What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten? South Asian Diasporic Histories and the Shifting National Imaginary

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Introduction

THIS PAPER CONSIDERS TWO EVENTS in Canada's past that continue to haunt the South Asian Canadian diasporic imaginary. The first event is the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, in which 376 British subjects of Indian origin sailed to Vancouver aboard a Japanese steamship with the aim of settling in Canada, a British dominion. For two months, however, the passengers were detained in Burrard Inlet by government officials determined to "keep Canada white," and 355 of them were finally barred from entry and forced to return to India. The second event is the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182, which claimed the lives of 329 people, 280 of whom were Canadian citizens, most of South Asian origin. It has been well documented that the bombing was "the result of a conspiracy conceived, planned, and executed in Canada" and that "[m]ost of its victims were Canadian" (Rae 2); in its aftermath, however, Canada failed to accept responsibility for what had happened. In *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, a journalistic account, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee argue that the investigation began with the racist assumption that the bombing was "a foreign, exotic event, a tragedy planned by 'not quite' Canadians in a 'not quite' Canada, with victims who were themselves 'not quite' ours" (xi). Thus, despite their notable differences, both the *Komagata Maru* incident and the Air India bombing have been understood in the South Asian Canadian imaginary in remarkably similar ways — as cases representing South Asian Canadian exclusion and as events that raise questions about the Canadian state's promise of inclusion of racialized others.

In recent years, a rather striking proliferation of texts on the *Komagata Maru* and Air India cases has emerged. Even more interesting is that these texts have come out in various forms, including novels, short stories, museum exhibits, inquiries, websites, illustrated books, apologies, and so on. There have been, for instance, novels such as Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), illustrated books such as Ali Kazimi's *Undesirables: White Canada and the* Komagata Maru (2011), and websites such as Simon Fraser University's digital archive of documents on the *Komagata Maru* case (2012). In this paper, I argue that, though these fragments might appear to be insignificant when read in isolation from one another, collectively they can be understood as a sign that the once obscured stories of racialized minorities and their exclusions are increasingly emerging in the public sphere and national consciousness. In other words, I argue that we might read this "new" body of texts as evidence that, despite the nation's reluctance to admit having committed wrongs, the once hidden stories of the *Komagata Maru* incident and the Air India bombing are beginning to appear in the public consciousness, to seep into the national imaginary, and to occupy a more visible space in the text of the Canadian nation.

In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson suggests that the modern nation can shift and change, depending on how it is imagined. For Anderson, the nation exists in the minds of those who see themselves as belonging to a shared temporal, geographical, and affective space, even though they might never meet one another face to face. As he writes, the modern nation is "imagined" "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). For Anderson, the birth of print-capitalism made it possible "for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36). Specifically, he notes that the novel and newspaper, insofar as they tied together events occurring simultaneously but in different geographical locations, replicated the structure of the nation itself and thus invited readers into precisely the kind of imaginative realm necessary to "'think' the nation" and bring it into being (22).

Drawing on Anderson's work, I want to consider the possibility that, if nations are indeed "imagined spaces," if they achieve unity from the

shared imaginings of their members, then they can change when our collective imaginings change: that is, when we "'think' the nation" differently. Beneath Canada's traditions of tolerance, peace, and good governance and its image of multicultural goodness are the hidden, if not deliberately forgotten, histories of racial oppression and violence: the decimation of Aboriginal peoples, the imposition of a Chinese head tax, the internment of Japanese Canadians, the turning away of the *Komagata Maru*, the destruction of Africville, and the failure to acknowledge the Air India bombing as Canadian. To marginalize such histories or erase them from the narrative of the nation is not only symbolically to write out the presence of minority communities for which these histories are of particular importance but also to recast Canada as a white nation. In contrast, to recuperate and retrieve these forgotten events from the depths of Canada's historical archives is to force the nation to recognize and remember minority communities and their histories and thus to grant them inclusion in the nation. That is, a conscious and deliberate remembering of the nation's forgotten past can serve strategically to alter the composition and text of the Canadian nation, to re-member it, and in so doing ultimately to transform it into a more heterogeneous space.

