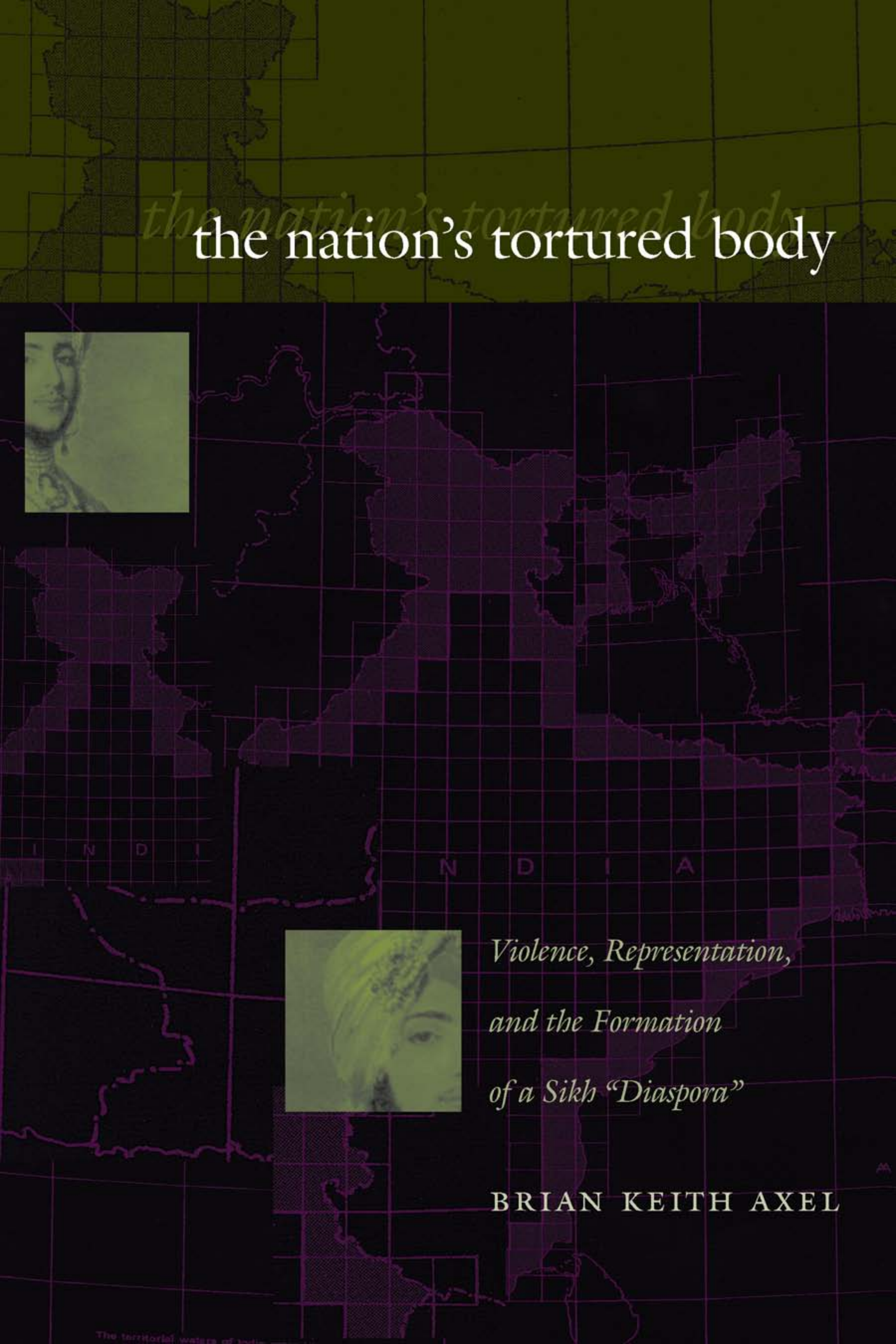
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N D I A
The territorial waters of India

the nation's tortured body

the nation's tortured body

Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"

BRIAN KEITH AXEL

the nation's tortured body

the nation's tortured body

Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"

Brian Keith Axel

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introduction: promise and threat

> What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things.
>
> —Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"

There is something peculiar and powerful about diasporas today. Perhaps, at least at first glance, this is because it is so difficult to comprehend a site of belonging and identification that is both spectacularly global and preeminently local. Yet who would deny that there is a Jewish diaspora, or a Chinese diaspora, or a Sikh diaspora? One would be hard put to say that, preferring the local to the global, there are no diasporas, rather Chinese *in* New York or, for example, Sikhs *in* London. The "exemplary" quality of these different populations, however, is, precisely, an indication of what makes diasporas peculiar and powerful. What is it about the lifestyle of a certain people that transforms them into an *example* of a diaspora (i.e., one in a series of something more generally encompassing)? Or, to turn this around, why is it that people identified as members of diasporas are so often susceptible to the procedures of nation-states that aim at making an *example* of them (e.g., through immigration legislation, debates over multiculturalism, or cases of deportation)?

These questions offer a challenge, which I take up in this book, to reconceptualize the formation of peoplehood through an inquiry into conditions of diaspora, belonging, and violence from colonialism to postcoloniality. In the specific instance, I examine the histories of displacement, of changing "homelands," and of corporeality that have grounded the formation of a Sikh diaspora. As of this writing, in 1999, there are an estimated 20 million Sikhs living in the world.[1] Although recent reports vary, it is estimated that 17 million Sikhs live in India and that 3 million are living in and moving between North America, South America, Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. By far, the majority of Sikhs outside India are located in Britain and the United States, with the largest concentration (approximately 500,000) in England.

