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ANATOMY OF A MIGRAINE Conflict and Tension in the South Asian Collectivity

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Article abstract

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ANATOMY OF A MIGRAINE

Conflict and Tension in the South Asian Collectivity

Saloni Mathur

The New School for Social Research

This article addresses the theme of internal differences among South Asian television producers in Canada. Not only is "South Asian culture" internally contested in the arena of broadcasting, but this can be related to a long history of contestation (over ethnicity, religion, language and culture) that extends well beyond the context of contemporary Canada. The cultural claims of the Fijian community (demanding more air-time and their own show), and the political demands made by a society of Sikhs (demanding the termination of a producer because of her political stance), represent only two of the conflicts generated through broadcasting. Further, these tensions are played out in front of the CRTC, through cable companies, and complex corporate and regulatory environments. Drawing from recent trends in critical theory, I explore some of the political and theoretical problems associated with the representation of radical difference, and the "real" heterogeneity of Canadian lives. These issues are discussed in relation to the present ideological context of "Multiculturalism", and in terms of emergent postmodern discourses of difference and "otherness", of authority and domination, as critical moments within the academy.

Cet article traite des différends qui opposent entre eux les producteurs d'émissions de télévision sud-asiatiques au Canada. Le fait que la «culture sud-asiatique» est source de protestation au sein même du domaine de la télévision peut être expliqué en retraçant une longue histoire de contestation de nature ethnique, religieuse, linguistique et culturelle qui déborde de beaucoup le cadre canadien contemporain. Des questions culturelles et politiques, notamment, sont soulevées par les représentants des différentes ethnies devant la CRTC, dans un milieu corporatif où les réglementations sont de mise. L'auteur examine quelques-uns des problèmes théoriques et politiques associés à la représentation de la «différence radicale» et la soi-disante hétérogénéité de la vie au Canada. Il est question de sujets des plus actuels : le «multiculturalisme», l'«autre», l'autorité et la domination.

The production of South Asian television broadcasting in Canada provides a context fraught with tensions and contradictions. The process of marginalization within the broadcast profession; the hegemonic relations within a state-controlled industry; the difficulties faced by South Asian women; the struggle for participation on the multicultural channel...all of these emerge as sites of struggle within the context of "ethnic programming". The tensions engaged by this cultural practice have provided a rich context in which to explore the recent focus on the intersections of differences such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Clifford 1988; Moore 1988; Sacks 1989; Spivak 1988). And yet, by far the most prominent tension to arise from South Asian television production has remained unexplored by these discourses of difference: the subject of internal divisiveness within the so-called community. Oppositions and alliances, frequently adversarial, are themes which consistently re-emerge within South Asian Canadian cultural activity. Indeed, the issues which tend to separate the "community" have a long historical and geographical bases, extending well beyond their articulation in contemporary Canada.

This article tells the story of a dispute between the Indo-Canadian broadcaster, Sushma, and certain Sikhs and Fijians who have contested her practice¹. The account attempts to address the nature of ongoing frictions between South Asians as they have been

played out within the context of broadcasting. By highlighting the fact of internal contestation, it will be shown that what constitutes "South Asian culture" in Canada is radically divergent and always competing. The differences which separate and unite South Asians are themselves inter-connected in complex patterns. This presents a degree of difficulty in the face of anthropological demands for coherence and totality. By questioning the increasing dominance of a theory of postmodernism, and the ideological basis for pluralist strategies, I will attempt to deal critically with the lived experience of "otherness" in Canada, and the representation of radical heterogeneity.

Earlier this year I was sitting in the UBC library studying my "data". Sushma had given me a file of correspondence which I was glancing through quickly, reading some passages and skimming through others. In the pile was a single piece of paper — a form letter with bold letterhead that immediately caught my attention. I picked it up. I recognized the unfamiliar Punjabi writing across the top, and then underneath it in English: KHALSA DIWAN SOCIETY, SIKH SOCIETY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. It was addressed to a local cable company, and dated June 26, 1984. I began to read:

"Dear Sir:

You must be aware that the Indian army raided the Sikh shrine Golden Temple with tanks and heavy artillery on June 6, 1984. During this tyrant raid thousands of innocent Sikhs lost their lives. The Sikh world has been shocked with the brutal action of the Indian government.

At this grave time of sorrow when the Sikhs around the world are mourning because of the desecration of their holiest shrine and the loss of innocent lives...your Channel 17 producer, Sushma, purposely aired the conniving speech of the President of India.

We want to draw it to your attention that our community is totally perturbed because of the false propaganda of this magnitude. We, therefore, strongly urge you to take note of our community's feelings and, in future, refrain from broadcasting the false propaganda of the government of India.

Furthermore, we are of the firm opinion that to irritate the feelings of the Sikh community, the producer, Sushma has purposely aired the show on behalf of the Indian government.

On behalf of the community, we strongly urge you to terminate the services of the producer immediately."

...."Saloni?"

I stopped reading, slightly startled, and looked up from the letter.

"Hello. I thought I recognized you here," said the elderly man.

