The Context of Diaspora

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This article emerges out of a struggle to come to terms with the formation of diasporic subjects through new technologies of communication with a particular focus on Internet practices. When I first began to study the significance of Internet practices, I sought to portray them as extensions of what seemed to be similar intersections of technology, diaspora, and communication that I had already studied in depth ethnographically and historically (e.g., portraiture, newspapers, and maps). This, indeed, is the kind of analytical move of much recent literature that views anthropology as a discipline “well-placed” for the study of “virtual communities” (Escobar 1994:216; Hakken 1993:128; Wilson and Peterson 2002:450) and that makes the case that research methodologies for these new cultural formations ought to be derived from traditional ethnographic approaches developed for the study of face-to-face interactions (Jacobson 1996) or the Kula Ring (Miller 2000). However, I soon realized that the Internet was not simply derivative of prior forms of social communication so much as it constituted something new. Moreover, rather than fitting within anthropology as usual, these “new” technologies of communication compel anthropologists to rethink their disciplinary procedures of knowledge production.

The ethnographic ground for exploring these new modes of subjectification is inextricably bound to a critical inquiry into state-sponsored terror, particularly the “effects” of the torture of Sikh men on the formation of Sikh identities in an age of emerging Internet technologies. One important effect (I use the term quite warily) is that the Internet is a significant technology for the circulation of images of torture and martyrdom that have become a common aspect of the lives of many Sikhs around the world. This element of violence substantially changes the force or authority of normative institutions of identification within Sikh life. This confluence of Internet productions of diasporic subjects with state terror provides anthropologists with a unique provocation to think closely about analytic categories like diaspora, context, temporality, and gender. In the process, we may return to some basic questions—not just about what conditions subject formation but about the production of locality, identification, visuality, and the performative effects of language.

More specifically, in addressing the significance of the Internet and its representation of violence for diasporic life, critical scholarship necessarily
faces a struggle with what Nietzsche (1967:45) would call the “seduction of language,” or what J. L. Austin would refer to as an “importation of nomenclature” (1975:113, 115). The indiscernible conventions of the language most scholars use to talk about diaspora seem often to be inescapable. For instance, I seem to be compelled to speak of diaspora as if it were a thing—and, conversely, just in the speaking, I cannot resist putting diaspora in the position of being, for example, a subject or an object. Diaspora, then, can barely help but appear given as already present. It is almost as if my own language were to simultaneously supply me with, while prohibiting me from examining, my own desire—a desire that, moreover, I am not always aware is mine (e.g., a desire to find subjects, to isolate or position objects).

Of course, the constitution of categories such as diaspora is more than just a matter of these semantico-referential indications. Nevertheless, most scholars of diaspora experience, corroborate, and struggle against these importations of nomenclature. Emerging Internet practices invite a fresh exploration into the parameters of what, quite surreptitiously, may have become the norms for analyzing diasporas. Hence, in this article, not only would I like to tell a story of an Internet production of diasporic subjectivity, but I would also like to take a critical look at the analytical tools available for telling that story.

Given the complexity of these questions, the discussion below does not presume to make claims of generality. As will be seen, my critical engagement with Benveniste and Heidegger for the purposes of this argument temper their very different forms of generalization with culturally and historically specific nuances. Indeed, my goal is quite modest. The centerpiece of this article is a close reading of a highly localized and very particular emergence of an enunciative subject of diaspora within a single poetic performance mediated by the Internet. From within this quite localized study, however, I do hope to make some contributions that are more generally significant by examining the impact of violence and gendered normativity for those who self-identify as Sikh.

Toward this aim, my discussion of what I will call the “context of diaspora” may appear somewhat counterintuitive. First, I argue that diaspora, rather than a community of individuals dispersed from a homeland, may be understood more productively as a globally mobile category of identification. Second, I offer a view of the “context of diaspora” as a process productive of disparate temporalities (anteriorities, presents, futurities), displacements, and subjects. These two points can bring diaspora studies and linguistic anthropology into a fruitful conversation.

In the following two sections, I hope to clear the ground for a different way of talking about diasporas that extends the insights of our received explanatory models that have allowed us to produce studies of diaspora that are highly nuanced and complex, while also recognizing their limits and our need to go beyond them. Following this ground clearing, I explore what might be seen as the frontier zones of our explanatory models—that is, the zones where they may be most fragile precisely because they intersect with some of the most potent aspects of diasporic discourses themselves. Through this border
exploration, I wish to evoke the ambivalence and nuance of the categories “diaspora” and “context,” with which most students of diaspora struggle, by talking about how “we” conceive of diaspora. By using the anonymous “we,” I mean we students of diaspora. And although I do not wish to imply that all students of diaspora produce their object of study in the manner indicated, I do feel that many of them, like myself, engage with a set of compulsions that not only configure our analytical work but also interact in a dynamic way with the practices of the people we study (i.e., the object of knowledge that then emerges as a subject). That we continue to pursue such work suggests to me that we nevertheless envision the possibility of more powerful and accurate portrayals of diasporic life. Therefore, throughout this article, I continue to use the pronoun “we” to signify this collective—if imaginary—effort by maintaining my sight on such possibility.

Excursus: How “We” Conceive of Diaspora

Diaspora, as we often conceive it, seems initially to defy our attempts to contextualize, to frame, to circumscribe. How can we find its center? Its locality is not strictly here, so much as it is here and there, or at least, elsewhere. Some may even describe diaspora, precisely, by its loss of context. For instance, many studies tell of how, during colonialism, large populations of people were torn away from their birthplaces or ancestral villages and transported as slaves or indentured servants to new lands where they labored and from where other generations departed for the metropoles of former colonial states. Within such descriptions, the lost context of diaspora takes on an originary value, as a place of origin, a homeland. Therefore, in our quest to define diaspora, to find its defining center in a proliferating domain of margins and to distinguish one diaspora from another, we employ well-worn anthropological tools—genealogy, for example. We trace a diasporic people back through the generations to what is presumed to be their defining locality—the homeland—where we discover the determining features of, for example, language and race. These discovered features, no matter how transformed in the “host country” and no matter how distant from the homeland, are seen to endure in diasporic cultural life today. Their significance, indeed, is sometimes signified by their absence.

In other words: we come to understand diaspora as something objectively present in the world today with regard to something else in the past—the place of origin. The bond, however complexly delineated, between diaspora and place of origin appears nevertheless as a matter of course. The place of origin is revealed, perhaps by default, as the context of diaspora. This understanding of diaspora, indeed, sets up an imperative, demanding that we analytically rejoin what has supposedly been separated by history (i.e., diaspora and homeland). Nevertheless, at the same time, our object of study, seemingly by definition, inexorably separates that posited originary and constitutive bond. Conversely, and often unbeknownst to us, our confrontation with our object of
study turns into an energetic movement against it: searching for its context, we return our diaspora home.

Obeying the demands of our analytic, we also generate a diasporic archive, collecting “facts” from the homeland to help explain the peculiar problems of a dispersed population (e.g., assimilation, the difference or change of tradition, internecine conflict). When we pursue further the Nietzschean “seduction of language,” we find here that diaspora might be understood to mediate archive and context, accentuating a mutual (semantico-referential) relation, showing up the one within the other. One etymology helps specify this complex relation. The word “archive” comes from the Greek arche (origin) and arkheion, initially a house or a center where a publicly recognized authority locates its official documents. An intersection of place and the law, archive recalls the power of consignation, the gathering together of signs (Derrida 1996:3). This archival principle of consignation articulates with the principle of context, which, in its Latin etymology, signifies precisely the same process, con-textere, meaning to gather or weave or, indeed, to bind together.

We students of diaspora waver between context and archive, where we hope to find in the present a repository of an authoritative knowledge of the past. Concurrently, context and archive find a generative site within our conception of diaspora, which, with its significations of “scattering” and “dispersal,” offers its membri disjecta as something to gather together and bind.

Spatializations and the Dreaming of Authenticity

These articulations of context, archive, and diaspora may be understood in terms of a broader inquiry into histories of colonialism and anthropological knowledge production. I believe that any attempt to develop an alternative approach to the study of diasporas prompted by Internet subjectifications may benefit from this kind of inquiry, but it also opens up possibilities for extending the parameters of models that conceive of diaspora as a spatial entity and as a community of dispersed individuals separated from a homeland. The complex dilemmas evoked above suggest that, rather than inaugurate our studies of diaspora with analyses of “the homeland,” we may wish instead to reconsider a basic question: “What is the context of diaspora?” As the study of diasporas and globalization becomes more compelling, I think the question of context becomes that much more acute, not least because of the nontraditional research methods that are required.

