

The Apology and its Aftermath: National Atonement or the Management of Minorities?

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Introduction

On April 29, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI apologized to native Canadians for the abuse—physical and sexual—they suffered in Church-run residential schools. In an age marked by the proliferation of official apologies, the Pope's expression of regret is merely the latest in a series of such acts of formal atonement in Canada.¹ In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized for Canada's internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. In 1990, Mulroney offered another admission of wrongdoing, this time to the Italian-Canadians who had been interned under the *War Measure's Act* (James 142). In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology for the Chinese Head Tax. In 2008, he offered two more official apologies. The first was to the Aboriginal community for the abuse they experienced in residential schools. The second, which will be the focus of this paper, was to the South Asian Canadian community for what is known as the *Komagata Maru* incident, an event that took place in 1914 when 352 Punjabi migrants aboard a Japanese ship—the *Komagata Maru*—were denied their legal rights as British subjects to enter Canada and were consequently forced to return to India.² In this paper, I ask: how are we to read this proliferation of apologies? Is it an expression of genuine regret or a strategic attempt made by the state to manage its minorities? The answer to these questions, as might be expected, is somewhat ambiguous. However, as I shall argue, the apology can be read as a mechanism of state-power from which certain strategic possibilities emerge, and these possibilities may be put to use by diasporic communities.

J.L. Austin, a theorist of performativity and speech acts, argues that apologies can be understood as belonging to a unique class of speech acts called performatives, or utterances that make something happen. Distinct

¹ As this article was going to press, another official apology was made. On June 23, 2010, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to the families of the victims of the 1985 Air India bombing for the “institutional failings of 25 years ago and the treatment of the victims’ families thereafter” (“Air India Families”).

² There were originally 376 passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* ship. 352 of them were barred from entering Canada.

from what Austin calls “constatives,” or statements that can be deemed true or false, performatives, for Austin, “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constative anything at all” (5); rather, they enact what they promise in the very process of enunciation. For example, to say, “I pronounce you man and wife” refers to the act of marrying someone, or to say, “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” refers to the act of naming a ship. To apologize is to say, “I’m sorry,” and in saying that the apology is performed and rendered complete. For this reason, apologies are often associated with closure. The apologizer seems to want to forget yesterday and instead get moving towards tomorrow. Thus, Harper’s apology for the *Komagata Maru* incident, which I will later discuss in detail, seems to have aroused rather than allayed the anger of members of the South Asian Canadian community.

The qualities of sincerity and authenticity that we might attribute to the personal apology might be difficult to discern in a national apology such as Harper’s to the South Asian Canadian community. First, such an apology is made by a collective body that may not have any connection with the original perpetrators of the crime; and second, the apology may be issued to a community that is similarly distanced from the actual victims who experienced the harm firsthand. As Rajeswari Sundar Rajan has quite rightly noted, therefore, “it would be a fallacy to read the collective psyche in terms identical to the individual, as well as...a sentimental reduction to view it entirely in terms of affect” (165). The formal apology might be productively understood through a Foucauldian lens: as a mechanism used by the state to manage its supposedly unruly minority subjects. However, the intentions of the state and the actual outcome of the apology are often at odds with one another. Between the performance of the apology and its reception, there exists a space of possibility for intervention. My argument is that even if official apologies are meant to be strategies of containment, they offer considerable opportunities for minority resistance. The very structure of the apology renders it a site of possibility: as it closes off the past, it also opens up a door to the future. I explore these possibilities with the help of Austin’s speech act theory, Jacques Derrida’s reading of Austin, and Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. I also owe a general debt to Walter Benjamin’s lifelong faith in the possibility of reading hegemonic history against the grain and discovering signs of revolutionary energy and hope in the most unlikely realms.

Theories of Performativity

Austin recognized that performative utterances—“I promise, I apologize, I do”—are highly unstable and slippery speech acts. In *How to Do Things With Words*, he argues that whereas the success of a constative statement depends on its truth-value, the felicitousness of a performative hinges upon the “appropriateness” of the context in which it is uttered. As Austin writes,

for naming the ship, it is essential that I should be the person appointed to name her, for (Christian) marrying, it is essential that I should not be already married with a wife living, sane and undivorced, and so on: for a bet to have been made, it is generally necessary for the offer of the bet to have been acted by the taker (who must have done something, such as to say, 'Done') and it is hardly a gift if I *say* 'I give it to you' but never hand it over. (9; italics in original)

Since Austin argues that performatives, unlike constatives, must conform to established conventions and ritual procedures, these speech acts run a relatively higher risk of failing to carry out what they promise.