"Mr. Jayant! What a surprise," I replied, stuffing the letter back into the file. The short South Asian man in front of me was neatly polished, wearing a stiffly starched white shirt, a tweed jacket, and a striped tie. His hair was oiled back impeccably. He was Mr. Albert Jayant: previously a manager for Air-India's jumbo jet service to the "islands", but now the President of the Fiji Commonwealth Forum Society, and the producer of *Fiji Today*. He was also working on his Phd in sociology. To me, he smelled slightly like the coconut oil in his hair.

"How are things?" I asked him politely.

"Well, quite good, shall I say. The program is coming along nicely, though we have had many problems — I am now trying to get an extra half-hour a week," he told me. "In the meantime I am still completing my Phd research. But then...I am a Gemini by birth, so I can wear many hats," he said with a broad smile. We laughed. I wished him the best. He went on his way. I smiled to myself because he had told me this before.

"The problem", he had said during our last interview, "is that Sushma has got too big a slice of the cake. She has both Monday and Thursday, at three hours a slot."

"The problem", said somebody else, "is that the Sikhs have created so much trouble for her. They are an exceptionally difficult group of people, it seems."

And "the problem", said Sushma, "is how to please everybody — without always catering to their special hidden agendas."

"The problem is that she lacks a sense of the community. She's third generation East African, you know?"

"The problem", said Jayant, "is that Fijian-Canadians have their own culture and language which is different from the rest."

And, and, and...

The threats...Bring a crew to our protest, or your son may not live...You MUST do a program on Guru Nanak's birthday... Question Indian patriarchy, and your tires will be slashed... Tell your Dada-ji to back off, or I'll break his hands and neck.

I felt a migraine headache coming on.

I gathered up the pile of "data", deciding that I'd done enough for one day. I wanted to relax with a newspaper instead. From inside my knapsack I pulled a copy of the morning *Globe and Mail*, and tried to replace it with the cluttered file of correspondence. Stuffing it in my pack, some of the paper fell loose, and one or two rumpled sheets fell disorderly onto the ground. I needed a new container for this information, something better to carry it in, I thought.

Leaning back in my chair, I unfolded the newspaper. It ruffled loudly in the silent library. My gaze was soon caught by a corner inside-page headline: 52 KILLED DURING RIOTS IN TAMIL NADU, it read. And then just slightly above it, ALBERTA SAYS "NO" TO TURBANS IN THE MOUNTAINS. I sighed, and didn't feel like reading any further. Pushing the newspaper aside, I realized what was causing my headache.

It was the sound of cultures clashing, the reverberation of clamouring voices, the static of conflict at a high decibel level. It resounded off the walls and the silence of the library — and caused the pressure, the pounding, I could feel behind my eyes. Outside I felt the harsh sounds of rush-hour traffic, though from where I was located — (dis)located — there was only the quietude of the university campus. I felt compelled to push my palms into the points of tension on my forehead.

I thought back to a poster I had seen in Sushma's office — distributed by the Ministry of Multiculturalism. A CELEBRATION OF UNITY WITHIN DIVERSITY...it proposed, but the words fell flat, not hollow, but flat and hard. They dropped off the poster unconvincingly, and empty, and greeted me like a fist in the pit of my stomach. Where were the joys of plurality and diversity? And how did they want us to be "harmonious", yet "diverse"? Nobody mentioned how to put this into practice. And nobody prepared me for confronting this lie.

The letter I was reading in the UBC library was written by a spokesman from the *Khalsa Diwan Society* (one of several Sikh Societies of British Columbia). In it, he was responding, on behalf of Sikhs in the province, to Sushma's untimely airing of an interview with Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In the spring of 1984, Sushma was working with a pay television channel and took her cameraman to India to shoot some material for the program. Included in her agenda was the interview with the late Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi. Sushma recalls:

"I had a very nice interview with her, and came back. By the time we scheduled the interview it was around April. She was having some problems then politically, but then India has been having problems for a long time. In June she attacked the Golden Temple which hurt the feelings of all of the Sikhs."

Shortly after the attack, Sushma aired the interview with Mrs. Gandhi to thousands of viewers throughout Vancouver and other parts of British Columbia. Her intention had not been to offend anyone: she claimed to be keeping a pre-set schedule, and had clearly underestimated the response it would generate. But she had struck a sensitive chord. Members of the *Khalsa Diwan Society* were quick to identify Sushma as a sympathizer of the Gandhi administration. And further, they understood her to be manipulating the media in the interest of this political end. Accusations of conspiracy, various threats, and the construction of a public "hit-list" on which Sushma was placed, were some of the strategies subsequently employed by certain members of the Sikh community. The ensuing political and emotional climate, marked by internally generated fear and the threat of violence, was unprecedented among the South Asian Canadian collectivity. Sushma reflects:

"I never thought for a second that I, a person who has been working within the Indian community — with all the Sikhs and Hindus and Moslems and Christians, would be considered a person outside the community. But suddenly I was. And at the time, with the instigation of a boycott, and the high emotional sentiments of the Sikh community, there were over a thousand cancellations of the pay service...which brought my total (number of subscriptions) tumbling down. Within two weeks I was out of the station. They told me that they could not carry on with my service."

