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Performing the *Komagata Maru*: Theatre and the Work of Memory

ANNE MURPHY

ਜੀ ਆਇਆਂ ਨੂੰ

ਮੈਂ ਅਕਸਰ ਗਲਾਂ ਕਰਦਾ ਹਾਂ
ਘਾਹ ਨਾਲ
ਦੌਰਖਤਾਂ ਨਾਲ
ਤੇ ਦਰਿਆ ਨਾਲ
ਕਦੇ ਨਹੀਂ ਕਿਹਾ ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ
ਮੇਰਾ ਏਥੇ ਆਉਣਾ ਖੁਸ਼-
ਆਮਦੀਦ ਨਹੀਂ
ਮੈਂ ਹਵਾ ਨੂੰ ਪੱਤਿਆਂ ਨਾਲ
ਤਬਸਰਾ ਕਰਦਿਆਂ ਸੁਣਿਆਂ ਹੈ
ਨਿਕ ਵੀ ਇਸ਼ਾਰਾ ਨਫਰਤ ਦਾ
ਨਹੀਂ
ਮੀਹਾਂ ਅਤੇ ਬਰਫ
ਮੇਰੇ ਦੋਸਤਾਂ ਦੀ ਤਰ੍ਹਾਂ
ਮੋਢਿਆਂ 'ਤੇ ਸਪਰਸ਼ ਨੇ ਕਰਦੇ
ਹਰ ਸਵੇਰ ਪੰਛੀ ਆਉਂਦੇ ਹਨ
ਮੇਰੇ ਘਰ ਦੀ ਬਾਰੀ ਥੱਲੇ ਗੀਤ
ਗਾਉਂਦੇ ਹਨ
ਨਵੇਂ ਦਿਨ ਲਈ
ਨਵੀਂ ਜਗ੍ਹਾ 'ਤੇ ਜੀ ਆਇਆਂ
ਆਖਦੇ ਹਨ
ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਕਿਉਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਸੀ ਪੁੱਛਿਆ
ਗਿਆ
ਜਦੋਂ ਮੇਰੇ ਕਾਮਾਗਾਟਾ ਮਾਰੂ ਨੂੰ
ਵਾਪਸ ਭੇਜਣ ਦਾ ਕੀਤਾ ਗਿਆ
ਸੀ ਫੈਸਲਾ

jī āiān nūn

*main aksar gallān kardā
hān
ghāh nāl
darakkhtān nāl
te dariā nāl
kade nahīn kihā unhān
merā ethe āunā khush-
āmdīd nahīn
main hawā nūn pattiā nāl
tabsarā kardiān suniān hai
ik vī ishārā nafarat dā
nahīn
mīnh ate barf
mere dostān dī tarhān
modhiān 'te sparash ne
karde
har saver pañchī āunde han
mere ghar dī bārī thalle gīt
gāunde han
navēn dīn lāi
navīn jagāh 'te jī āiān
ākhdē han
unhān nūn kiun nahīn sī
pucchiā
giā
jadoñ mere kāmāgātā mārū
nūn
wāpas bhejañ dā kitā giā sī
faisla*

Welcome

I often speak
to the grass
the trees
and the river
they never tell me
I wasn't welcome
I've heard the wind
chatting with leaves
not once a note of hatred
the rain and the snow
touch me on my shoulders
as many other friends do
the birds come every morning
and sing outside my window
welcoming me into a new
place
a new day
why weren't they consulted
when the decision was made
to send my *Komagata Maru*
away

— Sadhu Binning, *No More Watnoñ Dūr* (10-11)

I don't see art as being decorative.

— Sharon Pollock, "Musings" (35)

Introduction

THE SUMMER AND EARLY FALL of 2014 were marked by a series of events in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and Vancouver Island meant to commemorate the centen-

ary of the *Komagata Maru*'s arrival in Canada and, two months later, its deportation to India. Most of the ship's 376 passengers, all British Indian subjects, were disallowed in 1914 from entering Canada under three orders-in-council passed by the dominion government to amend Canada's Immigration Act, reflecting a much broader move against Asian immigration in the period (Cullinane; Lee; Mar; Roy; Wallace). They were forced to return to India, where they were received as a threat to public order and fired upon by British Indian forces (Johnston; Kazimi, *Continuous*; Ward). Activities for the centenary, organized by community organizations, arts and educational institutions, and scholars in British Columbia and across Canada, included a digital archive project at Simon Fraser University Library (komagatamaru-journey.ca); an exhibition of contemporary works reflecting on and responding to the history of the *Komagata Maru* at the Surrey Arts Centre entitled *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru*; portable physical and online exhibitions by the Sikh Heritage Museum of Canada (shmc.ca); and a welcome ceremony organized by the Musqueam people to symbolize the welcome that should have awaited the *Komagata Maru* upon its arrival a century earlier (Singh). Centenary events do not stand in isolation, however, and must be seen as part of a decades-long effort to commemorate the *Komagata Maru*, mainly by the Punjabi Canadian community.¹

Such events demonstrate one aspect of the living form of the past in the present, driven by both memory and the continuing resonances of the past with the present. There is, of course, a historical past that does matter at the core of such commemorative engagements. Without the ability to tell something approaching a true story of the past, all memories too easily become fictions. Representations of the *Komagata Maru* and other exclusionary incidents, for example, are too easily masked by the rhetoric of multiculturalism in Canada today, as Renisa Mawani ("Cleansing") and others have argued, erasing a history of exclusion that has been both pervasive and recurrent. The work of scholars such as historian Hugh Johnston and filmmaker Ali Kazimi, therefore, is crucial in both documenting the past and telling its story.

