

Remembering the Air India Disaster: Memorial and Counter-Memorial ¹
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Introduction

On June 23, 1985 an explosion at Narita airport in Tokyo killed two baggage handlers transferring luggage from a Canadian Pacific Airlines flight to an Air India flight destined for Bangkok. Less than an hour later, Air India Flight 182, originating in Toronto destined for Delhi via Montréal and London, exploded in mid-air over the Atlantic Ocean near the coast of Ireland. All three hundred twenty-nine passengers and crew were killed. Two hundred eighty of the passengers were Canadian citizens. Most were of Indian (South Asian) ancestry. More than a third of those killed were children and, in some cases, entire families were lost. The suitcase bombs that caused the two separate yet presumably related explosions had been overlooked by airport security and checked in with the luggage from connecting flights out of Vancouver the previous day.²

As the result of prolonged criminal investigations lead by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), one man from British Columbia was convicted for involvement in the bombing attacks while two others were eventually acquitted in 2005 based on a lack of evidence. All three men were allegedly connected to a radical movement for an independent Sikh state in India. Their participation in the movement was thought to be motivation for the attacks on India's national airline.³ In 2006, twenty-one years after the attacks, the government of Canada finally launched an inquiry into the disaster and its “aftermath,” including the criminal investigations, which, for many, had left crucial questions and a sense of justice gone unanswered. Twenty-two years also passed before public memorials to commemorate the dead were unveiled in Toronto and Vancouver where government representatives led remembrance ceremonies in June and July 2007, respectively.

These efforts—the criminal investigations, the government inquiry, and the recent unveiling of public memorials—mark severely belated or perhaps altogether failed attempts by Canadian authorities to recognize the Air India bombings and their resultant deaths as matters of national urgency. What accounts for this belatedness? Why such a lack of urgency in response to what one expert witness for the inquiry called “the most lethal terrorist incident in history for that era?”⁴ And why has the date June 23, 1985 not been etched into public memory with the same force that September 11, 2001 subsequently has, even though many fewer Canadians died in the World Trade Center attacks compared to the Air India bombings? Friends and family members of the victims as well as critics of the investigation have pointed to the systemic racism implied by these belated and wanting responses. Canadian authorities, however, continue to deny such criticism.

In this article I explore the Air India inquiry and public memorials as two crucial sites of remembrance through which negotiations of historical trauma and loss are undertaken. Embedded in hierarchical state structures and official discourses of nationalism, these sites invoke memory in limited, strategic ways to construct a particular version of the past, of the relationship between the present and the past, and of who or what matters in this relationship. More specifically, I argue that remembrance practices enacted here reveal a problematic desire to *forget* a racist colonial history and its lingering patterns in Canada, so that the loss and losses of South Asian Canadians in relation to the bombing attacks matter less than the project of maintaining a blameless nation state. In contrast, I introduce Eisha Marjara's film *Desperately Seeking Helen*⁵ as a “counter-memorial.” Interweaving an account of her mother and sister's

deaths on Flight 182 with the story of her family's immigration to Quebec from Punjab in the 1970s and a current-day quest for her Bollywood idol Helen, Marjara posits a different relationship of the present to the past; that is, one less anxious to establish so-called historical truth in order to bring about a sense of closure. The film complicates the temporality and politics of remembering by attending to the inconclusive and fragmentary natures of memory, loss, and diasporic subjectivity. In doing so, it challenges official interpretations of the Air India disaster and serves as an example of how working through personal memory can be a means of both psychical and cultural regeneration. Although there are obvious and important differences between government inquiries, public memorials, and experimental films, reading them alongside one another as sites of remembrance acknowledges that encounters between history and memory are in fact played out on a variety of stages and that it is through these encounters that the loss of individual lives to the Air India bombings become a matter of public consequence.

In the context of this article, what is ultimately at stake is the question: How might we remember or bring forward the traumatic past of Air India in such a way as to cultivate a critical historical consciousness in relationship to it now? The need for critical consciousness is pressing at this moment since public and official efforts—namely, the inquiry and memorial unveilings—are indeed both promising and hastening toward closure. Yet, how is closure understood here? Whose interests will closure serve? And at what costs might closure be pursued? Lata Pada, whose husband Vishnu and daughters Brinda and Arti Pada died on the Air India flight, raised the following questions in her testimony at the inquiry hearings of September 15, 2006:

Let us ask ourselves, why are we here today? Is this inquiry about closure for the families? Is this inquiry about fulfilling a campaign promise? Or is it about appeasing a group of South Asian Canadians? ... Is it about redressing a wrong that has become a stain on our national conscience? ... [Or] is this inquiry about sending a message to the world that Canada is not “soft” on terrorism?⁶

Similar to Pada, I am concerned that closure, as it is being pursued through official and state structured practices of remembering, will actually *close off* certain possibilities for critical dialogue and understanding in an attempt to save face on behalf of the Canadian government. Thus, I see cultivating a critical historical consciousness as a way, first, of staying open to possibilities for making meaning out of this complex tragedy that might otherwise be eclipsed by dominant forms of remembrance; and, second, as a way of acknowledging that despite its relatively low public profile to date, the Air India disaster and its still-emerging legacy must be recognized for its impact on the Canadian national imagination in terms of how Canadians conceive of themselves, each other, and what it means to be Canadian in the post-9/11 era of “war on terror.”

Cultivating a Critical Historical Consciousness

Cultivating a critical historical consciousness involves calling into question assumptions about the relationship between history, memory, truth, and knowledge and about how we come to know the past in the present. As well, it involves questioning whose knowledge is legitimated in the privileging of particular narratives of the past over others.⁷ In traditional historical criticism, the past is understood as a stable set of objective truths that can be unveiled and known if

memory serves us well. The historian or rememberer is ideally a stable, rational subject with the capacity to comprehend the past and transmit it accurately in narrative form.⁸ The trouble with this model—incidentally, the model upon which the juridical process of courtroom testimony bases itself—is both in its view of the past as a field of events whose meanings are inherent and simply need to be re-collected, and of the remembering subject as a potentially unaffected conveyor of the “truth” about the past. This model fails to account for the fact that the past does not simply exist, waiting to be rediscovered, but is constructed through highly mediated, often hidden processes of interpretation and struggles over meaning that reflect as much about the present as about what has already supposedly “happened.”⁹ The past, in other words, is always conceived of in light of what is felt to be at stake in the here and now, while what is felt to be at stake in the here and now is informed by pressures that produce certain versions of the past as more desirable for the present than others.