My argument is influenced by the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who suggests that the nation is always tied up with narrative. Whereas the nation tends to project a phantasmatic account of national progress, a linear march forward across space and time, Bhabha suggests that (subaltern) counternarratives "disturb those ideological maneuvers through which 'imagined communities' are given essential identities" by rewriting the nation as fractured rather than cohesive, heterogeneous rather than homogeneous (300). He draws on but also critiques Anderson's argument that the nation is characterized by a certain temporality, namely that of simultaneity and synchronicity, and he reads this temporality as mere illusion, as subterfuge, concealing and containing the nation's inner divisions and fractures. For Anderson, the nation is a "fraternity," "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). But for Bhabha, "the space of the modern nation is never simply horizontal" (293); it is both synchronic and diachronic, and thus its linearity is always at risk of being ruptured by multiple counternarratives. In his formulation, therefore, the struggle for narrative power is essentially a struggle to write the history of the nation.

My point, then, is that the modern nation is not a timeless geopolitical entity that emerges organically but a symbolic space that comes into being through narrative, through a process of remembering and forgetting past events. As Daniel Coleman suggests, in order to produce and sustain its public persona, "to sit comfortably with [its] claims of multicultural civility," Canada has had to engage in a conscious (and violent) discourse of forgetting (8). It has had to *forget* the violence perpetrated against racialized minorities, the genocidal atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples, and a "whole range of injustices in between them" (8). Against "official" forgetting, minority groups attempt to map their histories onto the nation's public record, a space in which those histories might be memorialized and etched into the dominant national consciousness. In this paper, I examine two texts that do precisely that: Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" and Ajmer Rode and Jarnail Singh's museum exhibit the "*Komagata Maru* Stories." I bring these texts together not only because they challenge hegemonic forgetting but also because they draw attention to the various kinds of remembering that have been taking place.

Situating the *Komagata Maru* and Air India Cases in Official History

If we are to understand how the nation comes into being through narration, a study of textbooks, many of which are taught in schools, seems to be necessary. As Louis Althusser reminds us, schools are part of the ideological state apparatus: "the school . . . teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (133). My logic is derived in part from the work of the late postcolonial scholar Edward Said. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Orient does not simply exist but is also discursively created through texts. Similarly, I would argue that the Canadian nation is not just there but is also produced through a range of discursive formations. Canonical history textbooks, because we tend to think of them as authoritative discursive formations and objective accounts of the nation, are particularly valuable as objects of study. Thus, I want to turn to a reading of Canadian history textbooks from the 1940s to the present day in order to track the national imaginary, to see what is remembered and what is forgotten, and to consider how the narrative of the nation might have shifted over time.

In Canada, two of the most well-known texts — Arthur Lower's *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada* published in 1947 and Donald Creighton's *The Story of Canada*, first published in 1959 and then in a second edition in 1971 — narrativize the nation in ways that we might predict: by omitting histories such as the *Komagata Maru* incident and by representing Canada as a story of white triumphalism in which explorers and settler-invader subjects, all of whom are white and all of whom are male, emerge as heroic and celebratory figures. Lower registers some of the histories of racial discrimination (e.g., the Chinese head tax) but only to justify and sanction them, and Creighton, writing some twelve years later, tends to overlook them entirely.[1] Subtle differences aside, both Lower and Creighton represent the nation as a struggle between the French and the English, and in so doing they imagine the nation as coming into being because of the valiant efforts of its imperial founders, its white forces.

