

Oak Creek Tragedy: The Promises and Limitations of Memorialization

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My paper examines the racially motivated attack on the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI on August 5, 2012, which killed six Sikh citizens and the place this tragedy occupies in the narrative of South Asian belonging in the United States. I focus on Sharat Raju and Valarie Kaur's films *Divided We Fall* and *Oak Creek: In Memoriam* and Pardeep Karkela and Arno Michaels' performances through their grassroots organization, Serve2 Unite, which memorialize and try to grapple with the legacy of Oak Creek. I study these works through the lens of trauma theory, particularly recent theorizations of traumatic memory by scholars like Judith Butler, Michael Rothberg, and Stef Craps among others. I argue that these works memorializing Oak Creek assert the significance of Oak Creek as a national tragedy deserving the same rituals of mourning and remembrance as any others in the national imaginary. I examine how these works re-inscribe a liberal multicultural framework of nationalism and also investigate moments when they challenge the limits of this framework.

Oak Creek stands out in the scale of its horrific atrocity, even in the midst of the undeterred regularity of mass shootings and gun violence in the U.S. The Oak Creek Sikh temple shooting is unique because it represents an instance of mass shooting at a place of religious worship of a minority religion. The place of attack was a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, a suburb of Milwaukee, WI and the perpetrator Wade Michael Page was ostensibly targeting Muslims. This episode marks a repetition of the traumatic backlash against Sikhs, in the aftermath of 9/11/2001, when the first victim of retaliatory violence against the attacks on the Twin Towers was a

Sikh man, Balbir Singh Sodhi, in Mesa, Arizona. In the time since the 2001 attack on Twin Towers in NYC and to the 2012 attack on the Oak Creek temple, a decade has elapsed and two wars have been inconclusively waged by the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. What are the kinds of theoretical and cultural analyses that have emerged and responded to these ongoing narratives of violence impacting racial and ethnic minorities? To what extent have artistic/ performative recordings of these traumatic acts disrupted mainstream media's representation of these incidents?

Recent scholarly interventions have sought to initiate dialogues between the distinct fields of trauma studies and postcolonial theory. Stef Craps and others have challenged Eurocentric origins of trauma studies and the asymmetry of grief over differently located human catastrophes. Judith Butler has continued to ask "when is life grievable?" In mapping the broad currents in trauma studies, Craps argues that although the founding scholars in the field like Cathy Caruth wrote that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures," the founding texts of the field of trauma studies did not live up "to this promise of cross cultural ethical engagement" (Craps 46). In the same essay Craps references Judith Butler's work *Frames of War*, in which Butler comments on "the differential distribution of grievability among populations (Craps 47). In other works like *Antigone's Claim*, Butler has pointed to the differences in our abilities to mourn certain kinds of death. This concept of differential grievability is critical in examining the responses not just to Oak Creek but the overall violence suffered by Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, and South Asians in the retaliatory violence and vigilantism following 9/11. Valarie Kaur and Sharat Raju's documentary film *Divided We Fall* (2006), made in the aftermath of 9/11, highlights through a series of interviews and documentary footage the differential grievability of South Asian lives in North America. In one of the haunting sequences

of the film *Kaur* interviews Muneer Ahmad, a law professor at American University, who contrasts the responses to other hate crimes to that perpetrated against Balbir Singh Sodhi. Unlike the public mourning and outcry against the murders of Matthew Shephard and James Byrd, which were “paradigmatic hate crimes” targeted against homosexuality and racism against African Americans, respectively, happening within a few months of each other in 1998, Balbir Singh Sodhi’s death did not carry the same emotional valence. This is because Balbir Singh Sodhi was not seen as belonging to the United States, as James Byrd and Matthew Shephard were. In *Divided We Fall*, Muneer Ahmad recites the names of several victims of post 9/11 retaliatory violence and comments that these names do not evoke sympathy because they sounded like the names of terrorists.

