California’s Punjabi Pioneers: Remembering/Claiming Homelands\textsuperscript{1}

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The exploration here is of “movement and memory,” forgetting and remembering, particularly of the constitution and use of memories to reclaim old and new homelands. The material comes from my study of the Punjabi emigrants to California before 1947 and the community they built,\textsuperscript{2} and I want to make several theoretical points. First, I want to reinforce the view that social memory is a valuable source of knowledge that should not be devalued in favor of the textual paradigm of knowledge.\textsuperscript{3} Second, I want to move away from the notion that the collection of event narratives and life stories is an exercise in “salvage ethnography” or nostalgia, and I want to depart from the remarked emphasis on pleasure in studies of popular culture\textsuperscript{4} by investigating social memories of these migrants and their children as a painful and problematic process of identity construction in the U.S. Third, I want to reiterate that looking at “practice”—in this case the constitution and use of memory—is not a stand-in for some objective reality or a way of getting at the subcultures of minorities, but a way of showing that “marginality” has become universal and is now the majority conceptualization of identity and difference.\textsuperscript{5} Finally, I want to show that this concept of “marginality” (by which Michel de Certeau clearly means situational, contextualized, or “multi-faceted” identity) is highly political and has the potential of claiming membership in American society for non-whites as well as whites.\textsuperscript{6}

To set the scene, let me take you to a meeting of the Rotary Club in Holtville, “carrot capital of the world,” in Imperial County, southern California. The very reason I was there involved memory, or the use of reconstituted memory: the son of a pioneer Sikh from

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India’s Punjab and a Mexican American woman, a successful farmer named Bob Chell, had asked me to tell his fellow Rotarians how the Sikhs beat the British in the Sikh Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, the British had beaten the Sikhs, defeating the independent Sikh kingdom and taking the Punjab and Kashmir into the British Empire in India. However, I gave a general talk about the Punjabi men who had immigrated to California in the early twentieth century. They had been called “Hindus” (from Hindustan, or India) by Americans of that time, although they were from all of the Punjab’s three major religious communities—Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu. I emphasized their hard work, perseverance, and achievements despite the legal barriers preventing them from holding land in their own names and marrying anyone they liked. (Anti-miscegenation laws prevented them from marrying women of races different from their own; in practice, this meant they could not marry White women but could marry Mexican women because the latter appeared more similar to them.)

Another person was giving a short speech at the meeting, a third-generation descendant of a Punjabi pioneer whom I’ll call Jennifer Singh (almost all male Sikhs have the surname Singh, especially among the immigrants to California). Jennifer had won the Rotary Club High School Speakers Contest, so she gave her winning speech and got her award. Afterwards she came over and said, “Oh, that was so interesting, I know I’m a Hindu, and I’m so proud of that, but I didn’t know about those three religions. Can you tell me, was my granddad a Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu?” Her last name was Singh, but the social landscape that gave the name its meaning had altered so completely that not even a memory of the strong religious and social identity evoked by her name in the Indian context remained.

Taking this double anecdote about memories as the starting point, we see that the primary identification of the pioneer Punjabi immigrants to the U.S. in the American sociopolitical landscape was that of being from India. The men may have talked about the fighting history of the Sikhs in the British empire, but in the U.S. they accepted and used the term “Hindu” for themselves. Not only that, but I argue here that, although identified as being from India, they deliberately forgot (forgot to transmit) much about their homeland. They were forced to view their displacement from India as permanent (because of American curbs on Asian immigration in 1917 and 1924) and therefore they married (in many cases remarried, having been married in India already) local women, mostly
Mexican Americans, and established families in America to whom they made little attempt to transmit Indian or Punjabi culture. In other words, they began a new story, constructed a new narrative, here in the U.S.

After establishing the pioneers’ new identity, we will look at the most striking feature of their stories, their memories about gender and its different meanings in the homeland and in the new context. There were not many old-timers left when I began interviewing them, but their stories about women and marriage showed the new narrative they were writing in the U.S. Then I will discuss the stories of the second generation. Despite their fathers’ relative silence about other areas of experience, their children tried to recapture more of their fathers’ memories. Two vivid “memories” bridged the geographic and generation rupture or relocation; here I draw on Richard Swiderski’s discussion of memories or a “memory room” which can be based on either “an artifactual assemblage or a set of characteristics.” The descendants agreed on a rather specific set of personal characteristics for their Punjabi fathers, characteristics which gave them a shared sense of what it meant to be “Hindu” and part of a “Hindu” family. Also, the descendants agreed on a collective characteristic—a public presentation—of the pioneers as fierce fighters for both India’s freedom and U.S. citizenship. They grew up in a highly political context and became as passionate about politics as their fathers were, but they fought to secure their place in the new homeland.