The story that I tell of this dispersed population must be distinguished from the well-known stories of other Indian diasporas. These stories usually begin with the colonial system of indenture, which, in a wide variety of cases, is understood to be the primary factor in the mobilization and dispersal of particular groups of people away from India (e.g., Ballard 1994; Chandan 1986; Kelly 1991; Ram 1989; Shankar and Srikanth 1998; Tinker 1976; and van der Veer 1995). This book, however, does not begin with indenture. The different "beginnings" of this book, rather, emerge out of three aspects of the histories of displacement constitutive of the Sikh diaspora: first is the position of Sikhs just prior to colonial rule within a unique territory; second is the specific manner of mobility within and after the colonial period; and third is the emergence of transnational struggle to create a separate, sovereign Sikh state called Khalistan.[2] In the following pages, I summarize these three points of emergence, which are then discussed at length throughout subsequent chapters.

Prior to colonial rule, most Sikhs lived in Punjab, what is often referred to today as the Sikh Empire or Khalsa Raj, a large territory in the northwest of the South Asian subcontinent. Ruled by Ranjit Singh and his progeny between 1799 and 1849, this indeed was one of the East India Company's last great territorial challenges in South Asia. As I discuss in chapter 1, after the company conquered the Sikhs and annexed the territory in 1849, the movement of Sikhs in the nineteenth century *did not,* for the most part, follow the dictates of the system of indentured servitude that, between 1833 and 1920, was responsible for the migration of people from all over the subcontinent to other colonies. The most important exception to this history of movement and mobility is the recruitment of Sikhs from Punjab to work as indentured laborers on the East African railway between 1897 and 1920 (Barrier and Dusenberry 1989; Bhachu 1985). Otherwise, between 1860 and World War II, Sikh men moved with the empire as soldiers and policemen, often settling in the locations where they were stationed (e.g., Burma, Singapore, and Hong Kong). Between the 1890s and the 1930s, some Sikh men also traveled to England and North America as students, scholars, adventurers, and "free" laborers. This history of mobility would take on an extreme importance in the years before Indian Independence (1935–47), when Sikhs drew on, or reconstituted, their position before colonial rule (as inhabiting a sovereign territory of their own) and their role during colonial rule (as protectors of empire) to construct an argument legitimizing their demand for a separate Sikh homeland, known variously as Sikhistan, Azad Punjab, and Khalistan. This demand, however, was not granted. Instead, in 1947, India and Pakistan were created following the dictates of the Radcliffe Award, which divided the "boundaries of the two parts of the Punjab on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims" (Kirpal Singh 1991, 473–83).

After Indian Independence, Sikhs in Punjab, led by the Akali Dal political party, continued to fight for the establishment of a Sikh homeland, but this was done through the medium of a "linguistic demand" for the formation of a state whose majority population would be Punjabi speaking. Between 1948 and 1966, the government of India officially redrew the map of Punjab three times because of, or in spite of, Akali "agitation." First, in 1948, a division was made between the state of Punjab and the Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU). Second, on 1 November 1956, a new Punjab was formed by merging PEPSU with a differently configured Punjab. Third, on 1 November 1966, the Punjabi Suba was formed (making up what is known today as Punjab). Thus, by 1966, the state of Punjab was reduced to an area of small proportions. This reconfigured its population, giving a slight majority to those identified as Sikh. Akali leaders, however, were not satisfied with this territorial "award" or with the position of Sikhs within it. And, between 1966 and the early 1980s, they continued to organize agitations against the central government, hoping to create, if not a Khalistan, at least a state within India where the "preservation of Sikh traditions and identity" would be ensured (Khushwant Singh [1989] 1991, 310).

While the Akalis in Punjab were continuing their fight for the institutionalization of a Sikh homeland within India in the late 1940s, Sikh men began traveling in large numbers to different parts of the globe, following the prior colonial trajectories of movement. They traveled to Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, England, and North America. This movement, however, was fundamentally transformed. Sikh men moved, not as protectors of empire, but as a new postwar labor force. In this book, I am concerned, most particularly, with how this transformation affected the emergence of Sikh life in postwar Britain. Between 1947 and the mid-1960s, the movement of these men to England, as well as to other nation-states, established a pattern of labor and leisure that contributed not only to the reconstitution of those nation-states but also to the discursive formation of a global Sikh *panth* (community) that was specifically gendered. Although, from the 1960s on, entire Sikh families began to travel around the world and new generations began to be brought up as citizens of different nation-states, the initial years of this movement would have an indelible effect on the creation of processes of Sikh identification. By means of particular bodily techniques, religious practices, visual representations, and narratives of Sikh "identity" — which, indeed, had a significant colonial genealogy that was to be globalized in the years after — Sikh men became the privileged site for negotiating who could be recognized as a member of the Sikh *panth.*

The story of a conjunction between a gendered "identity" politics and a fight for Khalistan plays an important part in my discussion of the Sikh diaspora's formation. In a way that may seem counterintuitive, however, neither the processes of gendering nor the fight for Khalistan has stemmed unidirectionally from Sikh practices within India. Khalistan and the presumed masculinity of the Sikh subject, in other words, were not simply lifted from Sikh life in Punjab and transported to the diaspora. Far from it.