Austin's work has been taken up by a number of theorists, including Derrida. In "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida attempts to undermine the hierarchical binary that Austin establishes between the "non-serious" and "parasitic" performative utterance: the former is a performative "said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem or spoken in soliloquy" (Austin 22), and the latter the "serious" or "normal" performative that adheres to pre-established conventions. Derrida argues that if the performative utterance hinges on its adherence to prior conventions, as Austin suggests, then the utterance must be defined by "iterability"—that is, by a potential to be repeated. For Derrida, this "iterability" confirms that there can be no such thing as an original performative. As Derrida writes, "a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative" (325) because *all* performatives are merely copies of copies, without an *a priori* referent. James Loxley cogently summarizes Derrida's critique:

For Derrida . . . this distinction [between the non-serious performative and the serious one] is undermined by Austin's equally strong insistence that proper performatives are conventional in nature, 'iterable' or repeatable, and therefore in order to succeed must involve what amounts to the recitation of an already written script. (74)

Derrida's argument is not itself of particular relevance to my argument, but the notion of "iterability" that he develops in order to arrive at his conclusion is crucial for two reasons. First, if, as Derrida suggests, performatives must always conform to or iterate already established conventions, then they must indeed be unpredictable speech acts that can be undermined by even the slightest deviation from those conventions. Second, Derrida's notion of "iterability" is important for the purposes of this paper because Butler uses it in order to theorize gender roles as anxious performative acts. Derrida's concept thus operates as a bridge between Austin's speech act theory and Butler's development of gender performativity.

What Butler claims is that the gendered categories of "man" and "woman" are performative acts that are made to appear natural and mundane over time. In order for gendered identities to produce themselves as natural and stable, as ontological identities instead of performative acts, they must be repeated over and over again. As Butler writes, "[g]ender *is a kind of imitation for which there can be no original*; in fact, it is the kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and

consequence of the imitation itself” (313; italics in original). While Butler is discussing the construction and maintenance of heteronormativity, her logic applies to official apologies, which may be read as partaking of this “compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own originality” (313; italics in original). In its very articulation, the apology is a form of repetition: it revisits the site of trauma, and does so in order to block off historical memory. The powerful groups want the apology to be a stable and constative utterance. For the hegemonic group, to apologize is to say, “the truth is, we have apologized, and what happened, happened. Let’s move on.” In the process, however, I want to suggest that the apology runs the risk of actually stimulating historical memory and of bringing it from the past into the present. Official apologies are thus like Butler’s gender roles, “propelled into an endless repetition of [themselves]” (313). What is particularly interesting about Butler’s theorizing of this repetition is that it is indicative of a deep underlying anxiety. She writes as follows:

That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that it ‘knows’ its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat . . . And yet, if repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity . . . what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? (314)

Apologies too, insofar as they are anxious efforts to shore up hegemonic power, repeatedly attempt to contain the past. The very economy of the apology, or the fact that it foregrounds the strictly performative part—“I’m sorry”—and evacuates the other—“what has been done”—seems to stimulate repetition. The state uses the official apology to placate its constituent minorities, but in so doing, opens up a space for potential resistance. However, this space is not only very small, but it is also very vulnerable to hegemonic recuperation, as we may see from the following analysis of some of the more important critiques of the logic of the apology.

Critiques of Apologies

While critics have granted a certain subversive potential to official apologies, they have tended to focus attention on how state-rituals of atonement are constitutive of state-power. For example, Sundar Rajan argues that in official apologies, those admitting to guilt not only “continue to occupy, and to speak from, a position of power” (162), they also treat wrongs as isolated events in the past, and thus ignore their ongoing implications in the present. This is not to suggest that Sundar Rajan is altogether dismissive of official apologies. Rather, she suggests that apologies have the potential to set the historical record straight and to open up the possibility for minority communities to make demands for compensation. Sundar Rajan’s contention is that even though apologies are empty rhetorical gestures, “the only thing worse than an apology . . . is

no apology” (168). Examining apologies in the context of Japan, You-me Park argues that the state’s apology to a minority group very often reinscribes a relationship of power between the perpetrator and the victim:

In the act of apology, the party that perpetrated the wrongs frequently assumes the position of the powerful, and ‘reminds’ everyone involved of the hierarchical differences between the perpetrator and the victim. In a world where power and success are intimately associated, if not interchangeable, with morality, the reminder of the wrongdoer’s power in some instances works only to add moral superiority: he is not only powerful but conscientious and ‘manly’ enough to own up! (203)

Park focuses specific attention on the apology delivered by the Japanese government to the former ‘comfort women’ who were forced by the Japanese Imperial state into a kind of prostitution that involved having to sexually gratify members of the Japanese army during the Pacific War. Park argues that rather than redressing the hierarchical relationship between the Japanese state and the former ‘comfort women,’ this apology had the opposite effect: it reaffirmed the very patriarchal relationships “that made the practice of comfort women possible in the first place” (200).