But the question of the context of diaspora is not a matter of methodology alone; it is also a matter that reflects on our basic techniques of knowledge production, the disciplines informing those techniques, the data that counts as reliable knowledge, and the units of analysis. In other words, “What is the context of diaspora?” is a trick question. The trick, however, is not that the question is difficult to ascertain but that, in my opinion, the question itself harbors very determined philosophical presuppositions that need to be investigated. So, the ruse in asking the question is that it gives me the opportunity to retheorize the very notions of diaspora and context.
One way to begin this exercise is to see how we commonly take “diaspora” and “context” to be self-evident and, in thus conceiving them ahead of time, impute to them a basic sense of *spatiality*. When we ask the question (“What is the context of diaspora?”), we immediately conjure the contours of this spatial presumption. We can barely resist seeing diaspora as already spatialized, particularly with its etymological qualities of “scattering or sowing apart, through, or between,” or with its more commonly known reference to the “dispersal” of people from a homeland. Likewise with “context,” our questioning directs itself to the task of finding a spatial frame within which to place and examine a dispersed population. We also speak of the lives of such people as Sikhs, Jews, or Chinese *in diaspora*, as if diaspora were, itself, a spatial container. Concurrently, we often claim to investigate the Sikh, Jewish, or Chinese diaspora in New York, Canada, or Southeast Asia and thereby imply that a city, nation-state, or region can be the spatialized and contextual container for a particular instance of diaspora. The space of diaspora and the space of context appear on the scene as natural qualities of the things in themselves (even if those “things” start to become more difficult to discern in the process). However, I am not convinced that we should accept the self-evidence of this spatiality so quickly.

The spatializations imported with the nomenclature of “context” take on a particular inflection within the historically sedimented practices of the field of diaspora studies. One way to illuminate the challenges of this particular field is to investigate how our practices of knowledge production have intersected with more general disciplinary histories or have been determined by them. These appeal to the (often unconscious) captivation with origins and archives that has driven the theory making of former generations of anthropologists. A brief archeological exploration of these procedures may help identify the kinds of understandings of diaspora that the spatialization of context forecloses.

Context, of course, is not at all an easy thing to specify, and many scholars have attempted to show us why (Daniel and Peck 1996; Dilley 1999; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Hanks 2000; Jacobson 1996; Keane 1997; Silverstein and Urban 1996). For example, historical anthropology has explored the way that the notion of context may be understood as a product of the “historically significant colonial situation” (Cohn 1987:19). In the colonial archive, where we see the obsessive production of peoples and a fetishism of origins, we no doubt also discern a desire to put those people in their proper place (Axel 2002b; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Davis 1987; Derrida 1996; Dirks 2001, 2002; Guha 1983; Richards 1993; Stoler 2002). This desire shows up not only as a fixation on identifying a people’s typical social habits but also as a quest for a site of closure and determination present to itself. We see this desire in the archive of diaspora studies where, very often, the homeland is postulated as a diaspora’s constitutive place of origin. Context, as a colonial product, like the homeland in diaspora studies, facilitates productions of both difference and “identity” (e.g., us versus them, or the Sikh diaspora versus the Chinese diaspora).
Let me pursue context a bit further by elaborating some points spelled out in the work of Bernard Cohn, who has been most concerned with both the colonial encounter and the importations of analytic nomenclature within anthropology’s procedures of knowledge production. Cohn (1987:201, 168) has never tired of reminding us of the insidious manner by which the assumptions developed through more than two hundred years of colonial rule have entered “consciously or unconsciously” into our present analytical models. His work has been concerned to demonstrate how the often banal practice of conjuring the ghosts of our discipline’s “theoretical guides” through the “exchange of irrelevant or widely-known citations” (1987:3) has facilitated such unwitting colonial insinuations. And, with wry humor, he has noted the place of pedagogy in the perpetuation of this exchange: “Old debates never die; they just become enshrined in graduate curricula and text books” (1987:67).

Perhaps more to the point, however, Cohn has generated a genealogy of context in anthropology, indicating its several transformations from the “island model” of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski to the segmentary society model of the Africanists and the village model of the South Asianists. Each of these, as spatializing categories, has helped anthropologists identify not just a “well-defined field” where we can do our work but also the supposed boundedness and authenticity of the people we study. These localized delimitations, Cohn ironically notes, also have helped us “tell one set of natives from another” (1987:32).

Cohn’s most important point of critique, however, is decidedly not about place and space, and it is because of this that his theoretical intervention must be seen to address more than just a moribund concept of “community.” We should not be seduced, he advises, by the rhetoric of the ethnographic present that privileges place through its seemingly timeless account of cultural practice (1987:56). Rather, the naturalized spatiality of context veils the productivity of context as temporality. Cohn calls this temporality “the before” (1987:27, 56), and he suggests that its effectivity stems from an anthropology caught within a disavowal of colonialism (1987:19). Context, in this modality, “delineates ‘the before’ ” as an originary moment of tradition or kinship, and as the “historical and ethnographic prelude” to modernity (1987:27). More radically, Cohn’s notion of “the before” helps us discern an archive or an archival desire immanent to context itself. “Context” thus serves as an epistemological reference for historical and anthropological discourse by signifying the “real” postulated to exist prior to and outside of our discipline’s textual procedures. The content of contextual fantasy yields an image of “what the natives were like before the intrusion of European colonial domination” (1987:72). Context, in other words, emerges inseparably with the archive as a temporalizing form of desire and knowledge. But there is more: “the before” of context apparently does not issue harmoniously into modernity. This tension of context and modernity has been typically used to explain, for example, nation formation and, more generally, “change.” “There was a time, anthropologists argue, when the systems we want to study were [indeed] stable . . . and the anthropologist studies change

The question of context now seems to have led us to a very difficult place. Yet, at the very least, Cohn’s insights help us distinguish the way spatializations of context may threaten to distract us from formations of temporality and desire. Nevertheless, we are still left with several new questions that surface in the place of our original query. How are we to frame our inquiries and differentiate one object of analysis from another without falling prey to what Cohn calls the “dreaming” (1987:21) of boundedness and authenticity? How do we escape the desire of the temporal “before” that defines context itself and locates a point of mediation between the social sciences and the discourses of the people we study? If we could possibly answer these questions, then how would we designate the context of diaspora?

**A New Point of Departure**

One way out of this quandary is to explore a different point of departure for an inquiry into diaspora and its context. It may be more fruitful to ask: who, in the most quotidian of ways, claims to be the subject of diaspora? What is the quality of this subject? Or rather, what are the everyday conditions for the identification of a subject of diaspora? What makes it possible to say “I” as a diasporic subject? Heidegger indicates this direction but, rephrasing Nietzsche’s critique of the seduction of language, he warns against presuming the “givenness of the I” (Heidegger 1996:109). The enunciative subject—the one who says “I”—is not an entity that exists prior to a collective “we” and, conversely, neither is the collective merely a collection of individual “I’s.” Rather, the subject emerges in relation to others: “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (Heidegger 1996:120). This basic ec-centricity of the self, of course, is a premise quite familiar to anthropologists.

One may very legitimately ask why I choose this point of departure and why I focus on the rarefied topic of subject formation: Do not the people we study begin their own narratives of identity with the homeland? Do they not operate according to the very same premises of spatialization and origin that I am questioning? The difficulty about making such claims about populations of individuals (with whom, in their anonymity and massive generality, we could never possibly become acquainted) is that we risk essentializing both difference and homogeneity (see Foucault’s [1978:137–147] classic analysis of the categories “individual” and “population”). One way to get out of such a complex problem is by shifting analysis away from populations and toward subjects. Implicit here is a question: must anthropological inquiry be restricted to the study of individuals, folks, or people rather than subject formation? In what follows, rather than claiming to write about Sikh or Khalistani people more generally, I wish to explore the fleeting emergence of a Khalistani subject within a historically specific instance of discourse. But first I make some broader comments about processes of Sikh subjectification that have occurred through history, most often within very specific acts of embodiment. Rather
than seeking to construct a transhistorical diasporic subject, I intend to accentuate the emergence of particular subjects in ways that are necessarily culturally and historically specific.

Today, there are an estimated 20 million Sikhs living in the world. According to recent though varying reports, 17 million self-identified Sikhs live in India and 3 million are living in and moving between North America, South America, Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. By far, the majority of Sikhs outside of India are located in Britain and the United States, with the largest concentrated population of approximately 500,000 in England (Barrier and Dusenbery 1989; Bhabha 1985; Hall 2002; Hawley and Mann 1993; Singh and Barrier 1996; Singh et al. 1999). These quantified “facts,” however, remain rather ambiguous because, on the one hand, there is not a single reliable source for global statistics on Sikhs, and on the other, the vicissitudes of self-identification as Sikh are indeterminate, and needless to say, the very procedures of quantification are somewhat dubious (cf., Asad 2002; Foucault 1978).