I will have more to say about the issue of gender later in this introduction and throughout the other chapters of this book. With regard to Khalistan, a few distinctions must be made immediately. The fight for a Sikh homeland, orchestrated by the Akali Party in Punjab, remained within India between 1947 and 1971 and was not a concern for Sikhs living in other parts of the world — even though the increasingly globalized Sikh population had created efficient networks of communication between different localities (e.g., through monetary remittances and the circulation of newspapers). The Akali's call for a homeland during this period was rarely made with reference to a Khalistan. Indeed, all calls for a Khalistan were either veiled or disclaimed (as I have already noted, political activity was oriented toward a "linguistic demand"). And, whether or not a call for Khalistan was made openly, Akalis envisaged the position of a Sikh homeland to be *within* India. After 1971, owing to the efforts, at first, of a few Sikh men outside India, the struggle for Khalistan began to be popularized in North America and Europe. These early diasporic activities conflicted with the premises of the Akalis within Punjab, most particularly because they were organized around the idea of Khalistan as a sovereign polity *separate* from India — a significant point of differentiation (which I elaborate in chap. 2).

The fight for Khalistan, however, remained somewhat obscure until 1984.

After Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's orchestrated siege of the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar (Punjab) in June 1984, and after the anti-Sikh riots of October and November 1984 in North India in response to Gandhi's assassination by her two Sikh bodyguards, Sikh life was radically changed. In the following years (1984–98), the proliferation of extreme violence in Punjab, leaving between 10,000 and 100,000 people dead, became a central element in the revitalization and transformation of the idea of Khalistan by Sikhs living around the world. Diasporic supporters of Khalistan began to understand the Sikhs to be a nation, or *qaum*. As we shall see in chapters 1 and 2, the discursive production of the Sikhs as a *qaum* has an important genealogy in nineteenth-century colonialism. As many scholars have noted, colonial discourse generated a shifting theory of peoplehood, race, sect, and caste for which the term *nation* was often a synonym.[3] During the struggles for Indian and Pakistani independence in the 1940s, *nation* clearly took on a different significance as a category that encompassed a diversity of "peoples," "races," and "castes" under a single rubric with a territorial designation. The "two-nation" theory that governed the division of the South Asian subcontinent into Pakistan and India envisaged two disparate nations in need of their own territorialized states. Akali politicians, however, continued to use the term *nation,* or *qaum,* in a way that reiterated some, but not all, aspects of colonial discourse, particularly in their demands for the institutionalization of a territorial homeland (i.e., "Sikhs are a nation in our own right"). In such moments, another term that I have already mentioned, *panth,* was also used in reference to Sikhs, but signifying something somewhat different.[4] *Panth* was used more generally, and much more commonly, to signify the Sikh "community" and its "religious path." *Panth* and *qaum* in specific ways (discussed in chap. 2) remained in tension—although, as we shall see, the two were not irreconcilable. After 1984, the term *nation,* or *qaum,* was transformed, referring to the "peoplehood" not only of Sikhs in India but also of Sikhs around the world. On the basis of the claim that Sikhs were already a *qaum*—and sometimes claiming that the *panth* was a "multistate nation"—Khalistanis, proponents of Khalistan, justified their call for the creation of a separate Sikh state where all Sikhs may live free from discrimination. In short, the post-1984 period has been a crucial time of change, not least for the translation and transformation of the globally dispersed Sikh *panth* as a *qaum*.

Today, although certainly not supported by all Sikhs, Khalistan is an idea that, nevertheless, has become a generalized trope of social practice and representation central to the post-1984 (re)constitution of the Sikh diaspora.

Generated on a global scale, Khalistan has formed the basis not only for militancy or "terrorism" but also for debates about terror and identity and for the creation of specialized commodities, diasporic economies, media technologies, and narratives of place and displacement. It has also infused Sikh diasporic practices with a sense of urgency and anxiety, a development that I discuss at length in chapters 3 and 4.

This urgency and anxiety motivated many Sikhs outside India, soon after the violence of 1984, to begin raising funds to sponsor programs in Sikh studies—programs that they hoped would both represent a more salubrious image of Sikhs to the world and educate Sikh students about their "heritage." Sikh studies scholars benefited greatly from this patronage. The persistent output of these scholars, some of whom have been involved in Sikh studies for thirty-five years or more, has increased dramatically, generating a large body of research on Sikhism, Sikh history, and the Sikh diaspora. A consideration of the diverse publications on the Sikh diaspora, of the increasing number of academic conferences and journals, and of the development of chairs in Sikh studies at prominent North American and European universities since 1984 demonstrates how powerful the practices of these scholars have been, despite their marginality within diaspora studies proper. It also demonstrates the wealth and interest of the many Sikhs who have supported their efforts.

The work of Sikh studies specialists—bringing together research on the history of the Sikh religion and politics with research on the Sikh diaspora in Europe, Southeast Asia, North America, and Africa—aims to articulate the radical heterogeneity of both Sikh political and cultural practice and Sikh histories of movement and mobility. The proposition of this heterogeneity is enough for some scholars to argue or intimate that there is not one Sikh "identity" and that, indeed, there is not *one* Sikh diaspora but many or, at times, none (cf. Barrier and Dusenberry 1989; Bhachu 1985; Hawley and Mann 1993; Oberoi 1994; and Singh and Barrier 1996).[5] These arguments, which also tend to turn on a deconstruction of Sikh identity, have been viewed as extremely troublesome by many Sikhs supporting Sikh studies, particularly those who have been involved with the fight for Khalistan. Against the supposedly empirical plurality of Sikh identities and Sikh diasporas, Khalistanis argue for the creation, not only of a sovereign Sikh homeland, but also of a singular Sikh identity.