Like Sundar Rajan and Park, Michel-Rolph Trouillot also examines the structural problems underlying official apologies and arrives at a fairly pessimistic conclusion. He contends that the success of an apology depends on forging a link between past perpetrators and victims, and the present-day collectivities that are meant to represent them. And yet, it is this very linking between past and present that paradoxically marks the contemporary collectivities as insincere and inauthentic to those on either side of the transaction. Trouillot concludes that official apologies are therefore intended to be “abortive rituals”—that is, rituals “whose very conditions of emergence deny the possibility of transformation” (171). For Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs, the formal apology is also a highly problematic speech act and might be read as a gesture performed not so much for the benefit of the victim as for the apologizer himself. For the latter, the apology is an opportunity to be relieved of feelings of guilt for having committed a wrong and thus to be repositioned as a moral subject. As Gooder and Jacobs state, “the apology is as much an act of narcissistic will and desire as of humility and humanity” (244). The apology, they elaborate, “is an utterance that awaits a response of forgiveness,” and this forgiveness, more importantly, “works to eradicate the consequences of the offence and restore some form of social harmony” (244). Gooder and Jacobs examine the performances of apology made by a group of mostly white, middle-class Australians known as the “sorry people” to the indigenous peoples of Australia for the suffering they endured under colonial rule. In “postcolonial” Australia, Gooder and Jacobs suggest that the “sorry people” have assumed responsibility for the nation’s ill treatment of the Aboriginal people and have felt the need to compensate for the Prime Minister’s inadequate apology to the indigenous people by publicly offering their own expressions of regret. In the process of making

these apologies and in return being forgiven by indigenous Australians, the “sorry people” have been absolved of their feelings of settler-colonial guilt and permitted to feel once again like legitimate subjects of the nation rather than subjects who have unlawfully occupied indigenous territory. For Gooder and Jacobs, therefore, the apology made by the “sorry people” is essentially a solipsistic gesture rather than a selfless act of sympathy and kindness.

Although these critics in their analyses of official apologies seem to arrive at slightly different conclusions, what they have in common is a tendency to interpret acts of redress with varying amounts of suspicion. Using a “hermeneutics of suspicion” as critical practice, as we well know, is neither uncommon nor surprising in academic circles. With the overwhelming influence of post-structuralist theorists like Foucault, academics, especially in the humanities, have tended to invest in the exposure of the workings of power, especially as they occur at national and global levels. As an academic, I too feel the pressure to approach official apologies with a degree of skepticism. And yet, as a South Asian Canadian, I want to align myself with those minority constituencies who actually *want* an apology and who, against critical tendencies, see in it an opportunity rather than a loss.

I would like to emphasize here that the opinions of “activists” have been as important to me as the opinions of “academics.” While writing this paper, I contacted South Asian Canadian activist Jasbir Sandhu, a person who has been intimately involved in negotiations with the Canadian government over the issue of redress. I presented the argument to him that apologies are instruments of state-power. He was surprised that such an argument should even be made; he and his fellow activists, he told me, had been lobbying for an apology for the *Komagata Maru* incident from the Canadian government for ten years. When I asked him why the apology was important to him, he replied, “It’s not about money. What we want is an apology in Parliament. It’s the right thing to do. It’s not about the Canadian government getting down on its knees; it’s simply about recognizing that this happened” (15 May 2009). Elaborating on the significance of the apology for the *Komagata Maru* case, Sandhu said:

This is a serious issue. The *Komagata Maru* incident was done on racial lines. The people on the ship were sent back because they were Indians. It hurts me. This was how we were treated. We are a lot more tolerant today. In order that we remain a tolerant society, we need to make sure that we don’t forget our past, that we recognize it, and that we recognize it in a respectful way. (15 May 2009)

For Sandhu, the apology is important for pragmatic reasons: First, it establishes the original wrong as part of the historical record, and second, it symbolically grants inclusion into the nation to a community that would otherwise feel excluded. While Sandhu’s claims are not by themselves an argument for state apologies, I would like to suggest that his position is fairly representative and that to dismiss it as a form of political naïveté smacks of academic condescension.

My aim is therefore to take seriously the aspirations of minorities like Sandhu to whom apologies *do* matter, while also keeping in mind the critiques made by academics. I suggest that we recognize, as many scholars have done, the ways that apologies contribute to hegemonic systems of power; however, I also believe that with enough conviction, we can “blast open the continuum of history” (262) as Benjamin proposes, and find within apologies a sign of Messianic hope, redemption, and possibility.

