

# WORKING PAPERS

## Re-assessing Early Sikh Migration Histories on Turtle Island: An Anti-colonial and Critical Solidarity Perspective

**Guntas Kaur**

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An Anti-colonial and Critical Solidarity Perspective**

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**Abstract**

Early Canadian Sikh migration and analysis of its anti-colonial origins can invoke a decolonial conceptualization of racialized histories in settler colonial Canada. At the same time, this re-assessment confronts non-Indigenous complicity in Canada's nation building project while initiating the possibility of critical solidarity in the present day through shared and interlocking colonial histories. Accordingly, this working paper respectfully centers critical Sikh and Indigenous scholarship and knowledge to bridge historical and community gaps to re-imagine racialized histories and immigrant-Indigenous relations in Canada.

Keywords: Canadian Sikh migration, Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, Decolonization, Solidarity, Sikh diaspora

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## Introduction

Like most racialized immigrants in Canada, I often get asked, “where are you from?”, but I have rarely been posed the question, “where have I come to?” and what it means to be on Indigenous lands (Mucina, 2019). After grappling with the above complexities as a racialized immigrant and researcher, the premise of this paper stands on the acknowledgment that the Canadian Sikh history has been narrated fragmentally for the sole convenience of the white Canadian settler. Therefore, my analysis below aims to offer an anti-colonial re-assessment of the early twentieth century Sikh migration story in Canada by respectfully drawing upon critical Sikh and Indigenous knowledge. The colonial analytic of early Canadian Sikh migration history may open spaces for inquiry into how the binary of the “colonizer-colonized” also permeates in histories of racialized migrant communities in Canada (Dhamoon et al., 2019). Besides, early Sikh history in the Canadian context is not only missing Indigenous perspectives whose land the Sikhs first entered as British subjects, but also deficient of critical Sikh and Sikh feminist perspectives. (Sian & Dhamoon, 2020). For this reason, as a Sikh woman, and racialized researcher, participating in knowledge production is an act of resistance against the oppressive structures which have intrinsically excluded individuals like me in the process.

I begin this working paper by questioning Canada’s foundation as a settler nation state through the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples, while simultaneously unsettling Canada’s image as a welcoming nation for migrants and refugees. After that, I locate interlocking colonial histories between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian Sikh community by revisiting three important episodes in the early Sikh migration story. The three episodes are - The tragic journey of the Komagata Maru (1914), the anti- colonial diasporic movement, The Ghadar Party (1913-1948), and the story of Maggie Sutej, from Ahousaht First Nation (1864), and her connection to British colonial India. Lastly, I draw on knowledge gathered from Indigenous and Sikh community leaders through community-based interviews conducted during my master’s research project in the summer of 2021. Direct community perspectives will be drawn on with the intention to identify meaningful ways in which racialized migrant groups in Canada, like the Sikh community can enact critical solidarity with Indigenous communities.

I am mindful that racialized immigrants and communities have varied complex histories, and everyday experiences in this country. However, this working paper may invoke an anti-colonial conceptualization of the term “settler.” This unconventional conceptualization can assist in underlining non-Indigenous complicity in Canada’s nation building project and initiate critical solidarity for decolonization movements led by Indigenous peoples (Phung, 2011).

## Researcher Positionality and Methodologies

Being a non-Indigenous person engaging with Indigenous knowledge, I cannot be neutral or objective. My social location and cognizant understanding of my own positionality is essential to building trust (Absolon & Willett, 2005) when participating in new knowledge production about my community’s history on Indigenous lands. Therefore, I begin developing my research design through a reflexive exercise.

I believe the journey to decolonise my positionality truly began in the fall of 2017 when I attended the Water Gathering and Toxic Walking Tour hosted by the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. I boarded a free bus from Toronto to attend the gathering and connect with community members living on the front line of the petrochemical industry in Sarnia, Ontario. While inhaling the chemical fumes surrounding the area, I became aware of the increase in life threatening diseases and community members being unable to grow medicine due to the toxins in the soil. With privilege in my backpack, I returned to my home in the suburbs near Toronto and had a profound sense of

realization that I needed to learn more and do my part - not knowing what that looked like at the time.

Later that year, I was invited to work in the Tsihqot'in territory, which is in close proximity where Sikh migrants first settled in Canada. I worked alongside and under the guidance of Tl'etinqox citizens on a community restorative justice program while being immersed in their culture and protocols. Connecting with community members in their traditional territory, I witnessed the unique challenges they faced, which included living under boil-water advisory. However, I also experienced the power of ceremony, culture and language, which reminded me of my connection to my homeland, Punjab. Unequivocally, the professional and personal lessons I gathered through this experience are monumental to my work as a researcher and have led me to nurture the relationships I made. More importantly, it has propelled me to continue to be on this journey to understand what it means to be a Sikh immigrant and settler on Turtle Island.

While conducting my master's research project, I gravitated towards qualitative research methodology due to its exploratory and human centered nature (Creswell, 2013) which complimented my research aim to connect diverse community perspectives and histories. Firstly, I developed a literature review based on the knowledge available about missing Indigenous perspectives from Canada's past and early Sikh migration history on Turtle Island. I intentionally made efforts to rely mostly on Indigenous and Sikh-South Asian scholarship for the review. Further, I conducted four community-based and participatory semi-structured interviews with two Sikh and Indigenous community leaders respectively. In particular, I applied the conversational method for the interviews because it "honors orality as a means of transmitting knowledge" (p.127) which is central to Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems." (Kovach, 2019). Moreover, storytelling through conversation is relational and is often considered a more organic way of learning from Indigenous community members (Kovach, 2019). This method also helped to embody a continuous sense of reflexivity and diminish the rigid structures of the researcher-participant dynamics within western academic paradigms (Greenwood et al., 2012; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Datta, 2018).

Keeping the above structures in mind, I was mindful of developing accountability and maintaining non-extractive and meaningful relationships with the Indigenous participants. Developing relationships in the recent past which were outside those of a researcher and participant formulation and purpose of the research (Greenwood et al.,2012) aided in making the exchange more honest and insightful. In addition, prior to the interviews, I familiarized myself with The First Nations research principles of "ownership, control, access, and possession" which assert Indigenous participants' control over data collection processes, and how the knowledge shared can be used.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, this working paper also interweaves elements of my ethnographic reflections about my experience living and working in Tl'etinqox First Nation from 2017- 2018.

After completing the interviews, I engaged in narrative analysis (Hendry, 2007), in order to identify common threads within the respective interviews. This helped amalgamate the narratives with the knowledge within the literature and examples of community instances about building solidarities.