In Canadian history textbooks emerging from the 1990s on, we can see a shift in the way that the nation is imagined: thus, texts such as Alvin Finkel et al.'s two-volume *History of the Canadian Peoples* (1993) and J.M. Bumsted's *A History of the Canadian Peoples* (1998) reinsert histories of ordinary people and minority groups, even though they maintain the same kind of narrative trajectory as earlier texts, tracing Canada's movement "from colony to nation." What is different in these accounts is the tone in which history is recorded: it is less authoritative than earlier accounts of the nation and more conscious of the multiplicity of historical perspectives. Take, for instance, *History of the Canadian Peoples: 1867 to the Present* (Finkel, Conrad, and Strong-Boag). In the introduction, the authors acknowledge that "most academic histories written before 1970 either ignored, or treated unsympathetically, women, people of colour, and issues relating to private life" (xiii). Texts from the 1990s are framed as being more inclusive, as histories written from below. Rather than naturalizing racist ideologies and thus implicitly condoning them, as some of the earlier texts had done, these texts also draw attention to and critique racial violence. Bumsted, for example, begins by documenting what he calls the "invasion" rather than the "arrival" of European settler subjects and the eradication of Native populations. He also critiques Canada's treatment of the Chinese when he explains that the Canadian railway "was built on the backs of Chinese coolies" (215). Yet there are limits to this new inclusive perspec-

tive. Because these Canadian history textbooks retain the shape of ear-lier ones in terms of their basic chronology, minority histories continue to be framed as marginal in relation to the ostensibly more important narrative of the struggle between the French and the English. In these texts, therefore, there is still no mention of the *Komagata Maru* incident, and no reference to the Air India bombing, even though the texts claim to trace Canada's history from the colonial period to the 1990s.

More recent history textbooks such as Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel's *Canada: A National History* and Roger Riendeau's *A Brief History of Canada* are not dramatically different from those written a decade earlier, except in one instance: they include the *Komagata Maru* incident as part of the history of Canada, though they do so in ways that are sometimes problematic. In Riendeau's account of the *Komagata Maru* incident, the name of the ship is never mentioned; it is simply referred to as an "alien" ship (229), and the event is not registered in the index of the book. Similarly, though Conrad and Finkel discuss the *Komagata Maru* incident in their account, they seem to overlook its complexity and the full extent of its violent underpinnings. Rather than noting that the passengers aboard the ship were threatened at gunpoint and forced to leave Canadian shores, for example, Conrad and Finkel frame the turning away as a much more civil act, and as a matter of legality, describing the passengers as being "[d]etained on board for two months in Vancouver harbour while their case was heard before the courts" and then being "ordered to leave" (291). These historical retell-ings show us that there are contradictory pressures at work: on the one hand, a desire to ascertain and record historical "truth"; on the other hand, a reluctance to admit that the country had racist national policies.

Thus, whereas the early texts engage in a straightforward disavowal of diasporic traumas, the most recent texts reveal not only a desire to write histories that recognize racial minorities and their exclusions as part of the Canadian story but also a certain reluctance to displace hegemonic accounts of the nation. The fact that these textbooks still fail to mention the Air India bombing — now understood to be the worst case of aviation terrorism in the history of Canada — might be read as proof of their reluctance to countenance histories of racial exclusion. After all, to recognize the Air India bombing and Canada's failings in its aftermath would be to undermine a narrative of progress that these texts seem to maintain and to raise dangerous questions about

the ongoing history of racial exclusion and the treatment of minority communities in Canada. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that, when read chronologically, these textbooks reveal that there has been a subtle shift in the national imaginary, a gradual albeit reluctant move from forgetting to remembering. Cautiously, I want to attribute this shift to the efforts of writers, artists, and activists who have done the hard work of inserting forgotten histories into the national imaginary and sought to remember the nation differently. If "nations *are* narrations," as Bhabha famously puts it, then diasporic texts — in their varied forms — serve a crucial function: they confront Canada's claims of multicultural civility and benevolence and participate in a process of discursively redrawing the borders of the nation.

Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief"[2]

Among the creative fictions that revisit diasporic histories of exclusion and trauma are Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" and Rode and Singh's museum exhibit the "*Komagata Maru* Stories." On one level, these texts engage in a straightforward process of memorializing events such as the *Komagata Maru* incident and Air India bombing and placing them on the map of the nation. "The Management of Grief" recuperates the experiences of the families of the victims in the aftermath of the Air India bombing and draws attention to their interactions with the Canadian state. Rode and Singh's exhibit puts together a visual and written account of the *Komagata Maru* incident, one that focuses particular attention on the passengers aboard the ship. But these texts, in addition to recovering South Asian Canadian histories, also comment on and complicate the politics of remembering and forgetting.