The boycott arranged by the *Khalsa Diwan Society* was responsible for a dramatic decline in subscriptions, and resulted in the cancellation of Sushma's pay programming. In addition, Sikh representatives appealed to the CRTC and the cable company claiming that Sushma violated CRTC regulations by airing "political propaganda". Sushma was deemed the "controversial producer", and found herself alienated from the population she serviced. But not long after, and entirely against the wishes of certain members of the *Khalsa Diwan*, Sushma was back on air — this time with Roger's Cable TV.

Over the next few years the society made it a part of their agenda to have Sushma terminated as the "Indo-Canadian producer" for Roger's by raising a variety of regulatory concerns and conditions. They drew attention to such issues as sponsorship guidelines, copyright of Indian films, and the airing of political programming to demonstrate a breach of the conditions of her license to operate. Their goal was to have Sushma's license revoked, through whatever means it would take.

While they failed, of course, to accomplish this specific task, the *Khalsa Diwan Society* did create obstacles in a variety of other ways. The CRTC saw some of their regulatory claims as legitimate, and came down with a reprimand against Sushma's employer, Roger's Cable TV. Roger's, predictably, was not pleased by this action, and wrote in a letter to Sushma that:

"The company is distressed in receiving this reprimand from the CRTC. We make every effort to remain in compliance with all license conditions, and our public image is important to us."

Thus Roger's Cable found themselves publicly accountable for an "ethnic" dispute generated internally by antagonistic groups. To Roger's, "ethnic programming" is a community service which helps to promote good public relations, and generates the subscriptions on which they depend. Their policy is

to contract one producer to serve the needs of each ideologically defined "ethnic community". Conflict within this arrangement is not a part of their corporate planning, and effectively makes them "look bad". From their perspective, political frictions get played out at the expense of their corporate image: their main concern was to remain unsoiled by the South Asian community's dirty laundry.

In contrast to the singularity of purpose with which the *Khalsa Diwan Society* have challenged Sushma, the Fijian, Albert Jayant is a Gemini by birth, and is very proud of the claim that he can "wear many hats". Since 1988, Mr. Jayant has led a small force of individuals who have expressed the need for Fijian participation on the multicultural channel. This is partly because, as he recently explained in a letter to the editor of a South Asian newspaper:

"Fiji as you are aware, as one anthropologist called it in the forties — is "A little India in the Pacific". And this South Pacific Island Nation has many linguistic characteristics and cultures besides Hindi. Fiji, from my point of view is a miniature United Nations, as there are many cultures from the Pacific in Fiji, besides those of Europe and Asia" (*The Link* 1990:4).

Concerned that Sushma's program, *Inradhanush* (ironically meaning "Rainbow"), was not adequately serving the interests of Fijian-Canadian viewers in Vancouver, Albert Jayant requested that at least one hour of her air-time per week be hosted by the Fiji Commonwealth Forum Society. Annoyed by these accusations, Sushma claimed to be doing "as good a job as humanly possible" of providing programming for all of the diverse interests within the South Asian collectivity. ("Did you know there are sixty-two South Asian organizations here in Vancouver? Sixty-two societies? Sixty-two different societies! Can you believe that?" she says to me in total exasperation.)

But Jayant viewed the situation in a different light. Claiming approximately 30,000 Fijian-Canadians in the Vancouver Lower Mainland (of whom over 17,000 subscribe to Roger's Cable TV), Mr. Jayant felt strongly that the existing programming did not meet the needs of an increasing Fijian-Canadian presence in the city. "We Fijians", he argued in a proposal to the multicultural channel of Roger's Cable TV,

"will be better served with our own style of programme to depict our art and culture, language and lifestyle, and a balance of Fijian news and events of the South Pacific as well as the activities of our Fijian-Canadians...It is im-

portant to emphasize that we Fijians have a different blend of cultural background and language colored by the South Pacific influence and far removed from the Indo-Canadians. We have been neglected so far...Our desire is to have our own Fijian programme on a given time slot operated by Fijians, for the Fijians and of Fijian interest. A non-Fijian to host our proposed TV shows will not be acceptable as we have the expertise to produce our own shows."

Initially, his claims received little recognition. The cable company rejected Albert Jayant's proposal. "Sushma", they said, "has been under contract as our Indo-Canadian producer for over ten years. We feel that she has done an excellent job." Pointing to the fact that Mr. Jayant had, in the past, used the *Inradhanush* programming for such things as public service announcements, for his political candidacy in a recent election, and during the coup in Fiji in 1987, Roger's Cable responded by insisting on the equitable nature of the existing production arrangement. "Please contact Sushma", they said, and work it out between yourselves.

So Jayant went to Sushma:

"She was not responsive nor cooperative. She would never return my calls or talk to me. She did not want to share her program. So where do you go from there?"

I went back to the government. I went to Ottawa. I found out which was the body that dealt with this matter — the CRTC. And I started an open line with them."

