

WHAT DO APOLOGIES APOLOGIZE FOR? REARRANGEMENTS OF STATE VIOLENCE

Sunera Thobani

Submission date: 10 August 2021; Acceptance date: 12 November 2021;
Publication date: 16 February 2024.

Copyright: © 2024, Sunera Thobani. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract: What do apologies apologize for? More precisely, what do the apologies regularly pronounced by states for some atrocity or other actually accomplish? This question animates my article. State apologies became an integral element of global political culture in the early 21st century. These politics of regret are reshaping Canadian national culture, most pronouncedly with the apologies for the Indian Residential School System (CBC News 2008a; McIntyre 2017) and the Komagata Maru (CBC News 2008b; Trudeau 2016). While Public Inquiries and Royal Commissions have long served as state responses to political mobilization, deployment of the machinery of regret has fast become the predictable response to accusations of atrocities, including genocide, enslavement and racial violence.

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's and Walter Benjamin's ideas on violence, colonial in the case of Fanon (1961), law in that of Benjamin (1996), I examine the apologies delivered to Indigenous peoples and South-Asian diasporic communities by the Canadian state. Locating these pronouncements in the histories of violence they index, I demonstrate how such apologies function as techniques of violence that advance settler power structures and narratives of nationhood. My argument here is that apologies are themselves acts of violence which rework histories of brutalization to meet the political destabilizations of the present. Apologies thus reorganize the racial violence of settler societies, drawing sections of subjugated populations into waging this violence and, in the process, derail resurgent politics of decolonization, abolitionism and anti-racism.

Keywords: state apology; settler colonialism; Indigenous peoples; violence; Asian-Canadian migrants.

Professor, University of British Columbia.

Introduction

The settler state is asking to forgive and forget. I find this request for forgiveness by a killing state with what we now know and continue to veer towards the absurd if not insult, in spite of its conciliatory intent. This is because historical, bodily and heuristic violence, along with theft are among those things that are really impossible to forgive let alone forget. (Simpson 2021: 154)

In May 2021, Chief Rosanne Casimir announced the discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children in a mass grave on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. Ground-penetrating radar technology had revealed this burial site, leading the Chief of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemec First Nation to remind Canadians, “[i]t’s a harsh reality and it’s our truths. It’s our history, and it’s something. . . we’ve always had to fight to prove.” (Pruden 2021: n.p.) For more than a century, the Canadian state removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in residential schools run by the Catholic Church to accomplish two objectives: sever the children’s ties with their families, communities, cultures, languages and traditions; and integrate them into Canadian culture and society through conversion to Christianity and assimilation into national languages and institutions (Fournier and Crey 1998). The schools—run as labour camps and sites of sexual torture for these stolen generations (Maracle 1988; TRC Report 2017)—were deemed the “humane solution” to Canada’s “Indian problem.” (Churchill 2004) In the face of such incarceration and violence, Indigenous communities struggled to survive the schools and to subsequently hold state and Church accountable. These attempts were met with staunch silence, until the closing decade of the 20th century when the government appointed the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP).

In June 2008, the Conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, issued an apology to Indigenous peoples recognizing the Indian Residential School System (IRSS) as “a sad chapter in our history.” (CBC News 2008a) As Harper put it, “Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country.” (CBC News 2008a) Going on to acknowledge as tragic the deaths of children at these schools, Harper nevertheless pointedly stated “some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools.” (ibid.) The apology, he pronounced, marked “a new beginning,” “a new partnership” of the Canadian state with Indigenous Nations.

Harper would be only the first Canadian Prime Minister to issue such an apology. And this apology would not be the only one he would issue that year. In August 2008, the Prime Minister issued another apology (CBC News 2008b), this time to the South-Asian-Canadian community for the Komagata Maru, 100 years

after this ship carrying 376 would-be migrants from the subcontinent was turned away from the shores of Vancouver in order to “Keep Canada White.” (Kazimi 2004, 2012; Johnston 1979) This apology—to a non-Indigenous minority racialized as “immigrants”—was preceded by earlier ones: to Japanese-Canadians for the internment of their community during World War II (in 1988); to Italian-Canadians for defining them as “enemy-aliens” in the same war (in 1990); and to Chinese-Canadians for the Head Tax on migrants from China from the late 19th century into the mid-20th (in 2006). In 2016, yet another apology followed for the Komagata Maru, this time by Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. By the second decade of the 21st century, state apologies had become *de rigueur*.

My examination of the phenomenon of state apology is centred on two main questions: What is the objective and content of the formal state apology? What does such an apology actually accomplish? My article begins with a brief discussion of the human rights framework that informs much of the scholarship on state apologies and their projects of reconciliation. Most of these studies focus on the sincerity and effectiveness of the apology, and on the benefits and limitations of what it offers to its community of address (Organick 2019). With few exceptions, these studies take the liberal-democratic state and its law at face value, rarely interrogating their nature; nor do they question successful integration into the liberal-democratic polity as the desired objective. Given the centrality of state violence to the IRSS and to border control policies, I draw on Benjamin’s essay on violence to highlight the distinctions he draws between law, violence and justice, and between the means and ends of violence. I also draw on Fanon’s (1961, 1952) ideas regarding the relation of colonialism and violence to the production of race.