At the same time, understanding how and why memories work in themselves is also crucial for understanding both the past and the present, and the different presents and futures enabled by the imaginative act of calling up/upon the past. This is indeed what Sadhu

Binning's poem, "*jī āiān nūn*" or "Welcome," provided at the opening of this essay, demonstrates so vividly: the poet's present is tied to the past of the *Komagata Maru* through a shared history of exclusion, and the physical landscape of British Columbia provides a material link that subverts time and creates personal connections across it. It is this enlivened landscape that the author shares with the *Komagata Maru*, giving him ownership: "*jadoñ mere kāmāgātā mārū nūn / wāpas bhejan dā kitā giā sī / faislā*" when the decision was made to send *my Komagata Maru* away" (Binning, *No More Watnon Dūr* 10-11; emphasis added). Through re-presenting the story of the *Komagata Maru* as *his own*, Binning makes that past an intimate part of his personal (and our, as witnesses) unfolding present. All our choices about what to consider of the past are shaped by such intimacies, making all historical representation a sometimes tacitly presentist concern.

This essay compares and analyzes three theatrical representations of the *Komagata Maru* incident: *The Komagata Maru Incident* by Sharon Pollock (first performed in 1976; in English), *Kāmāgātā Mārū* by Ajmer Rode (written and first performed in 1979 and published in 1984; in Punjabi),² and *Samundarī Sher Nāl Takkar* or "The Conflict with the *Sea Lion*," coauthored by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal (published in 1989 in *Pikeṭ Lain*; in Punjabi). Pollock's play now forms an important part of the Canadian canon; the works by Binning and Hundal and Rode represent signal Punjabi-language efforts to remember this troubled past and bring it into the experience of an also troubled present (although Binning and Hundal's play was not performed prior to 2014). All three plays also represent a broader moment in Canadian theatre when a self-consciously Canadian past was a preoccupation but when the "celebration" of this past was engaged in critical terms (Holder 101). Collectively, the plays show how this incident has been remembered and how the past has been configured over time, calling for a recognition of the past in the present and highlighting particular modes of defiance and important reconfigurations of community in opposition to a dominant "white Canada" discourse.

The analysis presented here was itself performed as a theatrical production undertaken in early May 2014, in which sections of these three plays were staged in a single production at the University of British Columbia and Surrey Arts Centre. Selections from the three plays were integrated into a single program through the construction of a framing

narrative, which I wrote, to explore how each configured memory of the incident. That production (and therefore this essay) are thus also examples of the commemorative events in 2014. Selections from Pollock's play were performed by students from the Department of Theatre and Film at UBC and directed by UBC MFA student Kathleen Duborg; selections from the two Punjabi plays were performed by members of the Surrey-based Punjabi-language theatre company Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre, under the direction of one of the group's founding members, Roopinder Sharma. The sets were produced by artist Raghavendra Rao K.V. (also a founding member of Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre) and his students from Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology (Bangalore, India) in the fall of 2013 (see Figure 1). The framing narrative was read by myself, Ranbir Johal (Rangmanch founding member, Punjabi instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, and PhD student at UBC), and, at different times, by Professor Rana Nayar of Panjab University, Chandigarh, and Sukhwant Hundal, coauthor of one of the plays and lecturer in Punjabi language at UBC (see Figure 2).³



Figure 1. Students from Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology (Bangalore, India) explored the history of the *Komagata Maru* and produced sets for the production in collaboration with artist Raghavendra Rao K.V. The sets consisted of painted backdrops, “furniture” painted on cardboard boxes, and projections that utilized manipulations/enhancements of archival photographs associated with the incident as well as individual works by Rao. Here we see the sets with the entire cast, at the end of the production. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.



Figure 2: The production was fully bilingual, with surtitling in English during Punjabi portions and the reverse for English portions. The narrators of the production spoke in both languages, framing the selections of the three plays to provide continuity and analysis. Pictured here are Sukhwant Hundal, Ranbir Johal, and Anne Murphy. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

This essay mirrors the performance, drawing out three key interventions that each play makes in the formation of our pasts in the present. The framing narrative highlighted these themes as a way to weave the scenes together, exploring (1) the relationship of the present with the past; (2) the gendering of resistance and, within the specific features of our production, the complexities of the racialized body; and (3) the contradictions within Canada itself that a broader history of the *Komagata Maru* can reveal. The analysis presented here is thus as it was performed, and is accompanied by photographs that illustrate that performance.

Contexts for Remembering

We can understand these plays as expressions of a larger changing Canadian national imaginary as well as a transnational one. The Punjabi works examined here signal activities that have taken place in Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley since the late 1960s, when the numbers of Punjabis in British Columbia began to increase significantly (Binning, “Punjabi”; Murphy, “Modern”). The first Punjabi com-

munity-based literary organization in the region, the Punjabi Literary Association of Vancouver, was founded in 1973, a year after the related Punjabi Cultural Association was founded. Some of those involved in these organizations — such as Sukhwant Hundal, who now teaches at UBC, Ajmer Rode, and Sadhu Binning, who formerly taught at UBC — wrote these plays in the context of their broader work as writers and community activists (Murphy, “Modern”). Binning has noted that he coauthored the play with Hundal “out of anger.” He had finally decided, at that time, to call himself Canadian, and he was angry about the sense of exclusion that he experienced within that decision (Playwrights’ Panel). Hundal, following Binning, described their effort as resulting from “being tired of explaining ourselves. We wanted to turn the lens onto white people, and stop telling them about us” (Playwrights’ Panel).