Albert Jayant's "open line" with the CRTC led him to file a formal intervention on behalf of the Fiji Commonwealth Forum Society against Sushma's application for licensing renewal. The intervention contained allegations that Sushma was not complying with CRTC guidelines relating to sponsorship messages. Some of her interviews with program guests, he claimed, were promoting small businesses and thus constituted advertising where it was not allowed. Supported by video-tapes, transcriptions, and translations from Hindi where needed, Mr. Jayant argued that these cases not only constituted a breach of CRTC guidelines, but also "used up valuable time which could have been allocated towards the needs of Fijians".

This time he was heard. But once again, he was rejected.

Then, Jayant recalled, several months later:

"I read that there was a CRTC public hearing for anybody who wanted to submit a proposal

or make an intervention. So I went with my delegation before them in public...Sushma thinks that I am a threat to her, but we want our rightful share of the TV show. It's a multicultural issue, a government issue...it's provided by the government, and we want the government to give us our rightful share. That's all we want."

Albert Jayant never did present the case publicly at the CRTC public hearing. Fortunately, the dispute was resolved during the afternoon tea break when he and Edward (Ted) Roger's made a "gentleman's agreement". While his program *Fiji Today* has begun production and airing, he is still not satisfied with this settlement. "Comparatively", he says, "Sushma has got too big a slice of the cake".

It is enough to give a person a horrible migraine.

I have outlined these disputes in some detail partly to get at the source of my headache — but more importantly, to demonstrate the nature of ongoing frictions and tensions *between* South Asians as they have been played out within the context of broadcasting. Cultural and political divisiveness is an important aspect of the production of South Asian programming, which in turn, is a reflection of the collectivity itself. In fact, South Asians *are known* for their predictable factionalism: whether it be over airtime or political office, or over the boundaries between countries ...they have a history of contesting for public space which extends well beyond the context of contemporary Canada.

Within Canada, what needs to be emphasized is that differences among South Asian Canadians extend across geographical, regional, political, linguistic, religious, class, caste, and gendered boundaries. While Canadians of South Asian origin may have in common their "South Asian origin", what constitutes this part of the label is radically divergent and always competing. The term assumes a certain internal consistency — when in reality "South Asians" include Caribbeans, Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans, as well as people from East Africa. South Asian "identity", "culture", politics, religion: each of these categories has a long history of *inconsistency* which informs the Canadian context, both violently and non-violently, and in various historical and geographical locations.

What becomes increasingly obvious throughout the disputes I have outlined is the fact that South Asian "ethnicity" or "culture" is evaluated differently by men and women, by Fijians and Sikhs, by East Africans and Canadians...or, for that matter, by Geminis. South Asian ethnicity in the Canadian

context is profoundly contested, with as little consensus about what it *really* is as in debates over what constitutes Canadian "culture" (an RCMP officer in a turban, for example?). "Culture" is not a unified system of meaning. It is as complex as each position within it, since "each version implies not only a different assessment of the statuses and relations of the sexes...but also a different account of society" (Lederman 1989:232).

And yet, as Paul Rabinow has suggested, in spite of this understanding, one of the most fundamental anthropological axioms has been (and still is) that "significance resides in the whole" (1975:98). Anthropology has always articulated (and has indeed helped constitute) what Paul Smith has called that "familiar occidental epistemological category which is that of *the conceivable whole*" (author's emphasis, Smith 1988:88). Smith has criticized Clifford Geertz, for example, for the hermeneutic claim that there does in fact exist some holistic sense of the order of things (Smith 1988:88). In Geertzian thinking, this is the proposition that *everything* can be construed as a cultural system. The hermeneutic problem, according to Smith, is that

"the fundamental category which they long to reach is that of the whole: "we" hop back and forth between parts, uncomfortably and with little satisfaction, until a totality (which is, of course, already presignified as a possibility, as a possible category) can be brought properly into focus as a result of our patient and humane attempts..." (Ibid:88).

Such a stance, even in its most reflexive articulation, is at the ideological root of a great deal of anthropology. The tendency towards what Smith has called "holocentric thinking" has been of particular concern in current critiques of colonial modes of representation (see Appadurai 1988; Bhabha 1986; Marcus 1989; Minh-ha 1987; Said 1978). Holocentric thinking has been held ideologically responsible for many of the totalizing narratives of conventional anthropology. The construction of "The Trobriander", or "The Andaman Islander", for example, as characters within a coherent, unified, totally integrated system has come to stand for many things: the tendency to privilege certain (male) meanings over others, the process by which unity has been contrived over difference, and the textual coup by which authority was seized and indigenous voices were silenced as practice...these are only a few of the lessons to be read from such texts in the contemporary post-colonial, postmodern era (Clifford 1988; Coombes 1991; Lederman 1989; Moore 1988).

Similarly, I would like to suggest, in the Canadian context the construction of the "ethnic" (in "ethnic studies" research, for example) has been readily posited along the same ideological and epistemological lines: that is, in relation to a "holistic sense of the order of things", or in terms of a presignified, coherent, and "multicultural" whole. As in earlier, colonial modes of representation, the suppression of difference as a textual strategy has helped smooth over tensions, or disregard them in the interest of a certain proposition, precisely that of a Canadian totality, a harmonious, unified, presignified whole. In my opinion, the notion of the "ethnic" as it has been constructed in a generalised discourse of Canadian "ethnic studies", and the ensuing assumption (in some texts) of a "single" South Asian experience in Canada — does not reflect any lived reality as much as it expresses and legitimates a *singular, dominant* perspective, shaped, consciously or not, by its own specifically motivated agenda (Coombes 1991:190-192). In other words, the ideological tendency towards holistic explanation, and the subsequent rendering of a unitary "other" can be traced (both currently and historically) as a basis for a racist cultural discourse.

