

SANJHA PUNJAB – UNITED PUNJAB:
EXPLORING COMPOSITE CULTURE IN A NEW ZEALAND PUNJABI
FILM DOCUMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the second author's positionality as the researcher and storyteller of a PhD documentary film that will be shot in New Zealand, Pakistan, and North India. Adapting insights from writings on Punjab's composite culture, the film will begin by framing the Christchurch massacre at two mosques on 15 March 2019 as an emotional trigger for bridging Punjabi migrant communities in South Auckland, prompting them to reimagine a pre-partition setting of 'Sanjha Punjab' (United Punjab). Asim Mukhtar's identity as a Punjabi Muslim from Pakistan connects him to the Punjabi Sikhs of North India. We use Asim's words, experiences, and diary to explore how his insider role as a member of these communities positions him as the subject of his research. His subjectivity and identity then become sense-making tools for validating Sanjha Punjab as an enduring storyboard of Punjabi social memory and history that can be recorded in this documentary film.

Keywords: united Punjab; composite culture; migrants; Punjabis; Pakistani; Muslims; Sikhs; South Auckland.

INTRODUCTION

The concept 'Sanjha Punjab – United Punjab' cuts across time, international and religious boundaries. On March 15, 2019, this image of a united Punjab inspired Pakistani Muslim Punjabis and Indian Sikh Punjabis to cooperate in support of Pakistani families caught in the terrorist attacks at Al Noor Masjid and Linwood Majid in Christchurch. This paper presents initial background research exploring 'Sanjha Punjab – United Punjab'. This research is guided by questions such as: Can the current harmonious relations between Pakistani and Indian Punjabis become a sustainable characteristic in Aotearoa New Zealand

Punjabi society? How might these endeavours develop into a contemporary composite culture built on close connections that can be passed on to Punjabi generations born in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The paper's second author, Asim Mukhtar, is the general secretary of the Pakistan Association of New Zealand. He was involved in organising financial and pastoral support for the six Pakistani families who lost their loved ones in the terrorist attacks at Al Noor Masjid and Linwood Masjid in Christchurch on 15 March 2019. Asim is currently carrying out his PhD studies at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) with the goal of producing a fifty-minute documentary film and a 40,000 word thesis. His research perspective is as an insider – a Punjabi migrant from Pakistan. Two questions emerge from his practice of visualising a Punjabi-centred film documentary while living in Aotearoa New Zealand: How is Asim the subject of his own research? And, when studying Asim's performative identities of native Punjabi and Pakistani national, how do these subject positions unfurl in the diasporic location of South Auckland?

Asim is supervised by the first and third authors: Dr Teena Brown Pulu and Associate Professor Harminder Singh.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Centring Punjab

Today, Punjab refers to two locations: the state of Punjab in India and the province of Punjab in Pakistan. This division resulted from the 1947 Partition of British India into the countries of India and Pakistan. Historically, the boundaries of Punjab extend from Delhi, the capital of India, to Peshawar, which lies on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The map (Figure 1) indicates the approximate historical and modern-day boundaries of Punjab. There is a large Punjabi diaspora globally, with significant populations in the United States, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Canada, and elsewhere. Punjabi Sikh migrants to New Zealand from North India are estimated to number around 40,000, with most having resettled over the past decade in South Auckland, although the first ones arrived over a century ago. By comparison, there are far fewer Punjabi Muslims from Pakistan, numbering less than 4,000 at the 2013 New Zealand census.

The boundaries of Punjab during the British colonial era encompassed Punjab state in India, Punjab province in Pakistan, and two other Indian states,



Figure 1. Map of Punjab State, India and Punjab Province, Pakistan.
 (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5615194>).

Himachal Pradesh and Haryana.