Stephen Harper’s Apology for the *Komagata Maru* Incident
As I have already suggested, while official apologies may well be intended to effect closure upon the past, they might also open up historical wrongs and summon them to memory. Stephen Harper’s apology to the South Asian Canadian community, for example, brought back to the collective memory the *Komagata Maru* incident, an event that might otherwise have been forgotten. The apology was issued on August 3, 2008 at an annual Punjabi festival in Surrey, British Columbia’s Bear Creek Park. Standing in front of a predominantly South Asian audience, Harper declared that on behalf of the Canadian nation, he was sorry for the *Komagata Maru* event. Harper’s speech act draws attention to the two-part structure that is common to all apologies. The first part, “I’m sorry, let’s get over the past and move on together,” serves to hermetically seal the past, and to proleptically project a new era of reconciliation. The second, and perhaps more interesting part, reveals the paradox at the heart of many apologies: that the naming of the trauma threatens to undo what the first part seeks to do. The apology thus rests on an ambivalent and tenuous logic: it has the potential to resuscitate memories of the past, even as it attempts to suppress them. Since neither the transcript nor the video recording of Harper’s apology has been made available to the public, I have appended a written transcript of the footage to the end of this paper.

In the footage, the camera pans over the spectators—some 8,000 Canadian citizens, most of South Asian origin—who have gathered in Surrey, British Columbia’s Bear Creek Park. Here, Harper is set to deliver a speech as part of the *Gadri Babian da Mela*, a Punjabi festival held annually to commemorate the *Ghadar* rebellion, an overseas nationalist movement of the early part of the twentieth century dedicated to the liberation of India from British rule and to the fight for racial equality in North America. The informal park setting and the festive song and dance numbers performed on stage during the early portion of the event seem, interestingly, to deflect attention away from the political subtext that underpins the festival: the “dark chapter” of Canada’s history that is to be addressed by the Prime Minister.

The atmosphere of the event is festive and celebratory rather than subdued and serious. The artistic and cultural performances function as entertainment and seem to fail to move the spectators who appear to this viewer to be passive and somewhat apathetic. Harper himself sits

backstage and watches the performances approvingly—an approval indicated by an occasional nod of the head—yet with a slightly bored expression on his face. His presence may be understood as legitimizing the incorporation of South Asians in the nation and as presenting the state as a benevolent host who is willing to politely accept the racialized other but not to engage with that other in any profound or meaningful way. The message of the event thus seems to reinforce that of official multiculturalism: that the nation is not really concerned with the particularity of group history. What the nation promises is to tolerate difference, but only to the extent that it remains shallow, cosmetic and essentially at the level of ethnic cuisines, dance, and music. The musical and artistic performances at the festival might seem to those in power to be acceptable and even commendable, while the refusal of the activists to accept the apology (a development I will discuss in more detail later) might be read as intolerable and potentially very dangerous. In this setting, there seems to be pressure on members of the South Asian Canadian community to “behave,” or to politely accept the apology. The government, in fact, sees the South Asian community as guests of the nation.

What is particularly interesting about the event is that there is an endless deferral of the actual apology. For one thing, the lead-up to Harper’s speech is extended and drawn out. The spectators are prompted to expect the apology, first by Parliamentary Secretary, Jim Abbot, who announces the commencement of the formal component of the program, and then by Minister of Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney, who recounts for the audience “the tragic story of the *Komagata Maru*” and outlines some of the initiatives already taken by the Prime Minister to redress the wrongs of the past. In fact, Harper himself reveals in his speech that the lead-up to the apology began two years prior, when he was first invited to attend the festival. Initially addressing the spectators in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English, and French, Harper makes certain that his speech remains within the boundaries of political correctness. His performance can be read as a sanitized and controlled one: a performance that is deliberately devoid of affect and spontaneity.