One response by some anthropologists has been to replace the tendency towards totalizing narratives with dialogue, polyphony, heteroglossia, multivocality (see Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Crapanzano 1986; Fischer 1986; Rabinow 1986; Tyler 1986). For example, in his book, *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), one of the dominant texts representing this trend, James Clifford writes that

"...twentieth-century academic ethnography does not appear as a practice of interpreting distinct, whole ways of life but instead as a series of specific dialogues, impositions, and inventions. "Cultural" difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness... the "exotic" is uncannily close...there is no master narrative...there is no single model..." (1988:13-17).

For Clifford, life in the late twentieth century is multiple and fragmented. "Twentieth-century identities", he writes, "can no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions"; "people and things are increasingly out of place"; the world is a "pervasive condition of offcenteredness"; the pure products are irrevocably crazy (1988). Thus older forms of anthropological writing are no longer adequate as modes of representation; "the time has passed when privileged authorities could give voice to others" without fear of being challenged (1988). It is, of course, the anthropological rendering of what Jean-

Francois Lyotard recognized as *La Condition post-moderne* (trans. 1984). And for Clifford, the old maps are no longer adequate in this "global condition of heteroglossia", this world of ambiguity and multivocality — in short, this condition of "total" fragmentation.

While there are many who find this position particularly provocative, there are equally as many of us (non-white women, for example) for whom the idea that the world is fragmented is little more than the most basic, fundamental, and preliminary assumption. Trinh Minh-ha has expressed some of the ambiguity of this response: there is a need on the one hand, to recognize the value of Clifford's questioning insofar as "it speaks to those who perpetuate such practices in a language they can understand" (1987:138). But on the other hand, there is a tendency to be suspicious of the "range of in-between possibilities" that can prevent his critique "from closing off or stiffening into a potentially prescriptive "politically correct" line" (Minh-ha 1987:138). For South Asian Canadians like Hemi, Sushma, Albert Jayant, or myself — and particularly those of the younger generation who are both Canadian and not-Canadian, both Indian and not-Indian — this "brand new" postmodern position reflects little more than the business of, the reality of, the actuality of, the way we have *always* transacted our lives. It is a position given full expression in the work of author Salman Rushdie, who has long since recognized the "great possibility that mass migration gives the world...hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings...melange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that...a love-song to our mongrel selves" (Rushdie 1990:4).²

But what is most problematic about Clifford's position is not simply the fact that it does not constitute "news" (though for him and many others, it may well be new). More importantly, following Paul Smith's critique (1988:90), is the suggestion that Clifford's post-modern anthropological stance and the textual strategy it proposes is no less of an attempt to recover the putative "whole truth" than some of the earlier narratives which it rejects. For Clifford, the tendency towards monological holism is replaced by fragmentation and heteroglossia, but it is posited nonetheless as a *global* condition — or as a *total* condition of fragmentation. In this sense, consciously or not, he exhibits the same desire for holistic explanation as some of the conventional anthropology which he attacks. In the end his articulation remains imprisoned within the epistemological assumption of a conceivable totality (albeit a fragment-

ed one) that has historically guided traditional Western thought.

Other authors have been critical of the manner in which Clifford has transacted these assumptions, a phenomenon Bruce Kapferer has referred to as "delusions of radicalism" within anthropology (1989:99). According to Kapferer, Clifford, like many other anthropologists, has a tendency to present himself and his work as radical in vein (1989:99). Clifford's sense of cultural otherness, his claim to depict realities at sharp variance with Western traditions, has been frequently used to legitimate his practice and carefully underline its epistemological value. At the same time he has remained virtually silent on the political significance of his white, North American, masculinist context of writing, in spite of the growing number of critiques regarding the hegemony of this denial from feminist and postcolonial writers, and their sympathizers (e.g. Gordon 1988; hooks 1990; Kapferer 1989; Mascia-Lees et al. 1989; Minh-ha 1987; Owen 1983; Said 1989; Visweswaran 1988). Although pluralism and difference is foregrounded in his work, what is also being reaffirmed is the primacy of Western, white, male knowledge. In fact Clifford continues to carry the "invisible knapsack of privilege" without unpacking it or confronting its contents (see McIntosh 1989). The growing dominance of Clifford's theory of postmodernism is, in spite of some seemingly radical claims, inherently conservative at its epistemological roots.