Finally, and again emphasizing the political potential of “remembered” identities, I will look at the confrontation of the Punjabi pioneers and their children with the post-WWII immigrants from South Asia and the new political movements for Pakistan and Khalistan. Their memories do not serve well to connect the descendants to the socio-political landscape in South Asia today, and the lack of connection pushes them to claim full membership in U.S. society. The new narrative in the U.S. has diverged; it cannot be easily reconnected or reconciled with the stories developing back in South Asia. There are the post-1947 Spanish Pakistanis, but they are an American invention, and they relate uneasily to “real” Pakistanis. There are the Mexican Hindus, the many Catholics named Singh, who may wax enthusiastic about the Ghadar movement and the Indian nationalist movement but not about the Sikh movement for Khalistan. The “memory room”—best exemplified by the East Indian gallery in the Pioneers Historical Museum in California’s Imperial Valley—fights erasure of the early twentieth-
century past by juxtaposing recently acquired artifacts from South Asia with a few surviving artifacts from the pioneer families, objects not really part of the same narrative jostling against each other as an artificial assemblage in an institutional setting.

The “Hindu” identity of the Punjabi pioneers, a point initially contested by some other academics and many post-1965 South Asian immigrants, is now being admitted.10 As James Fentress and Chris Wickham state, “The social meaning of memory...is little affected by its truth,”11 and it does little good to set this matter straight retroactively. Hindu is an ethnic term for people from India today in California’s agricultural valleys, although no doubt it was a term bestowed on the early immigrants by the Anglo-dominated societies into which they were immigrating. It is quite clear that early twentieth-century Punjabi emigrants accepted and used the term Hindu for themselves.12 Jayasri Mazumdar Hart made a documentary about the Imperial Valley Mexican Hindus entitled Roots in the Sand, which captures numerous instances on film of widows or children speaking quite naturally of their Hindu husbands and fathers.13

This “Hindu” usage is still resisted by some. When in 1991 I spoke in the Sikh city of Amritsar in a university setting about Sikh pioneers, a young Sikh student with full beard and turban was most upset. He said, “Madame, you are wrong, they would never have accepted the name Hindu, and also to call the Stockton gurdwara a temple is wrong. Temples are only for Hindus, Sikhs have gurdwaras.” Fortunately I had with me a photo of the Sikh temple with the letters across its front, “Sikh Temple.” But he and others find it hard to imagine another place, another time. He did not even remember, nor did I until later, that we were sitting in the shadow, so to speak, of Amritsar’s Golden Temple—this most famous of Sikh shrines is always called that. One should also remember (although this too is still contested by some) that religious identifications in the Punjab were not as bounded and distinctive at the turn of the century as they are today.14

In most cases Punjabi men who stayed in the U.S. consciously set out to start over again, to separate themselves from their homeland and their families in India. Just as the 1917 U.S. “Barred Zone” immigration law set all of Asia beyond the zone of legal immigration, it barred these men from going back and forth, from thoughts of return to India. According to diasporic writer Shashi Tharoor, “If it has no meaning for me now, it is dead. . .”15 One good example of this is external markings of identity upon the body:
“embodied memory,” as suggested by Jonathan Boyarin.\(^{16}\) Body markings customary in India, the Sikh turbans and beards, were removed by the pioneers, and they viewed this in later years as a positive development, not just a response to discrimination.\(^{17}\)

The most striking new groups came about through marriages made by the Punjabi men. Unable to bring their wives from India, the Punjabi immigrants sought local women and found they could most easily marry those of Hispanic heritage. Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu became brothers-in-law and compadres, godfathers to each other’s children, through these unions. They learned about romantic love as the basis of marriage and also of divorce; they fathered children who grew up speaking Spanish and English and, most often, became Catholic like their mothers. Fathers could not or would not teach Punjabi language and culture. They did not want to keep up connections with relatives and property in India because the geographic and legal distances were thought to be insurmountable—return or reunion seemed out of the question to these Asian immigrants in the America of the 1920s and 1930s. Punjabi pioneers may have been “post-modern” in terms of shifting constantly and contextually reformulated identities,\(^{18}\) but transnationalism was not yet possible for them. These men made commitments of many sorts to being American.