The plays can also be seen to represent a particular moment in the broader Canadian social imagination, when Canada moved toward a stated commitment to multiculturalism through the 1970s and 1980s, culminating with passage of the Multiculturalism Act in 1988. It is no coincidence that this is the period in which the three plays in question were written and/or produced. Perhaps Pollock’s play in particular reflects this national orientation: it can be situated among a range of works from the 1970s that was “self-consciously ‘Canadian,’ preoccupied with issues of identity and nationalism” (Holder 100). At the same time, Pollock’s engagement with the Canadian past took shape not in a celebratory mode but as a “de-mythologizing process” (Nothof, “Crossing” 82) and with a focus on what Heidi Holder calls “defeat and disaster” (102). Pollock has indeed distanced herself and her work from a particularly “Canadian” stance (“Interview” 167-79; Playwrights’ Panel). As noted, it was Binning’s sense of exclusion *within* claiming Canadianness that inspired his work. As such, the play he coauthored is an expression of that claim to being Canadian, within its critique.⁴ Pollock’s disavowal of a “Canadian reading” of her plays, and also of a Canadian identity, stood in contrast to the Punjabi playwright’s parallel claim to these; this provoked a lively debate in the Symposium that accompanied the performance (Playwrights’ Panel).⁵

The Punjabi plays must also be located in a broader transnational history, reflecting a commitment to the expression of a progressive and secular ethos that characterizes postcolonial theatrical work in India in broad terms. Modern Punjabi theatrical work, in general, grows out of the

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which itself developed out of the Progressive Writers Movement, which from the 1930s on had strong international affiliations in the context of a global anti-fascist and leftist movement in the arts (Gopal). IPTA was formed in the early 1940s, with a "new emphasis on Indianness, a new enthusiasm for the culture of the people coupled with a fervent post-1942 patriotism that condemned alien rule in its entirety" (Dalmia 153). This formulation dismissed differentiation between Indian elite and popular cultural production (161). The remoulding of traditional or folk theatre forms for contemporary purposes was one aspect of the IPTA's approach, and it accompanied experimentation with European theatrical forms and "realism" in urban contexts, pushing work produced in this vein out of a dogmatic and patronizing "use of tradition" and into something more experimental. The work of Binning, Hundal, and Rode reflects such theatrical and progressive commitments, embracing aspects of a street theatre ethos with a focus on the lived experiences of non-elites; the authors thus wrote within a larger Punjabi tradition as they wrote their Canadian plays.

There are further circumstances specific to Punjabi and Punjabi Canadian history in this period: Operation Bluestar, and the subsequent anti-Sikh pogrom in urban centres in north India in 1984, and the 1985 Air India bombing (which had local connections in British Columbia). Rode's play was completed before these events, and Binning and Hundal's after them; these works can be seen as counterpoints to growing political unrest in Punjab and concern for this within the diaspora, especially after 1984. The Punjabi-language plays might thus be seen as efforts of their authors to pull attention to the history and experience of the Punjabi Canadian community, and away from religious and political divisions in Punjab, to address urgent social problems such as racism in Canada for the South Asian/Punjabi community (and, in other works by these authors, issues *within* the Punjabi Canadian community, such as female infanticide). Such interventions are parallel to broader "re-homing" efforts (Zhang), perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the renaming of the journal *Watanon Dūr* — "Far from the Homeland" — founded in 1973 in Greater Vancouver and published until 1986. After the journal ceased publication, it was revived under a new name, *Watan*, or "Homeland," which continued until 1995; it was brought to life again in 2007 as an online magazine.⁶ The "homeland" in this way had come home to Canada.

The Plays and Performances

The three plays are distinctive in their approaches to the *Komagata Maru* incident yet intersect in important ways (Murphy, “*Komagata Maru* as Performance”). We see in all three plays, for instance, elaboration of the imagined dialogues among racist white Canadian officials. In Binning and Hundal’s work, this emphasis is almost exclusive. We briefly see in their play only one Punjabi character: the community leader Sohan Lal, who speaks only one line directly to the audience (another Punjabi voice is mediated through a newspaper account). The Punjabi passengers exist otherwise as silenced phantoms: this choice suggests the complete exclusion of the passengers, their total lack of voice within the traditional archives available through the state and media. In this way, the voice of racist Canada prevails. Yet, at the same time, the play challenges the victory of the racist Canadian position in its very title: “The Conflict with the *Sea Lion*” refers to an attempt by Vancouver police to board the ship through the use of a boat called the *Sea Lion* and the successful resistance of the passengers to the attack. The authors thus highlight this one instance of triumph to underscore the fractured and incomplete nature of the victory of the Canadian state. As I will discuss, Binning and Hundal also call into question the seemingly monolithic power of that state and the shape of its society.

Pollock and Rode present the voices of Punjabis on the ship; Rode also presents them on the shore. In his play, we hear from Punjabi protagonists fully: he portrays efforts on the shore to help the passengers and the efforts of Gurdit Singh, who chartered the ship, and others on the ship to confront racist Canadian policy and respond to an evolving situation (see Figure 3). Pollock’s portrayal of Punjabi voices is far more limited but finds a parallel in Rode’s play: both Pollock and Rode feature a single woman on the ship who speaks for all of the passengers (see Figure 4). Her voice provides a kind of high moral commentary on what transpires, filled with hope at the beginning and condemnation and powerful defiance at the end. This woman stands in for the passengers as a group: she describes their hope, disappointment, and suffering during the excruciating two-month wait in the harbour as officials stall immigration processes and attempt to force the ship to leave under duress; most of the passengers are later forced to wait longer as their cases are adjudicated in court. This is the only Punjabi voice in Pollock’s play, and it calls everything into question. In Rode’s play, there are numerous

Punjabi characters; as we reach the end of the play, we also hear other voices — unnamed, disembodied — that intervene and call both *for* and *against* a moral accounting of what has transpired.⁷

By performing these plays in a single production, we attempted to highlight these connections as well as distinctions. The production was entirely bilingual: all three plays were presented in their original languages, and access to them across the linguistic divide was provided through surtitling. The overarching narration, performed by speakers at stage left and stage right, moved in and out of the two languages equally. As a result, the production was perhaps most enjoyable to those who could understand both Punjabi and English, and significant proportions of the UBC and (particularly) Surrey audiences were able to do so. Yet distinctions were vividly apparent in the responses of the audiences to the different plays: the Punjabi plays elicited a far greater response in Surrey, where the audience was lively and vocal, whereas the UBC audience was relatively subdued. The playwrights attended the 3 May UBC performance after attending a related symposium entitled *Performing the Postcolonial* at the university earlier that day. It was a goal of the project overall to bring together these linguistically (and, as I will discuss further, racially) distinct audiences in a single conversation.