Moreover, the view of the historian or rememberer as rational knower/transmitter of history is problematic in its failure to recognize memory as a subjective process where social experiences and unconscious desires are brought to bear upon interpretations of the past. The rememberer, this is to say, is neither dispassionate nor consistent in his or her view of history. Rather, he or she imbues the past with meanings based on shifting political and psychological attachments as well as varying access to frameworks of interpretation. In his study on “the erotics of memory,” Nicholas Miller argues that memories and their narrations are places where the past is more often than not revised in order to satisfy “a desire for subjective and cultural stability and control in the present.”¹⁰ That is, what we see and report seeing when we turn our gaze backwards may be driven more by a desire to create a sense of continuity or security in the moment of remembering than a wish to render an accurate picture of history. This is a very different view of temporality than the one adhered to in traditional modes of historical criticism where the past is treated as discrete or separate from the present—as that which came discernibly before. Maintaining this separation is limited for thinking critically about remembrance practices since it fails to recognize that human subjects do not somehow stand outside of history as detached onlookers; rather, we are actively engaged in constructing the past through what we both remember and forget.

To begin cultivating a critical historical consciousness, then, entails recognizing the precariousness of the meaning-making process at the heart of interpretation; namely, that interpretations of the past are always subjective, contingent, and partial. Of course, despite these limits, certain interpretations are treated as more legitimate, more objective, and closer to the truth than others—typically those which uphold the status quo and dominant relations of power. As such, to begin cultivating a critical historical consciousness around the Air India disaster would mean, on the one hand, to divest any given interpretation of the past of the capacity to uncover some kind of objective truth about “what really happened” and, on the other hand, to notice which or whose interpretations become the basis for public memory/record of the disaster and for subsequent action (or lack thereof) in its wake. At the same time, incorporating and attending to interpretations that either resist or are curiously missing from dominant accounts of this traumatic history challenges the mechanisms of power through which hegemonic and strategic forms of remembrance are substantiated. Toward all of this, the remainder of my article undertakes examples of both modes of historical consciousness: (1) the traditional or dominant mode of historical consciousness as it is expressed and adhered to in hegemonic/strategic

remembrance practices and (2) what I refer to as a “critical” mode of historical consciousness as it is offered by the counter-memorial.

Strategic Remembrance: The Inquiry ¹¹

The Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 (herein referred to as the “inquiry” or the “Commission”) opened on June 21, 2006, presided over by retired Canada Supreme Court Justice John Major. The inquiry finally came as a result of mounting pressure on the federal government—led predominantly by the Air India Victims Families Association (AIVFA)—to take action in the case since it was felt that Canadian police, intelligence services, and the legal justice system had largely failed to do so. This pressure hit a critical peak in 2005 upon the acquittal of the second and third suspects accused in the bombing attacks where the RCMP and the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) conceded that crucial evidence such as wire-tap and surveillance recordings of the suspects plotting the attacks had been erased or had only belatedly been translated from Punjabi to English.¹² Following the acquittals, a federal review committee headed by former Ontario premier Bob Rae recommended an administrative (closed to the public) inquiry. It was not until Stephen Harper was sworn into the Prime Minister's office in 2006 that the recommendation was revised and a public inquiry called on May 1 of that year.¹³

The task of the inquiry is to examine the investigation of the bombing of Air India Flight 182 and to present its findings and recommendations to the government of Canada. As set out in its formal “terms of reference,” the inquiry is mandated to cover the following issues: whether the government was remiss in its assessment and/or response to threats of Sikh terrorism in this case; if there were problems of cooperation between the government, CSIS, and the RCMP in either the pre- or postbombing assessment of this case; whether existing Canadian legislation and security practices are adequate to address terrorism in general; or whether changes in all of these areas are necessary in order to prevent or respond better to terrorist threats in the future.¹⁴ The inquiry's primary evidence derives from previously published reports by government officials and safety and security agencies, proceedings from previous trials and inquiries, reports commissioned specifically for this inquiry, and a public hearing of new testimonies, both voluntary and summoned. Testimonies commenced on September 25, 2006 and ended on February 15, 2008. In total, 218 witnesses were called to the stand representing individual relatives and friends of the victims, AIVFA, rescue crews, CSIS and RCMP members, legal experts, security and terrorist experts, officials from various government departments, airline and transport authorities, community organizations including Sikh groups, and academics. The Commission's legal counsel itself totaled more than a dozen lawyers plus another twenty or so who represented interested individuals and organizations.¹⁵

The inquiry hearings opened with an introduction by the Commission's lead cocounsel, Mark J. Freiman, who outlined the format of the proceedings: Phase 1 was intended to recognize the “human dimensions” of the Air India tragedy by way of the voluntary testimonies of friends and relatives of the victims as well as rescue workers who retrieved the victims' remains from the Atlantic ocean. Phase 2 was to be a review of the institutional and public policy implications of the bombings.¹⁶ Of Phase 1, Freiman noted, “For twenty-one years [the friends and family members of the victims] have been asking to be heard. It is fitting that we commence the inquiry by affording them that opportunity.”¹⁷ Before the testimonies of friends and families began,

however, the Commission's lawyers gave the first of several dossiers. The dossier, explained Freiman, was to be considered “a concise statement of facts based on judicial findings and official reports that the terms of reference for [the] inquiry allow you to treat as conclusive....” He continued, “The purpose of the dossier is to serve as a factual introduction to the subject matter about to be dealt with so as to allow the hearings themselves to proceed quickly to the heart of the topic in question and to focus on key issues.”¹⁸

From the outset of the inquiry, then, both the mandated terms of reference and the dossiers function very clearly not only to frame but to manage and assign value to the subsequent content of the hearings, including the testimonies of family members and expert witnesses on their behalf. Implicit in Freiman's description of the dossier, in particular, is the suggestion that without the “facts” assembled by the Commission's legal experts, witnesses risked distracting the inquiry from what were deemed to be the “key issues.” Moreover, presenting the dossiers as “conclusive,” Freiman reveals that the knowledge produced by the Commission's authorities is already, decidedly, beyond question—already taken for granted as truth. Despite his insistence, then, that the testimonies of friends and relatives of the victims were integral to the Commission's work,¹⁹ ultimately they are to be understood as subjective interpretations and therefore less reliable than the conclusions drawn by the Commission's experts with their facts.