In looking at the “memories” of the pioneers, I want to highlight gender issues, because this is the most striking difference the men seem to have found in terms of personal life between India and the U.S. Punjabi pioneer material is somewhat fragmentary, but we do get glimpses. One man bought a Victrola and sent it to his brother in India for Christmas; another spent some time selling tamales from a cart in San Francisco and going to taxi dance halls, wearing spats; another woman, a widow of two Sikhs, told
me she preferred her second Punjabi husband because he liked it when she taught him to dance; she and he would put on a record and dance together out in their rented house along the irrigation canals.

For extended narrative material, we have Mola Singh’s life story. Mola Singh, who left the Punjab as a young boy in 1913 and ended up farming near Selma in California’s Central Valley, had a young Punjabi wife in India but subsequently married three Mexican and Mexican American women, in sequence, in the U.S., producing some seventeen children. Mola told me how he discovered the meaning of love as a young man in El Centro. He got involved with a white woman, who made him “crazy with love,” and then he described the death of his young wife in India, which he attributed to pining away from love of him. He went on to talk about love and marriage, love and divorce in an interview I conducted with him in 1982:

In this country it’s a different class of people. You can’t force love here, women go where they want to, even if they’re married, even with three or four kids. In India you could only get a divorce after India got freedom. Here, women go away, here it’s different. The woman is the boss in this country. A woman can have four husbands, a man can have two or three women. What you gonna do, that’s the way with love...

Sometimes I feel like I’m suffering here, you know, trouble at home. Here, when you marry, you have woman trouble, kid trouble, not like in India. When I got here, I saw, you have liberty, women have liberty, you know. The way it is here, I’ve been separated, divorced. In India you stay together all your life. In this country you have love. When you love a person, you stay with her, with her kids and everything.

I divorced Carmen, when she went away to Mexico. I couldn’t do anything, so I filed for divorce. She had two more kids by then. My wife in India, she’d died already by that time. Yes, I knew about divorce. In this country I no sleep. Everybody was divorced, I could see what they were doing. It’s only normal, you see the customs of the country, and so you have to do that...

[Talking about the breakup of his second marriage, when his wife ran away with a younger Mexican lover]: I kicked them both out. They went to Mexico. ... She said, “OK, this is my friend, I’m going with him.” I couldn’t say, “No, you can’t go.”

In this country, when she wants to go, my wife, she says, “All right, sonny honey, I’m going,” and I say, “I can’t stop you.” It’s because of love, therefore I couldn’t stop her.
Mola Singh and other Punjabi pioneers became convinced that romantic love was better than arranged marriage, and they also supported women’s education. I had many reports of men sending money back to their villages to found girls’ schools. Again it is Mola Singh who expressed his approval of a greatly improved position for women in India. One day while I was recording his life story (it took two or three days), we got tired and sat back and watched a Hindi movie on video. The name of the film was something like *Justice* or *The Law*, and the heroine was the beautiful daughter of a judge and herself a barrister. We watched her sweep into the courtroom in her long black robe, fighting to free an innocent man wrongly convicted of a young woman’s murder some twenty-five years earlier. By chance, the judge for the case was the barrister’s father, a stern handsome man at the peak of his legal career. He sat there presiding over the trial, and little did she know that it was really he, her father, who had committed the murder, who had allowed an innocent man to go to jail! Then there was her handsome young fiancé, working with her to unravel this dreadful secret, and a scene in which she and her fiancé were talking about their love, their approaching marriage, even touching each other as I remember. Mola Singh turned to me at this point, and said, “When I left India, in my village, girl look at a boy, talk to a boy, killum, killum good. Now see, India good, women get education, can be barrister, can talk to men. India changed, India good for women now. This kind of movie, she [his wife Susanna, watching with us] likes.” And this kind of memory is what the old-timers liked to transmit about their homeland.

Moving to look at the “memories” of the second generation, one is struck by the dramatic ruptures, the absence of cross-generational transmission, of “vicarious memories” as Jacob Climo has discussed them. Climo defines vicarious memory as “strong, personal identifications with historical collective memories that belong to people other than those who experienced them directly.” He goes on to specify that vicarious memories are passed through strong emotional attachments from generation to generation in groups sharing a common historical identity and the process of its redefinition. In the case of the descendants of the Punjabi pioneers, there is not an absorption and assimilation of a continuing identity, but rather an interruption, a consciousness of difference, and an effort by the descendants to constitute and interrogate their fathers’ “memories.”