The debate between Sikh studies scholars and Khalistanis—the topic of chapter 5—conjures an old anthropological problem in a new guise. We find one instance of this problem in the work of Ruth Benedict ([1934] 1989), who wrote about the sensitivity of "primitive peoples" positioned within modernity: "Even very primitive peoples are sometimes far more conscious of the role of cultural traits than we are, and for good reason. They have had intimate experience of different cultures. They have seen their religion, their economic system, their marriage prohibitions, go down before the white man's" (p. 5). Benedict's notion of *intimate experience* mediates a liberal anthropological enterprise that, in her terms, must interrogate and attempt to disrupt what "from the beginning" appears to be the "first and important distinction," an illusory differentiation between "the Chosen People and dangerous aliens." Ventriloquizing primitive discourse, Benedict enunciates succinctly this originary and dangerous, although apparently illusory, distinction: "Outside the closed group there are no human beings" (p. 7). Both Sikh studies scholars and Khalistanis are concerned to illuminate the "intimate experiences" of Sikhs around the world, particularly as they pertain to the "experience of different cultures" and histories of domination. The notions of a *closed group* and a *chosen people* figure critically into these formulations. The investigations of both Sikh studies scholars and Khalistanis into Sikh identity, however, fall starkly on one side or the other of the closed group. For many Sikh studies scholars, the distinction of the closed group is indeed a caprice that must be dismantled (cf. Oberoi 1993, 1994), whereas, for Khalistanis, the proposition of a closed group — a people with a destiny — represents the only possibility for survival (cf. Giani 1994; Mann, Singh, and Gill 1995).

Diaspora and the "Place of Origin"

This book, a historical anthropology of the Sikh diaspora, emerges from this recent history of knowledge production and violence, and it rests, sometimes uneasily, on the fissures, gaps, and continuities of the Sikh diaspora's involvement in the composition and dissemination of that knowledge. Studies of the Sikh diaspora, today, cannot help but become intertwined in political discourses about the Sikh *qaum*. With this understanding, I have tried to develop a historical anthropology that is sensitive to both the highly politicized nature of its intervention and the exceptional reproductive commitments of the Sikh people. I have decided to make the problems of violence and pain, which many Sikhs know too well, part of my inquiry.[6] But I have also hoped to offer an analytic that, itself, does not recuperate the ideologies of that "people," however defined. In writing this book, I have tried to redirect the argument away from claims and forms of questioning concerned with evaluating the validity or status of the closed group. In other words, I am not concerned with deconstructing the boundaries of Sikh identity, with debating whether Sikhs are a closed group, or with determining whether the Sikh people have a destiny. I am concerned, rather, with how those distinctions have become very real for the Sikh diaspora. To put this more precisely, my object of study is the Sikh diaspora *as a diaspora,* one that has been constantly generated and reconstituted through historically specific kinds of regulatory practices and contradictory discourses about who is a Sikh and the future of the Sikh nation.

This object of study, the Sikh *diaspora,* presents a challenge to analysis. It may be helpful to reflect on this challenge more generally. What makes a certain people a "diaspora"? In the past few decades, scholars of diaspora studies have offered answers that return time and again to a singular proposition: the common denominator exemplifying a diaspora is its vital relation to a place of origin that is *elsewhere.* There is, however, something extremely elusive about the locality of the place of origin within a diaspora. According to these studies, the place of origin lives, is replicated, or is transformed within a population that is globally dispersed.[7] It is elsewhere, yet it is right here. This elusiveness notwithstanding, diaspora studies scholars deploy *place of origin* as a basic category to describe, explain, and distinguish the "identity" of a particular diaspora in relation to other diasporas and in relation to the specific spatial and temporal formations that the phrase signifies (i.e., "the homeland" and "origin" or "descent"). But identifying the place of origin also provides the basis for a much stronger argument, which is not always offered explicitly but rather presumed. The argument is that the place of origin or homeland—embodied in formations of language, religion, tradition, race, ethnicity, indications of territoriality, etc.—*constitutes* the diaspora. In other words, according to this argument, because the homeland is originary and constitutive of its people, regardless of birthplace, those people, wherever they are, form a community, a dispersed community, a diaspora. This argument helps discern what most scholars consider an enduring problem: the ambivalence, or even antagonism, with which the nation-state regards the diaspora. The peculiar and powerful relation of a place of origin to its people not only helps identify a group as a diaspora but also effectively makes the nation-state in which the group resides a host country. With this status as a host country, a nation-state then assumes responsibility for making an example of diasporas by either valorizing their "presence" (e.g., multiculturalism) or limiting where and how they may settle (e.g., immigration or deportation), or both.

