

## Un/Authorized Exhibits

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Tanis MacDonald

Volume 40, numéro 1, 2015

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl40\\_1art05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl40_1art05)

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

MacDonald, T. (2015). Un/Authorized Exhibits: Elegiac Necropolitics in Renée Sarojini Saklikar's *children of air india*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 40(1), 93–110.

# Un/Authorized Exhibits: Elegiac Necropolitics in Renée Sarojini Saklikar's *children of air india*

TANIS MACDONALD

Memory is a bio-compound. Add us, and release —  
— Renée Sarojini Saklikar, *children of air india* (18)

To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to  
define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.  
— Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" (12)

**T**HE INTRODUCTION TO Renée Sarojini Saklikar's 2013 book-length elegy *children of air india* notes that the text can be read as "a series of transgressions" (9). The book's major transgression is an act of naming endemic to the elegy yet audacious in the national and geopolitical project proposed by Saklikar — "to name other people's dead, to imagine them" (9). In this case, "other people's dead" refers to the bombing victims of Air India Flight 182, and Saklikar's act of imagination in naming them is both elegiac and political. Examining the politics of naming the dead, especially naming people whose lives or circumstances have been suppressed by history, is not a new idea, or even a new project in Canadian literature, for since the late 1990s a spate of book-length elegies written by Canadian women has pursued the project of challenging history via necropolitics. The elegy, historically, has been a genre that thrives on the paradoxical dimensions of its own conventions and its extreme willingness to adapt those conventions to shifts in human history, social constructs of power, and vicissitudes of affect.

My own incursions into the study of elegy in Canada began with a consideration of gender in the elegy, with an emphasis on the possibilities of the paternal elegy to act as a feminist moment, debating the terms of socio-cultural power by deconstructing the concept of inheritance. That work considered the ways in which the elegy is invariably a

political genre, even when — or especially when — it concerns familial loss, that “personal” site of affect that seemingly exists beyond the political but in fact is the burning core of the historical and political rebellion in female elegiac work in twentieth-century Canadian poetry. In the twenty-first century, Canadian women writers have begun to engage with the authority of inheritance to inquire into grief on a larger geopolitical scale while interrogating Canada’s historical positions in global politics, with special emphasis on the politics of migration. It should come as no surprise that the direction and force of these elegiac inquiries have eschewed gender as a shaping force of the elegies in important ways that elegies written decades earlier could not. The notion that the female elegist is a madwoman in the basement is outdated at best, especially with so many Canadian women poets of the twenty-first century writing book-length works that engage with the necropolitical elegy: Nathalie Stephens, *Touch to Affliction* (2006); Rita Wong, *Forage* (2007); Di Brandt, *Walking to Mojácar* (2010); Dionne Brand, *Ossuaries* (2010); Erin Moure, *The Unmemntioable* (2012); and Rachel Zolf, *Janey’s Arcadia* (2014). Reframing the elegy to consider transnational terms of intimacy and the geographies of inclusion and exclusion means, for *children of air india* and texts like it, investigating the ways in which the language of grief intersects with concepts of the local and the global, mediated as they are by history and violence. Saklikar’s declaration in *children of air india* that “Memory is a bio-compound,” while an immediate reference to the strengths of organic memory, is also an allusion to the manipulation of memory by the state. The connotations of “compound” as a patrolled (and controlled) enclosure resonate with the metaphor of the bio-compound as a substance that leaves a chemical trace. What, then, is the elegiac trace of remembrance in any arguably state-controlled discourse of tragedy?