Figure 3 (left): Gurdit Singh, who chartered the *Komagata Maru* from a Japanese company, discusses the situation with Daljit Singh, another passenger. Actors: Bhupinder Dhaliwal as Gurdit Singh and Harjot Singh Sahota as Daljit Singh. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

Figure 4 (right): The role of the single Punjabi woman was performed by Jasleen Kaur for both the Pollock play and the Rode play. This brought narrative and visual continuity to the performance and allowed us to breach the distinctions between the plays in linguistic and racial/bodily terms. Here Kaur delivers the final lines of the production, after the entire cast has appeared, mixed together, and the two Hopkinsons — one from the Punjabi-language plays and one from the English-language play — have met on stage. See Figure 9. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

The Presence of the Past

As a way to call attention to the relevance of the *Komagata Maru* incident persists in the present, within the lives of Punjabi Canadians, Rode's play opens with an exchange between a young woman and an old man who is looking for the Second Avenue gurdwara, the historical centre of the South Asian community in Vancouver before it was sold and the gurdwara was moved to South Vancouver (see Figure 5):

Young Woman: Sir? Have you lost your way?

Old Man: No, daughter. I haven't lost my way. Isn't this Second Avenue? There should be a Sikh Temple here somewhere. That's where I am going. Do you know where it is? (9)⁸



Figure 5: Rode's play opens with this scene between an old man, who was a passenger on the *Komagata Maru*, and a young Punjabi Canadian woman in Vancouver. "Performing the *Komagata Maru*" also opens with this scene, inviting the audience to reflect on the contexts for remembering the ship in Vancouver today. Actors: Balkarn K. Dhanoa and Gurcharn Talewalia. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

The scene proceeds with the old man revealing that he was a passenger on the ship and that he has come to pay his respects to the site of the gurdwara, where the South Asian community of Vancouver had gathered under the leadership of Hasan Rahim, Bhag Singh, and others

to support the passengers and battle both negative popular opinion and the Canadian state. He explains to the young woman the importance of the place:

Old Man: This was that Gurdwara, where the Hindustanis came and made historical decisions, and spilled their own blood trying to see those decisions through. In this very place the struggle for the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* took place. Here, leaders like Balwant Singh, Sohan Lal, and Hasan Rahim brought a spark of life back into their downtrodden countrymen. Bhag Singh was martyred here. In this place, Mewa Singh received the inspiration for his own sacrifice. And now, what is left? What has become of it all? (11)

The scene progresses with the old man grieving the loss of the Second Avenue temple. The young woman then asserts her need to hear the story of the *Komagata Maru* and her desire, as a student of history, to write about it. He refuses, describing the dramatic physical impact that telling the story would have on him. The student protests: "Why not Baba Ji? . . . If we were unable to keep the Gurdwara as a way of preserving our history, we can at least write about it. Please. Tell me your story of the *Komagata Maru*, in detail" (12). The scene ends as the two seek a place along the shoreline to talk, "where the voices on the *Komagata Maru* still echo in the waves" (13).

This scene functions in Rode's play as a call to the Punjabi Canadian community to remember its history. It is very much an internal call: while the scene comprises the opening of the original published Punjabi version of the play, the English version published by Rode (and translated by him and Surjeet Kalsey) in 1985 does not feature the scene, "at the request of the author" (Rode and Kalsey iii). This is in keeping with his approach: Rode sought to educate the Punjabi Canadian community about its history by providing detailed portraits of key figures, both Punjabi and not, within a broad historical account (Rode, Interview). We can, of course, see all of the plays in this light: as calls for an accounting of the Canadian past that exposes the circumstances that undergird the present. As Pollock has noted, "as a Canadian, I feel that much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us. Until we recognise our past, we cannot change our future" (*Komagata Maru* 98). Indeed, as Sherrill Grace and Gabriele Helms point out, research on actual events was at the centre of Pollock's theatrical method in writing her play (89).

This connection between past and present was a core theme explored in the production of the three plays. The framing narrative created to weave the three plays together referenced the living memory of the *Komagata Maru* and its connections to ongoing questions of justice; for instance, as the production closed, a narrator asked (in Punjabi, with English surtitles),

What would happen if we were to write another play about the *Komagata Maru* today? Perhaps that play would include more about the First Nations and their prior harrowing conflict with the same forces that sought to exclude the *Komagata Maru*. About the other people who were shut out. There are always more stories to tell, more injustices to expose, more pasts to relive and bring into our present. And more injustices of the present to call attention to. (Murphy, “Performing”)

The narration was meant to connect the drive to remember the past with social justice imperatives of the present; exclusive attention to the former suggests that such concerns are comfortably past, while attention only to the latter preserves the idea of a normative “just Canada” that might fail to live up to its ideals in pragmatic terms today but is somehow intact (and eternal). Attention to both allows for consideration of the fragility and incompleteness of the promise of justice over time and in multiple instances, and the need for active participation in the demand for its fulfillment. As noted below, such engagement fundamentally entails recognition and action regarding the “specter of indigeneity” discussed by Mawani, which operates both throughout the history of the *Komagata Maru* and today in multiple ways, relegated to a past within colonial formulations but always present in spectral terms (see below and Murphy, “*Komagata Maru*”).