## **Missing Indigenous and Racialized Perspectives from Canada's History**

Knowledge about Canada's foundation as a settler nation state has been disputed by Indigenous peoples since its establishment. In 2016, during an Indigenous TED Talks series called RED Talks, renowned Blackfoot educator Dr. Leroy Little Bear famously said, "Canada is a pretend

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<sup>1</sup> The First Nations Principles of OCAP - <https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/>, <https://fnigc.ca/online-library/>

nation”.<sup>2</sup> This is because the foundational rationale is often premised largely on a constructed fantasy that Europeans found under-discovered land with primitive and politically unsophisticated civilization. Further, these historical underpinnings and false propositions of nation-state foundations have been generally immune to any kind of direct criticism (Gaudry, 2016). Contrary to the false colonial logics, Indigenous people have lived and taken care of their territories on Turtle Island for thousands of years. Before contact and the devastating impacts of colonisation, they retained all rights and responsibilities in their respective communities (Palmater, 2014). The primary objective of oppressive colonial policies, including the early establishment of the Indian Act, was the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples, “a goal which has not changed in hundreds of years” (Palmater, 2014, p. 27). These systemic policies have not only destroyed many aspects of Indigenous ways of life but influences the way Canada’s history continues to be written, imagined and consumed. The systemic displacement and genocide of Indigenous communities also led to the fundamental exclusion of Indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings, and experiences from knowledge about Canada’s foundations (Battiste, 2005).

As a consequence, majority of settlers, immigrants and newcomers have invented an alternative viewpoint of Canada’s past in their collective consciousness. White settler dominance over the construction of the colonial logics is maintained through the bodies, property, land, and labor of Indigenous communities and other people of color (Bonds and Inwood, 2016). The oppressive power dynamics of the colonial states have continued to forge structural inequalities as these exclusions are built on and justified through settler colonial discourses and oppressive practices against racialized communities. Hence it becomes indispensable to dispute the structures of space, place and race within notions of white settler colonial states which are maintained by white dominance (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2018).

Further, the historical interpretation from a narrow outlook helps settler nations like Canada to succeed in their goal of masking their own criminality, oppression and injustices against Indigenous peoples (Stark, 2016; Simpson, 2017). To oppose the gaps in histories and bind them as per truth-telling process, Simpson (2017) further emphasizes the significance of the act of refusal and challenging the legitimacy of the state. Therefore, the process of active refusal (Simpson, 2017) entails challenging one’s existing beliefs and value systems. Correspondingly, upon challenging personal beliefs, individuals can participate in learning directly from Indigenous perspectives and worldviews (King, 2014). Initiating truth telling and learning processes allied with Indigenous value systems are undisputedly linked to also challenging the white settler dominance in the erasure of Indigenous paradigms from Canada’s national identity (Moreton-Robinson, 2018). In practice, the process of truth-telling has two components, learning new information and at the same time, unlearning notions which continue to pass as common logic (Gaudry, 2017).

Furthermore, beneath Canada’s international image of tolerance, and multiculturalism, there are deliberately forgotten migrant stories about systemic racial oppression. For example, the imposition of the Chinese head tax, among other oppressive chapters have finally begun to be referenced when re-imagining Canada’s foundations as a nation-state (Somani, 2015). The exclusion of racial narratives from Canada’s history has led to a form of national forgetting about the early experiences of migrants (Somani, 2015). Similarly, in the context of South Asian migrant histories in Canada, there also exists a hegemonic erasure of racial exclusion. To interrogate and challenge the national forgetting of racialized narratives, the following section re-asses two important episodes in the early Canadian Sikh migration history - the turning away of Komagata Maru, 1914 (Kaur, 2012) and the anti-colonial diasporic political movement, Ghadar Party, 1913-1948 (Gill, 2014). The re-examination of these two episodes can help initiate a decolonial or/and anti-colonial framework to re-imagining Punjabi Sikh origins on Turtle Island and their resultant

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<sup>2</sup> “Canada is a Pretend Nation” REDx Talks - Leroy Little Bear #WhatIKnowNow- Link <https://vimeo.com/172822409>

relationships with Indigenous people. This alternative analysis not only helps address the gaps in Canadian migrant narratives but can also change the trajectory in ways the motivations of early Sikh migrants have been viewed previously. For instance, considering their journeys not just bounded by economic ambitions but towards anti-colonial interests, shifts the way we understand Sikh history on Indigenous lands (Gill, 2014; Kaur, 2012; Ogden, 2012).

### **'Decolonizing' Early Canadian Sikh Migration History**

About thirty million people migrated out of India between 1830 and 1930 for economic imperative or by force to provide labour largely in Crown colonies (Ogden, 2012). Among those migrants, most of them were men who later worked as merchants, soldiers, plantation workers, or laborers across Asia, Africa, and Australia. No matter where they travelled to, the British imperial powers restricted their autonomy and they continued to be considered as colonized subjects (Ogden, 2012). The Sikh community predominantly lived in Punjab, a north-western province of India. Punjab was also one of the last regions of India to be annexed by the British. The story of the Punjabi Sikh community differs slightly from other cultural communities who migrated out of the Indian sub-continent at the time. Sikh migration patterns outside of India and South Asia were unique because of the preferential treatment the British gave the Sikhs. The reasons why Sikhs enjoyed a peculiar relationship with the British lies in the history of Punjab, its rich agricultural attributes, and Punjabis' extensive participation in the British army regiments (Kaur, 2012). In addition, both Sikh men and women have historically been cited as warriors of justice and taking political action is a foundational aspect of *Sikhi*. For this reason, they actively participated in many anti-colonial and social movements against the British rule in India, South Africa, Canada, Britain, Hong Kong, and the United States (Sian and Dhamoon, 2020). The drive for justice has been instrumental in both revolutionary religious and secular components of the Ghadar movement, as well as labour migration action, global anti-colonialism, and local antiracism movements (Kaur, 2012).

According to historians and academics, the first of the Sikh migrants arrived in Canada during the winter of 1903-1904, encouraged by agents of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Hong Kong. There are speculations that the encouragement was not meant to be an invitation to emigrate but was a strategy to replace labourers after the Canadian government raised the Chinese Head Tax (Johnston, 2014). The census count of the year 1911 attests that there were approximately 2300 South Asian migrants in Canada, and many of them settled in select few parts of British Columbia. Besides, the early migrants were predominantly men which depicts the gendered and exclusionary nature of immigration policies at the time. Although as colonial subjects, they were allowed to move "freely" in the Dominion of Canada, Sikhs refused to be treated as "second class citizens" under the British imperial rule. For them, demanding equal and fair treatment both in India and Canada were two sides of the same coin (Johnston, 2014).