These necropolitical elegies, with their shifting emphases on speaking and silence, might also be called elegies of shibboleth history: poems in which pronunciation of the language of memory carves out enunciation of a grieving public, and the enunciation of that public reappropriates a history effaced by ideological forces. The grief politics of the elegy itself are set in high relief by this enunciation because of the suppression of a violent historical moment, and their revelation in language reinvokes these publics as they have been erased, blurred, assimilated, or ignored by the nation-state. The shibboleth itself — the utterance that

displays one's heritage, especially a heritage that includes migration or diasporic shifts in citizenship — constitutes the very work of mourning that the elegy sets out to define. Such a pronunciation of memory is never enough, of course, in the same way that the elegy can never be enough to satisfy the demands of grief; rather, it operates as an artifact of mourning: a declaration of affect rather than the dissolution of it.

Since the 1990s, studies of elegy have grown suspicious of consolation, and, while Jahan Ramazani notes the modern elegy's "fierce resistance to solace" (*Poetry* 4) as a result of the waning of faith in the twentieth century, a more political view is worth considering. Mourners are rightfully suspicious of consolation as a result fervently desired by the forces of right-wing ideology: the patriarchy, the military-industrial complex, capitalism, conservative political parties. Consolation achieves its much-ballyhooed psychological balance only at the expense of suppressing history or co-opting a mourner's grief. In many cases, consolation requires a mourner to suppress her own history for the sake of appropriate social conduct and, in the end, for the sake of preserving a rhetorical and perhaps legal version of a grief narrative. The calcification of a grief narrative into an official history — such as a sacrificial and heroic death in war or a senseless tragedy without a social or cultural context — suggests that grief itself is a body manipulated by government entities rather than an affect expressed by and in possession of the victims' families. An excellent example can be found in one of the earliest published samples of "Air India lit." In her work on Bharati Mukherjee's 1988 short story "The Management of Grief," Chandrima Chakraborty ("Remembering") noted the ways that the protagonist's grief at losing her husband and two sons in the Air India bombing is manipulated by government agencies to encourage the protagonist to become the "model mourner" and consequently and designedly to become the "model minority": someone whose grief is managed politically and whose citizenship in her adopted country becomes dependent on her ability to convince other bereaved people of her community to align themselves with the government's official handling of the tragedy.

But in Mukherjee's short story, the protagonist's choice to assist the government with its official narrative is ambivalent at best, and the protagonist parses her own narrative as being trapped equally by competing definitions of citizenship: "A wife and mother begins her life in a new country, and that life is cut short. Yet her husband tells her: Complete

what we have started. We, who stayed out of politics and came halfway round the world to avoid religious and political feuding, have been the first in the new world to die from it. I no longer know what we started, nor how to complete it" (196). Although it might be a cliché to think of a person's tragic death as a story interrupted, Mukherjee's use of that incompleteness is resonant with what Angela Failler, in her work on memorial and countermemorial of the Air India disaster, has called a method of "cultivating a critical historical consciousness" about Air India Flight 182: a strategic resistance to official narrative, a way of "staying open to possibilities for making meaning out of this complex tragedy that might otherwise be eclipsed by dominant forms of remembrance" (152). The cover image of Mukherjee's 1988 book *The Middleman and Other Stories*, in which "The Management of Grief" was first published, shows the hand of the Statue of Liberty holding the torch that lights the way for emigrating "masses yearning to breathe free" on American soil, as Emma Lazarus's 1883 poem, "The New Colossus," carved into the statue's base, reminds us. At the time of publication, the image was certainly intended to be ironic, but it has gained additional resonance following the World Trade Center incident of 11 September 2001. In Saklikar's book, too, 9/11 is symbolically central and culturally peripheral, appearing *sous rature*: crossed out but still readable in the text as a "marker to be excised" (*children* 58), a redaction that will not be redacted.