Manjeet Birk, Hartej Gill and Kal Heer in their article “De-Islamicizing Sikhophobia: Deconstructing Structural Racism in Wisconsin Gurdwara Shooting 10/12” write that the Sikh population of the United States has been particularly vulnerable as collateral victims in the rising tide of anti-Islamic sentiments since the 9-11-2001 attacks in New York and Washington, DC. . . The Sikh Coalition, a New York-based advocacy group, has documented over 700 incidences of Sikhs being targets of racial aggression ranging from vandalism and robbery to murder (CBC News, 2012). The majority of the perpetrators of these hate crimes are white males attacking Sikhs under the mistaken assumption that the latter are Muslims” (Birk *et al* 99). Birk *et al* are very critical of the homogenization of brown bodies in North America which have left “left Sikh communities with the task of distinguishing themselves from Muslim bodies, leading to a lateral and violent game of finger pointing. This is exemplified through the media’s representation of the angry rage-filled Muslim and the peace-filled Sikh community, which is strictly in contrast to the ways in which Sikhs are often portrayed in relation to the Khalistani fundamentalist Sikh

communities (such as in the media portrayal of the 1985 Air India bombing)” (Birk *et al* 101). They argue that the media’s collapsing of Sikhs with Muslims have forced Sikhs to constantly explain their religion, educate white Americans about their faith, in a defensive posturing. This amplifies Islamophobia and leaves unaddressed questions structural racism. The authors are critical of media representations which framed the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting as domestic terrorism but did not use the same language for the Aurora Colorado movie theater shooting. They also note the lack of attention or willingness to discuss Wade Michael Page’s white supremacist allegiances in the general reporting of the event in the media.

Parvinder Mehta in her article: “Rethinking Multiculturalism: Sikh Integration after the Oak Creek Tragedy,” makes an urgent plea for the need for more writers, visual artists, filmmakers to represent the reality of Sikh lives in North America: “Instead of portraying Sikh ethnicity through visual objectification or an absent presence we now need more writers, painters, visual artists willing to highlight a genuine understanding of what being a Sikh American might entail and how Sikh Americans negotiate their multicultural identities vis-à-vis the mainstream perceptions and receptions” (Mehta 238). After critiquing many aspects of the self-policing of the Sikh community and highlighting the deficiencies with liberal multiculturalism in the U.S that pressure religious minorities to assimilate, Mehta calls for a change from liberal multiculturalism to a “revised moral philosophy that is rooted in self-affirming subjectivity for Sikhs” (Mehta 239). Sharat Raju and Valarie Kaur’s *Oak Creek: In Memoriam* continues the important task of creating a visual archive of memories of this devastating tragedy. It restores the rites and rituals of mourning, often denied to lives that are not considered integral to the nation’s imagining of itself. It affirms the multiplicity of Sikh identities by showcasing first generation Sikh families wearing turbans and speaking Punjabi as well as the

experience of second or third generation Sikhs, who do not always wear turbans and practice all the strict observances.

In contrast to the complexity of issues raised in the early work of Kaur and Raju, in *Divided We Fall, Oak Creek: In Memoriam* does not produce similar moments of complexity and discomfort. Perhaps because this documentary is much shorter, it restricts itself more or less to a recording of the incident from the perspective of the victims and survivors. There is no reflective component and Valarie's personal reflections which framed the earlier documentary, *Divided We Fall*, are absent in this short film. The film is technically sophisticated, recreating the disorientation of a mass shooting by beginning with a blank screen replaying 911 calls for assistance from the Oak Creek gurdwara. This is followed by interviews in Punjabi and English from survivors of the shooting, including those who have lost family members. The film then shifts to images of outpouring of support from various communities, including a message from President Obama, juxtaposed with images of gurdwara members engaged in cleaning up and repainting the building. In the final scene we see a young man whose mother was killed at Oak Creek, testifying in front of Congress and declaring that despite everything he believes in the American dream. The film thus ends with a reiteration of faith in the nation state, without raising questions about the new forms of racism emerging after 9/11 and the accentuation of lines between those who are perceived to belong and those who do not fit into to the national imaginary of the United States. In conclusion, the film reinstates a liberal multicultural paradigm and does not question its limitations.

The performances of Pardeep Kaleka and Arno Michaelis through the grassroots organization Serve2 Unite are a practical demonstration of the kind of memory work, involving multidirectional memory that Michael Rothberg has been studying. Rothberg points to the fact

that histories of traumas tend to produce competitive memories of the traumatic events, with different groups trying to establish the primacy of their grief. Rothberg describes competitive memory as the project of thinking about different social groups' histories of victimization" (2). Instead of competitive memory as "a notion of the public sphere as a pre-given limited space in which already established groups engage in a life and death struggle, Rothberg argues that "pursuing memory's multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable, discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others: both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction" (3). Rothberg demonstrates this thesis with many case studies but particularly by an exploration of the emergence of public memory of the Holocaust "in dialogue with the dynamic transformations and multifaceted struggles that define the era of colonization" (7).