It is in light of these official framings that I argue the inquiry is a site of strategic remembering. In *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert describe strategic remembering as memory structured within particular spatiotemporal frameworks in an effort “to mobilize attachments and knowledge that serve specific social and political interests.”²⁰ In the strategic remembrance of historical trauma, they go on to suggest, the promise or fantasy is that memory will generate knowledge about the past, which will, in turn, protect the future from any similar fate.²¹ These characterizations apply to the inquiry. Within the specific spatiotemporal framework of the inquiry's hearings, memories, as they are conveyed through witness testimonies, are structured in particular ways by the use of discursive and procedural mechanisms such as the legal dossier. The promise or fantasy of the inquiry is that the harnessing of “objective truths” through these mechanisms will serve in the interests of a mandate designed to ensure that an incident like the Air India bombings will never happen again. And the stakes for this insurance are high; for in the face of an overwhelming number of testimonies pointing to the impotencies and failures of the government and its agencies to heed the warnings of what may have been a preventable tragedy, strategic remembering is more than needed to recuperate and secure public confidence in their power and authority. Thus, the inquiry is not only the state's response to a loss of lives but to an incident that presents a crisis for the maintenance of its own systems.

To be sure, nowhere in its actual mandated terms of reference is the purpose of the inquiry stated to be to redress the grief caused by this tragedy or the government's apathetic response to the victims' families in the aftermath—even though grief is clearly on display in the anguished testimonies of family members (and rescue workers) as well as in the Commissioner's summary reports.²² With respect to its official mandate, then, perhaps the Commission knows its limits in this one instance. Ann Anlin Cheng, author of *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, observes that while formal or public avenues for grievance may offer marginalized persons the opportunity to finally speak out, these avenues are not necessarily equipped to respond to that which is “incommensurable and unquantifiable” about grief, racial

grief in particular.²³ In other words, since the juridical system relies on calculable and tangible evidence, it cannot well attend to those *internal* reverberations of loss, such as the psychological effects of racism, which are most insidious precisely because they are largely unrepresentable or unspeakable.²⁴ “Grief is the thing left over after grievance has had its say,”²⁵ Cheng writes, drawing attention to the fact that the emotional residues of racist injury remain long after that injury is publicly named—as it was by the majority of family witnesses who testified at the inquiry that their grief was compounded by feeling ignored by the Canadian state on account of being Indian.²⁶

But if the Commission knows its limits with respect to redressing the grief of the victims' families, what purpose does it serve to have this “human dimension” so clearly and prominently visible at the inquiry hearings? In other words, what is the explanation for this seeming contradiction between the mandate of the inquiry and its actual process? Alongside missing practical supports (information, counseling, financial or legal aid, assistance for those who went to Ireland to identify their family members' remains), relatives of the victims testified to a lack of recognition by Canadian authorities in symbolic terms; that is, in terms of a public acknowledgement of their loss as a Canadian loss.²⁷ In 1985 their disappointment was no doubt amplified by then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's blundering offer of condolences to the Indian government for its loss.²⁸ But does not this offering of the main stage at the inquiry hearings answer their call for recognition, albeit twenty-two years belatedly? I turn again to the inquiry's official terms of reference for clarification where the only mention of the families is to note the Commissioner's authority to grant them “appropriate participation” in the inquiry “as he sees fit.”²⁹ Of course, this reference begs the further questions of what exactly “appropriate participation” means, and upon what grounds the Commissioner determines the “fitness” of participants. Surely, from Major's perspective, “fitness” has to do with the potential for fulfilling the overall mandate of the inquiry, which, to put it bluntly, is a mandate about the state management of terrorism and not of recognizing the human consequences of loss, as Freiman's hearing introduction claimed. In this light, granting the victims' families the “opportunity” to publicly share their grief does begin to appear as an act of appeasement and political self-preservation as Lata Pada cautioned, or perhaps even an instance of “stealing the pain of others,” a phrase Sherene H. Razack uses to describe white dominated economies capitalizing upon racial grief.³⁰ What I mean to question by way of Pada and Razack's critiques here is whether positioning what were undoubtedly expected to be emotionally powerful testimonies by family members of the victims ahead of the institutional/public policy review was a strategic move to embolden, first, the public's sympathy and, upon this, their willingness to direct resources back towards the very institutions in question for the purpose of bolstering counter-terrorism mandates.

Thus, despite the appearance of being front and center at the inquiry's hearings, I anticipate that the testimonies of the relatives of the victims of the Air India disaster will be remembered selectively and strategically in the inquiry's eventual recommendations to the government. This was made most obvious in a cross-examination of Professor Sherene H. Razack by Barry Brucker, counsel for the Attorney General of Canada. Razack, a sociologist from the University of Toronto, was commissioned by a lawyer for the victims' families to write a report on whether or not systemic racism played a role in the prebombing threat assessment as well as the postbombing response. After reviewing reports and key official documents including transcripts from the inquiry's hearings Razack found that, indeed, systemic racism had played a significant

role in both contexts. “In a nutshell,” she writes, “systemic racism operates when all lives do not count the same and when those charged with protection are not inspired to do their best to ensure that no life was lost.”³¹ Citing repeated instances where government officials, CSIS, RCMP, and Canadian airport authorities ignored, disbelieved, erased, and lost crucial evidence including warnings by the Indian government and Air India officials and surveillance tapes of the acquitted suspects, Razack argues that there was little to suggest that the potential threat to the lives of Indo Canadians was taken seriously. The lack of response following the bombings only served to reiterate this point. “When police, political and media elites all consistently treated the Air India bombings as a foreign event,” she comments, “it is not surprising that Canadians do not recall June 23, 1985. As a nation, we were not shaken, transformed and moved to change our own institutional practises for a tragedy we considered had little to do with us.”³²

Brucker, representing the federal government, rejected Razack's report outright. He called it “argumentative in the extreme”³³ and consisting of “blank, bald statements.”³⁴ Mainly, however, Brucker's concern was that “[the report] was going to form part of the public record,” to which he added, “I think it is dangerous and unfair to leave it hanging out there the way that it is.”³⁵ And herein lays the crux of my argument. Razack's report took seriously the testimonies of the victims' families and their treatment by the government immediately after the bombings and in the decades since. These testimonies were part of the basis for her conclusion of systemic discrimination. Discounting her conclusion by characterizing it as “argumentative,” “extreme,” and even “dangerous,” Brucker maintains the government's defense that its mistakes had nothing to do with systemic racism but were strictly the result of nondiscriminatory human error, cultural and linguistic differences, or a general unpreparedness for terrorist attacks.³⁶ Effectively, the government side-steps a charge of racism, shifting scrutiny away from its own potential liability while reestablishing authority to define public memory/record of this particular event.