Nevertheless, since the 19th century, Sikh discourses have valorized several different kinds of Sikh subjects in relation to specific corporeal formations, as have different colonial regimes and nation-states. The most significant of these bodily identifications—the one that has had enduring significance for Sikhs all over the world today—is the masculinized body of the amritdhari, the stereotypical “man with the beard and turban.” Through a history of conflicts and negotiations, this gendered and specifically religious figure has today taken on a power to stand in for all Sikhs—both within Sikh discourses and by the non-Sikh community more generally. This, of course, implies that not all Sikhs are amritdhari, and in fact, most are not.13

Amritdhari means “one who has taken the sacred nectar”—that is, one who has undergone initiation into the Khalsa, the “pure ones,” a select order of Sikh religious practice inaugurated, in 1699, by the tenth and, according to Khalsa discourse, the last Sikh Guru—Guru Gobind Singh. Evidence that one has undergone the Khalsa initiation is provided by specific signs that are displayed on the male Sikh body (despite the possibility that women may also display these signs). These signs are called the “Five K’s” (panj kakke), and in order to delimit the body of the amritdhari Sikh, they must be “worn” at all times. Most prominent of the five is the uncut hair (kes). The other four are the comb (kangha), the steel bangle (kara), the sword or dagger (kirpan), and the so-called distinctive shorts (kacch) (McLeod 1989: 45). The Five K’s have the effect of explicitly “emphasiz[ing] the importance of a visible identity, one which makes it impossible for [an amritdhari] Sikh to remain anonymous or concealed” (McLeod 1984:73, emphasis added). This “visible identity” of the amritdhari is a corporeal identity that is pure and whole, devoid of piercings or scarification. In short, the Khalsa initiation refers to a specific process designed to constitute an individual as a representative—and the body as a representation—of a Sikh collectivity.
The masculinized figure of the amritdhari body has attained a hegemonic quality that is so extensive that all other ways of being a Sikh are constituted in relation to it—particularly, to put it crudely, through a relation of being not-male and not-amritdhari. In a very specific way, this gendered image of the Sikh has become the measure of all Sikhs to the extent that, as Nikky Singh has demonstrated, feminized symbolism and imagery have been virtually excluded from Sikh life (N. Singh 1993). A common instance of this exclusionary process is that the few women who do choose to undergo the Khalsa initiation and wear the turban are often stigmatized not only by their peers but by “non-Sikhs” who apparently know that only men with beards should be wearing turbans.14

In short, the figure of the amritdhari has become a normative model that organizes these disparate productions of Sikh subject and body. Many practices of subject formation cite this model performatively and reestablish it as an authoritative reference. This citational process is often most effective precisely in its being a practice of negation or deferral (e.g., “not all Sikhs are amritdhari;” “sahajdhari Sikhs may one day become amritdhari”). Just as importantly however, during the 1980s and 1990s, Indian police and military institutionalized this citationality in a variety of ways. For instance, within the torture scenario, Indian police deployed the symbolics of the amritdhari against Sikh victims (e.g., by tying them up with their turbans or cutting their hair). These bodily practices, visual images, and speech acts situate points of mediation between various populations of Sikhs around the world. Such mediation occurs on many levels: through debates about “who is a Sikh,” through the disciplining of bodily techniques, and by means of the commodification of images circulating in media and on Internet web-pages. Although the amritdhari has become a central figure defining, in a sense, a diasporic Sikh normativity, at the same time, as we shall see, the formation of a Sikh diaspora threatens this normativity (just as it corroborates its authority).15 This latter aspect of Sikh diasporic life, with all its contradictions and conflicts, has emerged through culturally inflected processes of power and knowledge within the domains of both Empire and Nation. This is not to say that the interwoven histories of colonialism, capitalism, and nation-state formation created a visage of the amritdhari Sikh ex nihilo, but rather that they have effectively revalued the appearance and significance of Sikh icons as we know them today. They have also provided the groundwork for those icons qua bodies to be constituted in the post–World War II era as sites of transnational representational strategies and violent activity.

The Khalistani Sikh Subject

Let me now take up again the question of context in a specific instance of Sikh subject formation. As I have noted, there have been several kinds of Sikh subjects since the colonial period. The amritdhari is one significant general subject (i.e., the subject of normative discourse), the visual image of which has taken on a powerful iconicity. In this case, I will be talking about the formation
of one specific diasporic subject, the Khalistani Sikh subject, emerging through histories of violence and generated through Internet mediations.

When I speak of violence, I am referring here to the violence emerging out of the conflicts between the Indian nation-state and the Sikhs who are fighting to create a homeland called Khalistan (“land of the pure”). The idea of Khalistan was introduced in the 1940s in an attempt by colonial India’s primary Sikh political party (the Akali Dal) to secure an official territory for a majority Sikh population in the northwest of the subcontinent. Khalistan, however, was never created. Since the Partition of 1947, when millions of people were displaced within South Asia, the shadow of the desire for a Sikh homeland has cast itself darkly over the constantly changing state called Punjab (Axel 2001; Mahmood 1996; Pettigrew 1995; Khushwant Singh 1989; Kirpal Singh 1991).

More recently, Khalistan has been revitalized and transformed by Sikhs living in India and around the world, and the kind of violence at stake has changed. Since 1983, the reemergence of conflicts between Sikh militants and the Indian government has left at least 100,000 people dead. During this time, Sikh men in Punjab have been routinely and indiscriminately rounded up by police, tortured, and often killed or “disappeared.” Constitutional acts have sanctioned the use of violence against suspected insurgents, and requests of international human rights groups to monitor these practices in Punjab have been rejected (Asia Watch 1991; Citizens for Democracy 1986; Human Rights Watch/Physicians for Human Rights 1994; Kumar et. al. 1999; Mahmood 1996; Pettigrew 1995; Tully and Jacob 1985).

These developments identify a specific moment of subjectification pertaining to the history of the India nation-state—this is a moment in which a masculinized Sikh subject is formed out of a subjection to both the law and the extrajudicial procedures of the nation-state. Around 1996, however, Khalistani activists began procuring photo images of tortured bodies of Sikh men (valorized as martyrs) and circulating these on the Internet along with survivor testimonies and historical narratives of the Sikh nation (qaum). These images and narratives have also circulated elsewhere, in a vast array of sites, from temples to magazines to living rooms in Sikh homes. By generating an archive—indeed, a cyber-archive—of Sikh struggles, Khalistanis have established an extremely effective set of practices that remake the putatively private scene of national torture into a transnational spectacle of subjectification. Concurrently, the iconic image of the pure and unscathed amritdhari Sikh has been coupled with another image, that of the tortured body.

The archiving of these disparate corporeal images through Internet technologies has become integral, indeed central, to the creation of a particular Khalistani Sikh subject. The visual identification of whole and fragmented male bodies and the significance, more generally, of visuality and iconicity for Internet practices suggest one alternative ground from which to generate analysis. However, this globalized domain of images, which I call a diasporic imaginary (Axel 2002a), has “meaning” for the Khalistani Sikh subject, and that subject has a relation to it only insofar as it is inscribed in a linguistic order. In
other words, the Khalistani subject, emerging through Internet mediations and
subject to a transnational domain of visual images, is at the same time sub-
jected to language. The imbrication of these different registers of subjectifica-
tion complicates how we might explain the masculinization of the subject,
which cannot be understood either by isolating the Khalsa initiation ceremony
from other historical phenomena or by positing prediscursive categories of gender.

Diasporic Performativity

In what follows, I do not present a case study that claims to be widely rep-
resentative but an analysis of a poetic enunciation as an “instance of discourse”
(Benveniste 1971:219). In order to clarify a very localized and specific argu-
ment about the processes of subject formation within this particular instance of
discourse, I try to demonstrate the relationship of the enunciative moment to
larger sociocultural processes and historical formations. Such an analysis may
be more generally significant for helping anthropologists think about diaspora
as well as the relationship of gender and temporality to the creation of the par-
ticular kinds of subjects under discussion (in this instance, Sikh or Khalistani
subjects). Likewise, it provides a ground for extending the parameters of more
well-known approaches in the study of performativity in linguistic anthropol-
yogy, philosophy, and feminist theory. In other words, what is at stake is not a
generalization from the testimony of a single informant but: (1) the analysis of
an instance of discourse, which is, in this case, a poem, (2) an attempt to dem-
onstrate a model of context that explains the position of the “I” in the poem
(i.e., the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a particular enunciative
subject), and (3) the suggestion of one of several possible ways that this analy-
sis and demonstration may provide fodder for further studies of diasporas.

The instance under discussion is prompted by a spectacle found on
www.khalistan.net. When you click on this site, you first see a map of the
world, on which it is written “Khalistan: The New Global Reality” (see Figure
1). A series of click options leads you to the heading “Glimpses of Genocide”
and the image of a body of a tortured Sikh man lying face up. Outside the
frame, someone is holding up the corpse’s right arm, and several people are
crowding around. Standing behind the head of the body is a boy, perhaps five
years old. He is staring right into the camera with a look of utter abjection. The
caption reads: “A candidate for Punjab Assembly brutally tortured (with hot
iron and electric shock) and murdered by the Indian Police.”