In this article, we suggest that Asim's community involvement and planned documentary film will contribute to reflections about the living and evolving history of migrant communities as they re-create and re-narrate their own culture in a diasporic setting. For Asim, this re-creation is centred on the stories and memories of Punjab that migrants carry across time, international borders and religious boundaries. Stories passed down from generation to generation in their native language of Punjabi manufacture the social glue of cultural identity for Pakistani and Indian Punjabis, transcending religious differences. The remembrance of the past in contemporary contexts points to the deep attachment that Punjabis have to their place of origin. Punjabi stories also remember that their home is a territory that has been invaded over centuries from West Asia and Eurasia, and endured British colonial rule. Punjabi stories document how their home was divided on the basis of religion in 1947. Layered like a colourful Punjabi tapestry, stories describe a composite culture emerging from the fusing of various traditions of civilisations, religions, and languages that had influenced the peoples inhabiting the Punjab plains (Bhasin-Malik 2007, 1). Retelling the past before Partition highlights key themes in the narratives that Punjabis share: uniting against oppressive rulers for their freedom; and, resisting religious division. Thus, Punjabis of all faiths – Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs – work together willingly and without reservation in times of need.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, such cooperation between Pakistani Muslim Punjabis and Indian Sikh Punjabis was evident following the March 15th Christchurch massacre in 2019. After this traumatic event, Punjabi Muslims and Sikhs have gone about consolidating cultural identities in their communities, while at the same time, combining forces to raise their visibility and inform the general population that they are integral to South Auckland's social and economic fabric. As well as exploring the questions of sustainable and intergenerational cooperation in Aotearoa New Zealand, a further question is whether such cooperation in Punjabi migrant communities can assuage the political fracture of Partition, which is manifested today in the ongoing tensions between Pakistan and India's governments and militaries.

United Punjab, Divided Punjab

Since Partition, Punjabi literature has broadly had two perspectives about the idea of a united Punjab and its composite culture: pessimism and nostalgia. Bhasin-Malik (2007) provides an example of the first perspective, pointing out the sombre tone of contemporary Punjabi writings. She notes that both fiction and non-fiction writers mourn the demise and death of a shared culture. She argues that although the heterogeneity of Punjabi culture could transcend and temper religious differences, the history of Partition highlights 'an increasing obsession with' delimiting community interactions and intermarriages outside of strict bounds (Bhasin-Malik 2007, 1). She writes:

The vivisection of Punjab on the basis of religious identity, and the violence, dislocation and rupture that came with it, meant the destruction of the shared Hindu, Muslim and Sikh culture of the region. This loss of shared cultural traditions and patterns of co-existence is lamented in much of the writing on Partition, both fiction and non-fiction, and there are frequent articulations of the need to "preserve a memory, however fugitive, of that culture before time and history have placed it beyond reach". [...] In such a teleological reading of Punjab history, there is little scope to examine those aspects of culture which brought communities together rather than prised them apart. This is perhaps rashly what I want to do. (Bhasin-Malik 2007, 1)

Rajinder Kaur (2015) provides an example of the nostalgic view asserting that the 'multicultural spirit of both Lahore and Amritsar embodied in a composite Punjabi culture was ruptured by Partition', leaving these once bustling cities, that were central to Punjab pre-1947, as 'peripheries' emptied of pluralism, perched on each nation's edge and carved up by religion (Kaur 2015, 1).

[...] Lahore and Amritsar ... once existed in close intimacy with one another in pre-Partition India but now might as well be worlds apart, given the vagaries of the delicate relationship between India and Pakistan and the daunting logistics of visa and immigration procedures. Lahore and Amritsar, barely thirty miles apart, were once important trading posts on the historic Grand Trunk Road and together constituted the thriving commercial and cultural center of a multi-lingual and varied Punjabi culture. However, severed by the seismic Partition of India in 1947, Lahore and Amritsar became desolate border cities at the peripheries of the new nation-states of India and Pakistan [...] (Kaur 2015, 1)

Asim's documentary film will draw on these two themes. He intends to interview Punjabis from the Pakistani and Sikh communities in South Auckland, Pakistan and North India to depict shared practices representing common values. This is an example of the identity work that Asim practices in his communities: instead of grieving for a composite culture that is said to have perished in 1947 and centring his research on Partition and the subsequent loss and damage, Asim intends to highlight present-day cultural exchanges and changes among Punjabis in the diaspora, Pakistan and India.