The most peculiar and perhaps most notable aspect of the Prime Minister’s performance is that it is impossible to discern at what point he actually issues the apology. Harper seems to move fluidly from a prolonged anticipation of the apology to a cathartic post-apology. Rather than opening with an admission of wrongdoing, Harper, in a strikingly multicultural gesture, diverts the spectators’ attention away from politics and redirects it towards “[t]he vibrant dance and musical traditions, exquisite art and timeless literature,” which he claims have “become an integral part of our own [Canada’s] cultural diversity.” Harper goes on to praise the South Asian Canadian community for their contributions to the nation, for their help, as he states, in “mak[ing] our country [Canada] even stronger for the generations yet to come.” Then, at the very moment when it seems as though the apology will be delivered, the moment immediately

following Harper's statement, "Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada," the audience encounters a silence—Harper pauses, turns away from the microphone, and takes a slow and seemingly deliberate drink of water. The crowd, meanwhile, begins to applaud, which indicates perhaps that the people are reading Harper's moment of pause and silence, his moment of drinking water, as an action, a performative: that is, as taking the place of the apology itself. Thus, when Harper finally returns to the microphone and utters the long awaited speech act, "Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am officially conveying as Prime Minister, that apology," it is as though the apology has already been made. The opportunity to react to Harper's delivery (and retraction), or making (and unmaking) of the apology seems to have slipped by without notice. Instead of being permitted to reflect upon Harper's apology, the spectators are briskly ushered into a relieved post-apology period during which Harper conveys his appreciation to the people who demanded the apology, implicitly indicating to them that they have now received what they had asked for. The message of Harper's concluding remarks seems to be that the nation, having made the apology, has done its part to right the historical wrongs committed against minority constituencies and will now move on to more important matters.

As Harper walks off the stage, another kind of performance begins. Stepping up to the podium, members of the South Asian Canadian community vehemently denounce (rather than cordially accept) the apology, insisting that it should have been made in Parliament rather than in a park. "We do not accept this apology at all. We were ashamed in 1914 by the government and today the government again has ashamed us [sic]" (Trumpener), shouts one activist as he aggressively waves his fist in the air. His proclamation is followed by that of another activist, Jaswinder Toor, who, addressing the audience and the (now absent) Prime Minister, loudly declares: "Prime Minister, we clearly told your representatives yesterday that this apology will only be accepted if it will be done in Parliament" (Trumpener). These performances by the activists, unlike the prior performances of the state, are impassioned and unscripted rather than detached and pragmatic; they are thus of a very different kind, much more in the realm of strong feeling and affect. This is interesting in part because it marks a sharp break with the festive and multicultural ethos and a turn towards a new kind of politics that is much more disruptive and potentially violent. Rather than reading this disruptive energy as part of an "inferior" performance, I read it as both necessary and productive—that is, as rupturing the bland surface of multiculturalism and pushing the nation towards a more inclusive and more tolerant synthesis.

The portion of the event that follows Harper's departure is, for obvious reasons, not assimilable to multiculturalism: the activists are shouting, gesticulating wildly, departing from the podium, and shifting repeatedly between English and Punjabi. In fact, I argue that if multiculturalism is meant to appease minority demands for recognition by effecting closure upon past wrongs while stealthily seeming to evoke and

remember them, then what happens after Harper leaves can be understood as the (productive) failure of multiculturalism. I am suggesting, in other words, that there is a clear demarcation between the earlier portion of the festival and the concluding one, where the former is marked by multicultural harmony and the latter by active protest, or by a struggle of the people against the state. The activists' protests might be understood on the surface as simply demands for a more formal apology from the nation: an apology delivered from the House of Commons, the very space where the original policy—the Continuous Journey clause, which kept the passengers aboard the ship out of Canada—was conceived; but, I believe that they can and should be read also in more complex terms. To deliver an apology in Parliament means to officially document and record that apology, or permanently inscribe it in the nation's historical record. Thus, what the activists are implicitly demanding is that the state remember precisely what it wishes to forget, that it break away from the economy of forgetting that characterizes official multiculturalism, and, in doing so, grant the South Asian Canadian diaspora a more meaningful recognition and inclusion in the nation.

Perhaps even more interesting than the protests made by activists is the state's response to them. After members of the South Asian Canadian community rejected Harper's apology, for example, the Minister of Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney, made an announcement that revealed some anxiety on the part of the state at the prospect of having to repeat the apology. He declared, "[t]he apology has been given and it won't be repeated" ("Harper Apologizes"). The first part of this statement—"the apology has been given"—is an attempt to effect closure upon the past, and the second part—"it won't be repeated"—indicates an awareness that, in repeating the apology, the state might lose power. As Nicholas Tavuchis notes, "[w]hen we apologize . . . we stand naked" (18) and we become vulnerable. The state's reluctance to make the apology permanently accessible to the public, therefore, can be read as an anxious attempt to erase Harper's speech act from the nation's memory and thus to close the wounds of the past that it unwittingly opened. Interestingly, rather than accepting the government's refusal to repeat the apology, more than 4,600 Canadians (many of South Asian origin) signed a petition after Harper's performance demanding that an apology for the *Komagata Maru* incident be made in Parliament. New Democratic Leader Jack Layton presented this petition in the House of Commons on April 13, 2010 and stated that the South Asian Canadian community deserved an apology for the *Komagata Maru* incident, an "unhealed scar in the Sikh community" ("Jack Layton Presents Petition"). Layton's demand attests to the failure of Harper's speech act to close off the past and instead demonstrates how apologies can open up a space for further demands and discussion.