The epigraph from Achille Mbembe that began this essay is a standard tenet of necropolitics, one that is valuable to consider in light of how *children of air india* works as an elegy that scrapes the grief politics of South Asian Canadian tragedy against the official ideology of remembrance offered by the Canadian government. In considering the resonant warning against completion embedded in "The Management of Grief," I propose a modification of Mbembe's sentence to include "*the memory of mortality*" and replace "life" with the word *citizenship*, "To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over *the memory of mortality* and to define *citizenship* as the deployment and manifestation of power." I intend no disrespect in altering Mbembe's sentence; on the contrary, I intend to direct it toward the way that Saklikar's book-length elegy troubles the state by invoking the judicial procedures of the BC Supreme Court that were desperately unsatisfying to the families of the victims of Flight 182. As Saklikar offers the text as an archive and exhibit of

the erased, she also invigorates *children of air india* with the audacity of the un/authorized: the reappropriated authority to imagine the dead, the living, and the unnamed as they are redacted and float between the discourses of life and death.

The more these geopolitical elegies probe the role of remembrance in global events in interrogating buried histories through the language of grief or dispossession, the more strongly they suggest that geopolitics can never escape family connections. Just as a daughter's position in the family is inevitably political, so too is an elegy's position in history: tenuous slips of memory and the violence of shibboleth often nudge the elegy toward a connection so strong that it imitates a family connection even when there is no biological relationship. When global necropolitics meet the elegy, the questions that arise are not only those asked by the tenets of necropolitics (i.e., Who is privileged enough to be allowed to live? Who is considered expendable to poverty and violence?) but also, chillingly, those that seem to arise from the genre itself. Whose body is valued enough to merit elegiac remembrance? Whose voice can call up and keep memory on the page? Who can offer that interjection of the elegy — that which is both highly stylized and grounded in affect — as a disruption of the official narrative of disaster or war? What is the force of the elegy to keep memory fresh, especially when details of the events that the elegist re-remembers have been blurred or lost not only through the force of time on the human mind but also, more cruelly, by forces more insidious? These forces include rhetoric of the state, destruction of archives, neglect of memory sites both physical and emotional, and manipulation by the government to suggest that some memories are more acceptable and some bodies more grievable than others.

*children of air india* takes as its subtitle *un/authorized exhibits and interjections*, well aware of its position as public dirge, un/official archive of voices and names, and interruptive document to the official story of Air India Flight 182. Official accounts foreground the facts: 329 people — including 280 Canadian citizens of South Asian heritage, eighty-two of whom were children under the age of thirteen — died when a bomb exploded on that plane off the southwest coast of Ireland on 23 June 1985. The “un/authorized exhibits and interjections” of the text and its embedded grief politics are championed by an oppositional figure of a female mourner in a public space as a critic of postmodern “despairing rationalism,” much as philosopher Gillian Rose discusses in her ele-

gantly titled *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (7). Rose also asserts that the law, if it is still the law that serves citizens and not an ideology that serves itself, has no other ethical choice but to acknowledge this truth: female mourners, by insisting on mourning as an act of justice, “reinvent the political life of the community” (35).

This is not to say that the law — or the nation-state — is the final arbitrator of the value of a life; indeed, elegy specialist Jahan Ramazani has suggested that “Elegiac transnationalism can be tracked intrinsically and extrinsically. . . . [T]he elegy crossed geographic spaces and cultural divides long before the birth of the nation-state” (“Nationalism” 612). Although Ramazani is not wrong about the elegy’s affective power to transcend the borders of the nation-state, he glosses over the tangled intimacies of transnationalism that do depend, at least in part, on people’s access to rights of citizenship that include the right to public remembrance. Texts such as *children of air india* point out that the powers of the nation-state are not so easily circumvented when the citizenship of victims is ill considered, effaced, or rendered moot. Raji Singh Soni and Asha Varadharajan point out in their article on the Air India tragedy that thinking about a neoliberal “Canadian public” is a zero-sum game and that it is necessary “to historicize and (re)frame the violence in question within, across and beyond eponymous borders” in order to make meaning of the loss, a project with which all “Air India lit” texts have engaged with considerable energy (185). Transnationalist views of the disaster have been preceded — and in some cases embedded in — a debate about nationalisms. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the bombing was spoken of as a tragedy for South Asian communities in Canada but was transformed into a “Canadian tragedy” under Prime Minister Stephen Harper — so much so that the phrase served as the subtitle to the report from the Commission of Inquiry into the disaster, published in 2010 (Chakraborty, “Introduction” 174; Failler 151; Soni and Varadharajan 179). In terms of reading *children of air india* as a book-length elegy, it is necessary to keep in mind that the transnationality of the elegy as a genre of affect cannot disengage from the rhetoric of the law as it is dictated and upheld by the nation-state. Gillian Rose confirms this, noting that mourning’s greatest task is the interrogation of the law as it relates to death, loss, and memory. The elegy as a literary artifact exists and functions not only to record grief but also to admonish the law to answer to citizens, to remind them to