Asim's film project is in line with Bhasin-Malik's (2007) intention: 'to examine those aspects of culture which [bring] communities together' (Bhasin-Malik 2007, 1). He intends to do this by surveying how Punjabi migrants in South Auckland are fostering a composite culture after the 2019 Christchurch massacre. He then plans to trace the origins of common cultural practices to the Punjabi cities of Lahore in Pakistan and Amritsar in North India, which lie forty kilometres (thirty miles) apart and are divided by a militarised border. In this way, Asim's film will examine how the traditional practice of cultural coexistence in historical pre-Partition Punjab is manifesting itself in Punjabi community life today, both in the migrant and 'home' contexts. By exploring the composite culture of migrant Punjabi communities, Asim will examine whether traditional concerns about identity, culture and security, have been modified by the modern lifestyles of Punjabis. He is especially interested in what happens in the diaspora when borders are collapsed allowing Punjabi migrants to network, intermingle and intermarry of their own volition beyond religious and national confines. Thus, by following Bhasin-Malik's line of questioning, the film documentary questions Kaur's argument that Punjabi culture, a composite culture of hybridity and multiplicity, is dead and buried.

Asim follows Kaur's view about the 'lines between the real and the imagined

city' not being set in stone; but rather, dwelling in the Punjabi social imagination of Lahore and Amritsar before an international border separated them into different countries. However, while Kaur views Lahore and Amritsar as 'desolate border cities', Asim views their historical connection being rejuvenated through the interactions of Punjabi migrants meeting each other while visiting their historical home communities in Pakistan and India. He plans to explore this idea in his film by recording the parallel visits of himself to Pakistan and of his Punjabi Sikh friend to India. While staying in their home communities separated by an international border, the film will portray their shared culture: speaking the same native language, participating in similar activities, and engaging in comparable conversations with kin. The film will also follow Asim's Sikh friend from New Zealand walking across the border from India to Pakistan to meet Asim on the other side. Asim will take him to Okara, the town where his Sikh friend's grandfather was born and lived until 1947 when he was forced to migrate to India.

Filming Punjabi Muslim and Sikh communities is expected to unveil the restoration of their historical ties and their common culture of resilience and coexistence, which sustains, not severs, a united Punjab. When complex Punjabi identities shift with migration, they are reassembled and readjusted to better understand how to make collective sense of a composite culture and rekindle bonds to their pre-partition history of an undivided Punjab relevant to new places (Al-Krenawi, Graham, and Sehwal 2002; Ansari 2007; Elbedour *et al.* 1999; Fekete 2011; Malik 2009; Pollack 2003; Sollom 2013).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Teena asked Asim to put together a visual diary reflecting on himself as the subject of his own research in preparation for developing a storyboard for his documentary film. In the excerpts from his visual diary Asim looks at his conscious and subconscious practices of a composite Punjabi culture in public life. It is expected that the excerpts can form a basis for assembling a storyboard about composite culture and the complexity of inheriting Punjabi identity. He sees this identity as both united and divided; remembered in fractions and forgotten in parts; suppressed by religious nationalisms and applauded by the natives; and split by an international border but partially restored in the diaspora. An important mechanism for this restoration is the role of technology. Our offline and online lives are closely connected through the Internet and cameras (Halley 2018). For Asim, the close connection can be seen in the blurred line separating his conscious and subconscious identities, when identity is constructed both in the actual world and the virtual world of Facebook, as

well as when speaking in person to community gatherings. Thus, the methods Asim uses to perform and narrate the life of a Punjabi in the West merge the virtual and actual worlds.

Reading Asim's visual diary indicates his insider position as a Punjabi migrant from Pakistan.

DATA: Visual Diary

To develop a storyboard, he took three screen shots of his public updates about the Christchurch massacre that were live streamed on the 16th, 17th, and 23rd March 2019 on the Facebook community page of the Pakistan Association of New Zealand.

Captioning the shots by translating into English snippets of the original descriptions in Urdu, he added contemplations on his feelings and experiences. The fourth screen shot was the speech in Punjabi he delivered at a Vaisakhi dinner run by South Auckland Sikhs, relating the voluntary work and resources Punjabis donated to support the victims' families of the Christchurch terror attacks. Radio Spice, a Punjabi language station in South Auckland managed by Punjabi Sikh migrants from North India, live streamed his public address on their Facebook community page on 27th April 2019 to Punjabi speaking audiences globally.