None of this is to say, however, that through their testimonies the victims' families failed to resist official framings or that their accounts did not significantly rupture the imaginings of those of us who had scarcely heard their stories before; in fact, just the opposite may have been true, which is precisely why the government's defense council raised such objection. Nevertheless, the question remains as to if or how these resistant remembering, these “counter-memories,”³⁷ will be taken up in the inquiry's final recommendations or in subsequent public recollections of the tragedy; for as sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka points out, documenting absences within collective memory is one thing, accounting for them is another.³⁸ This is to say that while the inquiry via its public hearings may well be documenting the previously unheard voices of the relatives of the victims and the previously hidden “mistakes” by the various Canadian agencies involved in the investigation, it is yet to be seen whether these absences will actually be accounted for in terms that acknowledge systemic racism as part of the reason why they were rendered absent in the first place, or whether “accounting for” will be limited to the ramping up of antiterrorist security measures.

Memorial Unveilings

The official unveiling and dedication of public memorials to those who were killed in the Air India bombings sheds further light on how this traumatic history is being constituted in public memory. Hodgkin and Radstone elaborate on the significance of public memorial sites in this regard: “Memorials and museums represent public statements about what the past has been, and

how the present should acknowledge it; who should be remembered, who should be forgotten; which acts or events are foundational, which marginal; what gets respected, what neglected.”³⁹ These statements of acknowledgment, respect, neglect, and so on are communicated in various ways: through memorial design and the processes by which particular designs are chosen over others, through the discursive framing of memorials by way of official unveiling ceremonies and media coverage, and through the experiences of memorial-goers themselves. In this sense, the meanings conveyed by public memorials are not simply fixed upon the stones from which they are built. Rather, they are arrived at through the different and often contradictory personal and political investments that individuals and parties have in remembering at these sites. In my own preliminary case study of the recently inaugurated Toronto memorial what I am most interested in, then, are the ways in which investments in remembering are “unveiled” or made visible, and how they shape the potential for mourning.⁴⁰

In a *Vancouver Sun* article from November 6, 2004, journalist Kim Bolan reports that some family members of the victims wanted to have the recovered pieces of Flight 182's wreckage be the basis for a memorial design.⁴¹ Among others, she cites Lata Pada who had been in Vancouver for the criminal trials of the accused bombers and had seen the wreckage as part of evidence during the trial.⁴² Pada, who described the viewing as an “extremely powerful and very emotional moment,” felt that the use of wreckage as the basis for a memorial would be the “most visceral and the most physical way of preserving what happened.”⁴³ CBC news also reports that Susheel Gupta, whose mother Ramwati Gupta died on the flight, spoke on behalf of victims' families to request that the wreckage not be returned to its official proprietor, Air India, but that it remain in Canada to be included in a national memorial.⁴⁴ But no such proposal ever came to fruition. In fact, no resemblance of it has materialized at the few memorial sites in Canada to date. Instead, what have materialized are relatively “safe” monuments that are more symbolic than representational or artifactual, and fairly conventional in their references and design.

For instance, the Toronto memorial (which, to be precise, is located on the banks of Lake Ontario in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke) consists of informational plaques, two concrete benches, a ramp, a platform, and a stair forming a “processional path” which, in its angular projection, is meant to trace the course of Flight 182 through the air. Alongside the processional path are engraved the words: “This memorial honours the victims of the bombing of Air India Flight 182 which crashed into the Atlantic ocean beyond the shores of Ireland on June 23, 1985.” The processional path then leads to a polished black granite wall which, in its angular projection, is meant to point to the crash site off the coast of Ireland. Upon the wall are also engraved the names of those killed, including the two baggage handlers from Narita Airport. In front of the granite wall is a sundial, which marks the sun's passage on the day of the bombing as well as solar noon in Ahakista, Ireland. The sundial sits upon a circular stone wall engraved with the poetry “Time flies, suns rise and shadows fall. Let it pass by. Love reigns forever over all” as well as the names of provinces and countries representing the victims' homes (Figure 1). From this section of the memorial extends a “Remembrance Walk,” a path which leads to another small plaza, garden, and another concrete bench with the single word “RECONCILIATION” etched into the side facing away from Lake Ontario, toward the land (Figure 2).⁴⁵

Figure 1 Sundial (foreground) and granite wall (background), Toronto memorial site (photo credit: author).



Figure 2 Reconciliation bench, Toronto memorial site (photo credit: author).



What does one make of this busy site? Can any particular “statements” be inferred from the design itself? At least in contrast to the specificity and visceralness that an artifactual or representative monument such as the reconstruction of plane wreckage might conjure up, I would hazard to say that this design intentionally distances itself from the horror of the bombings and their resultant deaths by offering the reassurance of measured angles, polished surfaces, manicured gardens, paths, and universalizing poetry. A city official involved with the memorial project suggests as much when he comments, “After what these families have gone through for more than twenty years, it’s important to give them something respectful and beautiful.”⁴⁶ But how, exactly, did we get from the visceral conjurings of plane wreckage to sundials and remembrance walks? Whose notion of what is respectful or appropriate for a public commemoration of this particular violence is reflected here? And exactly who or what is to be “reconciled” on this lakeshore, as the memorial itself promotes? Undoubtedly, these considerations have been shaped by the fact that while family members of the victims apparently approved the location of the memorial site and were consulted on its design, ultimately the

project was directed by the City of Toronto and financed by the federal and provincial governments.⁴⁷ No design competition was hosted. According to the same city official cited above, construction was pushed through in a mere three months,⁴⁸ presumably so that the memorial would be ready for a timely public unveiling.