In the second section of the article, I present a close reading of the Canadian state’s apologies for the IRSS and for the Komagata Maru. Foregrounding the histories of violence referenced in these apologies, I analyze them by situating them in the contemporary conditions that have prompted their delivery. The forms of racial-colonial violence referenced by the apologies for the IRSS and the Komagata Maru are neither interchangeable nor symmetrical in form, effect or consequence. They are, however, inextricably linked within the structure of colonialism, racial capitalism and the settler Canadian state formation. Placing them in the same analytic frame underscores the global nature of colonialism and illustrates the interconnected nature of its forms of violence that worked *through* each other to produce the racial-colonial hierarchy that organizes the Canadian nation-state. Demonstrating how this structure of power is enfolded into the apology itself, I show *how* the official statement produces a new ‘history’ for the nation-state, one that removes this entity from its own *historicity*. I also show here how the apology’s foremost concern is preservation of the law, and as such the

statement itself wages violence on the historical consciousness and psyche of the subjugated community to reinscribe their dehumanization as a condition of the apology's offer of inclusion.

The final section brings together my main arguments: the apology isolates a particular form of violence and defines this as a misguided misfortune. In thus overwriting the structural and systemic violence of settler colonialism, this violence becomes enfolded into the apology itself and makes its reproduction the condition for *inclusion* into the nation's history and the democratic polity that remains riven with asymmetries of power. Moreover, the apology's offer of reconciliation advances the psycho-affective affiliation of the community of address with the on-going violence of the state to derail the former's demands for decolonization, anti-racism and abolition.

What is the Apology?

The remarkable frequency of state apologies in the early decades of the 21st century prompted some scholars to dub this the "Age of Apology." (Gibney et al. 2008; Lightfoot 2015; Organick 2019) Although the Canadian state began offering apologies in the closing decades of the 20th century as noted above (in 1998 for the Japanese Internment; in 1990 for the treatment of Italian-Canadians as "enemy-aliens" during WWII), it was with the IRSS apology (in 2008) that the "Age of Apology" had fully arrived.

Settler state apologies to Indigenous peoples began with the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2007). The Canadian state, however, had doggedly resisted accepting this Declaration and the IRSS apology came as part of a settlement for the largest class action suit for the residential school system brought by Indigenous peoples; also included in the settlement was the appointment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see Government of Canada TRC 2022). In that same year, the Progressive Conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, delivered an apology to the South-Asian-Canadian community for the turning away of the Komagata Maru (KM), the ship that carried migrants from the subcontinent to Canada in 1914, only for them to be turned away after a struggle waged on- and off-shore (CBC News 2008b). This apology was now a response to the community's political mobilization for redress amidst its growing electoral significance within Canadian politics. Deemed unsatisfactory by the community for its informal delivery, the first KM apology was followed by yet another one delivered by the next Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, head of the Liberal Party, in the House of Commons (Trudeau 2016).

Most studies of state apologies take the liberal-democratic framework of human rights which underpins them for granted and focus on the sincerity or effectiveness

of the official statement, the form of inclusion and redress it offers, and its impact on state-minority relations. Organick, for example, argues that in order to be effective, the apology requires the following elements: “(1) expression of regret; (2) explanation of what went wrong; (3) acknowledgement of responsibility; (4) declaration of responsibility; (5) offer of repair; and (6) request for forgiveness.” (Organick 2019: 150) Moreover, if the apology is not made in a timely manner, it risks the danger of being taken as “disingenuous,” offered for the sole purpose of “political gain.” (ibid.)

Some studies of the state apology conclude that it reflects the (potential) maturing of democratic societies (Mihai 2013; Somani 2011) and advances social cohesion by “revising” national history and self-image (Mihai 2013; Wakeham 2012), while others argue the offer of reconciliation upholds the myth of the nation’s benevolence, that is, its “white civility.” (Wakeham 2012; Somani 2011) In many cases, the apology is welcomed as the means to incorporate previously excluded communities as it extends the recognition of their “truths,” “agency,” “worth” and right to democratic participation (Mihai and Taiwo 2022). Some caution that these statements extend the state’s strategic interests in the national and international arena (Wakeham 2012).

With regard to the Canadian apology to Indigenous peoples, Lightfoot offers a different approach by highlighting the following concerns:

- (1) apologies can be used as a tool of integration, or even manipulative and subversive assimilation; (2) apologies can be self-serving for the state actor; (3) apologies can perpetuate power imbalances; (4) apologies can produce a backlash; and (5) apologies can fail to fundamentally transform relationships in favor of solidifying the status quo. (2015: 19)

Moreover, these apologies are not connected to Indigenous people’s struggles for self-determination, argue Corntassel and Holder, they are hence “fundamentally flawed” as they do not hold the state accountable, nor do they transform its relationship with Indigenous peoples (2008).

Studies of the KM apology have also raised concerns regarding the apology’s authenticity, meaningfulness and effectiveness. Singh argues that despite its shortfalls, given that “a national apology is collective, political, or inter-state or intra-state,” (2019: 278) one reason for supporting this initiative is to avoid “closing our eyes” to the past, as this makes us “blind to the present.” (ibid.) Nevertheless, Singh goes on to identify “three basic mechanisms to measure the truthfulness and genuineness” of an apology, namely “sincerity, consistency and material compensation” (279) and finds the unofficial and official KM apologies lacking on all three counts. Somani offers a somewhat different assessment of this apology by

emphasizing that its “unpredictability” opens up space for “further demands and discussion” from the community and their supporters (2011).