To look more closely at the complex difficulties of what I will call *the place of origin thesis,* let us consider work on the South Asian diaspora. The South Asian diaspora, as a diaspora, has only recently become an object of study.[8] Three interrelated moments emerging in the past thirty years are of particular significance for understanding these studies as well as the diasporic populations themselves. First, the category *diaspora* was disengaged from an exclusive reference to Jews and people of African descent.[9] *Diaspora* came to refer, more generally, to immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile, overseas, and ethnic communities.[10] Second, the diaspora became a way of organizing varying kinds of practices spanning academic institutions, government agencies, and wealthy community organizations. Despite often contradictory goals, these communities have joined together to sponsor academic chairs, conferences, and journals, educational literature for children, and state liaisons. Third, the different practices, interests, and university positions of scholars instituted a division within academic programs concerned with studying the new diaspora: specifically, a separation of work into the domains of cultural studies, on the one hand, and area studies, on the other.[11]

Within this institutional division of practices and approaches, the area studies approach to the South Asian diaspora has been dominated, for the most part, by studies of the Indian diaspora — a category most often defined by the Hindu-Muslim binary (Shankar and Srikanth 1998). Studies of the Indian diaspora, however, have tended to focus primarily on the Hindu side of this binary, constituted implicitly or explicitly in relation to the Muslim. The provenance of this exclusive focus has as much to do with the interests of diaspora studies scholars and the practices of their colonialist and orientalist predecessors as it does with the historical involvement of nation-states in the projects of area studies programs. As we shall see (chap. 5), studies of the Sikh diaspora sit awkwardly among studies of the Indian diaspora, not only because of the hegemonic position of the Hindu, but also because of the creation, since the 1980s, of a transnational Sikh identity politics and particularly a diasporic fight for Khalistan.

Place of origin figures prominently in the area studies approach to the South Asian diaspora.[12] One of the major contributions of this scholarship has been to elucidate the ways in which the "host country" often regards the diaspora as a threat. According to these studies, this threat revolves around the temporal aspect of the place of origin thesis. Put simply, studies of South Asian diasporas suggest that the diaspora embodies a particular time that manifests itself not only in terms of a "memory" but also in the physical and visible presence of the body. Together, the diaspora's memory—which, according to this thesis, allows the diaspora to draw on a homeland in the reproduction of culture, religion, or ethnicity—and its presence enact a process in which, by coming back, the past insinuates itself into the nation-state and threatens the established hierarchical order.

What, in this prominent view, is the character of the diaspora's time? How has it come to be the diaspora's definitive property? The answers to these questions can be found in the way in which the many studies construct the category *diaspora* in terms of the significance of colonialism to the movement of Indians from India, on the one hand, and the significance of the relation between diasporic religion or culture to a place of origin, on the other.

For the most part, scholars agree that there would be no South Asian diaspora without the process of colonialism, which, through the institutionalization of a system of indenture, violently and irreversibly separated large populations from their birthplaces in several regions of India.[13] That this history of colonialism constitutes a time that is immanent to the diaspora is apparently clear. Diaspora studies texts continually stress the transparency of this time by way of narratives of diasporic movement *away from* India, enunciating the diaspora through supplementary terms: "Indian communities outside India," people of "South Asian origin," people with "their roots in India," "people of South Asian descent," and "overseas South Asian communities." These enunciations effectively constitute an identification of the diaspora with a generalized diasporic time. Within this discourse, in terms of ethnicity, the time of the diaspora that threatens nation-states is the time that, between 1833 (the British Act of Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies) and the present, designates the successive movement, through several generations, of persons, often as groups, away from India.

But, according to this approach, the constitution of the diaspora's culture or religion is a different matter. This is evident in the way that, in order to construct the category *diaspora,* different scholars return to precolonial India for an explanation of the diaspora's cultural or religious practices and beliefs. This explanatory modality discerns continuities or transformations of Indian culture or religion, but it also attests to another time that is apparently definitive of the diaspora. In these terms, the cultural or religious time that constitutes the diaspora spans an indefinite period *prior to* colonial intervention.[14]

In terms of this approach to diaspora studies, then, the time of the diaspora, the time that gives the diaspora its embodied and collective identity, is a dual temporality. The first, generated by a colonial rupture, is defined by a movement of Indians away from India, the place of origin. The second, seemingly generated by the place of origin itself, is defined by the putatively a priori character of Indian religion and culture—a characteristic apparently independent of colonial intervention. Together, according to this essentialist argument, these times conjoin to constitute the diaspora, tie it to its particular constitutive space (i.e., the homeland or the place of origin), and generate a threat to the space-cum-territory of the host country. Diaspora studies scholars demonstrate the ways in which the Indian diaspora's ethnicity, religion, and culture have variously changed and remained consistent. Yet, while definitions of ethnicity, religion, and culture may change—owing, it is said, to external factors impinging on the diaspora—the (dual) time of the diaspora, itself, remains the same (i.e., there is always the double constitutive time of movement and religion or culture). According to this trajectory of scholarship, the diaspora's (dual) time is a structural property of the diaspora's *form.*

This conceptualization has several difficulties that, in subsequent chapters, I will counter within specific historical analyses of the Sikh diaspora and of the constitution of its particular form of temporality. For the moment, I would like to question the formulation of the diaspora's structural time, particularly its unchanging character generalized to all South Asian diasporas. Here, within diaspora studies, is evident a recuperation of well-known anthropological discourses. Consider the work of Evans-Pritchard, which, like much of diaspora studies, attempts to explain a moving and segmented society's structural continuity and stability. Evans-Pritchard's relation to studies of South Asian diasporas has a significant genealogy in social scientific practice mediated both through the training of British area studies specialists working on "overseas Indians" in the 1950s and 1960s and through the general hegemonic position of Louis Dumont's work in area studies.[15] In this genealogy, the prominent position of Evans-Pritchard's notion of *structural time* is unmistakable.[16]