Gendered and Racialized Bodies in Critique

The historical archive of the *Komagata Maru* — captured in the records of the state, newspaper articles, and a few photographs — is dominated by the voices of men. Women do make strong appearances in the plays, however, as playwrights attempt to imagine what Ajmer Rode has described as “what must have been there” (Interview). We see this in the Punjabi woman who stands in for the ship in Rode’s and Pollock’s plays: she speaks for the mostly male passengers. She is not a fiction,

for we know that there were several women on the ship. We know little about them, however, and the playwrights make these figures central in their works. They go yet further: they introduce female characters who do not feature in the historical record. These figures function mainly as means to express dissent and critique.

Pollock's play takes place in a brothel, a symbol of moral ambiguity, reminiscent of the bankrupt nature of the state in its dealings with the *Komagata Maru* (and its patriarchal nature; see Grace and Helms 95). Evy is its proprietor, and William Hopkinson, the immigration officer, has a relationship with her, despite his association with law enforcement (demonstrating again the moral contradictions at the heart of this story; see Figures 6 and 7). As in Binning and Hundal's play, the focus is on discourse among whites; Pollock has noted that, as a white person, she did not think that the Punjabi story was hers to tell (Playwrights' Panel). She counters the state's case against the *Komagata Maru* with a defiant voice — Evy's — that rejects with increasing urgency the premises upon which Hopkinson's case against the ship and its passengers is based. She questions his rationale and his methods, such as when she indicates the arrival of Hopkinson's informant in the Punjabi community, Bela Singh:



Figure 6: Evy and Hopkinson on stage together. Actors: Ghazal Azarbad and Jeremy Odriscoll of UBC Theatre and Film. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.



Figure 7: Evy and Sophie, who works in Evy's brothel: two women who challenge Hopkinson's authority directly and indirectly. The role of Sophie was played by Morgan Churla. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

EVY Your rat again.

HOPKINSON (*preparing to leave*) Don't call him that.

EVY I don't like rats coming around.

HOPKINSON Let's not start this again.

EVY He's always coming round and when he does, off you go, poof!

HOPKINSON It'll only take a minute.

EVY My mother always said, don't snitch, and don't play with snitchers. Didn't your mother ever tell you that? (103-04)

Evy is uncomfortable on multiple levels with the deceit and trickery at the core of the state's response to the *Komagata Maru*. She exposes, for instance, Hopkinson's efforts to use a German national, Georg Braun, to his own advantage in implicating the passengers of the ship in a fabricated plot with Germany (121-23). She questions the racialization of the *Komagata Maru*'s passengers — their designation as "others." As the play progresses, her defiant critique emerges as condemnation, and Evy intervenes in Hopkinson's machinations to subvert his interests. At one point, she receives a note from his informant and does not pass it on to Hopkinson. He is indignant at discovering this:

HOPKINSON You wanted to make me look bad, is that it?

EVY No.

HOPKINSON I look bad enough then they'll dump me. Is that what you want?

EVY No.

HOPKINSON And off we go! Something else, somewhere else, eh?

EVY What's wrong with that? People do it!

HOPKINSON Not me.

EVY Don't you like honest work?

HOPKINSON That's a funny remark from a whore!

EVY You want to know why I threw out your note? I'll tell you why! I'm a whore and what you do is offensive to me! What you do would gag me. I'm a whore and when I look at your job, I could vomit. (115)

There is a parallel role in Rode's play. In Pollock's play, the insertion of a white voice critical of the white racist actions of state actors provides a place that a white audience of today might inhabit in relation to the story of the *Komagata Maru*, an alternative that failed to prevail in its time but might be possible today. In Rode's Punjabi-language play, we can see this character as fulfilling a related but different role: that is, allowing Punjabi viewers to imagine the possibility of inclusion, a society available *for them* now that was unrealized in the past. The white female character in Rode's play, Jean, therefore represents a kind of promise, a gesture toward a possible future in which Punjabis and whites share a common landscape; in its engendered mode, however, it remains only that.

Jean, the white female character in Rode's play, is a secretary in the office of the immigration official, Malcolm Reed. In her first appearance in the play, it is clear that Hopkinson is attracted to her, and they discuss developments with the *Komagata Maru* (see Figure 8). She makes it clear at the outset that she does not agree with his efforts, and her voice becomes increasingly strident over the course of the play:

HOPKINSON You listen well. When the Hindus started to come here 8 to 10 years ago, everyone started to worry. Everyone thought, if the Hindus keep coming, our Canada will be full of them in no time and white folks will get squeezed out.

JEAN The same way that the native people here were squeezed out when we came?

HOPKINSON Yes . . . no, no. We whites are a superior race, the Hindus can never be made to understand this.

JEAN I don't agree with you, but go on. . . . Then what happened?

HOPKINSON Then the Canadian Secretary went to London and things were secretly settled with the British and Indian governments: tell the world that all citizens of the empire are equal . . . but allow whom you want into Canada.⁹

JEAN So this is the "British Justice" that we are all so proud of? (24-25)



Figure 8: In Rode's play, Jean and Hopkinson interact in the Immigration Office. Actors: Balkarn K. Dhanoa as Jean and Ravneet Singh as Hopkinson. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

Jean calls attention to the larger principles at stake in the state's treatment of the *Komagata Maru* and to the question of "British justice" that haunts its story. We also hear of the First Nations, the spectre of violence and exclusion that haunts the story of Canada itself. The racist treatment of Punjabis, Rode makes clear, is not just indicative of a general attitude toward Asian immigration but also characteristic of the treatment of the First Nations and their racialization and marginalization within a larger effort to found a "white Canada."