resist laws that demand proscriptive closure, to insist on the acknowledgement of individuated loss, and finally to “become” the law in the sense of enhancing its usefulness to civic life (Rose 36-40).

For Saklikar, a lawyer, *children of air india* is the first book in her “life-long poem,” the ongoing “canadaproject”: “The first completed sequence of poems from *thecanadaproject* explores the nature of personal loss situated in the midst of public trauma. What does it mean to lose loved ones in an act of murder? How does “‘terror’ intersect with the *terroir* of a culture, appropriated, represented, claimed, disowned?” (“Bombing”). In offering *children of air india* as a series of “un/authorized exhibits,” Saklikar juxtaposes the unauthorized act of grieving with the authorized (and often redacted) documents of the courtroom and the media junket in order to interrogate the rhetorical legacy of the Air India bombing as Canadian *terroir*, the shaky ground on which the nation-state asserts its claims and refusals of citizenship. In probing the dimensions of public loss, Saklikar becomes what Rose calls the “inaugural mourner” (70), a figure who redraws citizenship explicitly from the resonance of public loss and challenges the nation’s civic responsibility to acknowledge the citizenship of both the mourner and the mourned. Saklikar notes on her website “that violence, both personal and collective, produces continuing sonar, an echolocation that finds us, even when we choose to be unaware or indifferent” (“Bombing”).

That “continuing sonar” has produced a body of literature, film, and critical texts in Canada, and, while the growing body of “Air India lit” has been perhaps more prominently examined in fiction and film, Saklikar is not the first South Asian Canadian poet to take up the Air India bombings as her subject. Winnipeg-based scholar and poet Uma Parameswaran’s long poem titled “On the Shores of the Irish Sea,” which takes the point of view of a woman whose daughter was killed in the bombing, was read at the fifteenth anniversary of the Air India bombing, on 23 June 2000, for a gathering of passengers’ families and Irish rescue workers on the Irish coast near Ahakista (Kumar). Part of a poem sequence titled “Kanishka” for the name of the plane that flew Air India Flight 182, “On the Shores of the Irish Sea” appears in Parameswaran’s 2002 collection *Sisters at the Well* along with “An Invocation Dance for Lata Pada,” which alludes to choreographer and Bharatanatyam dancer Pada’s elegiac performance piece, “Revealed by Fire,” about the loss of her husband, Vishnu Pada, and her two daughters, Arti and Brinda,



on Flight 182, which premiered at Toronto's Harbourfront Theatre in 2000. Playwright and poet Sadhu Binning, founder of the Vancouver Sath and Ankur collective, produced an English-Punjabi poetry book, *No More Watno Dur*, with TSAR Publications in 1994, including a poem about the Air India bombing, "Heart-Breaking Incident." Other Canadian prose fiction about the disaster includes Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), Neil Bissoondath's *The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008), and Padma Viswanathan's *The Ever-After of Ashwin Rao* (2014), recently a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. Films that offer examinations of the event include Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* (1993) and Eisha Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (1998). These works, in their various ways, seek to "refine the contours of public memory through its call to history and (re)frame Air India beyond the scope of a singular state" (Soni and Varadharajan 174). Critical work that examines the Air India disaster is extensive and includes a 2012 special issue of *Topia* that offered five substantial examinations of the legal and cultural legacy of the Air India bombings before and after 9/11 (including Soni and Varadharajan's article), Deborah Bowen's 1997 article on Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief" that calls for a more rigorous examination of government responsibility and cultural resistance, several articles on the culture of memorialization in Air India literature by cultural critic Angela Failler, and Alia Somani's 2012 dissertation written at the University of Western Ontario, "Broken Passages and Broken Promises: Reconstructing the *Komagata Maru* and Air India Cases."

