

Jagdeep Raina:
Bonds





Image left: Jagdeep Raina. *Don't Forget About Us*, 2014. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.



Image right: Jagdeep Raina. *To my sweet Stephenson road, as you continue to pierce the streets of Guelph, you taught all of us to be loved and find community, unconditionally*, 2015. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.

Ontario-based artist Jagdeep Raina's *Bonds* brokers the interventions and innovations of a Punjabi global history to illuminate Punjabi subjectivities and identities into a set of "bonds." The years Raina has spent listening to extensive oral histories with women and his ancestors enable him to re-present these bonds in artistic form to unravel the intricate, interlinked, tenuous complexity of labor, love, immigration, and displacement of Punjabi life. Raina draws out these intertwined bonds through a broad range of artistic practices—weaving, mixed media prints, film, and poetry—that emphasize his own subjectivity: an immigrant artist working at the intersection of many homelands and artistic inheritances.

Raina's mixed-media work is marked by his early interest in this immigration history and forms of historical narration through imperial state archives. British colonialism reshaped economic and political life in India in the nineteenth century. Imperial preoccupation with wealth accumulation altered local economies across India. In Punjab, new colonial land policies focused on economic growth and extraction contributed to rising levels of debt and financial precarity. Punjabis resisted

and protested these colonial policies but were suppressed by imperial officials through a range of punishments including heavy fines and imprisonment. Some families living in the region believed that migration enabled them to find better economic opportunities abroad and political freedom. Immigration was not easy, however. Many Punjabi migrants were excluded from White settler colonies such as Canada and the United States, alongside other Asian migrants, after being described as parasites to the settler societies. Throughout the exhibition *Bonds*, Raina revisits these histories of immigration to both illustrate and rethink the long legacy of migrant identity and exclusion, and the centrality of queer and women's histories to them. For example, *Don't forget about us* (2014) re-presents an iconic archival photograph of passengers who traveled aboard the Japanese steamship, *Komagata Maru*. In 1914, Canadian officials denied entry to more than three hundred South Asian migrants aboard the *Komagata Maru* and forced them to sail back to India. Raina invokes this history of immigration to elucidate the long history of immigrant exclusion in a White settler colony that now positions itself as a pioneer of multiculturalism and racial harmony. In the image, five

South Asian migrants stand with the Vancouver harbor behind them. The sea and skyline become symbolic of the gulf between migrant aspirations and state exclusion.

Raina's works also draw out everyday migrant life that often remains absent in state archives and silenced in immigrant communities, and they push back on teleological narratives of immigration arrival, establishment, and assimilation. *Basement politics* (2014) and *To my sweet Stephenson road...* (2015), for instance, re-present Punjabi immigrants as historical agents present in their own making while those infused with color enliven the social, religious, and political spaces of Guelph, Toronto, and London's Punjabi diasporic community underscoring how city streets, religious sites, basements, local stores, and city skylines are intimate sites where immigrants have made their home.

An increasingly marginalized form of weaving also becomes a means and metaphor for Raina to convey the history of human displacement, and the history of labor and love. In his textile-based *phulkari* works, Raina resurrects a traditional form of weaving on muslin cloth using hand-dyed and organic materials. *Phulkari* (translated to "flower work") borders and

symbols rely on weaving methods that are largely existent only in small weaving communities today. His embrace of this tradition communicates how South Asian textile and art has a resonant and important place in the production of art within and beyond immigrant communities. Raina draws on this relationship vividly in his tapestry entitled *beautiful weaver* (2021), where he harkens the displacement of weaving communities under European imperialism and his family's displaced history from Kashmir.

The reclamation of space and place is an ensuing theme through the exhibition and becomes particularly poignant in Raina's work on Partition. In August 1947, British officials left India and the region was quickly partitioned into two independent nation-states—India and Pakistan. In the immediate aftermath of Partition, between 15-20 million South Asians were displaced from their homes, more than 75,000 women raped, disfigured, and dismembered, and at least one million individuals died. Countless others witnessed this violence or participated in it. In Punjab and Bengal—provinces where India and Pakistan's borders met—the violence was especially intense.