The Toronto memorial was officially unveiled on June 23, 2007 to mark the twenty-second anniversary of the Air India tragedy and Canada's new "National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism."⁴⁹ Government representatives and city officials, friends and family members of the victims, and the media were present. During the unveiling ceremony, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced, rather contradictorily, that the Air India bombing had "nothing to do with Canada, nothing to do with the people who were killed," and yet was "a singularly Canadian crime and tragedy."⁵⁰ Although trying to compensate for the state's historical lack of recognition on the one hand, on the other, Harper disassociates Canada from any connection to the conflicts that were suspected to have underpinned the attacks—conflicts that were connected to Canada and did involve Canadians by virtue of their relation to/impact on Canada's Sikh and Indian communities, and by virtue of RCMP and CSIS investigations into specific tensions arising from conflicts prior to the attacks. In his speech, Harper also cites the Commission's inquiry as an effort to "ensure that such an outrage is never again visited upon our fellow citizens," a thinly veiled insinuation that the accused perpetrators—who, like the majority of the victims, were Indo Canadians—were just "visitors" and did not really belong to Canada.

Razack, in her Commission report, offers a way to read Harper's disassociation. She writes, "Canadians imagine themselves as a peacekeeping nation that is largely uninvolved in the world's crises.... Our sense of ourselves as an innocent nation outside of history means that we often account for the violence in the world as something that has nothing to do with us."⁵¹ Reiterating this sense of existing innocently outside of history and violence, Harper ends his speech with a call for antiterrorism that rests upon xenophobic ideology of the racial or ethnic "other" as a threat to the security of the nation, and assimilation as the most desirable way to move forward. "Our best defence," he opines, "lies in convincing all Canadians no matter what their background, to set aside the political, religious, and ethnic conflicts that have darkened the lands and times from which they came and to embrace our future together."⁵² Perpetuating the colonial legacy of racial othering that has arguably characterized the state's treatment of the Air India disaster to date, Harper here appears to "forget" that the victims' families described their suffering as compounded precisely by the racial othering they experienced in relation to state authorities. In other words, what Harper's memorialization makes visible through its dissociations and forgettings is both the state's desire to have its own failings around the case buried and forgotten, and its continued inability to fully recognize the Air India tragedy as a loss for Canada. In this light, Harper's speech might be better characterized as a memorial to the *absence* of national mourning than a demonstration of it.⁵³

Nevertheless, while memorial designs and official framings work to attach certain meanings to memorial sites, they do not necessarily or finally determine the meaning of these sites for memorial-goers themselves, whose readings and responses can never be secured in advance.⁵⁴ The following account by Eisha Marjara (the filmmaker whose work I will go on to take up in this article) makes these limits clear. Marjara, whose mother Davinder Marjara and sister Seema Marjara died on Flight 182, was in attendance at the Toronto memorial's official unveiling ceremony and recalls:

It was a bizarre experience (in TO). After the official speeches, all of the families were herded together and shoved along this narrow path which lead to the site with the victims' names. Some of the people were half living, aged after all these yrs [sic], grief permanently etched into their faces, holding faded photos from the 80's and flowers and personal items belonging to the dead family members. I saw a large man in a suit and tie, probably a father, who was holding a wreathed photo of a young girl with bright eyes, as though it were a delicate wedding bouquet. In an instant, he was no longer a man but a little boy. The girl was his sister. He, like I, was also going to be on the plane, but because of a delay in an exam he had to take, he had to miss the flight. It was probably at that moment, I quite vividly understood, in my bones, how connected we all are. It was also at that moment I understood a part of us died too that night in 1985.⁵⁵

In the first place, Marjara's poignant and embodied account of the unveiling ceremony calls into question whether the family members of the victims felt the “respect” government and city officials assumed they would as they were, in her words, “herded” and “shoved” through the memorial site. Also striking is how she renders the official speeches and the monument itself quite inconsequential to the purpose of why she and others were gathered together on that particular day. What the occasion did offer that was more meaningful to Marjara than any recognition bestowed upon them by ceremonial pomp or the gardens and plaques was an opportunity for mourners to share in each others’ grief. In particular, her identification with the man who, like her, had lost a sister and, like her, was an “accidental survivor,” enabled a moment of deepening recognition and a fresh understanding of what the loss of her mother and sister meant for her. At once personal and public, it is Marjara's connection to this community of rememberers—and not the memorial's promise of “reconciliation”—that fosters mourning at this site on the banks of Lake Ontario.

Counter-Memorial: *Desperately Seeking Helen* and Remembrance as a “Difficult Return”

Following Phase 1 of the inquiry hearings, the Commission released a summary report titled “The Families Remember.”⁵⁶ In it, Commissioner John Major cites the ways that friends, family members, and communities have memorialized the victims of the Air India bombings through, for example, the dedication of scholarships, sporting events, and a hospital nursery to their memory. He also notes the publication of memorial books that include, in his benign words, “inspirational messages” and “touching memorabilia.” “These,” he goes on to say, “must be distinguished from other books and films based loosely on the events of the tragedy. [For] in the latter case, the authors may have used artistic licence to develop stories which are not necessarily based on facts.”⁵⁷ Perhaps it is not surprising that Major makes such an effort to separate fact from fiction here, echoing the concerns of legal inquiry. Still, his emphasis on the distinction is significant; for what is it about the use of “artistic licence” in retelling the Air India tragedy that is sensed to be suspect or perhaps even threatening? Major's distinction, I suggest, is underpinned by anxiety about the precariousness of the meaning-making process; namely, that no interpretation of an event or of history can be made definitive, no matter how officially it is framed. Yet, this is precisely what is hopeful for the cultivation of a critical historical consciousness: it leaves room for the possibility of reinterpretations, and for the potential to interrupt preferred or hegemonic meanings as they are encoded within particular representations and practices.⁵⁸ Herein, then, lies the potential to challenge official accounts of the Air India tragedy as they are constructed through sites of strategic remembering including the inquiry and

public memorial unveilings. Eisha Marjara's autobiographical docudrama *Desperately Seeking Helen* offers such a challenge.

Desperately Seeking Helen opens to the present day with the protagonist-narrator Eisha arriving in Bombay as a thirty-year-old adult (Figure 3). She is there, she tells us, on a desperate search for her beloved childhood idol, the famous Hindi cinema vamp, Helen. We are also told that the last time Eisha was in India was to bury her mother and little sister's ashes, the details of which unfold little by little through the film. In the present, Eisha's nostalgic quest for Helen triggers flashbacks to her childhood and the story of her family's emigration from urban Amritsar, Punjab to small-town Trois Rivières, Quebec in the 1970s. The film proceeds this way, flipping back and forth between now and then, between India and Canada, between the action of Eisha scouring behind-the-scenes of Bollywood desperately seeking Helen, and the markedly different scenery of her family life in the quiet, wintry community of Trois Rivières.