Asim's visual diary shows that his identities of native Punjabi and Pakistani national are performed in different languages and for different audiences, and exist in different spaces. The screen shots and captions presented below convey variant messages determined by language and related cultural behaviours, presenting a self-reflective sketch of how these identity signposts are practised in public life.

Visual Diary: Excerpt 1



Figure 2. Evening of 16
March 2019

ٹر گیا سی اوہ

He who has left us

Asim: ‘In this video blog I knew that it was us, the Pakistanis, who had lost the most lives in the massacre. There was no official information provided by the New Zealand government to the Muslims from thirty different countries who had gathered at Christchurch hospital. I decided to prepare the families for the worst by indicating in the way I crafted my words in Urdu that there had been reports of deaths among the missing Pakistani community members.’

Visual Diary: Excerpt 2



Figure 3. 3.00AM on 17
March 2019

تھکیا ہویا نیند توں چور لیکن پر عزم

Exhausted but committed

*Eidaan tay shabratan ayian saray loki ghar noon aye
O nae are Muhaamad Bakhsha jeray ap hathi dafnae*

We belong to Allah and to Allah we shall return.

Asim: ‘The executive committee for Pakistan Association of New Zealand flew from Auckland to Christchurch the day after the massacre and did our utmost to provide accurate updates to our fellow Pakistani nationals via Facebook, WhatsApp, telephone calls, and text messages. We were humbled by the way our people made contact with us to pass on information and details about their loved ones who were missing and thought to be deceased.

Although we received informal information earlier in the day of the names of the deceased, we were obliged to officially confirm the dead bodies with the New Zealand authorities, in particular, the New Zealand Police. I posted this video blog at 3.00AM NZ time to keep up consistent contact with the families as to what the Pakistan Association's plan of action would be for organising burials and the attendance of families from Pakistan.

Visual Diary: Excerpt 3



Figure 4. Morning of 23 March 2019

پندرہ مارچ دے واقعے دے بعد کمیونٹی نوں
ڈندگی دے ول واپس لیان دی ایک کوشش

Bringing the community back to life after March 15

Asim: 'After the 15 March massacre, Pakistan Association of New Zealand cancelled the Pakistani community event we had planned to hold on 23 March to celebrate Pakistan national day. Our people in New Zealand were still in shock and mourning, and it was not considered culturally appropriate to switch from grief to a festive mood. Instead we created an occasion in Auckland that was religious and solemn in orientation. By inviting Quran Kwani and Interfaith Services to gather people from different faiths, it gave Pakistanis a time and place to demonstrate our appreciation to all New Zealanders who had shared in our sorrow. I think the event helped our people build some resilience and transition from emotional turmoil back to their regular everyday lives.'

Visual Diary: Excerpt 4



Figure 5. Evening of
27 April 2019

مٹھا تے سونا، سانجھا پنجاب
وساکھی دے موقع ویلے

Sweet and lovely united Punjab at the occasion of
Vaisakhi

Asim: 'A month after the Christchurch massacre, the Punjabi Sikhs of South Auckland invited me to give a speech at their Vaisakhi dinner. Vaisakhi has its indigenous roots in village festivities held in Punjab during spring when wheat crops are harvested by farmers. The Sikhs celebrate Vaisakhi in commemoration of the Khalsa in 17th century Punjab, the Sikh army under their 10th Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikhs clapped and cheered warmly while I was speaking and it hit home to me that when Punjabis from East and West Punjab come together, they praise each other highly as their cultural way of showing love for their cousins; a way

of showing a united Punjab where religious differences are secondary to who we are – native Punjabis by language, culture and ancestry. Punjabis love to say that the Punjabi dialect and accent spoken by their cousins on the other side of the border is the true Punjabi language as a form of flattery. They relish sharing stories of the past, their common history and their famous ancestors. Their expressive and emotional style of storytelling is what the natives of Punjab, the land of five rivers, are renowned for across South and West Asia. I thanked the Sikh community for generously donating money, resources, time and help to the families of the victims of the March 15th Mosque attacks. I was touched that the Sikhs opened the doors of the Christchurch Gurudwara, the Sikh temple, for Muslims to live and sleep in peace, stay under their protection, during this time of stress, anxiety and need'.