On April 4, 1914, a Japanese ship called the Komagata Maru arrived on the Vancouver coast carrying 376 Indian passengers (approximately 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus) (Johnston, 2014). The passengers on board were refused entry into Canada under the Immigration Act of 1910 and the Continuous Journey Regulation. This policy prevented individuals who did not arrive directly from the country of origin or of their respective nationalities through a continuous journey to enter Canada. It is crucial to underline that the law was enforced as an exclusive measure to stop emigration from British India and did not apply to European immigrants (Johnston, 2014). When the Komagata Maru ship was forbidden to dock, the rhetoric which was used to justify the act resembled the colonial narratives portraying Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. For example, labels used to describe Indian bodies included undesirable, alien-like, and dangerous seditionists in nature, who can be detrimental to the tranquility of the British rule (Roy, 2016). The above narrative manifested within a news outlet by justifying the act as form a



“biological enclavement through using ‘racial hygiene,’” theories routinely invoked in the nineteenth century to exclude native populations from colonial spaces (‘Trip of the Komagata’, 24 May 1914)” (Roy, 2016, p.74).

Undeniably, various forms of physical exclusion are embedded in all aspects of historical and contemporary ways South Asian communities are described in Canada. For example, Somani (2015) indicates that “members of the South Asian diaspora are often framed as outsiders in the dominant national imaginary, as having a particular kind of “brownness” that marks them as not quite Canadians” (p. 290). Similarly, Walia (2021) emphasizes that Canadian multiculturalism disregards its oppressive “histories of racial capitalism and continuities of violence” (p.159). She highlights the discourses of multiculturalism also destructed the diversity among “Indigenous nations into grammars of culture and ethnicity” (Walia, 2021 p.159), which has resulted in “historical aphasia of the conquest” (Byrd, 2011). Further, Walia (2012) poignantly paints the irony of white settlers now “welcoming” racialized migrants into Canadian multiculturalism with the backdrop of genocide, dispossession and forced dependency of Indigenous peoples.

In addition, the junction and complex inter-linkages between the transnational Ghadar Party movement and the arrival of Komagata Maru presents a distinctive and decolonising perspective of the early Canadian Sikh migration story (Johnston, 2013). The Ghadar Party was first developed as a diasporic newsletter in 1913 by individuals of Indian origin residing in the west coast of the United States. Eventually, the newsletter’s influence made its way into the lower mainland region of British Columbia and the organization quickly thrived within the South Asian diaspora outside of India with an extensive following in Vancouver, BC (Ogden, 2012; Bal, 2016). Ghadar party was highly rebellious in nature and aimed to strategize the overthrow of British rule in India from the West (Ogden, 2012; Bal, 2016; Johnston, 2013). The Punjabi and Urdu word “ghadar” with its origin in the Arabic language directly translates to rebellion or revolt in the English language. This resonates with the rebellious and revolutionary disposition of the party’s functioning against British colonialism both in South Asia and North America. The group that formed this movement included radical intellectuals and laboring Punjabi men who worked in the mills, farms and railways on the west coast. Subsequently, many of these men were later captured, detained, tried, or executed (Ogden, 2012).

The primary objective of the passengers of Komagata Maru may have been immigration into Canada. However, several reports by Canadian officials and research by academics later confirmed that the anti-British Ghadar Party had links to the passengers on the Komagata Maru (Johnston, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to highlight that the interlocking complexities of these two episodes are contested and continue to shape how Indians, especially Sikhs understand their histories in the West (Johnston, 2013; Somani, 2015). Due to the swift undermining of hegemonic narratives, and collective community organizing, individuals are now capable of re-examining complexities of their historical positionalities (Somani, 2015). A deeper analysis of The Ghadar Party and its connection to Komagata Maru episode presents an alternative view of the experiences and motivations of early Indian migrants in Canada. In the case of Ghadar Party members, they quickly recognized that racism and exclusion were not a question of personal prejudices but in fact, were structural issues tied to the British imperial order worldwide. As such, these new migrants saw antiracist struggles in Canada as connected to a broader resistance against the British empire in India and elsewhere. Revisiting these connections aids in viewing the Komagata Maru episode as not an isolated moment in Canada’s oppressive past but being endemic to the operations and maintenance of the Canadian settler state in the early twentieth century.

## Critical Solidarity – Bridging Gaps in Literature and Practice

The deliberate exclusion of Indigenous world views from Canada's history has resulted in a "parallax gap" between Indigenous-immigrant narratives (Bauder, 2011). The systemic gap between the two narratives continues to impact how most settlers, immigrant and newcomer communities imagine and understand Canadian narratives. At the same, this gap manifests itself within media, academic and policy debates (Bauder, 2011). Bridging these narratives requires a multi-dimensional understanding of settler colonialism through which place, culture, and relations of power are critically understood (Snelgrove et al., 2014). In the context of transnational migration in settler colonial Canada, "racialized immigrants and Indigenous peoples have been in contact as long as Europeans and Indigenous peoples" (Bhatia, 2013, p. 40). Bhatia (2013) suggests that since these connections took place during similar time periods, there is a need to collectively decolonize racialized and Indigenous histories. In addition, some of the transnational migrant labour movements from China and South Asian British Empire were occurring at the same time, as Canada a nation-state was being established on Indigenous lands.

The above interrogation can be initiated by "looking at interactions where the 'middleman' of the Crown is moved from the foreground to the background of analysis" (Bhatia, 2013, Pg. 41). The role of the crown and state may also be challenged and eradicated when imagining people of colour's role in abiding by treaty relationships with Indigenous Nations (Sehdev, 2011). The role of racialized settlers in treaty agreements has not been taken into consideration previously both in academia and in practice. Settlers and immigrant communities must not rely on the Canadian government to be their mediator when it comes to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Perhaps the idea of the "parallax gap" (Bauder, 2011) manifests itself in these scenarios. At the same time, the process of initiating and cultivating relationships requires some form of unlearning, both on individual and community levels. Without any sort of unlearning, hearing the other side of the story will do little to transform the ways in which Canada continues to function as a settler nation-state (Gaudry, 2017). In addition, centering Indigenous peoples' perspectives, without challenging and rejecting the settler colonial structures, practices of solidarity run the risk of reifying and replicating similar oppressive notions of dominance (Snelgrove et al., 2014; King 2014).