Multidirectional memory comes into play in the very different pasts that Kaleka and Michaelis have inherited. Kaleka is the son of Sikh parents who emigrated from India in the 1980s, whereas Arno Michaelis is a former member of a death metal band and a former white supremacist. While Kaleka speaks as a victim and survivor of violence, Michaelis occupies the space of someone who sees a lot of similarity between his former self and that of Wade Michael Page, the white supremacist mass shooter in Oak Creek.

Arno Michaels and Pardeep Kaleka use the Oak Creek tragedy to speak about their own personal connections to Oak Creek. They are both members of Serve 2 Unite and offer talks on Oak Creek and conduct teach- ins at various schools settings. I had the opportunity of seeing them perform at University of Wisconsin –Stout in 2014.

Pardeep Kaleka at his event in UW-Stout and in his Ted Ex talk at UW-Milwaukee, and other venues talks poignantly about the loss of his father, to the random shooting by Wade Michael Page. His father, Satwant Singh Kaleka, was the founder of the Oak Creek gurdwara and one of the six victims of Oak Creek. Kaleka talks about the pain of losing his father, the fracture and irrevocable loss faced by his family. He then segues into a short history of the Sikh religion and its principal tenets. He talks about the reason for his family's reason to immigrate to the U.S, stemming from the political turmoil that erupted in the 1980s. He concludes his speech by an explication of the tenets of Sikh religion, the message of love and tolerance propagated by Guru Nanak and the concept of chardi kala, a practice of joyful optimism, even in the face of adversity, a tenet he believes will help the community tide over the hate crime.

Arno Michaelis' in his public speeches like the one I heard at UW-Stout, provides an account of his attraction to right wing white supremacist ideology. In an appearance on *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodman, at the one year anniversary of Oak Creek, Michaelis summarizes the salient events of his childhood. He was born to a privileged middle class family and found himself becoming a bully as early as kindergarten. By middle school, he was getting into all kinds of trouble with authority. He became attracted to death metal music and white supremacist ideology in his youth. He confesses that he did not have any feelings of racial hostility but was attracted to this ideology as a way of lashing out and annoying people. He attributes his transformation from a white supremacist skinhead and death metal musician very popular with hate groups, to a peace activist to some milestone events in his life like becoming a single parent and losing a friend to street gang violence. The juxtaposition of Kaleka and Michaelis' memories of Oak Creek produces a very powerful performance. Michaelis humbly acknowledges that his former music with the death metal band Centurion may have been

inspirational for Wade Michael Page. While Kaleka and Michaelis could be framed as antagonists, they symbolize in their very coming together, the first steps in healing and recovery from trauma. They collaborate in an ongoing manner through their organization Serve2 Unite that works primarily in inner city Milwaukee, to encourage youth in schools to influence their environments by confronting issues of racism. Thus, while the two individuals are articulating two very different histories, memories and associations about Oak Creek, in their work of engaging with the past, they are helping to create a more productive analysis of the roots of racially motivated violence. Their narratives are not in competition with each other; neither Kaleka nor Michaelis is trying to erase the authenticity of the experience of the perpetrator of hate crime or that of its victim.

If Kaleka had been the only speaker for Serve 2 Unite, his speech would have easily fallen into the category of Sikhs being forced to explain their religion and affirm their peacefulness and harmlessness. However the powerful impact of the presentation comes from the presence of Arno Michaelis, whose past as an active skinhead/ white supremacist does not push the uncomfortable issue of racial intolerance under the carpet but forces the audience to confront it, no matter how troubling this may be for individuals.

Serve2 Unite, represented by Michaelis and Kaleka, although a small inner city grassroots organization, provides an effective model of remembering Oak Creek, which can serve as a model for other kinds of memorializing projects. The Air India tragedy, post 9/11 violence against those perceived to be terrorists, and the mass shooting at Oak Creek are connected by a common theme of marginalization and erasure of grief and trauma where the victims in spite of legal citizenship are not fully admitted into the affective and emotional domains of national

belonging and loss. This un-belonging is rooted in racial hierarchies and therefore acts of memory making must engage with this tension.

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