Fathers and children did not share languages, religions, or
knowledge about South Asian landscapes or social structures. A few cultural markers persisted in the domains of food and funeral customs. “We always cook chicken murgi [literally, chicken chicken] and roti, and those funny Punjabi vegetables, and lemon pickles.” The Catholic cemetery plots have children named Singh and Mohamed buried in them, but “The Muslim men had to be buried in the Hindu plot, while the Singh had to be cremated—my godfather’s body was kidnapped by other Hindus because my godmother tried to bury him!” And some ventured to recall names: “Oh yes, our home village was Quetta.” “There were Bohmans, Mohammeds, and Singh, and some couldn’t eat beef and some couldn’t eat pork, I don’t remember which, but mostly they all drank liquor.” “My mother, Bessie Abdullia, used to tell me about the other Mohammeds up there, Bleth Khan, Buga Ali, Glam Heather, Sultanly...”

A 1982 interview with Omar Deen in his bar/steakhouse named Chavella’s, which is the Spanish nickname for Isabella, his Mexican American wife, illustrated many of the movements made by memories. I had been reconstituting families in the county record office, looking up birth, death, and marriage records (by looking up Singh you got 85-90 percent of the population,
while Abdulla, Deen, Khan, and Mohammed got most of the rest, with a few Rams and Chands thrown in), so I knew that Omar’s father, Mohammed Deen, a Muslim, had been born in the Punjab and his mother had been born in Mexico. In fact, Omar was a Spanish- and English-speaking Catholic. Yet when I sat down across from Omar, he said, “Yes, my dad was a Hindu, he came from the Poonjaab, and I’m a Hindu too.” Distance and mis-recollection were there to the scholar who knew the Indian landscape, but closeness and a confident recollection were what the speaker expressed.

Memories were not helped by material objects, since so few were brought or preserved by the pioneers. I was shown only one item brought from India in the early decades, a decorated tin water tumbler, in the course of several years of research, and one woman mentioned a hookah she had seen as a child. Joe Romero Singh, son of a Sikh, illustrated his distance from his father’s culture by telling me in 1981 that a lady had found his name in the phone book and telephoned him to ask if he knew how to “wrap that thing, put on that thing they wear.” “Oh,” I said, “The turban?” “No, no,” he said, “like a mummy [the sari]—I told her I knew nothing about it.” Since his father was a Sikh and his last name, by which the caller looked him up, is Singh, one might have expected him to think of the turban—but like any American, he thought of the sari, of which indeed the men from the Punjab and their children had no firsthand knowledge.

In the Pioneers Museum many of the artifacts date after 1965, and these do include saris, embroidered cushion covers, and various souvenir items. These items speak to the discovery and reconstitution of a heritage. The “living museums” are few: they include things like the two Mexican Hindu restaurants, El Ranchero in Yuba City and Pancho’s in Selma which served full Mexican menus plus chicken curry and roti (both are now out of business), and the Yuba City Mexican Hindu Christmas dance and the Phoenix, Arizona, Spanish-Pakistani reunion dance (both are held only intermittently now). In the “museums of the dead”—Hindu cemetery plots in rural California—the pioneers speak only to each other, by putting their names and villages and districts of origin down on tombstones in the Urdu script, which no descendants can read. As Naim remarked about these Punjabi graves, they show the “poignant desire to hold on to a ‘place’” (but not to transmit the memory to others).

A sharp “memory” for members of the second generation is
the set of characteristics which marked “the old Hindus” as a California ethnic group. The children wanted to know their fathers better and were fascinated by these characteristics. Yet knowing them led to a certain ambivalence, an awareness of distance and alienation. Discussing the social in individual recollections, Halbwachs talks about the elusiveness of a “common familial past,” but let me try to illustrate second-generation recollections with a few short quotes and two longer stories. “Dad was hard to get to know, work-oriented; he was a strict disciplinarian and didn’t show his feelings.” “He was hard, he didn’t talk a lot to me.” “He was a grouch, all Punjabis are grouchy.” “Dad wanted to use his money for land. Mom had to wait until he went to sleep and then she went through his pockets to get us money for schoolbooks.” “Those old guys, all they cared about was money.” “They wanted to be the best. When I was growing up, I thought this was an isolated thing with my father, but later on, I saw it was a Sikh thing, a Punjabi thing. They never quit, and they wouldn’t let us either.” People discussed who was the stingiest or the most stubborn among the old Hindus: my favorite description of the latter comes from the Phoenix area, of a man “so ornery that if he fell in the river, you’d have to look for him upstream.”

