans attempt to remind the public of their contributions to the British Empire through service in both WWI and WWII, but they also appropriated the ultimate icon of The Royal Canadian Legion, the Queen herself:

Her Majesty has made it very clear that she feels no discomfort whatsoever when Sikhs appear before her at Buckingham Palace with their turbans on . . . Surrey resident John Pippus received a letter from Buckingham palace after writing about the issue to the Queen. In that letter, the Queen’s aide, Robin Janvrin wrote, “I can confirm that many Sikhs have been invited to Buckingham Palace over the years. They are not asked to remove their turbans.” (*The Link*, 17 November 1993)

One year later at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, both Minhas and Jauhal met the Queen and Prince Philip at a public reception and presented her with a Sikh medallion. This moment was presented as critical for the Sikh community, acting as an ultimate retort to the previous denials and exclusions they had suffered at the hands of the Newton Legion:

“I feel honoured and proud,” said Jauhal, who told the Queen of his efforts in the Second World War. “Right now the insults I suffered in the past are forgotten, I’m just so happy. . .” “I wore my best turban,” joked Harbhajan Minhas, a 69-year-old Royal Indian Air Force bomber who dropped medical supplies to Allied troops in the Second World War. “She was very gracious and interested in my war record,” Minhas said. (Canadian Press Newswire, 20 August 1994).



Strategic centering of Sikh veterans. Minhas and Jauhal present Sikh medallion to the Queen, 1994 Commonwealth Games, Victoria, B.C. <sup>4</sup>

What should we make then of this deliberate insertion of Sikhs into the continuities of this (post)colonial relationship? Can we call this resistance? While much work on postcolonial relations seeks to unearth and challenge the power differentials colonialism invisibility supports, in this case strategically reinforcing colonial relations worked for these Sikh veterans. On one level it positions and justifies their location in this (post)colonial place of British Columbia, and on another it evidences their right to be accepted into the peculiar colonial residual of The Royal Canadian Legion. Rather than the hybrid, diasporic identities offered as conceptual templates for a younger, second or third generation of immigrants, these older men actively reconstructed their identity along a strategically essentialized element of their past, one that saw them in the service of the British Empire. Their active compliance to be placed within the colonial, reveals the interrelationship between power and resistance and how the two can be intimately bound within the same spaces. These individuals used the symbolic colonial past to challenge the material postcolonial present. The impacts of this do not stay only with these men though, as I would argue that this event is significant for the potential it offers

all Sikh and Punjabi communities. Not only does bringing the past into our space of the present alter that present, it also informs the future. The struggle for minority groups to be accepted and included in all spaces of society, material or symbolic, is ongoing, and memory and tradition have become important sites of negotiation in that process. What the Legion represented for these Sikhs was their past places, memories and life within British colonial rule, and to be denied access to that space and its symbolic meanings represented a much greater denial than just their past; but of their future here in Canada as well.

## 9. Conclusion

Postcolonial theory, when attuned to the *continuities* of colonialism, can provide critical insights into power relations. An important tool in this is subversion is the extrication of history from its static or bourgeois interpretation. This process can reveal the multiplicity of spatial and temporal relations and responses, including ones that work within colonial discourses of authority to achieve forms of subversion.

I have related how colonial modes of power inserted themselves through the space of the Punjab, Northern India, and into the multiple constructions of Sikh identities from the late nineteenth century on. Colonialism inserted the region into commercial and military systems that produced, extended and maintained complex networks of global relationships that continue into the present. Orthodox Sikh identity, once actively supported and constructed by the British in India, was resisted and denied once transplanted into the (post)colonial space of Surrey, British Columbia. This historically informed reading allows us to make the assertion that the British were instrumental in *enforcing* the very symbols of religious adherence that less than a century later would be the focus of *exclusion* from the realm of military honour and remembrance in Surrey, British Columbia. This highlights the differentiated nature of power relations, and the need to draw out those connections and contradictions between places in order to reveal how power based on exclusion, and the power to define, can be challenged and rescripted, even from within the enduring discourse of “Empire.” The Sikh challenge to

the Newton Legion was predicated upon the power of past colonial connections to justify and validate their rights — and the rights of other immigrant and minority groups — to share the space and symbolism of the Legion. A strategic action, that while not apparently challenging the power of (post)colonial relations, subverted and reappropriated them.

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- <sup>2</sup> The Bengali mutiny was initiated by new Enfield guns that used animal fat to lubricate the cartridges. Soldiers were offended at having to rip open the cartridges with their teeth and thus possibly contact pig fat. Such details again stress the importance of understanding and contextualizing colonial relations and their possible outcomes. See T.A. Heathcote (1995).
- <sup>3</sup> In a bitter irony the British colonial identity ascribed onto Indians - which should have granted them citizenship rights - was further re-inscribed through additional layers of localized provincial/colonial discourse. This denial elucidates the *reconstruction* of nationality, entitlement, citizenship and the manner in which "British" subjects were selectively distinguished and disenfranchised based on a racialized discriminatory practice. (Jagpal, 1994)
- <sup>4</sup> *Indo-Canadian Business Pages* (1995). Cover photo.

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