Published in 1988 as part of a collection of short stories titled *The Middleman and Other Stories*, "The Management of Grief" tells the story of a fictional woman named Shaila Bhave, whose two sons and husband have died in the bombing. In the opening scene, members of the South Asian community have gathered in her home in Toronto to mourn their loss. Her friend, Kusum, whose husband and younger daughter have died in the explosion, questions her faith in god, while her older daughter, Pam, projects onto her mother her own feelings of regret for having survived the tragedy because of her refusal to join her family on their trip to India. She says, "You think I don't know what Mummy's thinking. *Why her?* that's what. That's sick! Mummy wishes

my little sister were alive and I were dead" (182). Shaila has perhaps the most unexpected response to the trauma: she cannot weep. In spite of all the commotion that surrounds her (there are two radios going, the television is on, members of the South Asian Canadian community have filled her house, the phone is ringing, and reporters have arrived at the door), Shaila is trapped by an unbearable sense of calmness, a feeling, she explains, that is "[n]ot peace, just a deadening quiet" (180).[3]

In her insistence on capturing the complexity of the tragedy, Mukherjee not only imaginatively reconstructs the scene of diasporic grief in the wake of the bombing but also draws attention to two important details. First, she shows us that members of the South Asian Canadian community are divided in the aftermath of the explosion. The young boys, we are told, are muttering "Sikh Bomb, Sikh Bomb," in response to which the adult men "bow their heads in agreement" (180).[4] As I will show, Mukherjee addresses and dissolves this divisiveness by the end of the story. Second, she shows us that members of the dominant white Canadian community are absent from the scene of diasporic grief. Drawing attention to this absence, one of the men in Shaila's home complains that the preacher on the television carries on as if nothing has happened, in response to which Shaila thinks that it is because "we're not that important" (180).

Throughout the story, Mukherjee suggests that, for many of the families of the victims, the experience of loss and trauma is exacerbated by the state's uncaring response and its refusal to treat the bombing as a Canadian event. In the story, the multicultural state is embodied in the figure of Judith Templeton, a social worker appointed by the provincial government to "reach out" to the bereaved, or the "relatives," as they are called. "Multiculturalism?" asks Shaila when Templeton arrives at her house. "[P]artially," Templeton responds, but she insists that she does much more (182). The seemingly sarcastic tone with which Shaila poses the question suggests that we should be suspicious of the role that the multicultural state plays in helping the families of the victims with their grief. Templeton is the face of official multiculturalism: she is polite, neat, and well turned out, and her mandate is almost entirely bureaucratic. As she explains to Shaila, "We want to help but our hands are tied in so many ways. We have to distribute money to some people, and there are legal documents — these things can be done" (183). Here Mukherjee wants us to see that the state does not really care about the families of the

victims. Instead, it wants to "manage" minorities and their emotions and to make certain that the past is forgotten. Thus, whereas critics such as Deborah Bowen have read the title of Mukherjee's story as a reference to the ways in which the victims are "managing their grief" (54), I suggest that we should read it as a sardonic reference to the disciplinary technologies used by the state to placate the families, to ensure that their feelings are kept under control, that they are dispersed and deflected rather than encouraged — put simply, that they forget the past.

Mukherjee shows us that one way in which the Canadian multicultural state tries to "manage" the emotions of the bereaved is by understanding them through the lens of textbook psychology. Templeton, for example, explains to Shaila that she has created charts to track the progress of the families and a list of those who have accepted the trauma and moved on. "Acceptance means you speak of your family in the past tense and you make active plans for moving ahead with your life," she says (192). Her research, she tells Shaila, has been drawn from textbooks on managing grief that outline four stages that the bereaved must pass through: rejection, depression, acceptance, and reconstruction. Although Shaila responds to Templeton politely, telling her that she "has done impressive work" (192), she is suspicious of the state's insistence on forgetting the past. Rather than letting go, Shaila welcomes the visions of her family, who visit her at night: "How do I tell Judith Templeton that my family surrounds me, and that like creatures in epics, they've changed shapes? . . . I cannot tell her my days, even my nights, are thrilling" (192). Templeton's formulaic and impersonal method of dealing with grief reminds us that the state has not been affected by what happened, that it only wants to effect closure on the past.