Visual Diary: Excerpt 5

These excerpts are taken from a filmed conversation in which Teena asked Asim to talk about being Punjabi.

Teena: Do you identify strongly as Punjabi?

Asim: Yes, definitely. I belong to Punjab and all my life have communicated with my parents in Punjabi, and I cherish the memories I have as a Punjabi boy. I strongly believe myself as Punjabi. The thing is I always, whenever the thinking part comes, I always think in Punjabi, and I like to talk in Punjabi. I celebrate like a Punjabi. I'm happy as Larry in Punjabi.

Teena: Asim, the community here in mainly Punjabi Sikh. How do you relate to them?

Asim: Oh, when you say Punjabi Sikh, I don't think like that. I think of them as Punjabi, my brothers. I don't know whether it's Sikh or Muslim, or all that. At the end of the day, it's all Punjabi, it's us together. There's no Sikh, there's no Muslim; they are all Punjabis. We have to live together; we need to learn to live together. And my memories, my first memories of them, always in Pakistan they were hailed as heroes in different movies and stories; the Punjabis from the other part of the border were always hailed as heroes, and I believe them, I take them as heroes. And I love them because they are similar people like me, they talk a similar language, they do a similar dance. And I also admire them because they are holding on to their culture, they are holding on to our language. They're cherishing, they are, what's the right word? They are loveable. So I don't see them as different to me.

Teena: Is it important to you to sustain Punjabi language and culture in New Zealand?

Asim: Oh, it is very important. Do you know any other culture, such vibrant, such colourful, such delightful dance? Do you know any other culture like that? I don't think so. There's nothing like that available in the whole world. Just imagine, there's one instrument that is called dhol. You start beating it and everybody, regardless of whether you are Tongan, or Samoan, or wherever you come from, your body will start beating along with it; you want to dance; you

want to put your hands up there. This is the culture that needs to be sustained. This is the culture that needs to be admired. I don't see any other colourful [culture]. I don't see any other vibrant [culture], and I don't see any other culture around the globe which is as good as Punjabi culture.

Teena: Asim, during your speech at the Vaisakhi dinner, why did the Sikhs clap and cheer for you? What did you say?

Asim: The speech at the Vaisakhi dinner was about the 15th of March, and the aftermath of the 15th of March, and by being a Punjabi and a Pakistani I have helped the people who need the help at the time. They were really happy that somebody from Pakistan and someone from a Punjabi background has gone onto the ground and helped the people in need. They cherished that I have broadcasted on Radio Spice from Christchurch. I have given the stories from Christchurch. I have gone live on Radio Spice. They were very happy that they were being informed in their own language on what's happening on the ground, and they were also happy for a Punjabi to be involved in a noble cause.

DISCUSSION

The composite culture that Asim practices in Aotearoa New Zealand includes multiple identities as a male, Punjabi, Pakistani, migrant and a person who is fluent in at least three languages - Urdu, Punjabi and English. In the process of reflecting on his identity using the method of visual diary Asim has gained insight into some of the relationships between speech and identity, and into how shifting from one language to another positions his different identities as more public or private.

Speech and Identity

Butler (2006, 2013) argues that identity is performative and custom-made for particular audiences. Lived experience, in this sense, can alert people to instinctively tone down parts of their personal identity for certain people, especially if there is a risk that one's public performance of speech could hurt listeners if the language is not carefully crafted for their liking:

Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be? Is our vulner-

ability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were by its prior power. (Butler 2013, 1)

Butler's notion that social groups are 'linguistic beings' confined and defined by their language and how collective identity is represented underlies Asim's visual diary about himself. His mother tongue is Punjabi, while his second language acquired through schooling is Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. These languages have afforded him discrete identities. On a personal level, he is a native male of Punjab, which is distinct from presenting himself in public as a citizen of Pakistan. By analysing Asim's indigenous and national identities as shifting subject positions in his public life, the circumstances cultivating what Butler calls 'a politics of the performative' are revealed (Butler 2013). Asim's identity is performed according to which language he uses for speechmaking – his native language of Punjabi or his national language of Urdu, and the very language he uses is targeted for a specific audience – native Punjabis or Pakistani nationals.