There is, however, a fundamental paradox between state apologies and their implicit offer of reconciliation and the quest of Indigenous, abolitionist and anti-racist movements for justice and decolonization. For the Indigenous struggle for self-determination is a political struggle to transcend the settler colonial order (Simpson 2022; Million 2013); abolitionism, grounded in the historical movement to end slavery, continues in the contemporary organizing that focuses on abolishing prisons as well as policing (Gilmore 2022; Davis 2005); and anti-racist movements, particularly those rooted in anti-colonial struggles, contest the racial dehumanization that organizes the borders of the nation-state system within global racial capitalism (Fanon 1961; Robinson 1983; Melamed 2015). As I demonstrate in the next section, the apology functions to counter these movements, reverse the political gains they have made, and subjugate the knowledges they have produced.

In the case of Canada, the institution of the IRSS was a constitutive element of the Canadian state and its sovereignty. Integral to this state’s formation was also the power to control its territorial borders through immigration control (Mongia 1999). The racialization of Indigenous peoples as requiring “civilizing” education became institutionalized through the IRSS, whereas the racialization of migrants from across the colonized world, including “British India,” as degenerate races that would pollute the purity of the Canadian nation were internally linked in the unfolding structure of the Canadian state, its law and its sovereignty, as well as its nation-in-the-making.

Useful to my discussion of Canadian sovereignty here is Benjamin’s essay on violence, justice and the law, and the distinction he makes between the means and ends of violence (1996). Violence is foundational to the law, argues Benjamin, as is the monopolization of this violence in the hands of the state, the upholder of the law. This relation between law and violence, however, needs to be further distinguished, Benjamin argues, by examining the relation between its means and ends. While the very imposition of the law is through violence, the use of violence is also the means to uphold the law, which is the end of this violence. Hence while the means of violence can be interrogated (in terms of its legality), the ends of this violence, which is the upholding of the law, and its sovereign power, remains beyond interrogation by the law, and by the state that is organized through this law.

In the following section, I centre the issue of the violence of the law—in terms of its means as well as ends—in my analysis of the state apologies for the IRSS as well as the Komagata Maru. For the IRSS as well as the treatment of the Komagata Maru were acts of violence enacted through, and sanctioned by, the law. As such,

both were constitutive of settler state power and its territorial authority. In my reading of the apologies that reference these acts of state violence, I also turn to Fanon's theorization of the relation between colonialism, violence and race. In his study of colonialism, Fanon identified violence as foundational to this order, which, through its racializing dehumanization of colonized peoples, reduced them to the status of objects (Fanon 1961, 1986). Political and socio-economic subjugation went hand in hand with the psychic assault on colonized peoples that sought to destroy their languages, cultures and historical consciousness, that is, their historical-being-for-themselves (Fanon 1986). The violence of the colonial state is hence etched into the alienated, traumatized psyche of colonized peoples, it is in confronting this abject status of "the thing" that the possibility lies for colonized peoples to overcome their dehumanization and reclaim their status as "man," as human subjects, self-determining through their being-for-themselves (Fanon 1986). The destabilizing effects of the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles on the legality of the law, on the authority and power of the state, however, that prompts the apology, which becomes the means to reassert state authority, and the legitimacy of the law. Moreover, these struggles also confront the "colonial" and "racial" neurosis that are the result of the psychic violence of colonialism. As I show below, the apology's offer of inclusion and reconciliation becomes the means for advancing the psychic violence that is enfolded into the expression of regret. The offer of inclusion functions as a psycho-affective mechanism that aligns subjugated communities with the upholding of the law, of the authority of the state.

The Politics of the Apology

The Indian Residential School System was in place for over a century, with Indian Agents, officials of the state, forcefully removing Indigenous children from their families for assimilation into Canadian culture (Churchill 2004; Fournier and Crey 1998). While the struggles of Indigenous peoples against the schools remained on-going, these struggles became increasingly effective in garnering public attention in the Indigenous resistance during the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and especially so following the Mohawk resistance during the Oka crisis (1990). The political mobilization by the survivors of the residential schools and Indigenous organizations eventually brought the largest class action suit in the Canadian nation-state's history, leading to the delivery of the apology to Indigenous Nations and the appointment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Given that the TRC is outside the scope of my study, in this section I present an analysis of the two apologies delivered by Conservative Canadian Prime Minister Harper, and then a third by the next Liberal Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. I then follow with my analysis of

the two apologies for the Komagata Maru, delivered also by these same Prime Ministers. As I demonstrate, reading the IRSS apology alongside the apology for the KM brings into sharper focus the integrated governance structure that shapes the Canadian settler colonial-cum-liberal-democratic nation-state.