Mukherjee's critique of the multicultural state echoes the argument made by Sherene Razack at the 2006 inquiry into the bombing: behind the nation's civil façade is an assumption that certain lives matter more or, as Judith Butler would say, that some lives are more grievable than others. This assumption, Razack says, is tied to the way in which the nation has been narrativized — as a "white settler society" in which racialized minorities are "consigned to the role of guests and late arrivals in the national imagination" (5). Mukherjee, by resuscitating the eclipsed histories of diasporic communities and enshrining them in the collective consciousness, narrativizes the nation differently, as a space in which diasporic histories are incorporated into the nation. But she also

complicates the politics of remembering and forgetting by encouraging a certain kind of remembering of the past.

The point becomes clear in the story when Shaila accompanies Templeton to the house of an elderly Sikh couple whose sons have died in the bombing. Shaila is initially reluctant to visit them and explains to Templeton that "[t]hey are Sikh. They will not open up to a Hindu woman" (193). However, she discovers a profound sense of connection to them when she visits their home. She understands their reluctance to sign legal documents not as an indication of their stubborn inflexibility, as the state does, but as a sign of their strength, a sign that they have not yet given up hope, that they have not forgotten. As a parent who lost her sons, Shaila feels connected to the Sikh couple. She is angry with the state, which seems to be saying to the bereaved "sign the papers, finish things off," and she wants to explain to Templeton that the elderly couple's actions are justifiable, that she understands them. The connectedness between Shaila and the Sikh couple marks a turning point in the story: against state forgetting, diasporic remembering is framed as being useful in the formation of the new nation but only, as Mukherjee reminds us, when that remembering unites the diasporic community around shared memories of loss.

Ajmer Rode and Jarnail Singh's "*Komagata Maru* Stories"[5]

Like Mukherjee, Rode and Singh recognize the importance of resurrecting and preserving diasporic histories. The "*Komagata Maru* Stories," which features paintings by Singh and a narrative account by Rode, was exhibited in Surrey at the Newton Cultural Centre and then in Abbotsford during the summer of 2011. The exhibit does not capture the history of the event in its entirety; rather, like most of the narratives on South Asian Canadian histories of trauma, it constitutes a fragment of the past. As a museum exhibit, the "*Komagata Maru* Stories" can be read as a particularly powerful shaper of public consciousness. According to Sheila Watson, "Anyone who has dealt with general enquiries learns that the museum is perceived to be the repository not only of objects but also of uncontested knowledge" (10). In this case, the "*Komagata Maru* Stories" not only memorializes the forgotten history of members of the South Asian Canadian community but also brings visitors back to the site of the original trauma: that is, to British Columbia, where the ship was turned away.

The exhibit features on one wall a chronological account of the *Komagata Maru* incident from the departure of the ship from Hong Kong, to the struggles of the passengers who remained locked in Vancouver's harbour for two months, fighting for their rights as British subjects to settle in Canada, and finally to the forced return of the passengers to India. Thus, viewers are encouraged to explore and retrace what the narrative accompaniment tells us are the "key incidents of the *Komagata Maru*'s stay off the Vancouver coast." On another wall is a large portrait of Gurdit Singh, the Sikh businessman who led the journey of the *Komagata Maru*. Juxtaposed against an ethereal sky-blue background, he is represented as formidable and even godlike. The size of the portrait, together with its placement at the centre of the exhibit, serves to highlight the importance of Singh as a historical figure. Against the forgetting of the journey of the *Komagata Maru* in history textbooks, the exhibit asks us to remember Singh and to trace the struggles of the passengers in 1914.