Two longer stories tell more about the way memory captures and expresses feelings of closeness and distance. The first story comes from Mike Singh, then a Deputy Sheriff in Imperial County, about a foot race between himself, a California state champion runner, and another son of a Punjabi, an Arizona state champion, at a picnic in Holtville, California, near the border with Yuma, Arizona (1990):

[At a large gathering of Hindus over by the Holtville Highline Canal] The old men were sitting around, drinking whiskey and boasting about their sons...an Arizona man put $1,000 on a blanket, said I couldn’t beat the Arizona boy. Dad threw in $5,000, then others put down money..... We kids were off shooting 22 rifles at tin cans.

Dad came, took me aside and, “Who are you?” I could tell something was up. I replied, “Mehnga Singh [his Punjabi name, seldom used].” “Yes,” he replied, “a lionhearted Sikh warrior. Nobody can beat you, run and win, you’re going to race this boy.” “OK,” I said, “I’ll run, where is it?” “No,” he said, “run and win, that’s what you’re going to do.”

He pointed to a course along the canal..... “You are my blood,” he said..... The women ran out, Mother among them, to see what
was happening, and she remonstrated with him; Dad hushed her, she shut up. There was one drunken old man; he shot off a 22 to start the race. He called out, “You chobdars, run!” in Punjabi. Dad stood there with a deadpan look. . . . I ran and the other boy was ahead of me. . . then I hit it and ran, a Sikh warrior, ran for my heart, and beat him by two yards. Father just stood there looking impassive, elders all around him. Then he spoke, “As I said, no one can beat my son, he’s of my blood and he’s a Sikh warrior.” The other boy’s father didn’t say a word to him, and they left within thirty minutes.

This is a fine example of the way an individual’s event narrative delineates the whole structure of social relations, offering many perspectives in addition to the narrator’s.

A second story from a Punjabi Mexican American son, Alfred Sidhu, a government employee and businessman in Sacramento, adds India to the “memoryscape,” talking about his father and his father’s relatives there:

Dad didn’t talk about his Indian family, although he sent money back for years, but then he stopped. “I left a son,” he said, “and he has the land, he’s probably OK, I don’t want to dig up old things.” But I worried about that boy, and I asked Dad, I said, “Dad, give me the address,” but he wouldn’t.

Then I went into the [military] service to Burma, and for four years I wanted to go over the hump to India to find my brother, but I couldn’t. Then I was home again, sitting home alone, and I had a couple of drinks, and I wondered how that poor fellow was over in India. I wrote a letter, and I put every place name on the envelope that my father had ever mentioned, and after fifteen days I got an answer. My Indian brother said, “I knew I had family there, I’ve been waiting all these years.” We wrote back and forth. I asked him, “How are your living conditions there?” and he wrote back that he was illiterate and worked in the fields all day long. I had five brothers, I got them together, and between us we sent $100 a month for three years, put in a new pump for him, stuff like that. When Dad found out, he got angry, but I told him, “You better find out what’s going on, your boy’s not in such good shape as you thought,” and after that Dad gave me money too. . . .

When Dad died, my brother Harry said, “Let’s go,” it seemed like the only time we could go over, so we both flew over. I was a great reader, the shock wasn’t great for me, but Harry didn’t like it much. . . . When we landed, we stood at the end of the line for Customs, and an Indian policeman kept looking at us. He wasn’t sure, but finally he tapped our suitcases and told us to join the short
line [for returning nationals]. I knew he was wrong but it was a shorter line, and when we got up there, there was a Muslim Customs officer, and sure enough it was a mistake. But that Muslim said, “Never mind, I’ll take care of them. Welcome home, boys!” That felt wonderful, we took a movie of him. When we got outside...we hired a car and chauffeur, it was a good idea, that man stayed with us the whole five or six days while we were there. We just drove off to the village.

No, we weren’t taking Dad’s ashes back, we just wanted to go, and we had some consolidation work to do, some advice to give to our brother, to straighten out his farming business. You know how they divide everything up among the sons—split it all up and stay poor?...Well, I made him agree not to divide the land up, just a verbal agreement, but I’m sure he’ll keep it. We told him not to arrange any more marriages either. They gave a dinner for us in Dad’s house, where he was born, in the courtyard; I saw things there, books, Guru books, like Dad’s...But Harry wasn’t feeling comfortable, so we left.

And you know, we found out there was a phone in that village. There’d been a phone for about ten years! My Dad had never seen his son—he could have talked to him on the phone before he died, but we didn’t know.

This was indeed a memorable journey home, a story about the recovery and then relinquishment of a brother and a homeland.