In the case of Sikh histories and discourses, very little attention has been paid to relations between South Asian diaspora and Indigenous peoples in settler nations like Canada (Sian and Dhamoon, 2020). However, both groups share complex and interlocking histories of British colonisation and imperialism like many other migrant communities in Canada (Bauder, 2011; Sian and Dhamoon, 2020). Specifically, Mucina (2019) points out the need for the Sikh community to decolonize their histories in Canada, because their historical racism and oppression is enmeshed with the colonization of Indigenous lands and first peoples.

Comparatively, King's (2014) exploration of how the Indigenous-immigrant gap can be liaised, indicates that if there is a chance to build coalitions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, establishing trust with racialized peoples will be easier. Since there is a shared sense of 'legacy of victimization' (King, 2014) in relation to colonization, that multiple communities continue to heal from, they can collectively challenge Canada's settler colonial identity. Besides, narratives related to racial discrimination and exclusion in Canada have commonly been understood separate from the colonial legacies (Phung, 2011). To shift that perspective, drawing from historical records and ancestral inspirations, collective organizing across social, economic, and political issues becomes essential when imagining critical solidarity with Indigenous people (Sian & Dhamoon, 2020).

In the same manner, Sedef's (2020) standpoint about settler colonialism perpetuating complex and contradictory relationships between colonialism and racialization is critical to this discussion. The contradictory dynamics have resulted in racialized people being "in a precarious continuum of racial hierarchy, rather than in a simple dichotomy against white settlers." (p. 382).

Therefore, while questioning Canada's history with Indigenous peoples and early Sikh migration, the research analysis hopes to engage the readers in two "seemingly incompatible perspectives" (Bauder, 2011, p. 517). The re-assessment has been brought together in a discursive manner with each other through historical intervention and engaging community leaders. The process may result in reactions of discomfort by some but can lead to a profound moment of crucial dialectical shift (Bauder, 2011) in the way Canada as a settler nation state is understood. Coulthard and Simpson (2016) also shed light on "grounded normativity" and how the framework is centered in teaching ways about conducting diplomatic relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations. These include nations who especially share "territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests." (p.254). In essence, grounded normativity and place-based solidarity may manifest in the conceptualization of how "land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity." (p.254) For this reason, centering of and support for Indigenous perspectives, through place-based solidarities can manifest in forms of relationships and practices which also challenge settler colonial power (Sadaf, 2020).

To illustrate the importance of knowledge mobilisation and bridging colonial perspectives from divergent sources, I will conclude this section by providing two contemporary examples of critical solidarity between the Canadian Sikh diaspora and Indigenous peoples. Both examples accompany artwork produced by community members to exhibit inter-cultural relationship building.

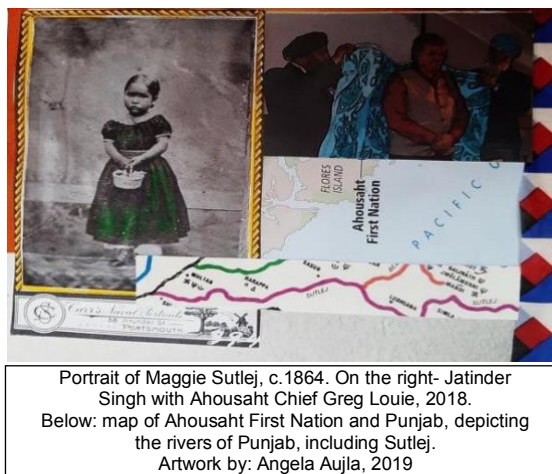
1. In the 1860s, a little Ahousaht girl was taken or rather abducted from her community during a war between her people and the British Royal Navy. According to the oral story passed down through generations, she was snatched from her mother and given to a British admiral's wife. The little girl was 'renamed' Margrette Suttlej Davis. The middle name, Suttlej stemmed from the ship she spent the rest of her life on, having died at sea about two years later after she was taken from her community. Additionally, the British navy ship, HMS Suttlej got its name in commemoration of the war where the British East India Company defeated the Sikh empire on the banks of river Suttlej. Ironically, this is the battle when, the province of Punjab was annexed and turned into a British colony. Punjab translates to "five rivers" in the Punjabi language and is often referred to as 'the land of five rivers,' Suttlej being one of them.

More than 150 years later, Jatinder Singh, a Sikh man living in Victoria, B.C was intrigued by a street named after the Suttlej River. Singh eventually learnt that the term Suttlej is in fact considered offensive to Indigenous communities in the region. Singh also happens to be the Canadian National Director of Khalsa Aid Canada, which is an international non-profit aid and relief organization founded on the Sikh principles of selfless service and universal love. Singh then reached out to the Ahousaht First Nation after learning about what happened to their community member, Maggie. Khalsa Aid donated \$200,000 to Ahousaht First Nation in 2018 and hosted a gala event in Vancouver Island where members of both communities gathered. The representatives of Khalsa said were quoted in the Indigenous newspaper, Hashilthsa on November 1, 2018, - "The Punjab and Suttlej River are important to us and to have that name used in the way it is atrocious and hard to understand. We also suffered many injustices. We know that pain,"<sup>3</sup>

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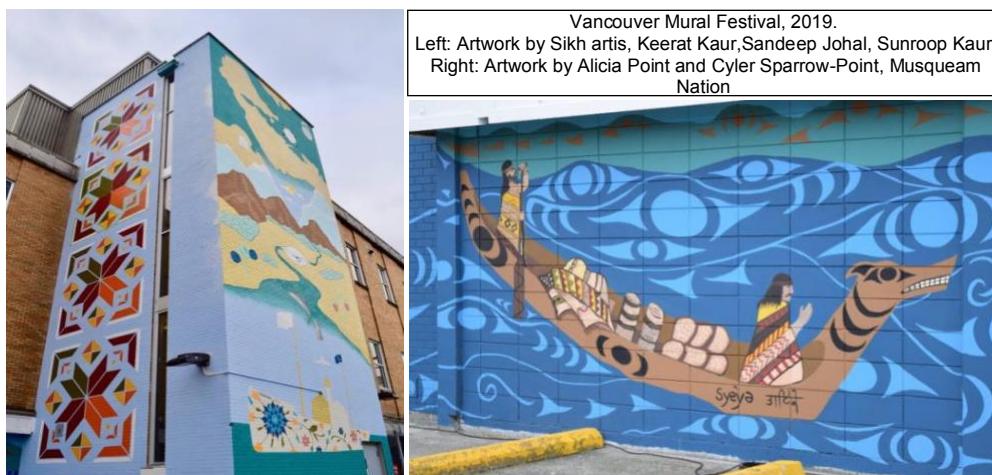
<sup>3</sup> <https://hashilthsa.com/news/2018-11-01/khalsa-aid-donates-200000-ahousaht-memory-toddler-maggie-suttlej>

The imagery on the right, is a part of the artwork titled *Land/ed*, produced by Sikh artist, Angela Aujla. The artwork depicts Sikh and Ahousaht community members coming together, adjoined with the map of Ahousaht First Nation and colonial Punjab depicting the river Sutlej, and finally, Maggie Sutlej’s potrait after her abduction in 1864. This artwork has been exhibited at various events across Canada but the digital image was personally shared with me by Angela, during my MRP process.