Figure 3 Protagonist-narrator Eisha from Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (photo credit: National Film Board of Canada).



According to curator and film scholar Laura U. Marks, this kind of movement back and forth across geographical and temporal space is characteristic of works of intercultural cinema in their attempts to portray the experience of living in diaspora, or as she puts it, “of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge.”⁵⁹ The back and forth movement itself mimics the disjunctures and displacements associated with diasporic subjectivity. At the same time, it creates a momentum through which memories are able to circulate and a history may be constructed in place of the overwhelming erasures and silences resulting from colonial violence and traumatic loss.⁶⁰

To similar effect, works of intercultural cinema often use the figure of the hybrid. Hybridity functions not only to symbolize the blendings and cross-overs that make up diasporic identities, but to “[challenge] the separateness of cultures and [make] visible the colonial and racist power relations that seek to maintain this separation.”⁶¹ In other words, by drawing attention to the genealogical and cultural mixing involved in the production of diasporic subjects such as, for example, South Asian Canadians, hybridity calls into question idealizations of racial and ethnic

purity as well as political distinctions made between “us” and “them” and who properly “belongs” or is just a “visitor.”

Thematically, Marjara invokes hybridity as the basis for Eisha's identification with Helen, her beloved idol. As a girl, Eisha dreams of becoming Helen where under the kitchen table she stages movie musicals, casting herself as the glamorous and rebellious star (Figure 4). Helen isn't a typical Indian heroine, the narrator points out. Typical Indian heroines were “the hero's fantasy of the perfect woman.”⁶² Helen, in contrast, is a vamp, and “the thing to know about the vamp is that she's usually an outsider. She's the foreign-looking woman the [hero] thinks twice [about] before taking home to mother.”⁶³ Helen, then, neither typically Indian nor altogether foreign, is a hybrid subject like Eisha herself, occupying both the here and there and somewhere in-between.

Figure 4 Eisha as a girl from Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (photocredit: National Film Board of Canada).



Marjara also constructs hybridity formally through the mixing of various media and production techniques including black and white family photographs (Figure 5), home movies, Bollywood film clips, stop-motion animated dramatizations of life in Quebec, archival footage of street scenes in Bombay, and the “mockumentary” style portrayal of Eisha's quest for Helen. These mixed forms work together to suture a narrative out of fragments, memories, and fictionalizations where no other images exist.⁶⁴ They work to implicate the past and the present in each other by overlapping images old and new. And they interweave the various threads of personal history and loss that bring Eisha to Bombay.

Figure 5 Photograph of Eisha's parents from Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (photo credit: National Film Board of Canada).



Through a nonlinear narrative that blurs fiction and fact, fantasy and reality, past and present, multiple story lines open out. We follow adult Eisha through the streets of Bombay and the backstages of Bollywood film sets (Figure 6), and we are told about young Eisha's family adjusting to their new life in Trois Rivières. In Trois Rivières, Eisha and her two sisters make friends, learn French easily, play games in the snow banks, and are able to imagine Quebec as home. Despite being “the only turbaned male for miles around,”⁶⁵ Eisha's father seems well-adjusted, perhaps on account of following his chosen career path as a professor in Canada. It is Eisha's mother, however, who experiences their move to Canada most distinctly as a loss. For her, belonging in this alien place never quite seems possible. In metaphorical terms, the narrator recalls her mother's sense of ill-fittedness: “My mother loved to walk, but she couldn't get used to the ice. She always found it hard to balance herself on the ice.... That's because she had one foot in Canada and one foot in India.”⁶⁶ Passed over for positions as an English teacher on account of her “different” accent and “foreign looks,”⁶⁷ unemployment and the chilly climate eventually kept Eisha's mother indoors—making chapatis, cleaning house, and “homesick” for India. But her “homesickness” was not simply a nostalgic attachment to India, nor an effect of her failure to adjust to the cultural and environmental differences of Canada; rather, it was a response to the systemic racism she faced, thwarting her attempts to make attachments to her new community, her new so-called home. Keeping one foot in India thus served to keep India, or at least an identification with India, alive within herself.

Figure 6 Bollywood film set in Bombay from Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (photo credit: National Film Board of Canada).



Nonetheless, Eisha's mother's melancholy is never assuaged, and this proves significant for Eisha; for Eisha inherits her mother's homesickness in a kind of parallel, sympathetic response—in her own feeling of longing and homesickness, which manifests as anorexia.⁶⁸ Hospitalized on account of her anorexia at age fifteen, Eisha misses the trip to India she was meant to go on with her mother and younger sister who are subsequently killed when their flight is bombed in mid-air. In the final scene of the film, the narrator recounts the harrowing event, and, for Eisha, the remarkable coincidence of her escape from death:

Discharge from the hospital meant that I [had to] gain weight. Summer came and my mother and little sister were ready to leave for India. Discharge meant that I could leave with them. But I fell a few pounds short of my goal weight, so they left without me, and I stayed behind ... I didn't expect that this goodbye was a real life ending. Dad woke me up the next morning. He heard news that the plane had blown up in mid air between here and there. She never made it back. She never made it home. The next day, I was discharged from the hospital and dad took me home.⁶⁹

This being the final scene, the film would seem to leave us here—unresolved but with the “difficult knowledge” of this traumatic event.⁷⁰ What are we to make of this ending? And where does this leave our narrator-protagonist, Eisha?

Curiously, in a scene that precedes the film's finale, still in Bombay searching for Helen, Eisha has a dream. In the dream she spots a girl in a playground who turns into a woman she thinks is Helen. She follows the woman more and more closely until she disappears through the doorway of an abandoned, relic plane. When Eisha boards the plane and finally gets near enough, the woman turns around, revealing her identity to be none other than Eisha herself. What do we make of this twist? What does it mean that Eisha has, essentially, been desperately seeking herself all this time? The dream scene, I suggest, links Eisha's nostalgic quest for Helen with her struggle to come to terms with the loss of her sister and her mother. In other words, Eisha's quest for Helen comes to represent the process of mourning by which she is returned to the past, to the scene of her mother and sister's tragic deaths, and to her own buried memories—signified by the abandoned, relic plane—after all these years.