One of my interlocutors is Sundari Kaur, a young woman born in Atlanta
and attending college in New Jersey. I met Sundari in the Autumn of 1999,
while I was teaching a class on the Sikh diaspora at Emory University. For the
midterm project, I conducted a collective inquiry with my students to evaluate
the place of the Internet in Sikh life. My students worked in groups, and each
wrote a paper on different aspects of the their respective group’s foci, which
ranged from studies of e-mail lists for Sikh youth, to resource sites for Sikh
history, and from the circulation of religious teachings to the depiction on
Khalistani sites of human-rights abuses. In these projects, my students and I
managed to elicit reflections from Internet users around the world, including those of Sundari Kaur. Sundari granted me permission to reproduce some of her contributions to this study, and she did so because of a strong commitment to promoting an awareness of human-rights abuses against Sikhs. Her biographical narrative relates many of the common tensions of Sikh subjectification I have already noted. For example, despite being ridiculed for refusing to shave her legs or for wanting to wear a turban, she has chosen to become a member of the religious order of the Khalsa, while nevertheless describing herself as a “full-blooded Punjabi girl.” The relevance of these biographical notes will become more apparent in a moment. For the present, what is important to note is that her engagement with the image of the tortured body, although prompting a somewhat unique articulation, demonstrates a critical process of identification constitutive of a desire of belonging to a diasporic collectivity. What strikes Sundari about the image I have described is the juxtaposition of the tortured body and the child. When she looks at the image, she responds with a poem, which is generated through an identification with the tortured body and addressed to the child. In other words, we might say provisionally that the enunciative subject—the “I” that emerges within the poem—corresponds to the image of the tortured body:

The salt from the tears overflowing your eyes, dear one, Stings me.
I never wanted to leave you alone to fight.
Let not the hot irons that burnt my flesh burn your spirit.
Let not the blood I shed flow to the river formed by the blood of the Thousands that will follow if your strength falters.
Let not your kirpan [sword] leave your side.
Let not your kes [hair] be cut.
Let not the beautiful Naam [name of God] leave you.
Do not focus on where I have gone, or where I shall go.
Focus on your strength.
Focus on the name . . . Waheguru.

In its poignancy and clarity, this poem speaks to what, in many Khalistani discourses, is seen as indispensable for understanding an outstanding feature of Sikh lives: that is, the extreme conditions and the immediate palpability of present violence. The analytic of performativity, which was first introduced in the writings of J. L. Austin (1975), provides one means for specifying how these conditions emerge as powerful and productive elements within the speech act and for elaborating a precise understanding of the context of diaspora. The performatives, likewise, draws our attention to the relations between context and the conditions by which the subject, or the “I,” emerges within language and thus provides a way for anthropology to take up an inquiry into the “givenness of the ‘I’” (Heidegger 1996:109). The following analysis, however, resists the generality that is usually associated with Heidegger and Austin. One might wish to put this in Peircean terms to underscore how highly localized the subject of Sundari’s poem is. One could say that the diasporic “I” enunciated here is a particular kind of sign, an indexical symbol that is historically and culturally inflected in its emergence (see Jakobson 1971:132). 

The performative, in simple terms, is an enunciation that in saying something does what it says. The most common example of this is a declaration: “I declare,” or “Guilty.” These enunciations do not describe or refer to an inner state or an act done; they are themselves the act spoken: to say “I declare” is to declare, and if a judge says “guilty” or “I pronounce you guilty” in a court of law, the utterance does not describe something but actually has a force that, in the moment of speaking, is definitive and transformative. Returning to the enunciation of Sundari, we may begin by considering how temporality and the diasporic subject emerge through the repetition of a series of what Austin would call “implicit performatives” (1975:61): “Let not the hot irons . . . Let not the blood . . . Let not . . . Let not.” Implicit here are indications of the verbal forms “I warn” or “I declare.” These verbal forms structure the utterance as an act, both of saying and doing, at the same time as they establish the subject of that act. But how is this subject to be understood? Benveniste calls the “I” a unique but mobile sign that “has no value except in the instance in which it is produced.” The “I” can only have “momentary reference,” but that reference is not an external object (Benveniste 1971:218). Moreover, within the moment of utterance, there is a split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement. The moment of this splitting simultaneously defines the temporality of the utterance itself as present. In the specific utterance under discussion, this present corresponds not merely to the Khalistani subject as a speaking being and as an element of the statement, but the present of the subject is also the present of Khalistan, itself defined as “The New Global Reality.” Simultaneously, this “eternally present moment” (Benveniste
In other words, the instance of discourse within which this category of identification emerges as “I” is characterized by at least two forms of differentiation: (1) the splitting of the “I” as subject of the statement and subject of enunciation, and (2) the production of a temporal distinction of a present of enunciation from a past and a future. “I,” however, as Jakobson (1971) after Jespersen (1922) has elaborated, is a “shifter,” and it is this quality that designates a third modality of differentiation. Specifically, the moment of utterance of “I” includes within itself an addressivity, whereby an “other,” addressed as “you,” in turn may become “I,” and the “I” may become “you” (see also Lee 1997:163–164). Benveniste writes of this dialectic of displacement succinctly: “It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes you in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as I. ... I posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to ‘me’, becomes my echo” (1971:224–225). This dialectic, of course, describes the constitution of the subject by means of an other. The subject is displaced by this process through which the posited exteriority of the “you” becomes immanent to the “I.” In short, the instance of emergence of the “I” is what Hegel (1977:100) would call a “self-sundering moment,” punctuated by the iterative interplay and displacement of subject and other, “I” and “you.”

The self-sundering moment is definitive for understanding the emergence of the diasporic subject within Sundari’s poem, particularly in the way this process conjoins “person” with formations of present and future temporalities. We are directed to this process by the detail of the poem, wherein the enunciation of the “I” corresponds, however fleetingly, to the formation of a present. This is a present visualized by the image of the tortured body. The “I,” as the present of the tortured body, concurrently signifies the present of “Khalistan: The New Global Reality.” Indeed, more generally, within Khalistani discourse, the image of the tortured body has become iconic of the present of a mass subject, a Sikh “people” (qaum). In this scenario, for some Khalistani organizations, the priority of the present grounds an ethics and an imperative of a global militant action.

Yet the specificity of Sundari’s instance of discourse requires that we consider the “I” and the present as only partial aspects of subject formation, hence our analysis must be supplemented. The “you” has a specific inflection: “I never wanted to leave you alone to fight. Let not the hot irons that burnt my flesh burn your spirit. Let not the blood I shed flow to the river formed by the blood of the Thousands that will follow if your strength falters” (emphasis added). The “you” addressed by the “I” is, apparently, the image of the child who witnesses the persecution of the Sikh people and receives the burden of the performative declaration. More specifically, the addressivity of the “you-child” not only makes possible but is anticipated within the “I” of the tortured body. It is anticipated that “you” will become the “I.” The “you” is temporalized as a
futurity. Heidegger’s understanding that the subject of the present discovers its being in the futurity of possibility (i.e., that the subject is always already ahead of itself) is certainly relevant for our discussion (1996:179). But this insight takes on a historically specific significance in this Khalistani speech act. At stake is not merely a generative interruption and displacement of the “present I” by a “future you” (although this is an integral aspect to the constitution of the subject). The sight of the tortured body, which incites the moment of enunciation, presents the basis for addressing an image of futurity (the child), as well as a projection of an independent state of Khalistan into which a Sikh people of the present will have reemerged. In other words, the diasporic subject (of the present, of the tortured body, of the “new global reality”) is generated through its own futurity (i.e., constituted in the moment of enunciation, visualized in the image of the child, and projected as a sovereign homeland). Concurrently, the diasporic subject is positioned in a future moment looking to the present: the immanence of the future “you” within the emergence of the subject lends to that moment of subject formation an anticipation, within itself, of what will have been.

At this point—the point where subject and temporality emerge—the analysis is calling out for an elaboration of context. But what indeed is the context? Very often, as I have already discussed, our conceptions of context are based on a fantasy of territoriality that isolates and bounds the object of study while disavowing its dynamic and constitutive temporal quality. If we were to follow the fantasy of context, then the only way to understand the poignant enunciation of the Khalistani Sikh subject would be in terms of an individual woman who, in a delimited locality, pretends in front of a computer to be a male amritdhari corpse, a martyr. Yet this argument not only tells us nothing about the force of globalized forms of identification, but it also relies on pre-discursive notions of gender that this analysis intends to question. In other words, this fantasy of context can only explain the appropriateness of the utterance and the authority of the speaker as a charade modeled on the supposedly more appropriate and authoritative utterances of an original, authentic speaker—for example, a Sikh Guru—whose very reality and location are presumed to exist prior to and outside of the instance of discourse itself. In fact, this is exactly the analysis that the J. L. Austin of How to Do Things with Words would have made, using the term parasitic to describe the enunciation under discussion. By this, he meant that such a speech act was a perverted derivative of more authentic and appropriate discursive forms. Indeed, Austin called all poetic and theatrical utterances parasitic, and for that reason he excluded from consideration performatives found within those forms of discourse (Austin 1975:21–22).