Portrait of Maggie Sutlej, c.1864. On the right- Jatinder Singh with Ahousaht Chief Greg Louie, 2018. Below: map of Ahousaht First Nation and Punjab, depicting the rivers of Punjab, including Sutlej. Artwork by: Angela Aujla, 2019

- Another piece of oral history brought together Coast Salish and South Asian artists, who collaborated to memorialize an interlocking colonial tragedy between the communities. Elders from Musqueam First Nation have confirmed through oral storytelling, that Musqueam paddlers brought food to the passengers on Komagata Maru in 1914. This newfound knowledge has touched the hearts of South Asian diaspora across Canada. The mural titled, “Taïke-Sye’yə”- Taïke- Punjabi word “Taïke” - a roughly translates to “cousin” and həŋqəmiŋəŋ word, “Sye’yə” means “friend” was inaugurated at the annual Vancouver Mural Festival in 2019. The artwork was put together by Musqueam artists Alicia Point and Cyler Sparrow-Point, and Sikh South Asian artists Keerat Kaur, Sunroop Kaur and Sandeep Johal. The mixture of Coast Salish and Punjabi art beautifully captures the story of the exchange in 1914. Raj Singh Toor, a descendant of one of the passengers on Komagata Maru was also present at the inauguration. The collaborative mural transformed the wall of the Harry Stevens Federal Building. Harry Stevens was a figure central in representing Canadian government’s denial of migrants aboard Komagata Maru.<sup>4</sup>



Vancouver Mural Festival, 2019.  
Left: Artwork by Sikh artis, Keerat Kaur, Sandeep Johal, Sunroop Kaur  
Right: Artwork by Alicia Point and Cyler Sparrow-Point, Musqueam Nation

<sup>4</sup> <https://salishseasentinel.ca/2019/08/taïke-syey%C9%99-mural-depicts-musqueams-aid-to-komagata-maru-passengers-amidst-historic-tragedy/>

## **Interview Findings and Community Knowledge Perspectives – A Narrative Analysis**

In this section I provide a narrative analysis of the interviews with four community leaders during my master's research project. I trace common themes which came up during the conversational exchanges along with highlighting distinct knowledge they imparted on me during the process. Sharing direct knowledge perspectives from the interviews with Sikh and Indigenous leaders is a way to affirm community and shed light on the resiliency of community members who continue to do transformative decolonizing work (Walia, 2013).

### ***Sikh Knowledge Perspectives***

The two Sikh participants, Mita Hans and Dr. Jaspreet Bal shared their families' migration journeys to Canada, childhood experiences in Ontario and moments of profound realizations about Indigenous peoples' relationship to the Canadian state in their adult lives.

Jaspreet Bal whose dad first left Punjab, India, to work on a ship in the 1970s, was born in Toronto and grew up in the greater Toronto Area in the 1980s. Jaspreet shared a verse from a morning assembly song in her elementary school - "The pioneers came to this land... they cleared the bush and built their homes, the farms we see today and Conestoga wagons journeyed through the forest to make a whole new world for us." She contemplated the glorification of the "pioneers" and how there was a clear exclusion of Indigenous peoples in the Canadian narratives she was exposed to as a child. Simultaneously, she grew up in a monolithic Punjabi immigrant environment. She stresses that the only discourse available at the time was that the Sikh community was grateful to be in Canada and is advocating for Sikh human rights in Punjab.

On the other hand, Mita's grandparents left Punjab, British India to East Africa, in the 1920s to test out the British supposition that the British Raj (rule) would give them permission as citizens to be "fully" British and be able to travel on that passport. She underlined that this was an attempt at decolonization going back three generations. Her family later fled to Tanzania as South Asian migrants were being expelled from Uganda. Due to growing anti-immigrant sentiments throughout the region, the family later moved to England before coming to Canada in the 1970s. Mita recalls that she was 10 years old when her family moved to Toronto and, there were only 20 to 30 Sikh families in the city. She witnessed her parents struggled immensely in the initial years of settlement. Her dad was an engineer by profession but ended up driving taxi due to the rampant discrimination. This story resonates in many South Asian families in Canada. Similar to Jaspreet's experiences with the public education system in Toronto and surrounding regions, Mita poignantly shared that the education system made her believe that "Native people were historical relics," and no context of present-day Indigenous people was provided.

It was not until their late twenties and early thirties, that both Jaspreet and Mita started learning more about the missing Indigenous perspectives from the mainstream Canadian narratives. For instance, in her late twenties, Mita came across an Indigenous drumming ceremony at a peace demonstration in Toronto and thought to herself - "they are very much present here," which was contrary to what her school had made her believe. She connected with the Indigenous drummers and activists and ended up developing strong friendships with some of them. She was later introduced to the Canadian Alliance in Solidarity with Native Peoples, where she discovered a library full of resources. That's when she began a lifelong journey to better understand - "how to be in a settler's body" and live up to treaty expectations. Mita recounted, "I thought it was going to be an afternoon, of having tea and browsing through the bookshelves and you know it turned into years....which took me through the Oka crisis, Gustafson Lake, all kinds of protests, demos and teachings...and a deeper understanding of everything - of forced sterilization of Indigenous women to missing Indigenous women ... fighting land theft and water rights." Contrastingly, Jaspreet as an academic was asked to teach a course titled, "Working with

Indigenous Communities,” and connected with an Indigenous elder at the institution. In hindsight she understands, she shouldn't have taught that course as a non-Indigenous person. Throughout the conversation, Jaspreet mentioned the similarities in struggles between the two communities, not just in relation to colonial histories but also ongoing state oppression. Jaspreet highlighted, “if people knew, they would react differently,” referring to the individuals in the Punjabi diaspora who lack knowledge about Indigenous communities and their interconnectedness with the Sikh community. Jaspreet shared that the community work involving Punjabi and Sikh international students she is currently part of, has knowledge components about Indigenous peoples. For example, she has recently started doing land acknowledgments in Punjabi during the information sessions with Punjabi international students.