Raina's family is among the thousands across the world

that live with the long legacy of 1947. After Partition, India and Pakistan claimed sovereignty over Kashmir. By the 1980s, attacks on Sikhs, Hindus, and minority Muslims in Kashmir grew, and many fled the region. Raina narrates this longer history of Partition following 1947 in a number of his works. In *garden minorities* (2021), for instance, Kashmiri Sikhs and Hindus are astutely rendered at Shalimar Bagh. The Mughal empress Nur Jahan built the garden for her husband Jahangir in 1619. Today, the garden serves as an emblem of Mughal architecture and a central pillar of public life in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. In garden minorities, Shalimar Bagh acts as a symbolic space of peace and tranquility in the midst of a history of displacement for these religious minorities. It also brings together the layered textures of religious life in South Asia: Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. Raina's focus on the garden space as community and religious space pushes audiences to deliberate what peace would look like in a region devastated by India and Pakistan's insatiable hunger for territory.

Bonds also illuminates the multiple strands of imperial displacement that culminate in Raina's rumination on the Green Revolution. Between the 1960s to 70s, Indian and US officials collaborated to transform India into a food-secure economy and ensured farmers that new technologies such as high yield seeds and

pesticides would transform the local economy in Punjab. However, the long-term impact of the Green Revolution, as Raina underscores, actually had severe environmental and health consequences on Punjab's land and people, and contributed to the large-scale debt that has continued to be carried across generations. Farming families' large-scale investments in farming equipment, seeds, and soaring land prices in the midst of unpredictable weather patterns and limitations on water access contributed to new patterns of economic debt. Additionally, insecticide and pesticide use and the systematic focus on high-yield wheat, rice, and cotton transformed the environmental landscape of Punjab and flooded local water sources with chemicals.

Raina captures the human components of labor and love for land that override the capitalist networks that have eroded the livelihoods of farming communities in northern India following the Green Revolution. In *chemical cotton flowers* (2021), Raina emphasizes the relationship of women to local lands through detailed articulations of their bodily comportment, dress, and presence in India's fields. The women in Raina's depictions' extended hands, cotton vests, and colorful salwar kameez (one form of traditional South Asian dress) contrast with the earth's green fields. The cotton ball shared between the two women

accentuates the history of women's labor in India's agricultural economy, and their deep knowledge of the earth. This theme is then explicitly emphasized by the poem that underlines the image, reminding the reader that the hands of labor are marked by the chemical footprints of the Green Revolution and a community wrangling with its environmental aftermaths.

These themes of displacement and imperial power are also present in the film work which Raina has pursued in more recent years, which underscore the artist's command on storytelling. *Gorgeous Farmer* (2021) and *Oh Lahore* (2020) combine video footage, print media, stop motion animation, and music into a cohesive story of human displacement, the relationship between humans and land, and the material objects that symbolize their lives. In *Oh Lahore*, the city of Lahore's historic Kashmiri Gate serves as a surviving narrator to the long history of colonization and partition that has marked the subcontinent, but also to Raina's family history and the larger expulsion of Sikhs from the region.

In 2021, Raina's exhibition is an important reminder of how human displacement and imperial power remain central to the world we live in. Immigrants across the world continue to risk their lives at sea, in deserts, or with power brokers to make their way to new countries. Others remain stranded amid war and climate change. In the middle of such devastation, immigrants and refugees continue to remake the world through their movement—creating new bonds and relations. As Raina so vividly highlights, we remain ever-present in our making.

—Hardeep Dhillon, Ph.D.
Harvard University

Hardeep Dhillon is a socio-legal historian studying the development of immigration and border controls at the turn of the twentieth century. Her larger research interests include histories of South Asia and the United States, US and British imperialism, law and mobility, and racial capitalism and settler colonialism. In Fall 2021, Hardeep will join the American Bar Foundation (ABF) as the postdoctoral fellow in the ABF/National Science Foundation Fellowship Program in Law and Inequality.

Jagdeep Raina: Bonds is organized by Tyler Blackwell, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Associate Curator at the Blaffer Art Museum. The exhibition brochure features texts by historian Dr. Hardeep Dhillon and the artist Kaveri Raina. *Bonds* will be on view at Blaffer Art Museum through October 24, 2021.

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Jagdeep Raina. *Oh Lahore*, 2020 (still). Animated film. 4:30 mins.
Courtesy of the Artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.



Raina Raina: Jagdeep Raina

Kaveri Raina

Saying something twice—not once, not thrice, but in actuality twice. This and this.

Formation of our thoughts, through our expectations. These burdens on burdens, beta—these messy histories, uncomfortable revelations—instances that have been told and stories that have been physically experienced. Beta, you weave these stories of our past, our now—over and over so seamlessly—keep us living for more and some more. Were you there, beta? Do you have vivid hauntings? Telling is visualizing but experiencing in flesh is divine or sometimes even horrific. One is traveling through others' voice and one is being physically there to live in the time—live in the exactness, live in the creation, live in the dialogue, the fumes. Stories and events told by our dadis, nanis—re-living the moments past of times when we weren't even born. When we weren't even considered, fathomed, formed, or thought of.