Performative identity in the context of his native language demands that when Asim is delivering a public talk in Punjabi, his words, metaphors, emotions, storytelling style and body gestures (lively hand movements emphasising his points of speech) are not bound by his national identity, but rather follow an identity beyond the nation's limits. When he gives speeches in Punjabi as a South Asian migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand, Asim is free of border controls and cut-off-points. His stories roam with less restraint in his social memory, stirring nostalgia for yesteryear when Punjab was one landed territory of fertile plains and meandering rivers, and Punjabis of all faiths and sects lived together as an indigenous people, creating and maintaining their composite culture.

Asim separates out the native Punjabi in him from the Pakistani national when addressing Pakistani community members in Urdu speeches. Performing his Pakistani identity constitutes a highly political act of speech, because '[t]he nation is imagined as *limited*' (Anderson 2016): it contains human beings within definite boundaries to ensure they are detached from, and not blended in with, peoples who live in nations outside their boundaries (Anderson 2016, 7).

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them [India], encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind (Anderson 2016, 7).

Constructing Punjabi identity is problematic on both sides of the Pakistan and India border. The composite culture of shared heritage and mutual benefit has been diminished not merely by the physical separation of Punjab, but also by the discursive forms of power staged in the public performances of national identity. The fear underpinning the tightly-constructed national identities is the unease that Punjabis are more culturally Punjabi than Pakistani or Indian. If given the opportunity to mix freely, these countries worry that Punjabis may rebuild their unity through shared cultural practices, with religion not being a dividing line among them. Erasing the pre-1947 history of Punjab from social memory causes injury to their common humanity in the present, which ought to be laying emphasis on Punjabi language and culture, alongside congenial relations among religious communities.

I Belong to Punjab

Asim's native Punjabi identity operates at an intimate level which he keeps close to his heart. It is a cultural identity suppressed by politics and subordinate to performing Pakistani national identity in public life. It becomes a novelty to find a public space among the Sikh community speak Punjabi and be Punjabi (Binning 2007; Taylor 2011). In the filmed conversation, Asim went beyond pondering how he might interweave stories from religiously defined groups of Muslims and Sikhs into one Punjabi-centred documentary film to completely collapsing the border: *'At the end of the day, it's all Punjabi, it's us together. There's no Sikh, there's no Muslim; they are all Punjabis'*. If this transformational thinking has snuck across a guarded border that has wedged people apart for seven decades on the assumption that different faiths and their devotees cannot live in peaceful coexistence, then a question that surfaces is what circumstances have led to Sanjha Punjab as a cultural resilience movement being expressed with greater cause and concern in South Auckland, compared to Punjab, the place of origin?

CONCLUSION

We don't come to any tidy conclusions. The practice of writing itself raises questions, prompted by the labours of practice as storytelling. (Vea and Braddock 2018, 66)

Asim has a two-fold relationship with his PhD film project. He is part of the subject matter and the film itself is an argument for his view of Sanjha Punjab, as well as emerging out of a certain cultural, geographic, political, and historic moment. His film documentary gathers Punjabis from different sides of the

border and from different religions who are collaborating in their search for a culture-specific resilience and sustainable coexistence that is purpose fitted for their South Auckland communities (Lempert 2012; Smith 2008). Asim will face political hostilities repressing ‘the pluralistic nature of the social world’ championed in Punjabi culture (Said 1978, 1993, 2000). If Asim values his mother tongue, uses his native Punjabi language for film interviews and the narration of Sanjha Punjab, then he will have adapted the screenplay to challenge dominant methods of researching and representing his people by privileging the native, the insider’s voice and vernacular.

The crossroad for all indigenous peoples in today’s fast-changing world is knowing their cultural resilience throughout colonial and postcolonial subjugation is about their struggles to keep their languages and stories alive. On subjectivity and identity then, it is native American author, Thomas King, whose words ring out for indigenous artists no matter where they migrate to and grow new roots in the soil: ‘The truth about stories is that’s all we are’ (King 2005, 3).

NOTES

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