Jaspreet further emphasised that it might be challenging for newcomers to take on the responsibility to educate themselves. On the other hand, individuals who have already established strong ties in the country and have a bit more stability, should take on the commitment to learn and raise awareness about Indigenous communities, their cultures and struggles. Jaspreet shared recent conversations she has had with her parents about the unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the grounds of residential institutions across the country. She said this discussion finally happened after being here for 40 years, but the real task is “how do we make those questions come up 40 years earlier?”

Comparably, when Mita was asked about what we can do better as racialized peoples ourselves, she underscored we (Canadians, settlers, immigrants) all need to recognize the essence of the Two Row Wampum where - “two cultures walk together, but also separate without interfering in each other's business.” She added, “more importantly, it's up to individual Nations to decide what their protocols around sharing land and resources are. Further, understanding that there is no “pan Indigenous” is vital. Lastly, Mita benevolently highlighted that the more time she spent around Indigenous peoples and cultures, the more she became closer to her own *Sikhi*.

### ***Indigenous Knowledge Perspectives***

To seek direct Indigenous perspectives on Canada's past and solidarity building with racialized migrant communities in Canada, I interviewed two Indigenous community leaders - Oshkii Ahnung Kwe/Janine Manning, an Anishnawbe Kwe (Anishnawbe woman) from Chippewas of Nawash First Nation in Neyaashiinigmiing, Ontario, with paternal ties to the Chippewas of Kettle & Stony Point First Nation, and Nits'il?in Joe Alphonse: Nits'il?in (Chief) Joe Alphonse, fifth generation hereditary and elected Chief of TI'etinqox First Nation.

Early in the conversation, Janine identified herself as an urban Indigenous woman as she was born and raised in Toronto, but in the same breath, highlighted the problematic connotations with being referred to as an urban Indigenous person. Janine has spent the last decade leading Indigenous relations and community development efforts in various professional capacities, most recently in the public and philanthropic sector. Her aim has been to make space in these sectors for Indigenous employees, grantees, communities, and worldviews. Chief Joe, on the other hand, is the direct descendant of Chief Anaham, who was the Grand Chief of the T'silhqot'in Nation during the Chilcotin War of 1864. Chief Joe led the first ever Supreme Court of Canada case in 2014 that recognized 1700 square kilometres of land as Aboriginal Title Land. The declaration includes the rights to control, benefit and ownership of the lands and resources, within the caretaker area of Xeni Gwet'in. He shared during our conversation that his goal remains for his community and people to heal from generational trauma and go back to a place where they are completely self-sufficient and rely on their traditional ways of being.

When asked about missing Indigenous perspectives from Canada's past, Janine compared her schooling experience growing up in Toronto to how her young son is learning Canadian history in the present day. Upon reflecting, she underlined that previously, in the

Canadian education system, “Indigenous people were always an afterthought” or “the last chapter of the course” which often had a “pan Indigenous” conception with rarely any mention of distinct Nations or treaties. She remembered how shortly after the Oka crisis in 1990, her teacher turned to her to ask about the resistance because she was the only Indigenous person in the classroom. Janine’s response was - “I am not a Mohawk.” Janine added that she was 30 years old when she first learnt about residential schools and her family’s experiences with the institutions. In a similar manner, Chief Joe highlighted that from a geo-political standpoint the knowledge about Canada’s foundation shared with Canadians is limited and deliberately altered. He emphasised that Europeans imposed their own value systems on Indigenous communities. Whereas Indigenous Nations had complicated political and trading structures which were integral to how people functioned before contact. Further, Chief Joe added that “no one knows this land better than Indigenous peoples,” and how communities have knowledge to take care of land, water, and animals efficiently and in a holistic manner. He emphasised that this knowledge could benefit all beings.

When speaking about Indigenous-immigrant relations, Chief Joe highlighted that although Canada likes to portray itself as the “good Samaritan,” it hasn’t been good to the Indigenous people of this land and needs to come to terms with that. From the perspective of the immigrants coming to Canada, he asserted that Europeans who first entered Canada were “arrogant” and didn’t recognize or respect Indigenous people’s ways of being. However, people who have recently migrated to Canada seem more “grateful” to be here. He added, “if it means having a better, safer life, they are more than welcome to be here but all we ask from them as Indigenous peoples is to acknowledge us and find out more about the territories you reside on” He further suggested, “do your research or find a Friendship Centre nearby and you will be guided accordingly.” In addition, I was amazed to learn that Janine has educational training in topics related to migration, refugees, and multiculturalism. Janine acknowledged that she cannot fully understand the experiences of racialized migrants in their countries unless she does further research. She also stressed that it is important to remember that “Canada is stolen land built by stolen labour” of many racialized communities and this was labour that many white settlers wouldn’t do or didn’t want to do. Hence, it becomes the state responsibility to teach newcomers about the true history of this land. She highlighted that allyship and solidarity on the individual level can happen simultaneously or once migrants have surpassed the initial challenges of settling in a new country.

I also briefly discussed the concept of Canadian multiculturalism with both Indigenous participants. Janine shared that Indigenous communities have inherently been multi-cultural. To demonstrate the above, Janine provided the example of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum<sup>5</sup> and how it is one of many multicultural and multinational agreements among Indigenous nations. In addition, Toronto itself is a multicultural Indigenous place, where many Indigenous Nations and communities have long standing ties. Furthermore, historically, Indigenous peoples invited individuals into their community and had set protocols around this. Lastly, Janine added that living in Toronto all her life, she has had a greater opportunity to connect with individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds, compared to her community members who live on reserve. As a racialized person, I worked alongside Chief Joe and witnessed other racialized people being employed by the Nation. Reflecting on the notion of multi-culturalism, Chief Joe shed light on the fact that remote community members at times do not get the opportunity to learn about people from different backgrounds. He further asserted, “we don’t get the diversity like big cities.” His priority is for community members to succeed in all aspects and work in their community. However, inviting diverse individuals who possess a certain skill set and at the same time, respect

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<sup>5</sup> To learn about Dish With One Spoon Wampum visit: <https://nandogikendan.com/dish-with-one-spoon/>

community protocols give Nation members the chance to learn about other cultures and nationalities, especially racialized communities.