Two other sections of the story above, omitted because of length, deal with strangers helping them on their journey; those sections express distance from the brother because of the way they contrast with the sections that mention him. First was a Punjabi named Sidhu who checked their passports in London, claimed kinship by marriage, and wanted them to stay there; he then introduced them to the second, an Indian of Canadian citizenship on their plane to India who showed them around Delhi and helped them hire a car to go to the village. Alfred provided vivid accounts of these two men, but of no one in the home village; conspicuously missing is an account of the brother or of subsequent contacts with him. The story of the discovery of the brother and journey to see him in the oral account has no real ending. It ends by using the remarks about his father’s books as a transition to recollections about his father and the things he did in domestic life in America.

The narratives above present memories of the fathers and of the fathers’ homeland, and they express pain and distance as poignantly as they express pleasure and closeness. Here the Asian American experience, or in one case the Asian Australian experi-
ence, is a shared and relevant one. A study of Chinese-Australian oral history states that “the legacy of a racist past is still structuring the process of remembering,” attributing silences, gaps, and lost memories to that, and to talk in the present about achievements and acceptance. Here too the fathers were not talkative and the children felt the need to reconstruct historical experience and ethnic identity pretty much on their own. The political energy derived from recognition and confrontation of a history of struggle, claiming the new homeland, is balanced against the romance of migration and continuing ties to the old homeland and the past, the diasporic perspective.

Another second-generation set of recollections or “memory” centers on political struggle, the Punjabi fighting spirit which was certainly transmitted to the immigrants’ children. The children of Punjabi pioneers witnessed funds, talk, and time being given unstintingly to political activities. When Indian lobbyists successfully pushed through the Luce-Celler Bill in 1946, giving South Asians access to U.S. citizenship, the “old Hindus” in their sixties, seventies, and eighties did become citizens (despite the prediction of the political scientist Harold Jacoby, who had heard their bitter stories of discrimination and denial of rights and who thought they would spurn the offered prize). In Imperial County sixty-eight old-timers applied, their ages ranging from forty-eight to eighty-four with an average age of sixty-six. From 1947 to 1953, there were two applications per year, and then from 1954 through 1958 forty-one Punjabis applied for citizenship. Not only that, they got Dalip Singh Saund elected as a Congressman from the Imperial Valley in 1956, the first and still only congressman of South Asian background. American-born children were envied by the older Punjabis for their easy assumption of citizenship rights, but they also located themselves in the political landscape as an integral part of the Indian nationalist movement, attending political rallies where Syed Hossain, Madame Pandit, and other figures from the Indian independence movement spoke.

The political conflicts within the Indian nationalist movement, however, did not travel abroad—Pakistan seems to have been a surprise to the Punjabis in California. Kartar Dhillon, a daughter born to parents both from the Punjab (and therefore one of the very few second-generation “real” Indians in the U.S. in the late 1940s), remembers celebrating independence by cooking Indian food one night for an official delegation from India and the next night for one from Pakistan, and some of the Muslims in Califor-
nia went to both functions. Specifically Sikh memories connected to the 1947 partition focus on pilgrimage sites now located in Pakistan and All-India wrestling champions whose villages are now in Pakistan. Some descendants of California’s Muslim Punjabi pioneers still revere Gandhi and talk movingly about his leadership against the British. Many people told me about the inspiring talks of Syed Hossain, Nehru’s “half-brother,” they said, whom they remembered as “the first speaker” about the Indian independence movement. One man said that Jinnah had visited California before 1945 (probably he meant Syed Hossain, a frequent speaker for the Indian National Congress), while another mentioned Jinnah in connection with photos in a post-1965 Pakistan House, but basically no one knew anything about the movement for Pakistan.

Yet their loyalty to their fathers led descendants of the Muslims in Phoenix, Arizona, to rename themselves “Spanish-Pakistanis.” New efforts were made to find home villages on maps, and a few daughters married newly arrived Pakistani immigrants and became “really Muslim,” or “Muslim and Catholic.” But relationships with Pakistanis in newly established mosques have proved difficult. Those daughters who go now put on dark slacks, and two daughters spoke disapprovingly of the lack of family values shown by newcomers at their Muslim father’s funeral, as men were forced to sit on one side of the aisle and women on the other. Another daughter lamented that the newcomers were not seeing that her father’s grave in the cemetery was swept properly, perhaps because her mother was an American black woman.