Evans-Pritchard details his theory of structural time in the essay "Nuer Time Reckoning" (1939) and in two of the volumes of the Nuer trilogy, *The*

Nuer (1940) and *Nuer Religion* (1956). He draws a sharp distinction between time and space. Whereas *structural space* denotes a functional property of an empirical social system — "the distance between social segments, which are groups of people who compose units in a system" — *structural time* refers to an abstraction "belonging to a different order of reality" (1940, 256, 94). Evans-Pritchard says:

> We have remarked that the movement of structural time is, in a sense, an illusion, for the structure remains fairly constant and the perception of time is no more than the movement of persons, often as groups, through the structure. Thus age-sets succeed one another for ever, but there are never more than six in existence and the relative positions occupied by these six sets at any time are fixed structural points through which actual sets of persons pass in endless succession. . . . If we are right in supposing that lineage structure never grows, it follows that the distance between the beginning of the world and the present day remains unalterable. Time is thus not a continuum, but is a constant structural relationship between two points, the first and last persons in a line of agnatic descent. (1940, 107–8)

Structural time, for Evans-Pritchard, is a stable structural entity, never changing, that (with its static, concrete power) manipulates human movement and thought (i.e., humans are mere pegs filling in unchanging peg holes).[17] Scholars concerned with South Asian diasporas run into the same difficulty as Evans-Pritchard did. The problem is that *time* is more like the geography of a land (of political, lineage, and age-set relations) that configures human existence (and a land, itself, that does not transform through erosion). That is, the suggestion of a nonprocessual time is a suggestion not of time at all but, rather, of the quintessential place.[18] Hence, studies of diasporas can refer to the definitive and continual influence of a place of origin. And Evans-Pritchard creates the stark image: "How shallow is Nuer time may be judged from the fact that the tree under which mankind came into being was still standing in Western Nuerland a few years ago" (1940, 108).

This discursive production of temporality and homeland has been reconstituted many times over since the first scholars of overseas Indians went to the field (between 1950 and 1960) in order to examine, document, and translate the lives of Indians who may never have lived in India. Whether in Fiji, Trinidad, or Mauritius, these studies of overseas Indians entextualized commonsense notions of *community, culture,* or *structure* that necessitated the production of India as a quintessential place of origin to which overseas Indians had a definitive, a priori link. Consider the following excerpts from the texts of two social scientists—Adrian Mayer (Fiji, 1950–51), trained in London, and Arthur Niehoff (Trinidad, ca. 1959), trained at Columbia University[19]—who first studied overseas Indians in the 1950s, both published in 1961:

> The first aim of this book is to provide an account of the rural section of the Fiji Indian community, for people either living in Fiji or interested in the Colony. Such an object should need no justification in a country where populations with such varied interests and customs live side by side. The ignorance of people of one community about the ways of life of another can be a hindrance, if not a danger, in the days of rapid social change into which Fiji is now entering. . . . Research on such questions was undertaken for a year during 1950–1, shortly after a stay in India. The difference between the highly stratified and controlled Indian, and the freer Fiji Indian society was striking. In contrast to Indian villages, settlements in Fiji were both officially and socially ill-defined. . . . The reader should therefore bear in mind the author's acquaintance with India as one of the implicit factors in the fieldwork, since it may have led him to stress the "looseness" of the Fiji Indian settlement. (Mayer 1961, xi–xii)

> To discover, assert, and point out the significance of the fact that in a brief fifty years immigrants from across the world, once strangers in the plantations of the island, have reconstituted in modernity their own variant of a rich and ancient civilization, India's, and done so as they rose to full citizenship and influence in a complex and rising young nation of the developing excolonial world, is not simply a provoking reiteration of the phoenix-like tenacity of the human spirit. It is to add, as this book does, to the penetration, the sweep, and the command of social science and cultural anthropology. . . . To find [the circle of villages] reconstituted in East Indian Trinidad, again without name or explicit rationale, is to find unexpected proof of their essential and integral part in Indian civilization. (Arensberg 1961, xi–xii)

These passages are significant for several reasons. Most important, they demonstrate that the production of India as a spatiotemporal place of origin was *necessary* for an explanation of overseas Indians. Let me address this suggestion more closely.

The two passages are apparently very different. Mayer's narrative produces India as a place of origin through its "striking" absence, while Arensberg's does this by arguing for its essential presence. Nevertheless, whether India is absent or present, these texts constitute it as a place with very similar characteristics. Most important, it is a container of tradition that is rich and ancient. It is highly stratified and controlled in officially and socially well-defined units (i.e., it has its own normativity): villages or a "circle of villages." These are familiar characteristics for those who have studied the history of research done in India.[20] While a genealogy of such a discourse on India may find one of several beginnings within nineteenth-century disciplinary strategies of the colonial administration in India, specialists in studies of overseas Indians came up with techniques of making them travel (see Cohn 1977; Appadurai 1986b, 1988). In a sense, the putative displaced character of the object of study sanctified the "displaced" character of the techniques of knowledge production.