Refusing to end the film conclusively, Marjara offers us something different from the reconciliatory or redemptive promise of strategic remembrance. That is, she offers us a view of remembrance as a “difficult return,” where “learning to live with loss ... [and] a return of a memory that inevitably instantiates loss, [promises] no ultimate consolation.”⁷¹ Remembrance, understood as a difficult return, acknowledges that memory may actually confirm the interminability of loss—especially when loss is too devastating and unimaginable to be simply “gotten over” or let go of. In this sense, Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* can also be read as “counter-memorial” in that it does not seek to remember as a means of closing or burying a painful history once and for all. Indeed, for Marjara's protagonist Eisha, moving forward means taking the risk of staying open to difficult memories and the difficult knowledge of her traumatic past as they inevitably live on in the present.

Conclusion

What I have essentially argued in this article is that official state responses to the Air India disaster have thus far been structured around a resistance to the difficult knowledge that continues to unfold in its wake. This resistance is visible in the state's ongoing denial of its own systemic racism in relation to the bombings and their aftermath, and in the contradictory aims and practices of the inquiry and public memorial unveilings. Strategic remembering at these sites is mobilized symptomatically, then, as a way of maintaining this resistance, effectively shielding the state and its agencies from the full implications of what it might mean to critically reflect upon its powers and operations in light of the disaster. Upon this resistance, the reaction-formation of a drive toward closure ultimately comes at the cost of accounting for the Air India disaster as a national loss, thereby postponing national mourning even further. Against such strategic remembering, a cue might be taken from Marjara's challenging work in *Desperately Seeking Helen* through which she manages to forge both personal and political meaning out of a traumatic history by bearing the uncertainties that encounters with memory and loss inexorably bring.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of this special issue as well as Roger Simon and Parvin Ghorayshi, in particular, for offering excellent feedback which I have made efforts to incorporate into the present version of this paper. Thanks also to Eisha Marjara for her inspiring work and for conversations which have helped shape my understanding of the Air India disaster and its continuing legacy.

2. Government of Canada (GoC), “Dossier 1: Background and Summary of the Facts,” *Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182*, http://www.majorcomm.ca/documents/FINAL_Facts_dossier_EN.pdf (accessed March 12, 2008).

3. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in any depth the relationship of the Air India bombings to the complex historical conflicts between Sikh separatist and Indian nationalist movements, many others have written about it and, in particular, about the series of violent

attacks and counter-attacks between the two “sides” that took place in Punjab the year prior to the bombings. These attacks clearly resonated with communities of the Sikh and Indian diaspora in Canada. For a journalistic account see Jiwa, Salim and Hauka, Donald J., *Margin of Terror: A Reporter's Twenty-Year Odyssey Covering the Tragedies of the Air India Bombing* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2006). For a version in historical fiction see Badami, Anita Rau, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*(Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007). For the Government of Canada's version see GoC, “Dossier 1: Background and Summary of the Facts,” *Commission*, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/documents/FINAL/Facts/dossier/EN.pdf> (accessed July 6, 2008).

4. GoC, *Commission* (Hearing transcripts, March 9, 2007), 1851.

5. *Desperately Seeking Helen*, Videorecording, directed by Eisha Marjara (Montreal, QC: National Film Board of Canada, 1998).

6. Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC) on-line video, *Commission* (Session 1 of September 26, 2006 hearings), <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=198> (accessed February 25, 2008).

7. Hodgkin, Katharine and Radstone, Susannah, Eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

8. Miller, Nicholas, *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

9. Hodgkin and Radstone, *Contested Pasts*, 1.

10. Miller, *Modernism*, 15.

11. At the date of my writing this article, though the public hearings of the inquiry have concluded the inquiry is still “open” and awaiting announcement of the findings and recommendations by Commissioner John Major and, so, I will refer to the inquiry in the present tense.

12. Razack, Sherene H. “The Impact of Systemic Racism on Canada's Pre-bombing Threat Assessment and Post-bombing Response to the Air India Bombings,” *Commission* (expert witness report submitted December 12, 2007), 15–19.

13. CBC News, “FAQ's about the inquiry into the Air India bombing,” *In Depth: Air India*, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/airindia/inquiry-faq.html> (accessed March 5, 2008).

14. GoC, “Terms of Reference,” *Commission*, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/termsofreference/> (accessed February 28, 2008).

15. GoC, “Witness List” and “Commission Counsel,” *Commission*, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/> (accessed February 28, 2008).

16. CPAC on-line video, *Commission* (Session 2 of September 25, 2006 hearings), <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=198> (accessed February 25, 2008).
17. CPAC on-line video, *Commission* (Session 1 of September 25, 2006 hearings), <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=198> (accessed February 25, 2008).
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Simon, Roger I., Rosenberg, Sharon, Eppert, Claudia, Eds., *Between Hope & Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 3.
21. Ibid., 4.
22. GoC, “The Families Remember: Phase 1 Report,” *Commission*, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/reports/phase1/> (accessed February 29, 2008).
23. Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.
24. I have elaborated further on this point from Cheng's work in an article called “Racial Grief and Melancholic Agency” in the forthcoming collection *Embodiment and Agency*, eds. Sherwin, Susan, Campbell, Susan, and Maynell, Letitia. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press).
25. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 172.
26. GoC, “The Families Remember: Phase 1 Report,” *Commission*, 99–111, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/reports/phase1/> (accessed February 29, 2008).
27. Ibid.
28. Razack, “The Impact of Systemic Racism,” 20.
29. GoC, “Terms of Reference,” *Commission*, paragraphs (f) and (g), <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/termsofreference/> (accessed March 3, 2008).
30. Razack, Sherene H., “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (2007): 375–394.
31. Razack, “The Impact of Systemic Racism,” 3.
32. Ibid., 9.