The new voices injected into the historical record complicate and oppose it. The role of women in both Rode's and Pollock's plays is a kind of moral accounting, a position of critique. Jean and Evy show us possible layers of opinion among white Canadians that audience members today can recognize or even inhabit, depending on their personal positions in relation to whiteness. As Craig Walker has noted in his discussion of work by Pollock, she appeals "to our common personal experience and social ethics, and to our willingness to project ourselves into the circumstances of the plays" (136). Both Rode and Pollock create the possibility of the refusal of racism by presenting characters who attempt to oppose racist ideology and practice (though ultimately these characters fail to effect real change). The assessment by Grace and Helms of these female characters dismisses such a stance; they argue that "the two white women have little agency beyond their roles as whores on the brothel-stage of their lives" and that "the Sikh Woman on the ship is even more marginalized" (95). She "remains the Other, a sign merely of her own, and child's, silencing and abjection, in a construction that comes dangerously close to reorientalizing her" (95). Although such a critique has validity, it is not fully convincing: these figures stand in direct opposition to the racist Canadian imaginary, with increasing urgency, and though thwarted, they do express agency in articulating such a position. This itself is an act of subversion, and it represents the beginning of an anti-racist politics. Holder's analysis of the ways in which Pollock's characters engage with personal conflicts is more promising in that it takes more seriously the tensions that Pollock produces within the play (103 ff.). Like Binning and Hundal's portrayal of the *silence* and exclusion of Punjabis, Rode's and Pollock's portrayal of these women in constrained terms highlights this *actual* aspect of their lives as a part of that time and place. The playwrights in this way call attention to marginalization and limited agency and to the possible emergence of other options within that experience. Both must be recognized.

The parallel provided by Jean and Hopkinson, in Rode's play, and Evy and Hopkinson, in Pollock's play, was enacted as a central counterpoint within the performance. The stage was split into two sections: on stage right, the Pollock scenes with Evy in the brothel were enacted; on stage left, the scenes with Jean in the Immigration Office were enacted. Other scenes traversed the space upstage. The linguistic differences between the plays racially marked the casts as well: with the exception of

one actor who performed in both Pollock's play and Rode's play, in the role of the single Punjabi woman on the ship, the casts of the Punjabi plays were ethnically Punjabi, whereas none of the cast for the Pollock play was (one was of Iranian background, and the remainder had white European roots). Jasleen Kaur, the actor who played the woman on the ship in both Pollock's play and Rode's play, therefore had a crucial role in connecting the plays, moving through racialized and linguistic difference and marking a place of continuity on the stage (see Figure 4). The narrators, white and Punjabi, also contributed to this blurring, with all speaking both in Punjabi and in English at different times. The actors in the Punjabi-language plays also subverted simple racialization by speaking in Punjabi when portraying white characters such as Conservative Member of Parliament (and advocate of "white Canada" policies) H.H. Stevens, the lawyer who fought on behalf of the passengers Edward Bird, and Hopkinson.

Jean and Hopkinson, Evy and Hopkinson: these two relationships mirror each other in the two plays by Rode and Pollock, providing a powerful meeting point between them. These two women reveal the



Figure 9: At the end of our production, the two Hopkinsons met, surrounded by the entire cast. The cast members then left the stage, and the final scene was performed by Jasleen Kaur as the single Punjabi woman on the ship (see Figure 4). Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

bankrupt nature of Hopkinson's work and, through him, Canada's exclusionary policies and actions. In our production, we foregrounded this mirroring to demonstrate the parallel interventions of these playwrights in the representation of the *Komagata Maru*, through the visual juxtaposition of the "Punjabi-language (ethnic Punjabi) Hopkinson" with the "English-language (ethnic white) Hopkinson" (see Figure 9), which took place as the entire cast mingled on stage behind them in the final minutes of the play. Racialization of the bodies on stage was thus consciously made and unmade, in tension at times with linguistic difference.

Turning the Lens Back

The effort to give voice to resistance is at the centres of all three plays. As has been mentioned, the title of Binning and Hundal's play refers to the success of the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* in repelling an attempt by state forces to board and take control of the ship. The female characters introduced into the story of the *Komagata Maru* also represent a form of resistance, providing an alternative view of white BC society, in opposition to the exclusionary vision of "white Canada." Resistance is accompanied by critique of Canadian society itself, an exploration in all three plays of the contradictions inherent in white society in British Columbia in 1914. This is a crucial political intervention in each: to turn the lens back on white society and complicate the simple terms set by racialized discourse.

Binning and Hundal's play opens with the reception of the *Komagata Maru*'s arrival in Vancouver harbour. The racism of newspapers and politicians is presented first (see Figure 10), the frame that also in many ways creates the *Komagata Maru* incident, setting the conditions of possibility for it:

Actor 1: Preparation for the attack of the Hindus on Canada. A ship named the *Komagata Maru*, filled to the brim with 700 Hindus, has set sail from Hong Kong for Vancouver.
[From the other side of the stage or elsewhere in the sea, another individual enters, reading a newspaper]

Actor 2: We have no need in Canada for the yellow and brown races. Their arrival here means danger for white people.
[A third actor enters and stands near the first person, perhaps holding a placard]

Actor 3: Right thinking people know that Hindustanis should not be allowed to come here. There is no benefit to them coming here — except perhaps to perform in the circus! (Binning and Hundal 185-86)



Figure 10: Archival images of period headlines related to the *Komagata Maru* were projected as actors performed this scene. The narrators of the production also entered the performance of the *plays* themselves; here Sukhwant Hundal enters the scene of the play that he coauthored with Sadhu Binning, in the 9 May 2014 Surrey Arts Centre performance. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

The scene ends with the Punjabi-language actors portraying white characters chanting racist anti-South Asian slogans (in Punjabi). The play continues with a portrayal of the reception of the *Komagata Maru* on shore: both those who oppose the ship and those who welcome it, such as lawyer Edward Bird, who pleads the case of the passengers in court, and H. Fitzgerald, a BC Socialist Party leader. It also portrays the state forces aligned against the ship and its passengers; the pressure brought to bear on the captain, Yamamoto, to leave the harbour, with or without the permission of the charterer; and the gathering of a force designed to compel the ship to leave. The play functions in a sense as a meditation on the workings of the state and the public sphere in creating this incident.