So what, then, is the political alternative? Is there any aspirin to relieve this headache? How is it possible to think through, without totalizing, the lived experiences of fragmented lives? What are the implications for "real" individuals inside the assumption of a post-modern condition? And how do we theorize the everyday practice of movement within this condition of flux? These are the types of questions which, in my mind, grapple with the "real" heterogeneity of Canadian lives, in addition to raising some of the epistemological issues (and contradictions) which are critical to their contemporary understanding. Where difference is profoundly contested, as it is among South Asians in Canada — where there is little consensus towards an agreed upon order, and where relations of power seriously inhibit the ideological possibility of "multivocality" — there are, of course, no inevitable outcomes.

In light of this, one of the most difficult epistemological demands is the tendency towards "internal consistency" (as assumed by the term "South Asian", for instance), and the ensuing expectation

that this consistency should interact without contradiction with other sets of "consistent" experiences. What needs to be problematized is the inability of theory to deal squarely with tension and internal contradiction. Although Clifford's postmodernist posture does represent a distinct development in critical anthropology insofar as it raises important questions about power, knowledge and representation, it does not deal adequately, in my opinion, with the political implications of radical heterogeneity. It does not deal, in other words, with the stuff that migraines are made of...

I realized what was causing my headache. It was the sound of cultures clashing, the reverberation of clamouring voices, the static of conflict at a high decibel level. It resounded off the walls and the silence of the library — and caused the pressure, the pounding, I could feel behind my eyes... But from where I was located — (dis)located — there was only the quietude of the university campus.

Within the South Asian collectivity in Canada, there is a complex assortment of conflicting social locations. Part of this became evident in the UBC library, as I leafed through the file of Sushma's correspondence. The tensions between Sushma and Sikh-Canadians took on different proportions when they were written as text. The accusatory letter from the Sikh society spokesperson was headed by a bold, dark Punjabi script — indicating the enormous rift between Punjabi and Hindi, or the unbridgeable gaps of linguistic divisions. The Sikh demands to "terminate the services of Sushma immediately" were prompted by a political event (i.e. Mrs. Gandhi's attack of the Golden Temple), but that became the catalyst for ongoing claims of Sushma's inability to represent their interests... "She's third generation East African, you know?"

Sikh-Canadian claims are also informed by their unique historical struggle in British Columbia which sets them apart to some extent (along with their own Sikh religious symbols and practices) from "other" Canadians of South Asian origin.³ Thus Sikh expressions of political difference are in turn deeply embedded in religious ideology — which can then be interpreted historically in different geographical and national contexts. If difference in this case seems more complex, ambiguous, and powerful than the term "diversity" might suggest...it is. The subject is as slippery as the coconut oil in one's hair.

In his book *Discerning the Subject* (1988), Paul Smith has argued that such difficulty arises precisely from our construction of the "subject", or more specifically, from academic notions of a unified "subject". Within the discourses of social science, Smith

argues, the term “subject” has had a wide and varied usage: in some instances it refers to the “individual” or “person”, in others it refers to the “self”, and in others still it refers to someone who is sub-jected or victimized. Almost always, however, it refers to a unity: *a Sikh*, or *the Sikh*, for example, in a holistic sense — rather than the more slippery understanding of a Bengali-born / British-educated / French-speaking / non-orthodox / male / Mountie / Sikh / Canadian, for instance. Smith’s main claim, thus, is that current conceptions of the “subject” have tended to

“produce a purely *theoretical* “subject”, removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live and that a different concept of the “subject” must be discerned or discovered” (original author’s emphasis; Smith 1988:xxix).

Thus, Smith proposes that the commonly used term “subject” be broken down, and be understood as “the term inaccurately used to describe what is actually the series or the conglomeration of *positions*, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily infeasible” which people occupy momentarily throughout their lives (original author’s emphasis; 1988:xxxv). These multiple subject-positions must be considered a part of the individual who exhibits them, but they never cohere to form a complete and non-contradictory individual. Instead, they interplay and produce tensions. Moreover, it is precisely in the privileging of such partial subject-positions that our methodological future as social scientists lies (Haraway 1988).

Another way of positing this, according to Albert Jayant, is that individuals are capable of “wearing many hats”. As a Fijian from the South Pacific,⁴ as a Canadian in Vancouver, as “far removed from the Indo-Canadians”, as a social scientist himself, and as a man operating in a world of “gentleman’s agreements” in the exclusionary, gendered sense of that term — Albert Jayant, as a contesting agent, is empowered by a variety of multiple subject-positions. Thus, not only is “The Problem” assessed in as many different ways as there are possibilities, but also *within each individual* is the capacity to manoeuvre or re-position in relation to that problem. In these terms, South Asian “identity” may be best explained as an “ensemble of dispersed positions” (Laclau and Mouffe cited in Smith 1988:150).

“Our Sikh world is totally perturbed by your channel 17 producer, Sushma”....

“A non-Fijian to host our show will not be acceptable as we have the expertise” ...

“Did you know there are sixty-two South Asian organizations in Vancouver? Sixty-two different societies! Can you believe that?”...

The incompatibility of differing subject-positions is embodied in Sushma’s practice itself. As a “community broadcaster” she must represent the “community”: which is at once both the premise that underlies her programming, but also the burden that has undermined its production. Part of the difficulty lies in the multiple meanings of the concept of “community”, as a result of it being appropriated differently by various groups who have adopted the term. In the terms of the state (represented by the CRTC or the cable company) the concept assumes a great deal of ideological harmony, with little room for difference inside it. The unstated, internal, South Asian reality, however, is that “community” is experienced as real lived difference, as concrete conflict — and not always positively.