That the state is aware of the dangerous potential of the apology is confirmed by my own difficulty in getting hold of the manuscript or record of the apology. The footage of the apology that I have been describing thus far was given to me by the activist I mentioned earlier—

Jasbir Sandhu—and it was very difficult to obtain. This is partly explicable by the fact that the apology for the *Komagata Maru* case, unlike other official apologies, has not been made available on the Government of Canada's official website. Having discovered this absence during the course of my research, I made several attempts—all of which were failures—to gain access to the transcript of the apology from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). First, I sent an email to the PMO with my request for the apology. When I did not receive a reply, I telephoned the office. On the phone, I was repeatedly transferred from one person to the next, until someone finally informed me that the written transcript of the apology was available on Harper's website. It was not. The next time I called the PMO, I threatened to file a Freedom of Information Act. It was only at this point that my query was taken seriously. Deputy Press Secretary Andrew MacDougall emailed me personally and asked me exactly what I needed. After a series of exchanges with MacDougall, I was informed that Harper's apology would not be made available to me and that I should search for it elsewhere. The email that I received reads as follows:

I don't have a final version of the speech . . . What generally happens is the Prime Minister will make final edits to the speech once it's left our office's hands. If the speech is to be posted on the PM website after the event we generally get the delivered version back (i.e. with final PM tweaks). We didn't in this case as the speech was not put online. I can't release the incomplete speech to you. (18 April 2009)

The government's refusal to make a transcript of the apology accessible on the internet, a space where it may be returned to over and over again, is significant. It speaks, perhaps, to an implicit awareness on the part of the state that the repetition of the apology is counterproductive—that instead of effecting closure, the tragedy will be reopened, and, more importantly, that this reopening can have unpredictable consequences; indeed, it might incite rather than defuse tensions and conflicts. The reluctance to make a transcript of the apology available to the public may be read as the state's attempt to counteract the unpredictability that is immanent in the structure of apologies, the logic here being that if a record of the apology is unavailable, there is no evidence that the act of atonement was made in the first place. We need to remember here Benjamin's famous words: "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255).

State apologies therefore need not be read as static and stable speech acts but rather as open-ended rhetorical structures that contain within them the potential for resistance. I locate this potential for resistance in the very moment that immediately follows the state's confession of wrongdoing but precedes, as Sundar Rajan points out, the victim's "feelings of bleakness at the emptiness of the rhetorical strategy" (166) and the confessor's sense of moral superiority for having purged his sins. It is, to cite Homi Bhabha, in this "interstitial" or "in-between" moment where the

encounter between state and victim is fraught with unpredictability and tension that the possibilities of reversing the trajectories of power become most viable.

After the state's performance of the apology, the victim may respond by accepting the offer of regret, a response that the state certainly desires. However, the victim might also respond in a variety of other, and perhaps more interesting, ways: she may reject the apology; she may partially accept it; and she may demand an expression of the state's remorse in a more concrete form, such as monetary compensation. As Sundar Rajan suggests, the state's admission of wrongdoing can provide the victim "with the grounds for demanding restitution and compensation—which may be viewed as a form of consequential 'punishment'" (166). To put it differently, what Sundar Rajan points to is the fact that the apology can be read not as a closing of the memory of past wrongs, but rather, as the first step in a series of demands for further compensatory actions. The range of possible responses that might follow the apology means that the power dynamic between wrongdoer and victim is a precarious one.

Conclusion

If, as I suggested earlier, the state apology functions as a tool for nation-making, then it can also offer an opportunity for minorities to challenge hegemonic constructions of the nation. The struggle between the state and the activists' demands for an apology is ultimately a struggle about how the nation might be imagined. Whereas the activists seem to be asking for a more inclusive nation, one that remembers events like the *Komagata Maru* case, the state seems to be saying, "forgive and forget." As Harper puts it in his address to the South Asian Canadian community:

We cannot change the events of the past. We cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future.

The rhetoric is clearly one of "Let us forget the past and move on." Harper's public performance of redress reveals that national unity in Canada is constituted through a foreclosure of past wrongs, or, to use the Prime Minister's words, through the forgetting of "misdeeds committed against those long deceased." Thus, Harper's apology works to reinscribe a teleological narrative of national progress in which past wrongs are demarcated from the newly imagined multicultural present.