Derrida (1982) and Butler (1997) provide another way to understand the performative. They argue that those forms of discourse that Austin excluded as parasitic are, in contrast, definitive of performativity itself, precisely because of their rupture with authenticity. The so-called authority and appropriateness of a performative utterance stems from what they name a break with context.
From this perspective, an analysis of Sundari’s instance of discourse leads us to a form of argumentation different from one that follows the Austinian line of inquiry. For instance, in Sundari’s enunciation, the break is evident not only in the formulaic phrasing but in the use of such terms as kirpan (sword) and kesh (hair) (i.e., two of the 5 K’s of the Khalsa order). These elements are lifted out of one normatively conceived context and grafted within another—hence the break is also a process of citation. By citing the Sikh Khalsa initiation, the break with context simultaneously produces the Khalsa initiation context as prior and generates a relationship of citationality between the present utterance and an anterior context.

All of which still begs the question of context. We may first note that the significant term break, used by Derrida and Butler, is not as useful as we might have hoped. Although a certain break constitutive of the process of citationality is crucial, what is at stake, rather, is both an invocation and a production. This distinction may help underscore qualities of temporality, while stressing that context is not to be understood as some originating environment that circumscribes meaning. In other words, context is specifically generated (Daniel and Peck 1996; Dilley 1999; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Hanks 2000; Silverstein and Urban 1996), and this is a vital point for understanding the practices of Sikhs around the world who, like Sundari, identify with a diasporic collectivity. It is also vital for accentuating the historical specificity of this utterance. To be more precise, let me relate the performative to what linguistic anthropology calls intralinguistic context and extralinguistic context. Intralinguistic context is the domain of the sentence, the repertoire of elements and rules of arrangement that together constitute a code or grammar for language (Mertz 1985:5; M. Silverstein 1976:21). Extralinguistic context may be more simply understood as the immediate surroundings of an utterance. What is unique about the performative is that it helps tell the nuanced story of these two levels of context. It does this, precisely, because of the position of the “I” or the subject in the utterance. Most importantly, the “I” is a duplex sign (Caton 1987:248–252; Jakobson 1971; M. Silverstein 1976); it operates at the levels of intralinguistic and extralinguistic contexts simultaneously.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the subject emerges at these levels of context in very different ways. What is intralinguistically invoked is an indication of the grammatical subject within the sentence. But this invocation, simultaneously, must be understood dialectically as a production, because the grammatical code can only be said to exist in and through its use, that is, through enunciation. This leads us immediately to the level of the extralinguistic, where my comments on subject and temporality come into play again. Consider, for instance, the utterance: “Do not focus on where I have gone, or where I shall go.” Wavering between the indeterminacies of tense and mood, deferred action and incomplete action, the Khalistani subject’s present is inflected with a warning and the urgency of a duty that are themselves visualized by the image of the tortured body as an icon of a Sikh people. We are thus reminded again that this complicated invocation of subject and temporality cites the normative
model of the Khalsa initiation, the imperative of which, within Sikh discourses, privileges the masculinization of the subject as a stand-in for all Sikhs. However, within the moment of enunciation I am discussing here, the Khalistani Sikh subject’s assumption of gender is an ambivalent one; indeed it is radically destabilized. This is not because a supposedly “real” woman is pretending to speak with the voice of a man, but because Sundari comes into being as a Khalistani Sikh subject only through simultaneous abstraction and embodiment (Berlant 1993); conversely, the object of corporeal identification, the image of the martyr, is itself produced and gendered through a state’s extrajudicial violence. The instabilities of temporality and gender within the instance of discourse, themselves, relate to the instability of the present of extreme violence in Punjab that Khalistani discourse seems to portray. This violence is also represented, or made present, by the image of the tortured body. The present is multiplied. Indeed, it is the present of multiple displacements.  

Displacement

It seems, however, with this last commentary on displacement, that I have slipped back into the spatializing tropology against which I warned earlier. I do so intentionally because I want to specify what makes these observations about subject formation particular for understanding this instance of discourse and the relation of this instance to our understandings of diasporas more generally. In other words, we must ask: How do we mark out the specificity of this diasporic “I” as a globally mobile category of identification, when, according to Benveniste and other linguists, what I have elaborated seems to pertain to the emergence of the subject within each or indeed any instance of discourse?

To address this question, let us return to the earlier discussion of diaspora, context, and archive, wherein I distinguished how we students of diaspora have been obsessed with understanding a people in terms of a posited place of origin (itself understood as originary and constitutive). This analytical confrontation with our object of study is, ultimately, an energetic movement against diaspora as such—the search for the context of diaspora is transformed into an attempt to return diaspora home. This latter comment now has a more substantial explanation. Although one of the challenges of diaspora studies has been to resist producing its object (i.e., the diasporic subject) ahead of time in terms of a posited past or the place of origin, I have, instead, attempted to trace out the ways that one moment of diasporic subject formation emerges within a dialectic of presents and futures. Nevertheless, the past and the homeland, as aspects of a diasporic imaginary, must also be considered.

In the opening of this article, I made reference to a frontier of diaspora studies where our understandings of “diaspora” and “context” intersect with some aspects of the most potent of diasporic discourses. Subsequently, I asked a question inspired by the work of Bernard Cohn: How can we escape the desire of that temporal “before” that defines context itself and that locates a point of mediation between the social sciences and the discourses of the people we
study? It may be clear now that the procedures of knowledge production of diaspora studies coincide with the discourses of diaporas themselves around the figure of the homeland.30 These procedures coincide because the work of diaspora studies often appropriates and singularizes one aspect of diasporic discourse (i.e., the “place of origin”). Looking closely at Khalistani discourse reveals the retroactive production of a past temporality that is distinct from the procedures of diaspora studies. At the same time, this analysis can supplement our understanding of Sundari’s constitution as a Khalistani subject of diaspora.

Khalistani discourse constitutes the homeland, Khalistan, as a unique place created by God, later given by the Sikhs to the British, and, as Punjab, is presently occupied by an alien polity, the Indian nation-state:

God gave the Sikhs their land, a rich and fertile land blessed with much sun and irrigation, the ‘land of five rivers,’ the Punjab. . . . Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave the Sikhs their state, later handed in trust, first to the British then to the Hindu Raj—but the Sikhs never surrendered their ultimate sovereignty to any power other than their own. Today, after forty years abuse of their trust, the Sikhs are ready to create again their independent, sovereign state. [Oberoi 1987:39, emphasis added].

Khalistan is a “place” that, moreover, is irreducibly tied, in historiography and hagiography, to a discourse of the Sikh religion that designates specific localities within northwest South Asia both as sacred and as embodying ultimate authority over all Sikhs wherever they may be in the world. Three of these places are noteworthy: Keshgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib, and Amritsar. As the Sikh text Rahit Maryada states: “Your birthplace is Keshgarh Sahib and your home is Anandpur Sahib” (McLeod 1984:84). Built in the time of Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru (1574–81), the Golden Temple or Harimandir (what Khalistanis also call the “Sikh Vatican”) is located in Amritsar. Harimandir is the place where the first Guru Granth Sahib (the “Sikh Bible” as some say) was installed by Guru Arjun, the fifth Sikh Guru (1581–1606) on August 16, 1604. In front of Harimandir, Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru (1606–44), confronted at the time by the active hostility of the Mughal authorities, built the Akal Takht (the Throne of the Timeless One) in order to establish a central seat (also called a “temporal seat”) of ecclesiastical authority. Today, Akal Takht is highly revered. Special decisions are made by the religious leaders of the Sikh panth (religious community) at the Akal Takht, whose granthi (priest) has been given access to a high level of power. One of my interlocutors, a supporter of the Khalistan movement, explained the importance of this locality with the following words: “Akal Takhat is supreme for the Sikhs. Sikhism is a way of life. Way of life covers all aspects of life—religious, social, and political. For this we need the direction and guidance of the Akal Takhat. In the life of a Sikh any directive from the chief of Akal Takhat is equivalent to an order from our Guru.”

Let us now consider precisely what the significance of “place” might be within Khalistani discourse. In this instance, place does not merely correspond, as de Certeau would suggest, to the delimitation of a “base from which relations
with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats . . . can be managed” (1984:36). Place, rather, has been installed into social practice as a definitive place of origin. Moreover, the production of knowledge of *displacement*, which apparently defines the diaspora as diaspora, effectively collapses that place into a specific category of temporality—an anteriority positioning the homeland with the pure image of the amritdhari body within a time prior to the diaspora’s emergence.