## **Discussion – Connections and Path Forward**

When analysing the above set of exchanges with four community leaders, I could not help but reflect on how “stories are spaces of resistance, resistance to the narratives of instituted power” (Lewis, 2011 p.506). Their diverse paths and stories highlight that the process of oral storytelling continues to sustain communities, validate experiences, epistemologies, and continues to nurture relationships and the sharing of knowledge (Iseke, 2013). Additionally, I would like to point out how the power of Indigenous storytelling and passing down of oral histories through generations was central in the instance about Musqueam paddlers and the Komagata Maru episode from 1914. The oral history turning into a powerful medium in bringing communities together after decades of when these relationalities began to exist is highly valuable to this discussion. The aim of this research analysis was to make the attempt to turn the process of truth-telling into practice (Gaudry, 2017) through the case of early Sikh migration history in Canada. In this section, I make an attempt to interweave the knowledge gathered during the semi- structured interviews with the anti-colonial historical analysis of Sikh origins in Canada.

The four image major themes highlighted below include, the process of learning and unlearning, a deeper inquiry into the concept of multiculturalism, the significance of Sikh spirituality, and the power of affirming community.

### ***Learning and Unlearning***

Firstly, three of the four research participants shared their experience with the Canadian public school system between 1970s to 1990s and how the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum was evident. Jaspreet and Mita, who belong to the immigrant Sikh community in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area, emphasised the glorification of the white European “pioneers” along with no or little stereotypical mention of Indigenous people. They both did not have meaningful interactions with Indigenous peoples until either their late twenties or early thirties and highlighted the significant unlearning which they both had to go through.

The above observation is not being underlined to decipher the obvious role of Canadian public education system in erasing Indigenous worldviews from history books and dominant narratives but is to emphasis the probable devastating impact of this erasure. Immigrant children growing up with little, or no knowledge of Canada’s painful past and meaningful discourses of Indigenous people may result in marginal possibilities of meaningful relationship building in their adult lives. Both Sikh participants alluded that they truly began unlearning and understanding their positionalities as settlers and treaty people after they met Indigenous people and had a meaningful exchange. I would like to add that I also relate to the above set of circumstances, as I did not have a meaningful exchange with an Indigenous person until I stepped out of my community and comfort zone to attend the Toxic Water Walk in Aamjiwnaang First Nation. I understand that this is a relatable experience to many racialized migrants and newcomers who at times settle or only find a sense of belonging in monolithic or mono-cultural settings. In addition, language and cultural barriers may also restrict individuals’ social mobility to expand their point of views outside of their current social positionalities. This is where the labour and commitment of community leaders who have gained a better understanding comes into play.

For example, Jaspreet translating land acknowledgments in Punjabi, is a small but powerful step towards Punjabi elders, newcomers and immigrants who face language barriers, being familiarised with narratives about Indigenous peoples in their own community settings. She



further added that if we get information to community members “where they are,” it is easier to ignite their spirit towards critical solidarity. I would like to assert that the concept of meeting diverse community individuals where they are is pivotal to connecting cultural perspectives and work towards establishing a united front against the oppression tied to settler colonialism. This may include translating resources or sharing culturally specific references to help individuals connect to re-assessing their histories and re-imagining decolonial futures.

Significant unlearning and replacing false histories with truth centered in community knowledge are monumental to building meaningful relationships among community members (Gaudry, 2017). There is no doubt that the Canadian settler state continues to benefit from this separation of Indigenous-immigrant discourses (Sehdev, 2011). The gaps in knowledge have resulted in a multi-generational understanding that people of colour are “recent additions to the national fabric” of Canada or/and do not have a direct connection to Indigenous people (Sehdev, 2011 p. 268). This may also lead to a form of denial of personal accountability based on the logic that their ancestors had no direct role in the displacement of Indigenous people. Tragically, we as racialized people cannot deny that all settlers including recent migrants have nonetheless been the beneficiaries of the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous people and their resources (Sehdev, 2011). Additionally, it is also important to point that Canadian migrant histories which are mostly entrenched in systemic oppression are often forgotten from national narratives (Somani, 2015). On the contrary, many racialized scholars have challenged this national forgetting by establishing that racialized people have not only been here since the establishment of Canada as a state, but in fact their labour built this country (Somani, 2015; Ogden, 2012).

### ***Multiculturalism, a White Settler Privilege?***

Another common motif which adorned most of the interview exchanges, included the ironic eminence of multiculturalism and Canada’s image as a welcoming state for immigrants and refugees. Janine highlighting that Indigenous communities historically had diverse cultures and worldviews. However, Indigenous communities are often perceived through a pan-Indigenous lens by both early settlers and new immigrants. Canada’s monopoly over the term, multiculturalism is not only accompanied by a disregard of historic diversity among Indigenous communities but also ignores the systemic change that needs to occur under the veil of multiculturalism in Canada (Sehdev, 2011; Walia, 2012). The above reflection makes me wonder if urban multiculturalism is in fact a settler privilege, constructed by and for the complicity of the white settler and the nation state?

Furthermore, when speaking of Indigenous-immigrant relations, the epicenter of this conversation commonly falls on individuals who have just arrived in Canada. In contrast, Jaspreet and Janine turned the focus from newcomers to individuals who have been here longer, sometimes for multiple generations and for them to take on the responsibility to educate themselves. This is based on the assumption that they may have overcome the initial hurdles which accompany settling in a new county. On the other hand, both Indigenous participants spoke about remote Indigenous communities not being able to connect with racialized migrants as often. Most immigrants normally settle in larger urban centers due to existing community networks or socio- economic opportunities. Janine underlined that her community members on the reserve at times are only “comfortable with the familiar white settler” as they have been in Canada longer. Similarly, Chief Joe shared how remote regions like Interior B.C don’t have as much diversity as big urban centers. In result, this distance restricts his community members to learn about diverse cultures and nationalities firsthand.