Harper's apology begins by describing the IRSS system as "a sad chapter in our history" and explains that the government's "separation" of 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families was "partly in order to meet its obligation to educate Aboriginal children." (CBC News 2008a) Attributing the twin objectives of this system—removal of the children and their assimilation—to the assumption that "Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal," the statement acknowledges that "[i]ndeed, some sought," as it was infamously said, "[t]o kill the Indian in the child." (ibid.) The Prime Minister then goes on to clarify, "[t]oday, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country." (ibid.) Notable here is the delinking of the IRSS from the larger processes of colonization during a formative period of Canadian state-making, the minimization of the violence of the system to a "sad chapter" and the individualizing of responsibility to "some" who "sought to kill the Indian in the child"; the policy itself is presented as being based on the misguided "assumption" regarding "Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs" which thwarted the state's intention to live up to its "obligation to educate" the children. The state's establishment of the IRSS as the violent means to secure the elimination of Indigeneity is here obfuscated, the remorseful statement's aim is to redeem state authority in the present by expressing regret for this policy of the past.

The "policy of assimilation" was part of the structural violence that was physical, sexual and cultural, it was also psychic in its attempted destruction of the historical consciousness as well as "being-for-themselves" of the generations of Indigenous people incarcerated in the schools, as well as their descendants. The apology minimizes this structural, institutional assault on the Indigenous children as the Prime Minister speaks of the deaths of "some" children as "tragic". Although he recognizes the policy's "lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language," his statement counterbalances this "damaging" impact by noting that some students "have spoken positively about their experience." (ibid.) The illegality of the means by which the violence of the IRSS was waged—physical death, forced labour, cruel punishment, rape and sexual assault, etc.—is further obscured in the apology's rewriting of these means as tragic, not the crimes against humanity they could be defined as in the age of human rights in which the apology is rendered.

The second significant element of the apology is its recognition that the schools "contributed" to contemporary social problems in Aboriginal communities, and that "healing and reconciliation" has been thus far impeded by the "absence" of an apology (ibid.). The government now recognizes that it was "wrong" to remove the

children, that it “failed” to “protect” them, and with this apology, Canada is now assuming the “burden” of “healing.” Here, the apology displaces the colonial subjugation accomplished through the IRSS and redefines this as on-going “social problems,” it then goes on to present “healing and reconciliation” as the proper remedy for the “suffering” of Indigenous peoples. The collective destruction of family and community, of languages and cultures, of psychic dehumanization and degradation is now remade as an “injury” that can be transcended through reconciliation with the very nation-state that organized and implemented the IRSS. Useful in understanding the workings of this rewriting of genocidal violence as injury is Million’s brilliant analysis of the project of reconciliation, in which she discusses how the “healing paradigm” used by the state remakes the political subjectivity of Indigenous peoples engaged in political struggles for sovereignty into a project of “affective personal management carried out in the name of human development.” (Million 2013: 8)

The apology’s offer of “healing” aligns the Indigenous subject with the state’s project of reconciliation, as management of Indigeneity in the present. Left unaddressed in the apology, hence integrated as on-going, is the psychic dehumanization at the core of the IRSS that has given rise to the collective “trauma” and “pain” of Indigenous peoples. The apology’s tribute to the “extraordinary courage” and “resilience” of the survivors and the “strength of their cultures” (*ibid.*) elicits sympathy and compassion, not responsibility and accountability, as the desired response of the nation-state. The apology thus “produces” the form of “injury”—by defining its cause (misguided incarceration) and its manifestation (social problems)—which it then recognizes in its confirmation of the (not injured) Canadian national’s commitment to reconciliation with this “healing” Indigenous subject.

Million has argued that the reconciliation project of the state has transformed Indigenous peoples demanding political sovereignty into subjects of trauma in need of therapeutic healing (2013). The apology functions as a mechanism for this transformation, it reassures Indigenous peoples, “there is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential School System to ever again prevail” (CBC News 2008a) even as these “attitudes” that accomplished the Othering of Indigenous peoples in the past are folded into the apology, with its tropes of injured Indigeneity and compassionate Canadians. As the official statement “sincerely apologizes and asks for the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly,” (*ibid.*) Canadian contrition is transformed into state benevolence with the offer of resources for Indigenous healing. This healing is, of course, conditional on acceptance of the apology and the IRSS Settlement Agreement, which “. . . gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership” (CBC News 2008a) for the TRC now provides “a unique opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian Residential Schools System.” (CBC News 2008a) In effect then, the TRC’s mandate is to bring Canadians along “in forging a new relationship” with

Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. . .based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and vibrant traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us. (CBC News 2008a)

The apology's rupturing of historical forms of violence from their contemporary forms, to which Indigenous communities are subjected even now, is here complete.

Harper's apology was taken as "largely symbolic," but this was for its lack of acknowledgement of the Innu, Inuit and Nunatukavut people of Labrador and Newfoundland (the schools in these provinces were established before these provinces joined Confederation, McIntyre 2017). These communities subsequently brought their own class action suit, with the government agreeing to distribute US \$50 million dollars to survivors (McIntyre 2017). Two years after the release of the Final Report of the TRC (in 2015), Liberal Prime Minister Trudeau delivered another state apology that specifically addressed the earlier one's exclusion of the Innu, Inuit and Nunatukavut peoples. Given that the earlier apology preceded the TRC and the latter one followed the release of its Final Report, it is worth comparing the two official pronouncements.