The white voice of the state is a relentless presence in the plays. In Pollock's play, it takes shape in the enigmatic figure of T.S., the mysterious master of ceremonies of her circus-drama (see Figure 11). As Grace and Helms describe, "He sets the stage, arouses the characters to action, soft-shoes from one episode to the next, spouts the racist propaganda of government officials, and reminds us constantly that everything we see — *and live* — is theatre, . . . a product of political legerdemain" (87). He opens the play in a carnivalesque mode: "Ladies and gentlemen. Lest we forget. The *Komagata Maru*. A Japanese steamer chock-full of brown-skin Hindus headed for predominantly pale Vancouver, and entry into whitish Canada. The *Komagata Maru* in blue Canadian waters!" (102). Vivid references to colour persist throughout Pollock's play, drawing attention to the ways in which race haunts this story; it was all the more vivid in our production, of course, in which mostly Punjabi and white actors interacted on the same stage but mostly in separate scenes and languages. The carnival becomes only more absurd as the play continues, full of contradictions and betrayals. T.S. assumes the voice of the state, directing things in an all-knowing, all-seeing, but distant mode, disallowing any sense of empathy that might arise in the tool that he uses to enact his machinations, William Hopkinson:

HOPKINSON Sir, when I boarded the ship for inspection, they seized me and were ready to take off in our launch and head for shore, patrol boats or not. They were desperate. They said they'd rather be shot dead than die of hunger and thirst. I felt it only — humanitarian to grant one week's provision.

T.S. You've enabled them to hang on. That's what you've done!

HOPKINSON I saw the mother and child —

T.S. Now where's the incentive to leave?

HOPKINSON Their case is still pending.

T.S. Never initiate action when you haven't the guts to carry it through. It's a sign of weakness, Hopkinson.

HOPKINSON Yes sir.

T.S. You disappoint us.

HOPKINSON Yes sir.

T.S. We brought you up. We can put you down.

HOPKINSON Yes sir. (112)

In this way, the sinister nature of the state is revealed, exposing a side of Canadian society that fits uncomfortably with values dominant today.



Figure 11: T.S. relates the story of the Doukhobors, a group of Russian pacifists who sought refuge in Canada in the nineteenth century and were dispossessed of their land by the Canadian government when they refused to abandon communal forms of ownership (Pollock 123-24). Actor: Simon McIntyre. Photo by Ali Kazimi, 9 May 2014.

In Binning and Hundal's play, this exposure of white society is comical and highlights the complex and contradictory nature of white society. We see this most vividly in the portrayal of the recruitment of forces to storm the *Komagata Maru*:

Immigration Official:

Here we have before you Mr. Bruce Hutton, our first recruit for the special force. Height: 5 foot 10.5 inches; Weight: 150 pounds; Unemployed for the last 6 months; Residence: the city parks. His passion is to drink as much and as often as possible.

[*Mr. Hutton enters walking in a drunken manner, and gives a salute.*]

Stevens: [*Indicating to the immigration official to leave*]

Thank you Mr. Campbell. [*Campbell goes outside.*]

[*To Hutton*]

Welcome Mr. Hutton. I welcome you in the name of His Majesty the King. The work you are going to do will earn your name a place in history.

Mr. Hutton: Sir, how much money will we get?

...

Colonel: Fine. Soldier, are you ready to die in the service of your King?

Hutton: [*Surprised*] Die?

[*Speaking to the Audience*] Listen here. They haven't even mentioned the money yet! Reed said they would give me drink, no one said anything about dying!

[*Gesturing to other characters, as if leaving.*]

We are out of here, sir. (Binning and Hundal 197-99)

This scene received a particularly enthusiastic response in the Surrey performance, in which greater familiarity with the Punjabi language among the audience likely allowed the humour of the scene to have full effect. Later, when the successful repulsion of police forces by the *Komagata Maru* passengers was described on stage (but not shown directly), members of the audience cheered in support of the passengers' resistance. Although Professor Rana Nayar questioned, in the UBC symposium, the heroic nature of this act, there was no question for the audience about the heroism of the passengers.

Pollock and Rode explore these contradictions at the centre of the constitution of the nation, and at the centre of William Hopkinson: he is described as half Punjabi or South Asian, and his rejection of this part of himself is shown to underlie his campaign against the *Komagata Maru* (Pollock, *Komagata Maru Incident* 125-26; Rode, *Kāmāgātā Mārū* 75-80). Each of these betrayals, then, is a betrayal of the self. This same betrayal also lies at the centre of white racism in more general terms. For example, in her play, Pollock creates a powerful comparison of the state's position on the *Komagata Maru* with the plight of the Doukhobors, a religious community from Russia that was welcomed in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century but ultimately lost much of their land when some members refused to abjure their practice of owning land communally¹⁰ (see Figure 11). In this case, those who suffered at the hands of the state were not racialized in the way that First Nations and passengers of the *Komagata Maru* were, yet they, too, were marginalized within an evolving exclusionary Canadian imaginary. Also striking is Pollock's portrayal of an instance of racial violence, witnessed by Evy. Her own inaction, Pollock shows, is a betrayal of herself. As Evy notes:

EVY I should have done something.

HOPKINSON You should have come home and you did.
Come on now, you saw a fight. You've seen fights before.