The contradiction of Sushma’s cultural production is that she must deal with the outside or external demands (i.e. the CRTC and Roger’s) by smoothing over some of the internal realities. In other words, at the end of the ideological *Indradhanush* “rainbow” is the lived ordeal of ethnicity in Canada, and the two experiences are at odds with each other. The broadcaster must occupy a certain “brokerage” position by selling the ideological “community” on the one hand, and interacting in the reality of what Hal Foster has called the “differential articulation” of the collectivity on the other (1985b:140). And yet Sushma is more than just a “cultural broker”; she is a living example of the simultaneous non-unity of subject-positions: a person manoeuvring herself within a contradictory realm, an occupant of a single location inside the assumption of a postmodern condition.

My headache was the result of precisely such movement — of the tensions created by inconsistent fragments. The painful part was not simply to recognize the “postmodern predicament”, but to actually live it in concrete, moving terms. To live the reality of a postmodern condition is to know that “difference and tension” may turn into violence. This is the turbulence of a polyphonic journey...

And, and, and...

The threats...Bring a crew to our protest, or your son may not live...You MUST do a program on Guru Nanak’s birthday...Question Indian patriarchy and your tires will be slashed...Tell your Dada-ji to back off, or I’ll break his hands and neck.

One possible step towards relief is to isolate the tensions; to call them what they are; to put a finger on the points where the pressures are the greatest.

To return, then, to my earlier question: How do we deal theoretically with this lived experience of tension and contradiction and the representation of radical heterogeneity?

I needed a new container for this information, something better to carry it in, I thought.

It is, as Smith implies, more than just countering totalizing constructions of the "subject" with a postmodern vision of a fragmented global condition, for this also rests on a unified "subject". What is needed is an account which recognizes multifarious subject-positions

"...insofar as it allows us not only to take seriously the "subject's" interpolated positions and the permanence of ideology, but also to conceive of the possibility of resistance through a recognition of the *simultaneous* non-unity or non-consistency of subject-positions" (original author's emphasis, Smith 1988:118).

An examination of the "South Asian subject" underscores the instability, even the impossibility, of the epistemologies which it inscribes, and by which it is itself inscribed (see Smith 1988:94). Where there are no fixed, coherent "subjects", but only an "ensemble of subject-positions", simultaneously inconsistent and contradictory, then the ensuing "world" that they inhabit cannot be construed as a general, totalizable reality. It is precisely in the politics and epistemology of multiple subject-positions that it becomes possible to use the partiality of all truth claims as the ground for reclaiming intellectual legitimacy.

Nelly Richards has observed a specific process at work within the construction of the "Clifford-ian reality":

"... no sooner are these differences — sexual, political, racial, cultural — posited and valued, than they become subsumed into the meta-category of the "undifferentiated" which means that all singularities immediately become indistinguishable and inter-changeable in a new, sophisticated economy of "sameness". Postmodernism defends itself against the destabilising threat of the "other" by integrating it back into a framework which absorbs all differences and contradictions" (cited in Connor 1989:235).

Here Richards provokes us to rethink postmodernism in terms that explore the "other" as a threat. The appearance of various "others" — people whose experiences as subalterns, dependents, subjugated, oppressed classes, women, ethnic minorities, and even marginalized sub-specialties — is indeed disturbing for some. It comes as no surprise, then, to

learn that postmodernism is primarily a Western, white, male phenomenon (see Gordon 1988; Mascia-Lees *et al* 1989; Owen 1983) — a response to the loss of the privilege to define. In anthropology the voice of the "other" is now sustained contestation, a reality which locates the postmodern argument not as explanation, but rather as symptom to a problem (Said 1989). In effect, postmodernism allows the continuance of its practice within fairly clear disciplinary boundaries...a kind of dominant "way out" of a difficult bind.

The current strength of state-initiated thinking about "ethnicity" is a similar way out of a difficult bind.

I thought back to a poster I had seen in Sushma's office — distributed by the Ministry of Multiculturalism. A CELEBRATION OF UNITY WITHIN DIVERSITY...it proposed, but the words fell flat, not hollow, but flat and hard. They dropped off the poster unconvincingly, and empty, and greeted me like a fist in the pit of my stomach.

The inherently conservative character of multicultural ideology is yet another expression of Richard's "sophisticated economy of sameness". The emergence of the Canadian "other", and all of the positions within this otherness, is experienced as a threat to a unified whole. The multicultural policy, no matter how strongly it claims to embrace difference and diversity, is still based in a claim to a unified "subject". In Smith's terms, "the fact that they can still promulgate ideologies of the "subject" in a relatively uniform — that is, overarching — manner" undermines any strategy for potential resistance (1988:156). In the political rhetoric of multicultural discourse the principle of heterogeneity has once again been appropriated into a contemporary conversation that "whitewashes" difference.⁵ The problem, in part, with the doctrine of pluralism, as it has been politically employed by the Canadian government, is its paternalistic insistence on the notion of diversity, when its underlying agenda has always been unity.