Harper's conception of nation-formation based on an active foreclosure and forgetting of the past echoes Ernest Renan's classic 1882 essay, "What is a Nation?" Renan argues that nations come into existence by an act of forgetfulness, or by an active erasure of the past. Renan suggests that "[f]orgetting is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation . . . Every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century" (11). Renan's essay might be usefully juxtaposed with Benedict

Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, not only because together these texts are among the most influential works on nationalism ever written, but also because they present theories of nation-formation that are in stark contrast to one another. Whereas Renan argues that nations are formed and essentially united through a deliberate covering over or erasure of the brutal and violent past, Anderson's work might be read as suggesting the opposite: that the modern nation is shaped through collective imaginings, or a shared exercise of memory. Although Anderson's argument is by now familiar, especially among scholars in the humanities, it is worth repeating. Anderson claims that the nation is an *imagined community* "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (15).³ For Anderson, then, the formation of the nation hinges on a particular kind of remembering: one that is based on a shared national imaginary.

Although Anderson and Renan's theories are diametrically opposed to one another, we need not read them as mutually exclusive. Rather, I argue that both Anderson and Renan are right: that nations are formed by remembering, but also by forgetting. What is crucial is precisely *what* is remembered and *what* is forgotten. In an effort to maintain its image of civility and tolerance, the Canadian nation repeatedly attempts to suppress the memory of historical wrongs committed against vulnerable minorities, such as the 1914 turning away of the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* ship. The forgetting of past wrongs is essentially an attempt to write out such wrongs from the hegemonic version of the nation's history, suggesting that they never happened in the first place. Thus, the apology has an important place here. It can offer minority constituents the opportunity to insert themselves into the process of history, to force the nation to remember what it might prefer to forget, and in so doing, contribute to a very different kind of nation: less cohesive, perhaps, but also less brutal, and less indifferent to the aspirations of its minorities.

³ Anderson makes a link between the origins of the modern nation and the advent of print-capitalism, and focuses specific attention on the rise of two print media, the newspaper and the realist novel, both of which, he maintains, made possible a particular mode of temporality—synchronicity and simultaneity—that was necessary for imagining the nation as a connected whole. Each person reading the newspaper, Anderson tells us, "is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion" (39). The events reported in the newspaper on a daily basis, for Anderson, establish among readers a shared history of the nation. Anderson seems to implicitly suggest that the understanding of the nation as a shared entity—an understanding that is narrativized by both the novel and the newspaper—will, over the course of time, develop into a shared collective memory.

Transcript of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Official Apology
for the 1914 *Komagata Maru* Incident⁴

Location: Surrey, British Columbia, Bear Creek Park

Event: *Gadri Babian da Mela*

Opening: A bhangra performance by the Surrey India Arts Club.

Nina Grewal (MP): I would like to thank the Surrey India Arts Club for such a wonderful performance. Let's give them a big hand. They also went to Ottawa and had a wonderful performance during the *Vaisakhi* celebrations that I hosted in Ottawa ... [and] during the *Vaisakhi* celebrations that I hosted in April. I know that the Prime Minister is a big fan of the bhangra.

Jim Abbot (Parliamentary Secretary): It's now time to start our formal program for this afternoon. In 2006, the Prime Minister gave me the privilege of consulting with Indo-Canadians in Vancouver and Toronto on the issue of the *Komagata Maru*. As you are all well aware, this is a dark moment in our great nation's history. I have listened to how the events of 1914 have affected the Indo-Canadian community and how we as a government could best respond to this issue. At around the same time I put together my findings, a young man here with us today was appointed to cabinet. Jason Kenney is no stranger to this topic; he has been a vocal member of our government and cabinet when this issue has come up for debate. Without him, today's announcement would not be possible.

Nina Grewal (MP): Ladies and Gentlemen, Our first speaker has been the voice of newcomers and cultural communities since our party took government. He is both a friend of our [sic] and an advocate for the Indo-Canadian community. It is both an honour and a privilege to introduce my friend, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity, the Honourable Jason Kenney.