Trudeau's apology is in the same spirit as that delivered by Harper, the two address the same issues, from the same perspective of the state, and they use much of the same language (the IRSS is defined as "a dark and shameful chapter" that has left a "tragic legacy"; the need of the day is to "acknowledge" this "past" and educate Canadians about it; tribute is paid to the "exceptional courage and strength" of survivors, the lack of apology is said to have caused them "hurt and pain"). Like Harper's, this apology identifies Canadian unfamiliarity with Indigenous cultures, "wrongly" believing these to be "inferior" as the cause of the problem (Trudeau 2016). Finally, Trudeau's apology takes the responsibility onto the state to "share the burden" of "our failings." (ibid.) This second apology also marks a "new approach to reconciliation," asking for "forgiveness" in the (coercive) hope that "we will continue to advance the journey of reconciliation and healing together." (McIntyre 2017) I mention these many similarities between the two apologies to highlight the point that the first was delivered before the work of the TRC, and the second after its work was done. Notwithstanding the emphases on the necessity of learning from "history," Trudeau's apology implicitly underscores the limitations of what Canadians are willing—or able—to "learn" from such processes of reconciliation given there has been no shift in perspective or in the state's approach to "reconciliation."

Both apologies are, of course, engaged in the process of rewriting the "history" they reference. The strategies by which such a "new" history is produced for

Canadians reinscribes the abject status of the Indigenous subject such that “healing” now becomes a psychic assault on the Indigenous knowledge and experience of colonial violence. Both apologies delink the IRSS from the larger process of colonization, which allows the violence of the school system—the means to the end of the erasure of Indigenous presence that is the foundation of the law and the state—to be represented as misguided, regrettably based on false assumptions. Isolating the IRSS from the other forms of institutionalized racial violence, including the creation of reservations to gain territorial control, also breaks the link between the Canadian settler project and the global colonial-racial order. The IRSS is thus removed from its own historicity, such that the apologies empty out the historical experiences and knowledges of Indigenous peoples of the actual workings of power within the settler society. The link between the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples *and* the state’s assertion of control over their territories is severed by the “history” produced through the apologies at the very moment of their recognition of Indigenous violation. Indeed, acknowledgement of the violation is transformed into a resource for the renewal of this very sovereignty in the present moment.

I now turn to the state apology for the Komagata Maru, the boat chartered in 1914 by Gurdit Singh, a South Asian, to challenge Canada’s racist immigration laws that were designed to keep the country “a white man’s country.” (Kazimi 2004) With 376 Indians—Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus—onboard, all subjects of the British Empire, the ship travelled to Vancouver, British Columbia. Uncannily enough, it was Harper and Trudeau, the two Prime Ministers who offered apologies for the Indian Residential School System, that did the same for Canada’s refusal to allow entry to South Asians. Harper’s apology was rejected by its community of address for the informal nature of its presentation,¹ the second was delivered formally, in the House of Parliament, by Trudeau in 2016 (Trudeau 2016).

The official process for pronouncing remorse for the Komagata Maru began in British Columbia in May 2008, when the liberal government in the Province apologized in the Legislature for the treatment of those on board the ship. The Opposition also offered its “deep” regret for this “dark chapter” in Canadian history and emphasized the need to “not forget” the event (Meissner 2008). Part of the apology was offered in Punjabi by the Liberal House Leader, these words were translated into English as “[f]orgive us, you are welcome.” (Meissner 2008) That this apology normalizes the claim that Canada in the present—belongs to “us”, and the community to which the apology is delivered is (now) “welcome” is certainly ironic, given that it is this very claim of national proprietorship that was used to earlier bar South-Asian migration. Instead of being “unwelcome” as was the case with the ship’s passengers, their descendants are now “welcome” to a country whose proprietorial rights clearly belong elsewhere.

Prime Minister Harper's apology was delivered at an event organized by the Sikh-Canadian community in British Columbia, the *Gadri Babian da Mela*. The Multiculturalism Minister spoke first, praising the festival as "this beautiful celebration of the rich and ancient culture of Punjab." (CBC News 2008b) This beginning erases the anti-colonial politics the community is celebrating by memorializing the struggles of the Ghadr movement that began on the West Coast, in Canada and the US. Noting that "Canadians of Punjabi origin" had been in the country for a hundred years, hence a "critical part of our cultural mosaic," the Minister thanked the audience for "bringing this rich culture to Canada as part of our diversity which is one of our unique strengths." (ibid.) Introducing the Prime Minister, he then informed his audience that Harper 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." (ibid.) The "old" diasporic South-Asian-Canadian community is here conflated with the "new Canadians" as both are placed squarely in the sphere of "newness", of immigration and cultural diversity, that is of the "foreign." Shared citizenship and nationality are not the perspectives from which the community is addressed.

The Prime Minister, presented as the community's benefactor, began by stating his own appreciation of the festival's "spectacular showcase of Punjabi culture." The "vibrant dance and musical traditions, the 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," he stated, "it has become an integral part of our own cultural diversity." (ibid.) The racialized Othering of the South-Asian-Canadian community is here advanced by Harper's description of its "ancient culture and civilization," (ibid.) an Orientalizing move long contested by the community itself. Moreover, the community is interpellated here as monocultural, Sikh-Punjabi, Canada is hailed as diverse and multicultural.