And place is logically presupposed in the category *displacement.* These two texts use many of the same techniques to produce India as a place that is both originary and constitutive. Both construct narratives that show the strong or loose connection of Indians to that place by the descriptions of districts in India that produced the Trinidad or Fiji Indians. They argue that overseas settlement patterns (grouping South Indians, Tamils, Madrassis, etc. here and North Indians, Gujeratis, Punjabis, etc. there) replicate "original" Indian divisions. They support their assertions through analyses of economic activities, agriculture, rituals (marriage, funerals, household rites, Hindu and Muslim festivals), political activities, caste, kinship, and culture. Furthermore, these analyses ground an argument about how internal forms of heterogeneity and conflict constitute India as a whole. Together, in a staggering display of detail, these techniques of knowledge production constitute a map of India as a foundational place, project onto it a series of differentially constituted points of origin (i.e., Punjab, Madras), and fill in these points with cultural / structural information that gives them value and assigns them a hierarchy in relation to other cartographies.

The "data" and the techniques used for producing place in these texts were being put to the test in the 1950s and 1960s — as was India. "Days of rapid social change" should not be taken lightly, nor should mention of "rising young nation," "danger," "hindrance," "modernity," "citizenship," freedom, and "discovery." The sayings and stories of these texts, which, to use de Certeau's (1984) phrasing, organized places through the displacements they described, were producing geographies of action in many ways. These stories are about the constitution of new educational practices—or, as Arensberg (1961) says, "the penetration, the sweep, and the command of social science and cultural anthropology" (p. xi). These stories are also as much about India as they are about modernization and the hopes and fears of a new world order. In other words, as Inden (1990, 16) has argued, these studies were integral to emerging forms of education (as a trope for talking about world order and as a set of practices that included development projects and military training systems) that had been concerned, primarily, with producing modernity.

From Threat to Promise to Threat: Genealogy of a Category

The difficulties that the present-day approach to diasporas runs into in theorizing processes of place and displacement mark the necessity to reassess some of the basic tropes of diaspora studies—a project of reassessment that will continue throughout the chapters of this book. Two of these tropes demand particular note. The first is the trope of the diaspora's "threat." The second is the explanatory trope that reduces time to an originary space.

One way to talk about the trope of threat is to see studies of Indian diasporas in terms of a genealogy of the category *overseas Indians*. This genealogy demonstrates the transformation of discourses about the category *overseas Indians* from "threat" to "promise" and to "threat" again. It also demonstrates the prominent position that government agencies have had in determining objects of study.

Overseas Indians was very likely an invention of British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century who were involved in generating records of and policies for the emigration of Indians to plantation colonies.[21] Through the years of colonial rule, the term was used in a variety of ways by colonial administrators and historians: to refer, first, to those "recruited" into indenture and sent over the seas from India after the abolition of slavery in 1833; then to both indentured and "free" laborers living in the plantation colonies; and then, after the abolition of the indenture system in the 1920s, to the aggregate of Indians living in the colonies (many of whose grandparents had been born in those colonies). Throughout these years, the term was, itself, produced as a value: that is, it is during this period that discourses began to position *overseas Indians* as a "threat" and a "danger" and began to formulate *overseas Indians* as a sign of "warning" about "troubles" *in* the colonies. Likewise, *overseas Indians* was often used in a discourse of economic profit, and it was sometimes used in a discourse about the "vulgarity of colour prejudice."[22]

After 1920, *overseas Indians* became an important category in many discourses of Indian nationalists. *Overseas Indians* was used to articulate a critique of colonial rule by evoking the perspective of Indians who were living, or had lived, in various plantation colonies. It was also deployed in appeals to overseas Indians either to return to the "motherland" or, at least, to support the movement for Indian independence. And *overseas Indians* was often constituted in narratives that detailed the predicament of both Indian and Chinese emigrants to varying degrees (see, e.g., Waiz 1927; Aiyer 1938; Gangulee [1946] 1947; Rajkumar 1951; Kondapi 1951). It was during this period that *overseas Indians* began to be transformed into a sign of a particular kind of "promise"—particularly, in Indian nationalist discourse, regarding the potential liberation of a nation that had *membra disjecta* located all over the world.

After 1947, India and its overseas Indians became one of the crucial sites for a new set of educational practices—not least of all because, in addition to India's size, its newly acquired independence, and its "tutelary democracy," the new nation was positioned "between two political worlds": the Soviet Union and China, on the one hand, and the United States and the rest of the free world, on the other (see Indian Council of World Affairs 1957). The U.S. and British governments, along with private enterprises like the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, initiated a series of projects with the aim of successfully converting India to a modern, democratic nation-state (see Harrison 1961; Rosen 1967; Singer 1957). With this challenge, and through an array of committees, institutes, funding sources, and international "aid"/ "intelligence" organizations,[23] institutions of formal education went through significant transformations that produced and, in many ways, made up the world of possibilities for these specialists studying overseas Indians.

By the time Britain and the United States produced the first group of anthropologists and sociologists specializing in studies of overseas Indians in the 1950s, *overseas Indians* took on a very different significance.[24] It constituted not just the aggregate of Indians living in ex-colonies but, more specifically, a new kind of relation: that between a new nation (or an ex-colony) and "her" dispersed people. This new relation was not only the object of study for social scientists. It became the focus of constitutional and administrative changes in many governments as well as a significant factor in the creation of various organs of the United Nations.[25] These various practices transformed the understanding of the relation between overseas Indians and Indians in India. Scholars considered overseas Indians to be going through the same kinds of experiences that Indians in India were going through (particularly, changes emerging through the clash of "tradition" and "modernity"). It was during this period that, through the discourses of scholars and government agencies, the notion of the "promise" of overseas Indians was reconfigured. Thus, through the study of overseas Indians, scholars were beginning to come up with explanations, not only about how India produced Indians, but also about how to deal with the promise of India as a new nation and potential ally.

