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Violence, Memory and Transnational Youth Formation in Sikh and Ahmadiyya Communities

How do diaspora youth locate themselves in transnational social fields shaped by multiple experiences of violence and dislocation? Recent research by YCAR Faculty Associate Michael Nijhawan, with Duygu Gül and Kamal Arora, focuses on how Sikh and Ahmadiyya youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) relate to past and present violence.

Two recent events with global repercussions provided an immediate occasion for new youth mobilizations in the GTA to arise: the white supremacist assault on a Sikh congregation in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012; and the Lahore mosque attacks against the Ahmadiyya community in 2010. The project has examined how violence is interpreted by a younger generation against the background of a longer history of discrimination, violence and dislocation on a transnational scale. The politics of memory around events of violence have long informed Sikh and Ahmadiyya diaspora formations. Yet, in the new era of digital activism and transnational solidarity movements, the politics and aesthetics of youth formations have likewise changed.

The research is based on biographical interviews with Sikh and Ahmadiyya youth, the analysis of youth performances and art, as well as observation and participation in various youth events over the past four years.

The research has contributed to existing debates on youth and youth formations in several ways:

- In the wake of the economic crisis, the idea of a “lost generation” has gained currency in the media, often conflating very different predicaments, activities and local conditions under the same umbrella of rising youth unemployment. Our research paints a different picture, accounting for the complexity of youth agency, young people’s ideas of citizenship and new forms of solidarity and engagement.

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- Transnational citizenship has become part of the landscape of belonging for the younger generation and does not necessarily undermine their self-understanding as Canadian. Our research demonstrates the diversity of engagements in transnational social fields such as regular family visits, social and political participation and memory-projects organized around issues of past violence.
- Our research produced accounts of uncertainty, fear and lingering doubts of where to belong. The proliferation of racial profiling and surveillance, along with a perceptible shift in public acceptance of visible religious otherness and securitization, have clearly informed and mobilized Sikh and Ahmadiyya youth in the GTA, leading some to openly embrace and others to reject the symbols of Canadian multiculturalism
- Most importantly, our research has provided an occasion for Sikh and Ahmadiyya youth in the region to articulate their own specific narratives of becoming and belonging that give credit to the complex ways by which they assess intergenerational relations, and new ways of imagining their religious identities under changing social and political conditions.

Acknowledgments

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