33. GoC, *Commission* (Hearing transcripts, December 13, 2007), 12616.
34. CPAC on-line video, *Commission* (Session 1 of February 15, 2008 hearings), <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=910> (accessed February 29, 2008).
35. GoC, *Commission* (Hearing transcripts, December 13, 2007), 12618.
36. This position also reflects Bob Rae's testimony at the inquiry where he maintained that he did not believe racism played a role in the pre-bombing assessments or post-bombing response even though he could acknowledge that the tragedy had not historically been understood as a Canadian one. See CPAC on-line video, *Commission* (Session 4 of October 3, 2006 hearings), <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=46> (accessed February 29, 2008).
37. I am using “counter-memories” here in the Foucauldian sense to describe “residual or resistant strains [of memory] that withstand official versions of historical continuity.” See Zemon Davis, Natalie and Starn, Randolph, “Introduction,” *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, Spring (1989): 2.
38. Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, United States, and London, U.K.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 117–118.
39. Hodgkin and Radstone, *Contested Pasts*, 13.
40. While my discussion here is primarily focused on the Toronto memorial, it should also be noted that a memorial park was built in the coastal village of Ahakista, Ireland almost immediately after the crash. Every year people gather here to commemorate the anniversary, including the families and friends of the victims who make the pilgrimage from Canada and other places to attend. The 20th anniversary of the disaster in 2005 marked the first year a Canadian Prime Minister (Paul Martin) was present for this ceremony. GoC, “Annex C: Timeline of Key Events,” *Commission*, 205, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/reports/phase1/annexc.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2008). For official monuments in Canada, there is a memorial plaque in Ottawa's Commissioner's Park that was refurbished and “re-dedicated” in a ceremony this past June 23, 2008. There are also plans to unveil a memorial in Montréal in 2008 to follow the recent unveilings of the Toronto and Vancouver memorials in 2007, as noted in the introduction.
41. Bolan, Kim, “Air India Plane Proposed as Memorial: Families Say Wreckage Should Be Permanent Reminder of the Tragedy That Killed Loved Ones,” *Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, November 6, 2004, <http://www.canada.com/vancouversun/features/airindia/story.html?id=2b957fd4-7841-4aed-9b5a-7935b19feccd&k=13047> (accessed March 4, 2008).
42. Lata Pada is an internationally known dancer, choreographer and Artistic Director of Sampradaya Dance Creations, a South Asian dance company out of Toronto. In 2001 Sampradaya staged a multimedia dance performance choreographed by Pada called *Revealed by Fire* which tells the story of her own journey through the loss of her husband and children who

were killed in the Air India bombings. Pada has also been at the forefront of organizing the families of the victims and has served on numerous occasions as a spokesperson on their behalf. Her involvement in these respects explains the frequency with which I came across her statements in my research, not only within the transcripts and submissions of the Inquiry but also within news media coverage.

43. Bolan, "Air India plane," <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/features/airindia/story.html?id=2b957fd4-7841-4aed-9b5a-7935b19feccd&k=13047> (accessed March 4, 2008).
44. "Air India wreckage to stay in storage," *CBC News*, Wednesday, May 25, 2005, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2005/05/25/airindia050525.html> (accessed February 13, 2009).
45. Thanks to representatives of the City of Toronto for explaining some of the elements/structures of the memorial site that I have described here.
46. Shephard, Tamara, "Air India Memorial Unveiled Tomorrow," *Inside Toronto News*, June 22, 2007, <http://insidetoronto.com/news/News/Etobicoke/article/28536> (accessed July 7, 2008).
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. GoC, "Prime Minister unveils memorial dedicated to the victims of Air India flight 182," http://pm.gc.ca/includes/send_friend_eMail_print.asp?URL=/eng/media.asp&id=1719&langFlg=e (accessed March 4, 2008).
51. Razack, "The Impact of Systemic Racism," 5–6.
52. GoC, "Prime Minister unveils," http://pm.gc.ca/includes/send_friend_eMail_print.asp?URL=/eng/media.asp&id=1719&langFlg=e (accessed March 4, 2008).
53. I owe this observation to an anonymous reviewer of this essay.
54. I am referring here to Stuart Hall's understanding of the way in which encoded or "preferred" meanings can always be read against or in negotiation with a reader's own investments/location in relation to a given text. See Hall, Stuart, "Encoding, decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During (Ed.), (London: Routledge, 1993), 507–517.
55. Marjara, Eisha, e-mail message to author, March 10, 2008.
56. GoC, "The Families Remember: Phase 1 Report," *Commission*, 140–147, <http://www.majorcomm.ca/en/reports/phase1/> (accessed March 4, 2008).

57. Ibid., 139.

58. Hall, Stuart, "Encoding, decoding," 507–517.

59. Marks, Laura U., *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

60. Ibid., 24.

61. Ibid., xii.

62. Marjara, Eisha, *Desperately Seeking Helen*, Screenplay transcripts (Montreal, PQ: National Film Board of Canada, 1998), 7.

63. Ibid., 5.

64. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 24.

65. Marjara, *Desperately Seeking Helen*, Screenplay transcripts, 14.

66. Ibid., 6.

67. Ibid., 21.

68. In their research on "racial melancholia," David L. Eng and Shinhee Han have found that losses which go unresolved or fail to be compensated for in the processes of immigration for first generation Asian immigrants to North America are often transferred or passed down to their children who, in turn, manifest this inheritance in their own forms of depression. For many immigrants, they note, a host of beloved "objects" are given up upon leaving the country of origin including homeland, family, language, cultural identity, property, status in the community, and so on regardless of whether leaving was by choice or forced exile. And since there are few avenues for these losses to be expressed or acknowledged in the new place, they come to linger as unarticulated grief. One way in which this grief is then negotiated is through an unconscious, intergenerational passing down. In other words, parents' unfinished mourning eventually comes to inhabit their children's psychic lives. See Eng, David L. and Han, Shinhee. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, (Eds.) David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 343–371. It is in light of Eng and Han's analysis that I am suggesting Eisha's anorexia can be understood as related to or even embedded within her mother's deep and unanswered longing for India. That is, Eisha's anorexia can be seen as a kind of inheritance or repetition of her mother's melancholy.

69. Ibid., 28.

70. I am using "difficult knowledge" here in the spirit of Deborah Britzman who notices that certain knowledge, such as that which may be produced through a traumatic event, can "provok[e] a crisis in the self" which is then met by resistance in the form of a hope that to bury this knowledge might preserve the pain of loss associated with it. See Britzman, Deborah, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State

University New York Press, 1998), 118–133. As I suggest in the next paragraph, her desperate search for Helen functions as this “hope” for adult Eisha who Marjara represents in the film as resisting the difficult knowledge of her mother and sister's deaths, as well as, perhaps, the coincidence of her own survival.

71. Simon et al., *Between Hope & Despair*, 4.