The reconstitution of overseas Indians into a category of threat after the 1950s is a story that I elaborate in later chapters. For the moment, a few comments may be useful. First, it may very well be that the emergence of the category *Indian diaspora* as a synonym and sometimes replacement for *overseas Indian* marks the terms of change from *promise* to *threat.* I have already noted how the emergence of the category *diaspora* had much to do with the influence of wealthy diaspora populations. It is also related to a new generation of scholars who identify themselves as diaspora members. These two overlapping groups have, in a short period, developed various discourses of "multiculturalism," "antiracism," "antifundamentalism," and "feminism" that identify the nation-state as a source of discrimination.[26] The increasing eloquence of diaspora populations in the general domains of nation-states, and in the specific domains of academic institutions, conjoined with an increasing awareness within government agencies that, on the one hand, migrants in large numbers are here to stay and, on the other, development projects in new nations like India have had serious problems — all these processes configured the construction of the category *diaspora* in the 1990s in terms of a trope of threat.

Separating Time and Space

The posited separation between time and space has a particularly important relation to discourses of promise and threat in the history of studies of overseas communities. The production of this separation in studies of the Indian diaspora today cannot be seen as distinct from a series of social scientific debates in the 1940s.[27] One way to understand this relation is to consider how these debates had to do, not only with the ascendance of the social sciences and theories of cultural anthropology and structural-functionalism, but also with the (re)constitution of these very disciplines and theories by U.S. and British government projects that were, in a sense, obsessed with monitoring the threats of some nations (e.g., Japan during World War II and China afterward) and the promises of others (particularly India). In this milieu, the techniques of knowledge production, the disciplines informing these techniques, the data that counted as reliable knowledge, and the functions to which various products were being put — all these, in addition to the very categories of analysis (i.e., *overseas Indians*), were redefined and transformed in a number of ways.

These processes were extextualized in Margaret Mead's 1953 edited volume *The Study of Culture at a Distance.* The text represents the first product of the Research in Contemporary Cultures project that was inaugurated at Columbia University by Ruth Benedict in the 1940s and modeled exclusively on her reformulation of Boasian methodology and theory. Benedict herself detailed the basic propositions of the culture-at-a-distance approach in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946).[28] Expanding and generalizing Benedict's work, Mead's volume brings together the research of scholars trained by Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, conducted between 1945 and 1953.

Mead (1953) describes the aim of the text as follows:

> This Manual is concerned with methods that have been developed during the last decade for analyzing the cultural regularities in the characters of individuals who are members of societies which are inaccessible to direct observation. This inaccessibility may be spatial because a state of active warfare exists — as was the case with Japan and Germany — or it may be — as is now the case with the Soviet Union and Communist China — due to barriers to travel and research. Or the inaccessibility may be temporal, since the society we wish to study may no longer exist. It may have been physically destroyed and the survivors scattered, as is the case with the East European Jewish small towns. . . . We then face a situation in which we have access on the one hand to many living and articulate individuals whose character was formed in the inaccessible society and on the other hand to large amounts of other sorts of material. (p. 3)

She is very clear to state that the object of study and methodology have been developed because of "contexts provided by World War II and the post–World War II divided world." Furthermore, she explains that the goal of such a study is to develop a sketch of spatially or temporally distanced people in terms of their "national character":

> This focus on national cultures has been dictated by an interest in the role of nationally originating behavior in warfare, policy making, domestic educational and morale-building campaigns, and so on. The method is, however, equally suitable for the study of . . . a group like the East European Jews, whose communities stretched across several national boundaries. With appropriate redefinitions, the same methods can be used to explore . . . the regular behavior of members of a religious order distributed in many countries. The national emphasis in our studies has been the exigent one that they were studies designed to help national governments to deal with members of other nations who were also behaving nationally. . . . So this Manual is primarily a manual on interdisciplinary research practices as they apply particularly to the study of cultural character structure in cultures that are spatially or temporally inaccessible. (p. 4)

Mead had good reason to be concerned about the provenance of her theory and methodology as well as about the significance of her conclusions. Not only did the U.S. government demand and fund the production of theories of culture at a distance and national character, but it also demanded their immediate use in policy making.[29] In this respect, Mead (1953) reflects on the interrelation of interests between social scientists and government agencies with extreme candor: "Because we are working on contemporary cultures, the processes of research and communication are interwoven in a different way. . . . Results in this field have to be made indelible to policy makers, to experts, and to technicians who are laymen to the disciplines used. Such results become automatically available to other laymen and a part of the climate of opinion within which further work has to be done. This means that the use of the research becomes, in a sense, an integral part of the research method itself" (pp. 7–8).

In Mead's discussion, it is clear, the division of space and time is articulated through the notion of *distance*. Yet this division, configured by the exigencies or violences of war and the interests of the U.S. government, defines space and time in terms of particular kinds of threat. The U.S. government was interested in the threat of the Soviet Union and Communist China. These cultures were spatially inaccessible because they could not be studied in person. Since the U.S. government necessitated a sketch of their national character for strategic purposes, Mead needed to develop a theory of a constitutive relation between those places and Soviet or Chinese people living in