The "*Komagata Maru* Stories" memorializes the incident not only as a Sikh history but also as part of a larger Indian history and a Canadian history. This is significant. Rode and Singh's exhibit can be read as responding to those members of the South Asian Canadian community who, in the 1970s and 1980s, wanted to remember the *Komagata Maru* incident as an exclusively "Sikh event." According to Rajini Srikanth, after the Indian government's raid of the Golden Temple and state-sponsored attack against the Sikh community in 1984, the diasporic Indian community became increasingly divided along religious lines (88-89). Local activists in Vancouver, Srikanth goes on to explain, suggested that the communal tensions in India "contributed to the Sikhs' feeling [in Canada] that the *Komagata Maru* should be memorialized as a Sikh event" (89). Rode and Singh, in their insistence on showing us that the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* were barred from Canada because they were Indian, remember the tragedy as a shared struggle, one that cuts across communal (or religious) divisions. For instance, in Figure 1, which depicts the passengers aboard the ship as they arrive in Vancouver, we can see that among the Sikh men, identifiable by their beards and turbans, are a Muslim man in a fez hat and a clean-shaven Hindu man sporting a Gandhi cap. The image of the passengers aboard the ship reflects the cosmopolitan Indian nation and constructs the

Komagata Maru incident as a secular struggle around which Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs are united against oppression and racial injustice.

Figure 1: Painting by Jarnail Singh. The image depicts the passengers arriving in Vancouver. Courtesy of Ajmer Rode and Jarnail Singh.

In another image, the exhibit captures the diversity of the Shore Committee, a historical collectivity composed of Indians living in British Columbia who sought to help the passengers. This image presents three men from the Shore Committee discussing the voyage on Canadian soil and shows us that, while two of the men are identifiable as Sikh, one, who appears to be the historical figure of Hussein Rahim, is wearing a kind of turban that deliberately marks him as Hindu. By documenting such details, Rode and Singh are careful to suggest that we should memorialize diasporic pasts in ways that might draw attention to the heterogeneities of those involved.

The exhibit not only partakes of the process of memorializing diasporic histories but also suggests, perhaps even more explicitly than Mukherjee's short story, that remembering the past is necessary. Thus, the first image in the exhibit, which depicts members of the South Asian Canadian community discussing the fate of the passengers with their

lawyer, J. Edward Bird, is accompanied by text suggesting that to forget the past runs the risk of repeating it. The narrative reads as follows: "These paintings and narratives tell us that unless we realize the injustice done to the *Komagata Maru* passengers, unless we acknowledge our past mistakes, unless we purge racism and casteism from our conscience and social conduct, the phantom of the *Komagata Maru* will continue to haunt us." Two things are worth noting here. First, the exhibit seems to insist on the importance of remembering the past in the present and of incorporating it into the national consciousness. Second, the reference to the injustice of caste draws attention to another important dimension of the event. As Rode himself informed me in an interview in December 2012, many of the passengers aboard the ship were high caste and wealthy, and some of them practised untouchability and caste prejudice in Punjab:

> It's probably a bit of a touchy thing which never surfaces in our dialogues on *Komagata Maru*. What I meant was that these people on the *Komagata Maru* and from here, they were fighting against injustice and Canadian racism, and at the same time most of the people were doing the same thing: that is, committing the same crimes back in India against lower castes. So the *Komagata Maru* incident is very complicated.[6]