Jason Kenney (Minister of Multiculturalism): Thank you Nina. Thank you Jim. *Sat Sri Akaal, Nameste, As-Salāmu Alaykum, Bonne après-midi*. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Are you having a great time today? Are you enjoying the show? I would like to acknowledge all of the special guests joining us today and all of you ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls for this beautiful celebration of the rich and ancient culture of Punjab. The Mohan Singh Foundation threw this *mela* and activities throughout the year both here in Canada, India, and elsewhere, brings to life the best of Punjabi culture in the memory of that great poet, Professor Mohan Singh who also brought people together regardless of divisions or

⁴ I have omitted the few sentences in French that were translations of the speeches in English.

differences in faith and other backgrounds. He is somebody who believed in pluralism and that is the secret to our success in Canada. The Punjabi community in this country, indeed in this part of Canada, is over a hundred years old. Canadians of Punjabi origin are not new to Canada; they have made a critical part of our cultural mosaic for over a century. So I thank all of you for bringing this rich culture to Canada as part of our diversity which is one of our unique strengths. It's a pleasure for me today to be here to introduce our nation's leader, the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper. You know that he has now been Prime Minister for two and a half years, and in that time he has worked hard to deliver results for all Canadians, including new Canadians by doing such things as cutting in half our right of landing fee, increasing funding for immigrant settlement organizations, providing and creating a national agency for foreign credential recognition. But he has also recognized important historic events. It was on this stage two years ago that he was the first Prime Minister in Canadian history to acknowledge the historic injustice and tragic nature of the events that occurred in Vancouver harbor and Burrard Inlet in the spring and summer of 1914. You all know the tragic story of the *Komagata Maru* when some 370 immigrants from, principally from Punjab of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu faiths came to this country as British subjects and after a sad period of waiting in the port of Vancouver, were turned back because of the continuous journey policy. The Prime Minister acknowledged this event on this stage two years ago. He undertook to consult with all Canadians, particularly those of South Asian origin about how best to address the issue. He charged Parliamentary Secretary Abbot to do that and I am pleased that we have since announced funding through the Community Historic and National Historic Recognition programmes to acknowledge, commemorate, and educate future generations about that sad event. And so, I am proud to be a member of Prime Minister Harper's government; I am proud of the leadership, the strong leadership he is providing for our country here at home and on the world stage. And so ladies and gentlemen, will you please join with me in welcoming here to the podium Canada's leader, the Right Honourable, the Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

Stephen Harper (Prime Minister): Good Afternoon, *Bonne après-midi*, *Sat Sri Akaal*, *Nameste*, *As-Salāmu Alaykum*. Thank you Jason for that introduction. Greetings to my colleagues, Nina Grewal, Jim Abbot, and Russ Heaper, and fellow Canadians. I'd like to begin today by thanking the president of the Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, Sahib Thind, for inviting me once again to this spectacular showcase of Punjabi culture. The vibrant dance and musical traditions, exquisite art and timeless literature being celebrated here today are the fruits of a millennial old civilization whose influence spans the globe. Canada now shares this rich cultural legacy; it has become an integral part of our own cultural diversity. [French Translation] Today over one million Canadians are of South Asian descent. These hard working men and women passionately

devoted to their families and communities are helping make our country even stronger for the generations yet to come, our country that affords opportunity to all, regardless of their background, our country that offers sanctuary to victims of violence and persecution, our country of freedom and democracy, of prosperity and peace, second to none in the world. As Canadians we have before us, and before our children and grandchildren, a future of literally unlimited possibility. A lot of that promise stems from the confidence, the ideas, and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers drawn to our shores by the promise of a new and better life. Canada is renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants. But like all countries, our record isn't perfect. We haven't always lived up to our own ideals. One such failure, as has been mentioned, was the detention and turning away of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, an event that caused much hardship for its passengers, 376 subjects of the British crown from Punjab, and which for many of them ended in terrible tragedy. Two years ago, I stood before you and made a commitment and since then, we have acted on that. [French Translation]. This May the Government of Canada secured passage of the unanimous motion in the House of Commons recognizing the *Komagata Maru* tragedy and apologizing to those who were directly affected. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada. [Harper pauses to drink water]. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am officially conveying as Prime Minister that apology. Now friends, many Canadians have worked long and hard to secure recognition for this historic event. I'd like to thank from this community, the Professor Mohan Singh Foundation, the Khalsa Diwan Society, the *Komagata Maru* Descendants Association, and Community Leader, Tarlok Sablok, for their persistent and passionate dedication to this issue over the years. I also wish to acknowledge, I also wish to acknowledge my own colleagues, Nina and Gurmant Grewal, Parliamentary Secretary Jim Abbot, and Minister Jason Kenney for the work they have done to help all Canadians come to terms with this sad chapter in our history. We cannot change the events of the past; we cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country, and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future. In closing, I'd like to once again thank the organizers of this event for inviting me to once again be part of this tremendous festival. One of the most rewarding things about being Prime Minister is being able to travel across our great country and to meet the hardworking men and women of all faiths and cultures who are making Canada such a success. We should all be proud of our country and of each other and work together to build an even stronger Canada for all of us. Please enjoy the rest of the festivities. Thank you. *Merci Beaucoup*. God bless our land.

Note

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