The Prime Minister acknowledges the contributions of this community ("hard-working men and women passionately devoted to their families and communities") in "helping make our country even stronger for the generations yet to come. . ." (ibid.) Implicit here is the recognition of Canada's need for labour, provided by 'immigrant' communities from across the Third World, including South Asia. The Canadian nation is described in markedly opposing terms (it offers "opportunity to all, regardless of their background," provides a "sanctuary to victims of violence and persecution," is "our country of freedom and democracy, of prosperity and peace." (ibid.) Canada, "renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants," has gained from "the confidence, the ideas and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers," the Prime Minister acknowledged (ibid.).

Notable here are: (i) the essentializing tropes that reconstitute the difference between this community as foreign (associated with “newcomers”, immigration, diversity, “exotic” culture, foreign) and the nation of Canadians, and (ii) the appropriation of this “cultural difference” as a vital, life-enhancing resource to Canadians, who are identified through their commitment to “diversity.” (ibid.)

The apology hence reproduces the hegemonic narrative of Canadian nationhood (land of immigrants, sanctuary for the persecuted, etc.) by naturalizing the nation’s territorial sovereignty, which was historically achieved through racializing border control, a racialization that was contested by the passengers on the Komagata Maru.

Rendered invisible by the apology is the settler colonial nature of state and nation by defining their values as essentially progressive and modern (freedom, democracy, peace, prosperity) against the South-Asian-Canadian community’s “ancient culture.” Defining the turning away of the Komagata Maru as a “failure” of Canadians to “live up to our own values,” (ibid.) the apology overwrites the Komagata Maru’s political challenge to the explicitly racist intent of state policies designed to build a white Canadian nation. Indeed, the South-Asian-Canadian community is then called upon by the apology to be “proud” of “our country.” (ibid.) This is, of course, an invitation for the community to reproduce its own cultured-racialized Othering as outsiders to the Canadian nation that celebrates its “diversity,” and its appreciation for its own multiculturalism.

Yet another apology for the Komagata Maru was soon coming, this time from the Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in May 2016. Trudeau delivered the apology in the House of Commons as demanded by the political leadership of the community. The second apology comes from the same perspective, that of a benevolent state, and repeats many of the statements made in the first. It reproduces the Othering binary between the nation and the South-Asian-Canadian community, the Komagata Maru event is described as an “injustice” and “tragic incident,” and those onboard are defined as “immigrants” who only wanted to “contribute” to “building” Canada (Trudeau 2016). In this manner, this apology too redefines and contains a challenge to the racialized sovereignty of the Dominion government, which relied—then as now—on racialized border control to produce a racialized labour force in service of the nation-state.

Unlike Harper, however, Trudeau acknowledges the ship’s passengers were “rejected” due to the government having “put in place a law that prohibited passengers from disembarking in Canada.” (ibid.) unless they arrived on a continuous journey. Yet he simultaneously describes this prohibition as a “tragic mistake” as he delivers this “full and sincere” apology that is “for every regrettable consequence that followed,” for “our indifference to your plight” and “our failure to recognize what you had to offer.” (ibid.) Trudeau’s apology is hence also permeated by the

Othering process, designating Canadians as the national community of “us” and the South-Asian-Canadian community as outsiders, addressing this community as “you.” Trudeau then harnesses the fate of the KM’s passenger to national mythmaking—the ability to learn from the “past” “is the unique promise and potential of Canada” for “[w]e believe that every person—no matter who they are, no matter where they come from—deserves a real and fair chance at success.” (ibid.)

The basic formula of the KM apologies consists of the following four moves. First is the delinking of the Komagata Maru from the myriad of colonial projects, conflicts and contestations negotiated by the Canadian state in the formation of its sovereignty, internal as well as external, that gave rise to the actual historical voyage of the Komagata Maru. These included the geographical span of British rule; the linkages and asymmetrical power relations among, and between, the Empire’s different colonies, particularly the settler colonial Dominions; the interconnected challenges mounted to British rule across its empire, of which the Komagata Maru was an important element; and the “internal” challenges of migrant communities from across the colonized world in North America to these nation-states’ racial structure of law and politics. Rendered invisible in the apologies’ writing of history are the multiple and interconnected histories and relations that bound the regions—and their peoples—crossed by the ship in its voyage (Dhamoon and Bhandar 2019; Mawani 2018).

Second is the delinking of the ban on the migration of the Komagata Maru’s passengers from the larger network of immigration control policies. This treatment of the refusal of entry to the ship’s passengers as unconnected to related immigration policies that subjected various racialized Others, including Black, Chinese and Japanese Canadian migrants, to racially targeted policies of exclusion. This strategy of setting apart the Komagata Maru from the range of immigration control policies delinks British and French immigration during this period from Asian migration to naturalize the Canadian nation as already fully formed. The law’s racialized regulation of immigration was the means to establish and control the state’s territorial sovereignty and to produce the whiteness of its nation, as was recognized at the time by the migrant communities who challenged the law, including South Asians in Canada.