Yet, in instances of discourse through which the Khalistani subject emerges, the place of origin, from which the figure of the Sikh is said to have been displaced, has a particular inflection. In order to clarify this particularity, consider a letter from the President of the Council of Khalistan circulated on the Internet in response to a letter written by the then President Bill Clinton (solicited for the birthday of Guru Nanak). Clinton’s letter, of November 14, 1997, states:

> Warm greetings to Sikhs across America observing the birth of Guru Nanak Dev, founder of Sikhism. In our country, built by men and women of many nations and many beliefs, it is fitting that we acknowledge the contributions of leaders like Guru Nanak who brought people together around a particular faith. As we search for new ways to ensure that America truly offers opportunities for people of all races, creeds, and backgrounds, it is particularly timely that we recognize the life and teachings of Guru Nanak. His message that everyone is equal in God’s eyes and that God’s grace is open to all is as appropriate today as it was during his lifetime in the late 15th century. By bringing people of all backgrounds together and advocating service to humankind, Guru Nanak encouraged his followers to build lives of compassion and commitment to justice. As you gather to observe this special day, you can be proud of your many contributions to the strength of our nation and the richness of our religious heritage. Hillary joins me in extending best wishes for a memorable observance. [posted on www.khalistan.net, accessed on November 19, 1997]

The President of the Council of Khalistan addresses the Sikh nation:

> Please send President Clinton a note of thanks for the letter. Please mention in that thank you letter that Sikhs in Punjab, Khalistan, do not have much to celebrate given a 13-year genocide campaign launched against the Sikhs by the Indian Government. Ask President Clinton to voice his concern for ongoing atrocities in the Sikh homeland. . . . Lastly, make it clear to President Clinton, that over 250,000 Sikh deaths have occurred in the last 13 years, all in a brutal effort to stop our PEACEFUL freedom struggle. You can contact President Clinton by writing to: The White House, Washington, DC 20500 USA. You can also send a message via the official White House website at www.whitehouse.gov. [posted on www.khalistan.net, accessed on November 19, 1997]

Khalistani discourse, in short, constitutes the Sikh homeland and the Sikh subject, as well as a Sikh anteriority and a Sikh futurity, in terms of the priority of present violence. To return to Benveniste’s insight about the formation of the subject through the dialectical displacement of a present “I” and future “you,” we see now that what is at stake is also the retroactive production of a past that
is “ours.” Yet standing in opposition to the “I” and “you” is the designation of what Benveniste (1971:198) calls the “non-person,” in this instance the Indian nation-state, considered to be the perpetrator of present violence. More particularly, Khalistani discourse constitutes the Indian nation-state not just as a non-person but as pathological and monstrous.

I may now offer a preliminary completion of the analysis of Sundari’s poem and the constitution of the subject by means of Internet technology. The diasporic production of the homeland, as a particular kind of “place” (i.e., temporality), turns out to be crucial for beginning to understand the context of diaspora but in a manner distinct from that which is usually deployed by diaspora studies. As noted above, I understand diaspora not as a community of individuals that supposedly derives its collective identity from a single homeland but as a globally mobile category of identification. In the specific performative moment of Sundari’s poem, you can see that this mobile category is not just the “I” described by Benveniste but a diasporic “I,” which is historically specific, conditioned by histories of colonialism and conflicting procedures of the modern nation-state, violence, masculinization, temporalization, and technological innovation. The context of diaspora, here, is not equivalent to what linguistic anthropologists call the extralinguistic context; it is not the immediate surroundings, the locality, or the individuals.31 Likewise, the context of diaspora is not typified by boundedness and delimitation. Rather, it is generated in the moment of enunciation by a specific process, one by which diverse local, individual, and present indeterminacies are displaced and qualities of the global, the collective, anteriority, and futurity are invoked and instantiated.32 This is a displacement, of course, which itself constitutes the condition of possibility for the diasporic individual, the local, and the present. It is in this sense that we may describe diaspora as translocal, emerging through a dialectic of displacement and “place” (i.e., temporality). The context of diaspora is defined by this vicissitude.

Conclusion

In drawing out some of the broader implications that this analysis might have for studies of diaspora, I see this inquiry as one possible exploration of the insights and limitations of diaspora studies and approaches that define diaspora in terms of a homeland that is said to be originary and constitutive of a dispersed collectivity. The question of context points to an alternative approach. In the brief history of diaspora studies, assumptions about diaspora and context (the “seductions of language”) have come to be complexly intertwined with what I call spatializations. Our reliance on spatial metaphors tends to distract us from examining specific processes of subjectification and temporalization. These kinds of tendency, at the very least, require a closer analysis, particularly because the problem of spatialization cannot be explained away in terms of a particular ethnographer’s prejudices or misinterpretations. Rather, a restrictive (or generative) relationship inheres between, on the one hand, the process of knowledge production about diasporas and, on the other, contemporary
definitions of diaspora and context. Just as importantly, this relationship must be understood very precisely as pertaining to histories of modernity, capitalism, and state violence that complexly ground formations of diaspora (Appadurai 1996a; Basch et al. 1994; Brown 1998; Constable 1999; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Lemon 2000; P. Silverstein 2002).

In contrast to models that presume spatiality, I have attempted to explore context, not as a structural index of place, authenticity, and origin, but as a process of displacement and temporalization. Pausing within the complexities and contradictions of these processes, I have focused on performative utterances within an instance of discourse mediated by the Internet to draw out the interrelations among subject, temporality, and gender. Performativity also illuminates context and subjectification as processes that interminably conjure images of coherence and stability, while remaining rife with indeterminacy. The ruse of the performative relates back to what I have referred to as a trick question: What is the context of diaspora? For indeed, while asking that question has led me to retheorize context and diaspora, this retheorization, unfortunately, veils more than it reveals. For me, at least, working through the initial question has lent an uncomfortable sense of fixity to inexorably emergent processes. This fixity, which our analyses have such difficulty escaping, reflects the normative limits of practices of knowledge production that, in contrast to our best wishes, unceasingly reify our object of study. In the most basic fashion, these are the limits against which “we” students of diaspora struggle.

I began this article with the assertion that attending to the confluence of Internet productions of diasporic subjects and state terror may provide anthropologists with a unique provocation to think critically about their own analytic models. In turn, it may be helpful to point out how the analysis I have offered here may help draw diaspora studies into a conversation with the anthropology of globalization. This possibility stems from the understanding of diaspora as a globally mobile category of identification that engenders forms of belonging that are both global in breadth and specifically localized in practice. In other words, diaspora, in these terms, provides one avenue for understanding globalization as a radically localized process. I think this is an important distinction that has a larger relevance, suggesting a point of intersection with recent discussions of the position of the local within the history of anthropology (see Appadurai 1996a; Asad 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). Here we find a call-to-arms to ethnographers to rethink the privileged notion of the local. Such studies have begun to articulate the historically specific ways that localities tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, an indication around which, indeed, new sentiments of longing and belonging may be generated. Ethnography may begin to understand the local dialectically as translocality. By this, I mean not merely that we may study how empirical localities are connected to distant places through various communications technology but that we may develop ways to study how emergent processes of globalization are productive of locality (Appadurai 1996a; M. Silverstein 1998:403–406). In the study of diaspora, we have begun to see that these productive processes have had such an
effect and that localities come to be defined by an integral, constitutive displacement, so that, more precisely, “places” come to embody and signify diverse elsewheres and temporalities. In short, studies of diaspora may contribute, more generally, to an ethnography of globalization that delineates how the local and the global have become intertwined in specific kinds of dialectical processes.

But, perhaps most importantly, the procedures I have described have had an indelible effect on the lives of Sikhs living around the world, and they have delivered the idea of Khalistan into a new global arena of knowledge production. Within this arena, Khalistan is not necessarily conceptualized as an empirical place of origin that Sikhs wish to return to and reterritorialize. If Khalistan is the “new global reality” and a homeland that the diaspora produces, it is yet not a place nor is it a lost place. Rather it stands in for historically specific displacements of many types: partition, torture, identifications with body images, instances of discourse. It is in these diverse, and indeed formidable, human exigencies, now occurring on a diasporic and globalized terrain, that I see the next challenge for ethnography.

Notes

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1. Within such a view, the Internet is portrayed as a complex of culturally defined material-symbolic technologies that diverse peoples put to use in specific localities; it is,
in this view, a meaningful phenomenon and a medium of communication that only exists through human use (Miller and Slater 2000:1). In other words, such technologies are material objects or instruments that prompt, and are incorporated into, a culture’s meaning-adding process, and thus they invite anthropology’s analytic approach (Fischer 1999; Hakken 1993; Pfaffenberger 1992; Spitulnik 1993; and Wilson and Peterson 2002). Perhaps what is most striking about such a portrayal is the way that the encounter of anthropology and new technologies of communication prompts, almost without fail, a policing of disciplinary boundaries and a conjuring of what “anthropology” (in the singular) always has been. Concurrently, while the newness of communications technology seems ever to be defined by a displacement of the “new” (i.e., what was new yesterday), the image of anthropology that is portrayed appears elderly, cautious, and conservative. How one might do an ethnography of the Internet and the World Wide Web remains an open question, one that is not explicitly addressed in the present article. Anthropologists have only recently begun to take up such an inquiry. See, for example, Blank 2001, Escobar 1994, Fair 2000, Hakken 1999, Jacobson 1996, Miller 2000, Wood 1997. See Axel in press for a discussion of how this constellation of objects may be reconceived as a problem for anthropology more generally.

2. However, please note one caveat: although the analyses presented in this article seem to privilege a specific Internet practice, I have no intention of making Internet mediations paradigmatic of diasporic subject formation. On the contrary, I wish to argue merely that the Internet is an important new aspect of diasporic life that demands attention.

3. For very different views on the possible intersection of Nietzsche and Austin, see Derrida 1982:322 and Cavell 1995:50.