The images in the exhibit, many of which depict the passengers wearing suits, vests, and ties, seem to support Rode's statement: the men might have enjoyed a certain amount of (caste and class) privilege in relation to some of their fellow countrymen. The exhibit therefore offers a complex understanding of the *Komagata Maru* incident, one that refuses to be reduced to a binary struggle between "white Canadians" and "brown Hindus," "perpetrators" and "victims"; it also seems to suggest that the passengers aboard the ship can be neither cast as "abject victims" nor uncritically celebrated as "revolutionary heroes." Yet the exhibit clearly shows that the barring of the passengers was an act of racial injustice and that they suffered tremendous hardship at Canada's border. The depiction of a mother and her sick, starving child in Figure 2 attests to this suffering and reminds us of a documented historical reality: the passengers were often denied adequate food and water by Canadian officials determined to deny them entry into the country. "[L]ook at this child, hungry, thirsty, sick. Not a pinch of water, not a bit of bread," the narrative tells us. Here Rode and Singh can be understood as building

on the earlier work of Sharon Pollock, whose 1976 play *The Komagata Maru Incident* also depicts a mother and child aboard the ship. But whereas her play empties out some of the political significance of the event by replacing the mostly male passengers with one woman and her unseen child, who are locked in a cagelike structure on stage, Rode and Singh's exhibit presents a messier portrait of the past in which the suffering woman and her child exist alongside the men aboard the ship, men framed as both victims and (possibly) perpetrators of violence.
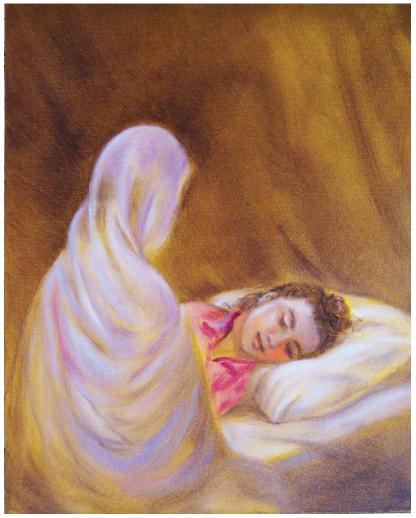

Figure 2: Painting by Jarnail Singh. The image depicts a woman and a child aboard the *Komagata Maru*. Courtesy of Ajmer Rode and Jarnail Singh.

Throughout the exhibit, Rode and Singh challenge the nation's image of multicultural benevolence and point to its dark (and deliberately forgotten) history of racial violence. Thus, they depict Canadian officials of the period and reconstruct the racist proclamations that were part of public discourse in 1914. In one narrative account, we are told that the historical figure of H.H. Stevens, a Conservative Member of Parliament, was "rabidly against any Indians landing on Canadian shores" and that, in one of his speeches made at Dominion Hall in Vancouver, he proclaimed that he intended "to stand up absolutely on all occasions on this one great principle — of a *white country and a white British Columbia*" (emphasis added). According to historian Peter Ward, Stevens was a "leading anti-Oriental spokesman" who publicly "voiced the central concern of west coast nativists, the belief that unassimilable Asian immigrants threatened the province's cultural homogeneity" (91). By invoking the figure of Stevens and representing him as a proponent of white Canada, just as Ward does, the "*Komagata Maru* Stories" draws attention to and documents the history of racism and violence against South Asians in Canada in the early twentieth century; it also forces viewers to acknowledge a past that the nation has forgotten. The exhibit suggests that, just as it is necessary to remember the passengers aboard the ship for any acts of injustice that they might have perpetrated, so too it is crucial to recall the violence perpetrated by the Canadian state. Perhaps more importantly, it is through the process of recalling such details, such complexities, that Rode and Singh seem to insist that the injustice *was* real, that the tragedy *did* take place, and that we *should* remember it.

Conclusion

Although Mukherjee's short story and Rode and Singh's exhibit contribute to the archive of South Asian diasporic writing and art about the *Komagata Maru* and Air India cases, it is important to consider, if only briefly, the extent to which these texts and their distinct modes of remembering the past help to reshape the national imaginary. Whereas a short story has the advantage of being easily accessible to a wide range of readers, a museum exhibit, because of its physical rootedness, means that one actually has to go to the location to see the display. Exhibits such as the "*Komagata Maru* Stories" are also impermanent;

they are put on display only temporarily, and as such they might not have a wide reach. The advantage of a museum exhibit, however, is its institutional status. Historically, museums have been used as sites for the preservation of national memory, culture, and history; perhaps more importantly, they have tended to be read, at least in the popular imaginary, as sites of legitimacy. This means that there are both limitations and advantages to Mukherjee's short story and Rode and Singh's museum exhibit in terms of challenging state forgetting. It also means that these texts build on, complement, and compensate for one another and thereby jointly constitute a powerful counternarrative, forcing the Canadian nation to remember its forgotten past and to recognize its minority communities.