Time before me, what was time before us—occurrences, moments, events before me and you.

Life before the existence of our heartbeat. From 'Thaplu' to 'Raina' but in actuality 'Thaplu' still. Choices we didn't make but were made for us, being born into these choices. They were made for us, but we experience for ourselves. Imagine what we didn't see and experience. These events are told to us in forms of stories. Stories that stand out to someone we know, stories that puncture our hearts, stories that make us bleed, weep—instances that ruin us for a long time, sometimes eternity. It stays, it lingers, it's always there. We become part of the past existence as well—even if not physically—but within the bodies of our ancestors, grandparents, parents, relatives. What were they like before us? How did they live before us? They certainly did. How did they? They were full humans, full beings, full entities. Potential of something. We forget at times. Must not. Life before us. Life they lived *for* us.

Place and space before us. Existence, birth, upbringing—before us. Truths before us.

I think of this often, betaji. Where and when were we thought about. What emotions were two people experiencing when we were thought of—when were we brought. Burden, sigh, relief, pleasure, sadness—what was it? Where was it? That moment I can't travel to—neither can they—only through memory now—but would like to relive through by tellings. The layers, the sandwich of memories, slabs on to slabs on instances that were experienced then. What land were they standing on? In fact, sitting on? Is that land of any importance now? How does it feel to belong to that specific place and then it being taken away? Slithered away from under. I see that beta, I see that in your words, your marks, your subconscious, your being. Detachment from that location—but does it fade away or does it stay like a hazy summer fever.

You and me. You only and me only. Mirrors of the larger world or ours. We continue.

Recalling our time—Rainaji. And many more times that will develop. My memory doesn't fade. It stays—like a well-made sandwich stays intact—lettuce, onion, tomato, cheese—leveled all inside. That is how my memory is—it stays buried in—wherever memory stays buried. Sometimes I recall something I didn't realize I had the capacity to remember—so now I know it's all there. Packed away, tucked away—but can be borrowed whenever, can make me combust whenever, too. Wish I could pick and choose what to keep and what to throw away—is it that easy? But if something is easy, should it be pursued, beta? What about effort—effort is utterly necessary—do you agree? Nothing is effortless. We have got to try—fail a little, fail a lot, then stand up and then try again. Fail until we fail yet again. Because we fail, we then rise—don't we, beta? Do you want something right now in this moment or can you wait for ten years? The slow, lingering process of obtaining, knowing, receiving, giving—waiting for the right audience. The audience that feels just made for you—*us*. But again, now or ten years later beta? I am waiting.

I think I knew you even before we met—in actuality—Rainaji. Not I think—I am sure now.

Why the divide beta? Why the divide I ask us—things we cannot control, choices we didn't make, but we and others feel and experience. Beta, you are the 'light of the world,' this world we reside in—I the 'river'—us, hailing from Kashmir, a land known for its unimaginable beauty. It is also a border—between India and Pakistan. We and other Kashmiris live here and there, neither there or here. Us—we see everything, vivid experiences, yet we are here. It's all embedded—like the memory sandwich slab. So much destruction of the world, people, our people—when did it all start, why did it start—*you* try, keep gliding, beta. Shed light, emphasize our histories, stories, untold and told—slowly revealed and held sacred. Much to say and much to tell—still. But, beta—I always go back to the day—warm, crisp summer afternoon in Maine—2017. Greetings, hellos, that started it all—many conversations, much silence that entire two and a half months. Bringing us together, long walks in the unknown, the darkness, amongst other loons—was that just yesterday? Raina Rainas, try.

Attic where the ancient dust assembles statues and moss. Boxes that keep the silence of devoured crabs. In the place where the dream was colliding with its reality. My little eyes were there.
—Federico García Lorca, *Poet In New York*, 1942

Kaveri Raina is a friend of Jagdeep Raina. They met at Skowhegan in 2017, where they spent a lot of time together chatting and going on long walks. Rainas share a special bond as both their ancestors hail from Kashmir. Kaveri is a painter currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York.



Image top: Jagdeep Raina. *Mrs Mohinder Kaur Thandi; The Bossni*, 2018. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.

Cover image: Jagdeep Raina. *The curious pause on that Broadway day*, 2017. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.

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