4. Clearly this is not merely a matter of the structure of language (a problematic phrase if ever there were one). Nietzsche draws out the correlation between semantically-referential aspects of language and the constitution of the Enlightenment version of reason:

   A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will effect—or, it is nothing other than precisely this driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a “subject,” can it appear otherwise. [1967:45, emphasis added]

   I attempt to draw out the implications of this kind of insight for the study of diaspora, context, and subjectification throughout the article.

5. For two very different discussions of the relations among diaspora, displacement, and homeland, see Brown 1998 and Constable 1999. Constable is concerned to illuminate the conceptualization of “home” as a place that displaced or exiled peoples may, in a sense, carry with them. Home may be mobilized, gendered, and materialized as a “home away from home;” the possibility of a return to home, thus, takes on a problematic, ambivalent quality. Brown, in contrast, questions the way theories of diaspora privilege displacement as an explanatory trope: “There is a steadfast reliance on a staid set of premises that constitute feelings of loss and displacement from one’s distant homeland and ancestral culture as the only kinds of diasporic subjectivity and desire” (Brown 1998:293). I am particularly in agreement with Brown’s commentary on the way diaspora studies “generally take an initial moment of dispersal—or ‘scattering’, as per the Greek etymology of the term diaspora—to be the starting point of analysis, rather than examining how historically-positioned subjects identify both the relevant events in transnational community formation and the geographies implicated in that process” (Brown
The present article may be seen as an extension of these insights regarding, on the one hand, the mobile and imaginary quality of “home” and, on the other, the complexity of identificatory processes that ground the emergence of diasporic subjects. At the same time, I hope to open a question about how we continue to struggle against our desires to spatialize “diaspora” as a community that can be discovered within or between places. For overviews of the issues of home, displacement, and diaspora as they pertain to South Asian diaspora more particularly, see Axel 1996 and Shukla 2001. A general discussion of diaspora studies literature is provided in Clifford 1994.

6. Very often studies of diasporas begin with an engagement with the import of the homeland (whether “real” or “imagined”) for a diasporic people. I wish to clarify my reasons for taking a different route here. I wonder, quite simply, why students of diaspora have difficulty talking about or defining diaspora without using an explanatory model that lends priority to the homeland. I attempt to specify the points at which the discourses of diaspora studies specialists and the discourses of their objects of study overlap; at the same time, I hope to show where there is an important disjuncture between the two. Ultimately, I do return to the question of the homeland but only to retheorize it not as a place of origin but as one among several aspects contributing to the formation of a diasporic imaginary. In this case, the homeland may be understood not as either a place or an imagined place but as a temporal modality—an anteriority—that contributes to processes of subject formation.

7. Here I wish to acknowledge my debt to Arjun Appadurai, whose teaching, particularly between 1992 and 1998 at the University of Chicago, has had a direct impact on the kinds of questions I seek to address. For his questioning of the normative notion of context and for his elaboration of the relation of this inquiry to the electronic mediation of diasporic subjects, see Appadurai 1996a, especially the chapter entitled “The Production of Locality.”

8. These reflections on spatiality may be related to the problem of how anthropology chooses a fieldwork “site,” about which Peter Metcalf (2001) has written eloquently.

9. Postulations about the space of diaspora and the space of context may be related to those concerned with the space of the nation—an entity akin to the archive, the force of which, likewise, seems to be one that gathers together and binds. To demonstrate the extent to which our work tends to impute to the nation-state the archival power of consignation, consider studies of globalization, which have made significant contributions to our understanding of this force. Some of the most powerful interventions have come from the disciplines of sociology and political science, illuminating the tensions that inhere between (1) the localization of globalization within national territories or institutions, (2) the formation of privatized interstate intermediaries, and (3) the reduction of the nation-state’s authority in regulating international economic activity. The productive contribution of these studies has been a retheorizing of nation formation as less solid and determined than we used to think. Here, however, we may see how the critique of the spatializing tendency within diaspora studies corresponds to a similar dilemma within the study of globalization in giving priority to the nation-form as an already spatialized entity. We borrow our priorities from nationalist discourse, which is itself obsessed with policing borders, isolating frontiers, and refining maps of integrated territories. Hence, the nation-state is conceived as a spatial context within which processes of globalization are said to take place. For a powerful exposition of the problems of “the global situation” and its relation to the practices of the social sciences, see Tsing 2000, as well as Appadurai 2000, and Comaroff and Comaroff 2002.
10. For critiques of how social and cultural theories have relied on a spatial or geographic imaginary, see, for example, Appadurai 1986, 1988, 1996a, 1996b, 2000; Cohn 1987; de Certeau 1984; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 1997b. See also the collections of essays in Boyarin 1994, Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, and Yaeger 1996.

11. I present here a rather truncated archeology of “context” that investigates some of the intersections of anthropology and colonialism. Although inquiries into the colonial legacy within anthropology is clearly well-worn terrain, I do feel that, other than in the work of Bernard S. Cohn, context has not often been illuminated in this way. Indeed, it appears that the great extent of Cohn’s contribution has yet to be fully addressed. Needless to say, I do not intend to portray anthropology as a discipline that has not already been transformed by the critical works of Cohn and others, nor do I wish this archeology to be taken as a comment on the current state of things within anthropology; rather I offer this discussion as a way of asking what happens when spatializations of context are found to inherewithin the procedures of knowledge production that students of diaspora struggle with and against. For discussions of the transformations of anthropology in the wake of Cohn’s interventions, see Appadurai 1996a; Dirks 1992, 1996; Guha 1987; Rabinow 1989.

12. Cohn would be the first to admit that he did not develop these ideas within a vacuum. Indeed, his version of historical anthropology developed within an interdisciplinary environment consisting of such scholars as McKim Marriott, Robert Redfield, Edward Shils, Milton Singer, and others. Likewise, Cohn’s scholarship critically engaged South Asianist and Africanist anthropologists, as well as British historians. One might see a similarity between his critique of “the before” and, for instance, Milton Singer’s critique of “primitive isolates”—a critique that not only drove the Village India project (Marriott 1955) but also inspired many writings, such as Singer 1972, for example. Singer’s work would indeed have been a major factor for the development of Cohn’s own approach. However, resemblances notwithstanding, Cohn’s critique stands somewhat to the side of Singer’s intervention, and it certainly draws into question many of the propositions of Marriott’s work. The specification of this period, between the 1950s and 1970s, when Cohn was involved with such a dynamic group of scholars—only a few of whom are mentioned here—is crucial for the archeology of spatialization that brings to view intersections of studies of diasporas with other Cold War social scientific practices. There are many reasons for this, not least of which is that the first anthropologists to study “overseas communities,” as they were called, were beginning to be trained.

13. According to the eminent Sikh Studies scholar, W. H. McLeod (personal communication, September 15, 2000): “Any person signifies his or her amritdhari status by taking initiation into the Khalsa, and in practice only a limited percentage of Sikhs (approximately 15–20 percent) undergo this ceremony. A substantial majority of Sikhs observe the Five K’s without taking initiation, and both these and the amritdhari are known as kesdharis.”

14. An anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this article has commented insightfully that this discussion of the figure of the amritdhari subject could very well be redescribed in terms of a double procedure of both the masculinization of ethnicity and the ethnicization of male bodies. This reader also offers a reminder of another distinct feature of Sikh subjectification, particularly as it pertains to South Asian histories (i.e., signs of ethnicity, or of nationalist desire, are often inscribed on feminized bodies).

15. My choice to precede the discussion of a more specific instance of subjectification with an elaboration of this normative figure has been quite intentional. However, I wish to clarify that I have concentrated on the figure of the amritdhari not because I
believe that most Sikhs are or want to be amritdhari—and not because of any desire to valorize it as "truly" representative—but because the figure of the amritdhari itself has become an iterable model that the practices of diasporic subjectification under investigation presume and cite. I state this caveat because I do not wish to reiterate the normative discourse of the Khalsa without attempting a critical engagement. Misunderstandings of this point have led to debates that may very well be revealing of productive tensions within the field of Sikh Studies. See, for example, the debate between Barrier 2002 and Axel 2003.

16. Fenech 2000 is an extraordinary work on the historical emergence of the figure of the martyr within Sikh life; however, it includes only very limited analyses of contemporary Khalistani conflicts, nor does it intend to address the transformations of the significance of the figure of the martyr in the post-1984 period. My discussions here of such transformations linked to the technological innovations of the Internet may be seen as a supplement to Fenech's very important work (see also Fenech 1996). Other works on the figure of the martyr in Sikh life include Mahmood 1996 and Pettigrew 1997.

17. It is not my intention here either to privilege the "global" and the "globalized" or to presume that the global may be separated from the local. My concern, rather, is to expose the ways that globalization may be understood as a radically localized process. The analysis that follows, however, questions the usual references for such terms as global and local at the same time as it invites readers to think of the more dialectical category of the translocal. In other words, I see the local and the global as far from self-evident and wish to contribute to a refinement of their use within studies of diasporas.