The apologies’ rewriting of the histories of the anti-imperialist challenge mounted by the ship’s passengers and their supporters suppresses “knowledge” of these anti-colonial histories of the politicized South-Asian activists, movements and communities that were linked by, and self-consciously linked themselves to, the Komagata Maru. The apologies’ subjugation of the knowledge of this political struggle within the South-Asian community allows the reworking of the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism at the present juncture. The possibility of “learning” from the actual histories in which the Komagata Maru was entangled, its relationality to, and embedded-ness within other axes of power in an

ascendant global racial capitalism, is thus thwarted as the apologies remake the essentializing Canadian self-image of an inclusionary democracy. By remaking the “meaning” of the event that was the Komagata Maru, the event itself is incorporated into the nation’s “history” of an unfolding of Canadian largesse and tolerance of immigrant outsiders. This largesse is presented as being on display in the very act of apologizing, an act whose remorse attests to the nation’s enduring social-moral fabric.

Third is the apology’s relocation of the contemporary South-Asian-Canadian community’s political—and politicized—subjectivity into the sphere of an Orientalizing cultural diversity. This internal splintering off of the “culturalized self” in the psyche of South-Asian Canadians from their subjectivity as political subjects imposes onto them the Orientalist fantasies of Canadians while undermining their claim to political citizenship. Such psychic fracturing in the community’s relocation onto the terrain of cultural difference depoliticizes its own self-understanding and self-identification by producing them as subjects worthy of recognition only on the grounds of their “cultural” contributions to the nation’s “multiculturalism,” and of their labour to serve the interests of the nation-state. As such, the post-Komagata Maru South-Asian-Canadian community and its generations—born and raised in Canada—are reduced to the status of cultural Other as well as that of “model minority.” This culturalizing move incites a self-Orientalizing dynamic within the community of the apology as the condition for their recognition by the state while setting them apart from other communities also produced in state policy as racialized Others.

Fourth is the apology’s reconstruction of the state and “Canadians” as essentially white. The delivery of both apologies on behalf of “Canadians” reinstates their positionality and status as the “true” subjects of the state. In this manner, the apology offers Canadians an exalted subject position that confirms their compassionate and inclusionary nature (Thobani 2007). The national identity—and identification—of Canadians is thus secured through the “learning” occasioned by the apology itself. Rather than a deconstruction of the whiteness of the nation that was historically produced through the racialized immigration policies that sealed the fate of the Komagata Maru’s voyage, the apology invests this whiteness with a maturity acquired through its present receptivity of the cultural resources of its racialized Other.

For the racialized Other, the apology sets it apart as a community of “injury,” unlike the larger “maturing” polity that constitutes the nation’s social body. With the state’s construction of South-Asian-Canadians as a community defined by a singular “injury,” that of the Komagata Maru, contemporary forms of racial violence, border control and exploitation to which the community is subjugated are made illegible.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued the apology reworks the historical violence of settler colonialism into narratives that stabilize the state's authority as well as the nation's self-identity for the present. The expression of official contrition is hence an assertion of power that upholds narratives of state benevolence and compassionate nationhood, whereas acceptance of the apology imposes subjugation onto the community thus addressed.

In studying the phenomenon of the state apology in Canada, I have demonstrated *how* this isolates a particular form of colonial-racial violence waged by the state and redefines its meaning as a misguided misfortune. In so doing, the structural, systemic as well as psychic violence of settler colonialism becomes enfolded into the apology itself, making the reproduction of this violence the apology's condition for state recognition. In other words, the apology produces a particular version of "history" and a particular form of "injured" subjectivity which it then offers to "recognize." Such recognition is conditional upon acceptance of this reinvented meaning of the past by the community addressed in the apology, and acceptance of the "injured subjectivity." The acceptance suppresses and subjugates the community's own collective knowledge and understanding of the meaning of the atrocity, and of their collective struggles against the violence of the state. Hence, as a technique of power, the apology invites into the state's institutional realm those sectors of the subjugated population willing to uphold state narratives of benevolence.

As a technique of power, the apology leaves intact the complex web of interconnected foundational violence of the nation-state, including its assault on the historical consciousness and psyches of the racialized communities targeted by the violence. In this manner, the state and nation are brought together to yet again meet the challenges posed by the anti-colonial Indigenous resurgence and anti-racist mobilization. The Apology, in other words, is itself an act of violence that extends the longevity of settler hierarchies and racial-colonial power relations by forestalling the political demands for anti-colonial, anti-racist and abolitionist transformation.

The state's "new partnership" with Indigenous peoples as well as South-Asian-Canadian communities with the objective of building "a stronger Canada" requires this erasure of Indigenous knowledge of genocide and colonization, as well as the erasure of the knowledge of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist challenges mounted by racialized migrants to the territorial sovereignty of the nation-states that uphold the global hierarchies of racial capitalism.

As the apology reworks the Hegelian/modernist narrative of Canadian exceptionalism, of its progress towards greater democracy, inclusion and freedom,

knowledge of the structural location of differently racialized-colonized communities in the production of Canadian state sovereignty becomes mystified. Moreover, the politically neutering and culturally essentialized ‘inclusion’ offered in the truncated mode described in this paper makes the apology itself a politically wounding and psychically fracturing encounter with the state and nationals that ‘speak’ through these politics of regret as a step towards realizing their own “unique promise and potential.” (Trudeau 2016)

Finally, I reiterate my argument that the apology is a *contemporary* rearrangement of the racial violence at the heart of the settler colonial Canadian project. The apology absolves the state and its nation of responsibility for the interrelated forms of racial violence and dispossession that can no longer be ignored, apologies also rework these brutalizations for the present juncture by rewriting their “history,” and therefore their “meaning.”