In summary then, there are a number of things I would like to re-emphasize. In this article I have explored in some detail expressions of factionalism in the context of broadcasting among the South Asian Canadian collectivity. By examining the contestation of Sushma's programming by the Sikh *Khalsa Diwan Society* and Albert Jayant's Fiji Commonwealth Forum Society I have explored the theme of internal differences, which has proven to be particularly rich within the South Asian collectivity. The story of these (still ongoing) disputes reveals that the category of "South Asian" itself is profound-

ly contested by the groups who are supposedly represented within it. In spite of this fact, there remains a distinctive tendency towards representing South Asians as “internally consistent” — not to reduce my discussion to a critique of homogenization, it is more a suspicion of “compatible heterogeneity.”

Part of the responsibility for this tendency rests in the fundamental anthropological axiom that “significance resides in the whole.” Holocentric thinking, even in its most reflexive articulation, has been at the ideological root of a great deal of social science research. The tendency towards holism has often resulted in a unitary construction of the anthropological “other”, and can be attributed, in certain instances, as the epistemological basis for a racist cultural discourse.

The increasing dominance of a theory of postmodernism may be seen as a reaction to these theoretical demands. But there are a number of ways in which James Clifford, for example, exhibits the same desire for holistic explanation as some of the conventional anthropology which he attacks. The postmodern view that truth and knowledge are multiple and fragmented may be seen to act as a truth claim itself; particularly in light of the extensive resistance to these claims by the voices of women, non-Western, and non-white individuals. Like the current Canadian multicultural policy, the anthropological discourse of postmodernism, fails to deal squarely with the political reality of tension and conflict. Both have come to represent a certain status quo whereby difference is absorbed into a new, sophisticated economy of sameness. Both pluralist strategies make claims towards unity, and insist on the equality of (impossibly) diverse positions.

Coming to age within the political context of federal multicultural policy in Canada has increased my suspicion of the postmodern impulse to reconcile all the details of a heterogeneous landscape. And further, I am skeptical of the need to subsume too many contradictory phenomena under a single master concept (or “ism” like postmodern-ism, or multicultural-ism). For this situation grants a kind of equivalence: difference is decidedly “in”, and everyone is granted an equal “in-difference”. Pluralism itself has become a type of conformity effectively foreclosing on the possibility of any resistance (Foster 1985a; Minh-ha 1987; Smith 1988).

I have used the combined insights of Paul Smith and Donna Haraway to argue that the inherent conservatism of these types of discourses are based in their claims to a “unified” subject. It is thus through

a politics and epistemology of partial subject-positions that such claims can be countered. Moreover, it is through a recognition of the simultaneous non-unity of subject-positions that the possibility of resistance can be reclaimed. South Asians in Canada are only a single example of people whose lived reality (as object of analysis) can *only* be construed as radically heterogeneous. The tensions to emerge from such simultaneous non-unity are, in my opinion, far more important to our analytic and theoretical practice than any of the existing “glosses” in circulation. To confront them squarely is to find relief from the migraine headaches they potentially create.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork on which this manuscript is based was supported by a research grant from the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Toronto, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

2. My reference to Salman Rushdie (a novelist) is not intended to highlight the issue of textuality as the crucial one (i.e.: Clifford’s preoccupation with whether ethnography can be fact or fiction). Clearly, I think it is both. Nor is it intended to echo the *New York Times*’ characterization of Rushdie as “a Continent finding its voice” (as if a person or continent has no voice if they do not speak in English, or as if a person can be a continent in the first place). It is this latter phenomenon that Aijaz Ahmed has observed elevates an Asian, African or Arab author to “the lonely splendour of a “representative” - of a race, a continent, a civilization, even the Third World” (cited in Asad, 1990:249). My claim is simply that Rushdie’s postmodern expression is much more profound for me than Clifford’s, in the sense that it is more than just a *vision* of postmodernism, it is testimony to its *experience*. A recent article by Talal Asad (1990) gets at some of this complexity by exploring how Rushdie’s authorial intention in the *Satanic Verses* articulates with its form and content, and with the political terrain of postcolonial Britain. What really matters, according to Asad, are “the kinds of political projects cultural inscriptions are embedded in. Not experiments in ethnographic representation for their own sake, but modalities of political intervention should be our primary object of concern” (1990:260).

3. For a comprehensive history of Sikhs in British Columbia, see James Chadney (1984).

4. See Buchignani and Indra (1985) for a brief social history of Fijians in Canada.

5. Hal Foster has made similar claims to those of Nelly Richards’ in an article entitled *Against Pluralism* (1985a). In it he argues that pluralism is a problem. “As a general condition pluralism tends to absorb argument...it is a situation that grants a kind of equivalence...(people) of many sorts are made to seem more or less equal — equally (un)important. The result is an eccentricity that leads to a new conformity... Pluralism leads not to a sharpened

awareness of difference (social, sexual, artistic, etc.) but to a stagnant condition of indiscrimination — not to resistance but to retrenchment” (1985a:13-31).

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