18. Put in slightly different terms, this inquiry into the formation of the diasporic subject that emerges as an indexical symbol through Internet mediation may be seen as an extension of the work of linguistic anthropologists in Silverstein and Urban 1996, a text that takes as its central object of critique the view that culture is a text that is inserted into a social context. The questions they ask are precisely those I am trying to address in this article: "In what culturally specific ways does an individual come to such an interactional role [as an 'I' or 'you']? Are such interactional roles always the same?" They offer an analytic for addressing the culturally and historically specific emergence of the subject within instances of discourse:

A . . . breakthrough occurred with the realization that even personal deictics, such as the English I and you, and so on, which seemed to have fixed, understandable meanings as elementary shifters, in fact do so only through an intertextual projection at the metadiscursive plane. . . . We realized in our discussions that the simple pronominal forms are, in fact, complex in semiosis. Because the pronouns are found across distinct texts, the absolutely unique, contingent specificity of the history by which individuals come to inhabit relevant roles in each instance seems to give way to an abstract essentialization, which can then be read into any given text. The attempt to fathom the meaning of that projected essence results in the realization that there are (perhaps infinitely many) distinctions that can be regarded as features of the essentialized categories denoted as 'first' and 'second person.' [1996:16]

19. These aspects of Austin's theory of performatives relate to a broader theory of speech acts that Austin elaborates through a distinction of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. The former concerns utterances that in saying something constitute particular acts that may be "bound up with effects" (Austin 1961:118). The latter concerns utterances that by saying something actually produce specific effects (e.g., I say that I am not going to New Orleans and you are devastated, or relieved). Performatives, thus, are types of utterances that have illocutionary force: I name a ship the Queen Elizabeth through particular ceremonies that I am authorized to conduct; subsequently, if
someone attempts to name the ship the Radcliffe-Brown, the act will be void. Making these distinctions is crucial for any discussion of Austin, and, indeed, they may make up his major contribution to the philosophy of language. I would add that it is here that his critique of the “descriptive fallacy,” and of “truth” and “cause,” are most profound. Cavell (1995) has noted that attention to the theory of performatives has distracted many scholars from the theory of illocutionary and perlocutionary force.

20. As was recommended by an anonymous reader’s close reading of an earlier draft, one might wish, at this point, to evoke M. Silverstein’s use of indexicality (1976), as well as the major contributions of Hanks (1989, 2000) on deixis, as a way of moving beyond the problematic reference/predication framework of Austin (which we also see reworked in more subtle ways within the writings of Derrida (1988) and Butler (1997) on performativity). I take up the conceptual insights of these and other linguistic anthropologists later in the article. Within this and the following paragraphs, however, I wish—with the help of Benveniste’s critical interrogation of performativity—to explore the limits of Austin’s approach first and then, having marked them, take up the powerful innovations of linguistic anthropology. See also Duranti and Goodwin 1992, Jacobson 1996, Mertz 1985, Silverstein and Urban 1996.

21. Within the moment of saying “I,” the subject that emerges is “split,” designating at once the speaking being and the grammatical element of a statement, neither of which coincide. The analysis of this “splitting” of the subject has formed an important part of linguistic and psychoanalytic theory. For instances of the former, see my discussion that follows; for the latter, see Lacan 1977.

22. The confluence of these disparate elements within a present and within a future indicates, moreover, that such temporal designations must be understood as heterogeneous to themselves. This is an important point that I cannot fully pursue here, but it helps to complicate the putative neutrality and homogeneity of our received notions of “present” and “future.”

23. This positing of prior authority of some object that is not susceptible to discourse has a larger significance elaborated by Silverstein and Urban in terms of a critique of the popular view of culture as a text that is inserted into a social context:

For [this] view . . . presupposes a differentiated social world, existing prior to the entextualization processes. Our investigations into the natural histories of particular discourses, however, suggest that the distinction between the social and the cultural cannot be easily made, and that social categories, if readable from entextualization processes, are just as much products of them. [1996:6]

24. This gesture, however, is usually read as an exclusion of an entire set of utterances (the nonserious, etc.) from all consideration within Austin’s philosophy. Cavell (1995:55–61) demonstrates, convincingly, that Austin meant only to exclude such “parasitic” utterances from discussion in How to Do Things with Words. Austin, in fact, wrote of these and other kinds of “etiolations” in other papers: “A Plea for Excuses” and “Pretending” (Austin 1961). Cavell questions whether Derrida had taken care to read Austin’s works other than Words and wonders what kind of impact Derrida’s selective reading of Austin has had on the proliferation of works on performativity.

25. The relationship of citationality, very importantly, is itself veiled, and for Derrida it becomes the definitive feature of the performative. Citationality indicates the production, simultaneously, of a rupture, a temporality, and a system of iteration. Butler repeats Derrida’s formulation:

Understanding performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker nor its originating context. Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context. Thus,
performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks. [1997:40]

26. The formulations of Derrida and Butler are quite powerful, and my own thinking owes much to their work, particularly their analyses of temporality. I am, however, implicitly pointing out in this discussion that a certain conflation threatens the viability of their position. We can see this most clearly in Butler’s (1997:40 [quoted in preceding footnote]) shifting uses of the terms context, speech, and social context. Aside from Derrida’s brief mention of “the alleged real context” and the “semiotic and internal context” (1982:317), the intralinguistic or semantico-referential context and extralinguistic or pragmatic context are conflated. As I argue, the performative operates very differently on these two distinct levels.

27. In more technical terms, the “I” may be described as a particular kind of index. It is a shifter (i.e., a mobile sign). It is also characterized by deixis in that its “referential structure is joined to an indexical ground” (Hanks 2000:5; see also Caton 1987:235–236). The meaning of “I” as a semantico-referential category can only be understood in terms of, or by reference to, the moment of enunciation.

28. This language of analysis provides us with a different way of explaining the relationship of “I” and “you” that supplements my portrayal inspired by a meeting of Benveniste and Heidegger. What is at stake here is a dialectic of entextualization and contextualization. For instance, Silverstein and Urban’s words may very well illuminate a further element that I cannot cover here but must only point to as a possibility. They write of the double functional capacity of personal pronouns:

Not only do they point to role-categories that exist, in some sense, independently of entextualization process (so, categories like ‘I’ and ‘you’ denote individuals inhabiting roles of speaker and addressee, respectively, from this point of view), but they also serve as metadiscursive labels (that is, denotationally explicit metapragmatic expressions) that denote the achievement of such role-category inhabitation as a result of entextualizing processes themselves. [1996:7]

See also Irvine 1996 and Hanks 1996.

29. I hope it is clear, at this point, that I do not refer to a simple notion of the present as it is framed in classical philosophy, which relies on underexplained notions of presence, consciousness, context, communication, representation, Being, etc. Rather, I position this category of the present at the intersection of what Benjamin (1986b:263), conjuring Freud (1975), called mémoire involontaire (i.e., an interruptive past) and a persistently deferred future or a “‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.”

30. I should reiterate: The precise point at which most procedures in diaspora studies is most fragile is that point at which the place of origin is isolated and valorized as a “real” definitive context that exists prior to, and outside of, diasporic discourse (in this case, we see a correspondence between the work of diaspora studies and J. L. Austin’s initial formulations of authority). However, within diasporic discourses that I address here, the place of origin is only one, though very important, feature. Nevertheless, it is this feature that, ultimately, distinguishes the procedures I have been discussing as specifically diasporic.

31. I should note that my discussion, up until this point, has already been a departure from an important trajectory of linguistic anthropology, not only by providing a critique of normative conceptions of context as a container of events and an empirical delimitation (equated with “setting,” “situation,” “background phenomena,” “environment,” “face-to-face interaction,” and “event”), but by stressing that time and space must be seen not as natural entities within which discourse and events occur or move, but as specifically produced.
32. I believe Hanks (2000:7) is getting at a related distinction when he writes: “What has concerned me . . . is precisely the ways in which context, including the body, is at once physical and conceptual, concrete and abstract, local and highly general, linguistically mediated and nonverbal, reflexive and irreflexive.”

33. From the perspective of globalization theory, which stands somewhat to the side of my present analysis, diaspora may be understood as a transnational social formation to the extent that its constitutive processes simultaneously transcend the strictures of the nation-state and yet are conditioned by its institutions and forms of knowledge. It is in this sense that we may say that the diaspora has a relationship with the modern nation-state and particularly a relationship that is mutually constitutive, one that both challenges and corroborates its authority (Axel 2001:23–33, 228–230).

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ABSTRACT This article brings diaspora studies into a fruitful conversation with linguistic anthropology by examining the relationships among the formation of Sikh diasporic subjects, images of tortured bodies, quotidian Internet practices, and state-sponsored terror in India. The fleeting emergence of an enunciative subject of diaspora within a single poetic performance compels an examination of the impact of violence and gender normativity for those who self-identify as Sikh. Diaspora may be understood more productively as a globally mobile category of identification rather than a community of individuals dispersed from a homeland, and the “context” of diaspora may be understood through its production of disparate temporalities (anteriorities, presents, futurities) and subjects. [Diaspora, torture, gender, performativity, Sikh, Internet]