I began this study with the question: What do apologies actually apologize for? My response is offered as a provocation: Nothing. Nothing that lessens the grip of the apologizer over the recipient.

Notes

1. Harper’s apology was taken as a “non-apology”; and rejected by the community as soon as it was made (Singh 2019: 278; Somani 2011: 9–10).

References

- Benjamin, W. (1996) *Critique of Violence, Selected Writings*. Vol. 1. London, UK: Belknap Press.
- CBC News (2008a) “Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Statement of Apology,” 11 June. Available online at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prime-minister-stephen-harper-s-statement-of-apology-1.734250> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- CBC News (2008b) “Harper Apologizes in B.C. for 1914 Komagata Maru Incident,” 3 August. Available online at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/harper-apologizes-in-b-c-for-1914-komagata-maru-incident-1.747120> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Churchill, W. (2004) *Kill The Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*. San Francisco, CA: City Light Books.
- Corntassel, J. and Holder, C. (2008) “Who’s Sorry Now? Government Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala and Peru”, *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 9: 465–489.
- Davis, A. (2005) *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Dhamoon R. and Bhandar, D. (2019) “Introduction: Itinerant Subjects of Empire: Unmooring the Komagata Maru”, Dhamoon et al. eds. *Unmooring the Komagata Maru*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
- Fanon, F. (1961) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

- Fournier and Crey (1998) *Stolen From Our Embrace*. Oxford, UK: Roundhouse Publishing.
- Gibney, M. et. al. eds. (2009) *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*. Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gilmore, R. (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*. London/ New York: Verso Books.
- Government of Canada Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2022). Available online at: <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Johnston, H. (1979) *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Kazimi, A. (2004) *Continuous Journey*. Documentary film. Toronto: VTape. Available online at: <https://alikalazimi.ca/films/continuous-journey/> (accessed 1 October 2023).
- Kazimi, A. (2012) *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru: An Illustrated History*. Vancouver, Canada: Douglas and McIntyre.
- Lightfoot, S. (2015) "Settler State Apologies to Indigenous Peoples: A Normative Framework and Comparative Assessment", *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 2(1): 15–39.
- Maracle, L. (1998) *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. Vancouver, Canada: Press Gang Publishers.
- Mawani, R. (2018) *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McIntyre, C. (2017) "Read Justin Trudeau's Apology to Residential School Survivors in Newfoundland," *Macleans*, 24 November. Available online at: <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/read-justin-trudeaus-apology-to-residential-school-survivors-in-newfoundland/> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Meissner, D. (2008) "B. C. Legislators Apologize for Komagata Maru Incident," *The Toronto Star Vancouver*, 23 May. Available online at: https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/b-c-legislators-apologize-for-komagata-maru-incident/article_37613101-3ce9-5cfc-b734-e5b92d65028f.html (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Melamed, J. (2015) "Racial Capitalism", *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 1(1): 76–85.
- Mihai, M. (2013) "When the State says 'sorry': State Apologies as Exemplary Political Judgements", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 21(2): 200–220.
- Million, D. (2013) *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. Tuscan, AR: University of Arizona Press.
- Mongia, R. (1999) "Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport", *Public Culture*, 1(3): 527–555.
- Organick, A. G. (2019) "Non-Apology in the Age of Apology", *Denning Law Journal*, 31(1): 149–164.
- Pruden, J. (2021) "Discovery of Children's Remains at Kamloops Residential School 'Stark Example of Violence' Inflicted Upon Indigenous Peoples," *The Globe and Mail*, 28 May. Available online at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-bodies-found-at-kamloops-residential-school-site-in-bc/> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Robinson, C. (1983) *Racial Capitalism*. London/New York: Pluto Press.
- Simpson, A. (2021) "The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," in S. Thobani ed. *Coloniality and Racial (In)Justice in the University: Counting for Nothing?* Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Singh, G. (2019) "An Appraisal of the Komagata Maru Apology", *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies*, 26(1& 2): 267–294.
- Somani, A. (2011) "The Apology and its Aftermath: National Atonement or the Management of Minorities?," *Postcolonial Text*, 6(1): 1–18.

- Thobani, S. (2007) *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Trudeau J. (Prime Minister of Canada) (2016) “Komagata Maru Apology in the House of Commons.” Available online at: <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2016/05/18/komagata-maru-apology-house-commons#:~:text=For%20that%2C%20and%20for%20every,to%20hear%20our%20apology%20today> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (2015) *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliations Commission of Canada, Vol. 1 Summary: Honoring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. Toronto, Canada: James Lorimer & Company Ltd.
- United Nations (2007) *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Official website. Available online at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (accessed 1 October 2023).
- Wakeham, P. (2012) “Reconciling ‘Terror’: Managing Indigenous Resistance in the Age of Apology”, *The American Indian Quarterly*, 36(1): 1–33.