It is these newcomers and confrontations with them that have spurred the Mexican Hindu descendants to marshal their memories and claim their homelands more sharply. Two political victories—the winning of access to naturalized U.S. citizenship in 1946 and the wresting of independence for India and Pakistan from the British in 1947—marked high points in the lives of both first- and second-generation “Hindus.” These achievements have both expanded and narrowed their memories and identities—expanded them in the sense that barriers to South Asian people and culture, to their own South Asian relatives and other immigrants, and to journeys back and forth for those with resources, were removed. After 1947 members of the second generation proudly represented the two new nations at local functions, the girls reigning as “Hindu” and “Pakistani” Queens of county fairs and presiding in saris over miniature Taj Mahals at “international fetes.” Yet their assumption of these identities faced new barriers, ones posed by the South
Asian immigrants who poured in after the 1965 changes in U.S. immigration law. These new immigrants did not find the Mexican Hindus recognizably “Hindu”—or Punjabi or Indian. Even the Punjabi families, men, women, and children, who arrived in large numbers in northern California in the 1970s, did not acknowledge a kinship.\(^{32}\)

When directly confronted by descendants, the new immigrants often turn away. A Muslim nephew brought over in the 1950s, Mohammed Afzal Khan, and Johnny Singh, the son of a Sikh pioneer, encountered each other at a mini-mart in northern California. Johnny Singh knew a fellow Punjabi when he saw one, and greeted Khan with a Sikh greeting, “Sat sri akal.” The greeting was not returned: “He said the wrong thing, and he looked Mexican to me,” said the newcomer.\(^{33}\) Another descendant, the son of a Punjabi Muslim, encountered a newly arrived family (he knew because the women were wearing saris) at Disneyland and happily introduced himself as “Joe Mallobox, a Hindu,” offering to show them around. “They didn’t believe me, I don’t understand why,” Joe said.\(^{34}\)

Initially welcoming, descendants of the pioneers became sharply critical of South Asian newcomers. Concluding that if the newcomers could not place them, they could not place the newcomers—their knowledge of geography and politics even in the Punjab, much less the rest of South Asia, was shaky at best—they emphasized their own solid location in the American sociopolitical landscape instead.

Marshalling their memories of how fast and thoroughly the old Hindus had become American, they used these memories against the newcomers to claim the new homeland for themselves and their fathers and grandfathers. They anticipated academic arguments about the openness of American identity (or limitations on that),\(^{35}\) the recognition of a multi-faceted identity as a way of validating ethnic and cultural difference,\(^{36}\) and the right to define what one wants to be a member of, that is, to invent a new society.\(^{37}\) The Punjabi Mexican experience speaks to the selective shaping of an American identity, the forgetting of much about India but the mobilization of memories to claim a place in mainstream American society.

Notes
1. This was a ten-year project, and while most of the old men who migrated from India in the early twentieth century had died by the time I began the work in 1980, about eight of them were still alive. I inter-
viewed them, along with ninety-seven widows, sons, and daughters, and about thirty other people.

2. Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

3. See James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 9; Samuel Schrager, “What is Social in Oral History?” *International Journal of Oral History* 4:2 (1983), 76-98; Daniel Bertaux, “From the Life-History Approach to the Transformation of Sociological Practice,” Daniel Bertaux, ed., *Biography and Society* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 29-45; and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, “Metaphors of Self in History: Subjectivity, Oral Narrative, and Immigration Studies,” Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, ed., *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 254-290.

4. Dick Hebdige, Talk at University of Southern California on cultural studies, 1996.

5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xvii.

6. See Mario T. Garcia, “Identity and Gender,” Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, eds., *Migration and Identity* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 152-153; and Stanley Lieberson and Mary C. Waters, “The Rise of a New Ethnic Group: The ‘Unhyphenated American,’” *Items* (Social Science Research Council) 43:1 (1989), 7-10.

7. Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*.

8. California had anti-miscegenation laws until 1948, and they were taken off the books in 1951.

9. Richard Swiderski, “Mau Mau and Memory Rooms: Placing a Social Emotion,” Marea C. Teski and Jacob Climo, eds., *The Labyrinth of Memory: Ethnographic Journeys* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 104.

10. Verne A. Dusenbery, “The Poetics and Politics of Recognition: Diasporan Sikhs in Pluralist Societies,” *American Ethnologist* 24 (1997), 738-762.

11. Fentress and Wickham, xi.

12. See Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*; Karen Isaksen Leonard, “Identity in the Diaspora: Surprising Voices,” Martin F. Manalansan IV, ed., *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 177-198; W. H. McLeod, *Punjabis in New Zealand* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1986); and Marie de Lepervanche, *Indians in a White Australia: An account of race, class and Indian immigration to eastern Australia* (Sydney: George Allen Unwin, 1984).