### ***Role of Sikh Spirituality in Building Critical Solidarities***

Striving to re-assess Sikh origins and positionalities on Turtle Island emerged during the interviews with the Sikh collaborators. Firstly, both of them center their solidarity work on the teachings of Sikhi and its foundation which is based on standing up against any form of injustice. Jaspreet highlighted, “we (as Sikhs) don’t separate the spiritual and the political. I think we can tap into it faster than other communities can. We’ve shown that historically.” This holds especially true in the way the Ghadar Party movement operated in the West coast during early twentieth century (Kaur, 2012; Gill, 2014). Sikhs leading anti-colonial movements on Indigenous land attributes to the historical vigour of the community to fight for injustice and human rights despite of physical, cultural and socio-political challenges in diaspora. In addition, during the interviews, both Jaspreet and Mita also made references to the Gurdwara spaces (Sikh place of worship) and its significance to the Sikh diaspora in the West. Munica (2019) has written extensively about Sikh spirituality in the West and highlighted how Gurudwaras across Canada are not just considered as a symbol of the Sikh Punjabi community, but they are places of resistance and freedom. In addition, in the early twentieth century and during the Ghadar revolution in North America, Gurudwaras were important sites of religious significance and anticolonial mobilization (Sohi, 2014). They were utilized as gathering places where Ghadar Party members strategized revolutionary actions against “anti-immigrant and racist violence in North America as well as fighting the British Empire in South Asia” (Upadhyay, 2014 p.3).

Therefore, an anti-racist and decolonial assessment of Sikh history on stolen Indigenous land presents an alternative positionality of “diasporic communities of colour in the context of settler colonialism, in solidarity movements, and within anti-racist theory” (Ranauta, 2020 p.367). Specifically, the shift in viewing first Sikhs in Canada as individuals also displaced by British imperialism/colonialism adds more dimensions to how perceptions of people of colour in the settler colonial structures are constructed (Ranauta, 2020, Sharma & Wright, 2008). At the same time, connecting these complex histories and positionalities to solidarity movements with Indigenous peoples means recognizing that solidarity is never linear but is a “multi-layered and complex” process (Ranauta, 2020, p. 367).

Finally, it is crucial for me to highlight that the discussion around Sikh spirituality on Indigenous lands requires a more personal and deeper inquiry for each individual practicing Sikhi. This section or paper surely is not efficient in encompassing everything this theme could mean to all Sikhs, as it requires a more extensive knowledge gathering across diverse members of the community.

### ***Affirming Community as a Path Forward***

Settler colonialism cannot be challenged through analysis alone, but is based on lived and contentious engagement with the literal and stolen ground on which people stand and come together upon (Snelgrove et al., 2014). Harsha Walia (2013) suggests where colonisation and capitalism require and perpetuate isolation, “decolonization calls us to affirm community” (p.266). She adds that the resilient collectiveness between communities cannot be sustained simply by a shared understanding of the system that oppresses them. In fact, healing and emotional justice through empathic, healthy and loving social relations interwoven into the struggle is necessary. Walia (2013) shares a quote by Joaquin Cienfuegos to stress on the above sentiment: “We have to learn to be human again; this battle is one where we not only decolonize ourselves and our minds, but decolonize our condition” (p.266).

There may be different sites of affirming community and decolonizing relationships. Some of these sites may include, organizing spaces, educational institutions, friendships and kinships or revisiting collective histories as in the case of this research. The diversity in the sites of

relationship building and affirming community were not only evident in the journeys of the interview participants. In fact, this diversity of relationship building also shone through the two community organizing examples - Maggie Sotlej (Ahousaht First Nation) and her connection to the Sikhs in Victoria, BC and the collective mural reclaiming the history between the passengers of Komagata Maru and Musqueam First Nation. Based on the above examples, the vital component of this analysis has been the intentional removal of the settler nation state and the Crown mediating (Bhatia, 2013) these inter-cultural relationships. The removal of the protagonist essence of the white settler colonial state from the discussions on both Sikh origins in Canada and solidarity with Indigenous peoples was notably effective in bridging the parallax gap (Bauder, 2011).

It is likely, that there are other under or un-discovered intersections in the past and current times, where early racialized migrants and Indigenous peoples' experiences with colonial and ongoing oppression connect. However, the analysis of the two historic episodes outlined above along with amalgamating direct community knowledge is an appropriate first step towards interrogating these relationalities further through future research.

## **Conclusion**

This working paper sheds light on the role of accountability alongside relationality (Snelgrove, Dharmoon, & Corntassel, 2014), when exploring the possibility of solidarity with Indigenous people from the perspective of racialized settlers. Further, exploring interlocking and shared colonial histories on Turtle Island, demonstrates the need for decolonizing and adjacently, Indigenizing racialized immigrant histories in the Canadian context. Majority of the time, South Asian positionalities have mostly been understood or interacted with Indigenous cultures and community members entirely through the phenomenon of settler colonialism (Upadhyay, 2019, Bhatia, 2013). However, by challenging the colonial logics separating Indigenous-immigrant narratives, critical re-assessments of British-Indian migration in the early twentieth century, of which Sikhs were a significant part, proves that these narratives are inter-connected but mostly undiscovered (Mawani, 2019).

Racialized migrants are not only alienated from learning about Indigenous worldviews through the mainstream Canadian discourses but are also isolated from their own community's past on this land. The false logic that our histories are completely distinct, and our connection is only through the Crown resulted in people of colour and racialized migrant communities being left out of the treaty relationships between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples. Perhaps this colonial alienation between community members has been working in Canada's interest to present itself as a unified and stable settler nation. Hence, my analysis intends to call upon racialized migrants to make efforts in the direction of harmonizing themselves as individuals and communities, in treaty relationships with Indigenous Nations (Sehdev, 2011; Bhatia, 2013). Attempting to decolonize the Canadian Sikh community's history and finding inter-colonial linkages with Indigenous peoples is an initial step in that direction. In fact, this working paper merely sheds light on few selects of those intersections and inter-locking histories. The work to unveil Canada's past with racialized people requires more elaborate inquisition and gathering of community knowledge both in academia and in practice.

The goal of gathering and connecting community perspectives combined with a personal yearning to make sense of my complex relationship to this land, further led me to incorporate the knowledge of the four community leaders. All four of the community leaders interviewed for the research come from unique backgrounds and histories. However, the common thread among all four participants is that they truly embody their community knowledge and have paved the path for others to learn in their respective communities. These meaningful exchanges ignite a sense of hopeful optimism and learning from these community leaders was a preeminent aspect of my

graduate studies experience. The generosity and honesty which both Indigenous participants displayed during the interviews was humbling and inspirational to experience.

In the case of racialized migrants, understanding of living histories which connect us to Indigenous people in settler colonial states to a deeper, meaningful, and place-based solidarity (Ranauta, 2020; Snelgrove et al., 2014) is a fundamental aspect of our current positionality on this land. More importantly, while re- writing our collective truths is paramount, but weaving in solidarity with the goal of healing from colonial histories means moving towards a future where oppression is no longer a prerequisite to critical solidarity and reconciliation in Canada.

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