EVY No, it wasn't a fight! And I just sat on the goddamn tram and came home. (113)

Conclusion

These three plays in many ways are instantiations of a broader conversation about the significance of the *Komagata Maru* incident and what it represents in the history of Canada: they assert the enduring importance of the past in the present, construct possible voices of resistance, and turn the lens back on white society to complicate and highlight contradiction and dissent within it. Our production of selections from the three plays thus constituted a performance of community memory, integrating both fiction and history to create a larger truth and calling further attention to the politics of racialization in the story through the movements and voices of the cast members and narrators on the stage.¹¹ Pollock has noted that “It’s as if truthfulness when you’re writing about life is a big multi-faceted diamond. I am standing in one place, and I am the result of a certain time and place and experience, and I have a flashlight. . . . By being aware of how I do see through certain eyes and in a certain way, I get to expand, I get to be able to move the light” (qtd. in Nothof, “Introduction” 7). No one play provides a complete writing of this incident, and all rely on and extend the factual past. By bringing three different plays by four different authors together, in two different languages (made fully bilingual through the use of surtitling), we attempted to expand further the diamond that Pollock describes and to show the multiple lights that might shine on an always contingent truth-in-formation.

This past is integral to our present: as Ajmer Rode noted when asked to comment on the production, “The best we can do to heal our wounded memory is to acknowledge the reality of the incident. And learn to avoid its recurrence” (Program note). The imaginative act of calling the past into the present, as these plays indicate, is productive of many different pasts, and many different presents, through which the definition of Canada itself is formed.¹² In this way, we expand on the technique that Pollock uses — and that I believe all of these playwrights use — to harness the power of theatre to call attention to the constructed nature of our understanding of the past. As Grace and Helms have observed about *The Komagata Maru Incident*, “it is a play about real life and real events as staged, manipulated, masterminded acts, acts that

inscribe, naturalize, and perpetuate the racist, sexist construction of Canada as a country of and for dominant white men, who hold all the cards and make all the rules" (88). As performance, "history" itself is staged, evolving for new audiences and performers, marked by the moving presence of racialized bodies and languages. Walker has noted that overall Pollock's concern in her work "has to do with the difficulty of establishing truth, and hence an integrated self, in circumstances where personal agency is badly corrupted by the insidious and ubiquitous systems of social power and by self-serving distortions of reality" (137). All of these plays reveal such a struggle. To stage these plays together, with an integrated yet racially/linguistically marked cast, we both accepted and challenged the place of difference within our shaping of past and present. We could have avoided the racialization of our cast by translating the texts into one of the two languages, masking the racialized difference that so often accompanies language. We chose not to do this but to embrace what differences can entail and, indeed, can promise.

The call to whites to challenge racism, so vividly portrayed by Pollock's *Evy* in her viewing of racial violence and her inability to counter it, and the call to Punjabis *and* whites to discern the complexity of the seeming monolith of white exclusion, represent the enduring political interventions of these plays in making our particular present. It is all too easy to let ourselves, no matter who we are, off the hook: for whites to deny personal involvements in racism but then not to stand up against the forms of racism and exclusion that persist in our society, to let themselves, as it were, "sit on the tram" and let it pass. That is, indeed, what constitutes privilege: the ability *not* to get involved. This privilege exists not only for whites but also for all in positions of relative privilege with reference to caste, gender, sexuality, and so on; it is easy to ignore what one does not experience. At the same time, the call by our playwrights to complicate an understanding of white society at that time — and today — is also important. It is far too easy to accept exclusionary voices as representative of those whom such voices *claim* to speak for. In doing so, we give them far too much.

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NOTES

¹ One can include in such work the agitation for an apology by the government of Canada, given by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008; it was dissatisfying for many because it was given at a community event in Surrey, not in Parliament ("Indo-Canadians"; Yiu). For important discussions of parallel cases of apology (and the related issue of redress), see James; Li; Mawani, "Cleansing"; Miki; Miki and Kobayashi; and Winter. The issue of redress did not form a central part of centenary observations in British Columbia.

² According to Rode, the play was serialized in the *Indo-Canadian Times*, a weekly Punjabi-language periodical, in 1982, and a short Punjabi-language radio play based on the original Punjabi play was performed on the Vancouver Co-op radio station in 1986 (Playwrights' Panel). The play was also performed in October 2014 in Surrey, with a significantly modified script. Reference here is to the original 1984 published version in Punjabi, the basis for the UBC production in May 2014; all quotations are from that text. Rode made slight changes to the text and self-published it in 2013.

³ A fourth new Canadian play about the *Komagata Maru*, by University of the Fraser Valley professor Rajnish Dhawan, was performed in November 2014 in Abbotsford; see Murphy, "*Komagata Maru* as Performance."

⁴ The issue of Canadianness was vigorously debated by the four playwrights at the symposium held at St. John's College, UBC, on 3 May 2014.

⁵ Hundal took Professor Rana Nayar of Panjab University to task for failing to describe the Punjabi-language plays as "Canadian" (Playwrights' Panel). This difference in access and ownership of "Canadianness" reveals its racialized, exclusionary nature.

⁶ The history and back issues of *Watan* and *Watanon Dūr* are available at <http://watan-archives.wordpress.com>. The site has not been updated, however, since 2012.

⁷ For detailed overviews of all three plays, see Murphy, "*Komagata Maru* as Performance."

⁸ Space limitations for this article did not allow inclusion of the original Punjabi-

language text. The performances, however, were fully bilingual in English and Punjabi through the use of surtiting. All translations are mine.

⁹ For a discussion on the notion of “citizenship” in the empire, see Mawani, “Specters” (385-86).

¹⁰ On the Doukhobors, see Friesen and Verigin; and Rak.

¹¹ For a discussion on the use of fictionalization in the work of Pollock, see Holder 123.

¹² In our symposium, Binning, Hundal, and Rode discussed their approaches to their works as Canadians (who are often denied that status), whereas Pollock — who arguably has greater access to that designation — rejected “Canadian” as a descriptor. For further documentation of this view, see Pollock, “Interview” (170-71).

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