13. The son of a Sikh from the Imperial Valley told me of his enlistment in the U.S. military up in northern California—he tried to tell them his ethnicity was “Mexican Hindu,” but they told he was “just a Caucasian,” stripping him of that special identity.
14. Harjot S. Oberoi, “From Ritual to Counter-Ritual: Rethinking the Hindu-Sikh Question, 1994-1915,” Joseph T. O’Connell et. al., eds., *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1988), 136-158; Harjot S. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

15. Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993). This quote is taken from the front of Tharoor’s book.

16. Jonathan Boyarin, “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory,” Jonathan Boyarin, ed., *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 20.

17. Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 191. The men also constituted new groupings in the U.S. based not on being kin, village mates, or schoolmates back in the Punjab but upon being shipmates, farming partners, co-residents of a particular California valley. Jonathan Boyarin, discussing Maurice Halbwachs’ seminal work *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), comments that Halbwachs speaks not of fantasies or people defining themselves as a collective in the present, but of the invocation of memories based on family, schoolmates, and village, of the shared reminiscences linking given sets of people in the past (see “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory”). I have argued that such groupings based on the past were rare among the Punjabi immigrants to California (*Making Ethnic Choices*, 85-90), and also I am working with aggregate, not collective memories here, a distinction made by Jacob Climo in his article, “Leaving Home: Memories of Distant-Living Children,” Marea C. Teski and Jacob J. Climo, eds., *The Labyrinth of Memory: Ethnographic Journeys* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 14. I elicited accounts from individuals in interviews and have then collated them, so I am working with aggregate memory or created collectivities, not remembered ones recreated as Halbwachs suggested.

18. Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, eds., *Modernity and Its Futures* (London: Polity Press, Open University, 1992), 275-277.

19. Jacob Climo, “Prisoners of Silence: A Vicarious Holocaust Memory,” Marea C. Teski and Jacob Climo, eds., *The Labyrinth of Memory: Ethnographic Journeys* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 176.

20. Interviews with Bob and Karmen Chell in Holtville, California (1981); Frank Singh in Selma, California (1983); Irene Brinkman in Imperial, California (1981); Niaz Mohamed Jr. in Brawley, California (1981); Teresa Carewail in Holtville, California (1981); Sophia Din in Brawley, California (1981); and Verdie Abdullia Montgomery (with Emma Smiley) in Citrus Heights, California (1982).
21. C.M. Naim, “Exile, Displacement, Hijrat—What’s in a Name!” The Toronto South Asian Review 11:2 (1993), 74.
22. Halbwachs, 54.
23. Interviews with Harry Chand in Live Oak, California (1982); Bob Chell in Holtville, California (1983); Fatima Mia in San Fernando Valley, California by phone (1983); Caroline Sunghera Resendez in Huntington Beach California (1982); Isabel Singh Garcia in Yuba City, California (1982); Pritam Sandhu in Calipatria, California (1990); Robert Khan in Phoenix, Arizona (1989).
24. Schrager.
25. Interview with Alfred S. Sidhu in Sacramento, California (1982). The last paragraph, which I placed at the end of the account, comes from an earlier phone conversation in 1981.
26. Janis Wilton, “Identity, Racism, and Multiculturalism,” Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, eds., Migration and Identity (New York: Oxford, 1995), 86-87.
27. Leonard, Making Ethnic Choices, 165.
28. Dalip Singh Saund, Congressman from India (New York: Dutton, 1960).
29. Interviews with Kartar Kaur Dhillon in Berkeley, California (1987); and Robert Mohamed in Yuba City, California (1983).
30. Interviews with Mola Singh in Fowler, California (1982); Pritam Sandhu in Calipatria, California (1990); Ali Abdulla in Fresno, California (1983); and Niaz Mohamed, Jr., in Brawley, California (1981).
31. Interviews with Olga Khan in Sacramento, California (1982); Elizabeth Hernandez in Burbank, California (1981); and Verdie Abdullah Montgomery (with Emma Smiley) in Citrus Heights, California (1982).
32. Bruce La Brack, The Sikhs of Northern California 1904-1975: A Socio-Historical Study (New York: AMS Press, 1988).
33. Interview with Mohammed Afzal Khan in Willows, California (1988).
34. Interview with Joe Mallbox in El Centro, California (1982).
35. Lieberson and Waters, 7-10.
36. Garcia, 153.
37. Evelina Dagnino, “On Becoming a Citizen,” Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, eds., Migration and Identity (New York: Oxford, 1994), 83.