Both Rode and Singh's exhibit and Mukherjee's short story are part of the "new" and growing body of diasporic texts that seek to memorialize South Asian Canadian histories of trauma and loss, a body of texts that I mentioned at the outset of this paper and that I would like to return to here. When responses to the *Komagata Maru* and Air India cases first appeared, they took forms that we might expect: historical accounts, journalistic reports, literary fictions, and documentary films; later, though, texts appeared in forms such as apologies, inquiries, museum exhibits, websites, and so on. Mukherjee's short story is part of the early wave of texts on diasporic traumas, whereas Rode and Singh's exhibit can be understood as part of a more recent wave of artistic work. Together, therefore, these texts draw attention to just how widespread and diverse the remembering has become.

Two "texts" perhaps worth noting in the story of the changing nation are the official apologies. The first apology was issued by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008 for the *Komagata Maru* incident, and the second was issued in 2010 to the families of the victims of Air India. Official apologies, as I have argued elsewhere, constitute a form of state forgetting: in apologizing, the state seems to say "let's get over the past and move on." But these apologies, because they are forced to revisit the past, can in fact shore up historical memory, even though that might not have been the intention. This is exactly what occurred in the aftermath of Harper's 2008 apology: instead of closing off the past, the apology opened up a space for minorities to demand more adequate statements, for compensation, and ultimately for a nation that remembers (Somani 12-13).

As we commemorate the centenary of the *Komagata Maru* incident, the archive of texts on South Asian Canadian histories of trauma is growing at such a rate that the nation's attempts to forget are regularly thwarted, and the hegemonic narrative of the nation is swiftly undermined. Thus, I read this archive — this new body of texts — with hope, as a sign that a new kind of nation might be visible on a not-so-distant horizon.

Notes

[1] Lower, for example, mentions and justifies the Chinese Exclusion Act: "Even before its completion the Canadian Pacific Railway had begun to arrange for steamer service across the Pacific. Most of the British Columbian sections of the road had been built by Chinese labour and that experience had decided British Columbians that the Asiatic was not going to be allowed to crowd into their province and swamp its white population. Against the Chinese, Canada built up such defenses as the 'head-tax'" (446). Since Lower acknowledges histories of oppression and seems to approve of them as markers of Canadian independence, his text can be read as engaging in a different kind of forgetting, one that contributes to the ongoing subjugation of racialized minorities.

[2] Although "The Management of Grief" was written after Mukherjee moved to the United States, the story draws on her experiences in Canada, where she lived and worked in the 1970s.

[3] Information on the diasporic community's affective responses to loss was largely unavailable in the mainstream media in the days following the bombing; rather than focusing on the affective responses of the people, mainstream media sources such as the *Times of India*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Globe and Mail* focused on asking what had happened, especially since the "black box" was not immediately found after the explosion. Questions were raised about how the plane had exploded, how airline security measures had failed, and how extremism might have been linked to what had happened.

[4] The bombing of Flight 182 was allegedly committed by Sikh extremists in Canada responding to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 1984 raid of the Golden Temple, her assassination by her two Sikh bodyguards, and the state-sponsored attack against Sikhs that followed.

[5] I would like to thank Ajmer Rode and Jarnail Singh for generously allowing me to use images from the exhibit and for discussing their work with me.

[6] His information is derived from personal experience. Rode was a child when some of the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* returned to his village in Punjab. His perspective can be confirmed by historian Hugh Johnston, who notes that the majority of passengers aboard the ship were Jat Sikhs, "a caste group with a formidable military tradition" (84). In other words, they were men, Johnston seems to suggest, who likely occupied the upper ranks in the Indian villages from which they came.

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