Saklikar alludes to the *Komagata Maru* incident as a historical parallel to the bombing of Air India Flight 182, part of the "mixed suffering" that diasporic peoples have encountered in Canada (*children* 49), and the motif of the broken passage is played out in the fragmented discourse offered in *children of air india*. But Saklikar's use of the elegy as her genre also functions to subvert the brokenness: not to recreate a whole but to regard the ways in which an archive of brokenness writes a contemporary history of South Asian Canadian communities and to examine the nation-state's relationship with these communities. The act of "redacting the redaction" not only draws attention to the gap between the families' stories and the "official story" but also connotes the ways in which the unspoken does not fade away but gains power despite — or sometimes because of — attempts at erasure. Calling *children of air*

*india* both a “dirge” and a “tall tale,” Saklikar underscores the expectations of intimacy embedded in elegiac convention by noting that the book will offer lies and the truth in equal measure, wryly noting that “another version of this introduction exists. / It has been redacted” (9).

The publication of Saklikar’s book in 2013, twenty-eight years after Air India Flight 182 from Toronto and Montreal, bound for London, New Delhi, and Bombay, exploded off the southwest coast of Ireland, brings attention back to the 1985 event and the long aftermath of governmental and judicial inquiry. At the heart of the text is the disappointingly mishandled trial of 2003-05 and the spectre of the “un/authorized” that haunts the state-approved — and sometimes state-manufactured — official story of the bombing. If we want to think about *children of air india* as a literary marker of an aporia in South Asian Canadian migration history, we can begin by noting the book’s work with information that is “both over-reported and under-represented,” as its back cover copy declares. This paradox situates the Air India bombing in parallel not only with its historical counterpart, the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, but also, frankly, with a historical litany of necropolitical erasures that Saklikar lists in a poem titled “C-A-N-A-D-A: in the after-time, always, there is also the before —”:

Alloy, mixed suffering:  
 name the Ukraine, find the Doukhobors, ferret out head taxes,  
 also, Cambodia, Ireland,  
 the bombing of Britain,  
 Guernica, Dresden,  
 Gaza, Afghanistan,  
 Khymer, Ararat, all such entries in any such list, incomplete,  
 Auschwitz (shush, shush)  
 each name  
 releases vibrations  
*Komagata Maru*  
 internment and confiscation (48-49)

This geopolitical list is long, and Saklikar wryly notes that it could be even longer. The position of Auschwitz toward the end of the list with “(shush, shush)” immediately after the utterance of the location of the notorious concentration camp implies that the necessary incompleteness of the list is predicated on historical silencings, with each silencing shoring up the official Canadian narrative of nation that emphasizes toler-

ance and acceptance of difference. The poem's title, "C-A-N-A-D-A," not only invokes the Canadian national anthem but also, with its implication of children's voices lifted in song, eerily reproduces the ultranationalist 1967 Bobby Gimby-composed Canadian centennial theme. The echoes of these two nationalist anthems underscore the Canadian propensity to build a narrative of suffering into the narrative of nation and simultaneously suggest that the same stories of suffering are calcified as the price of freedom, a national requirement for migrants. As Saklikar puts it,

condo tower, SkyTrain tracks  
emanating messages — hoarded in hoax nation,  
a-taking-and-a-taking, this country  
receiver of peoples, and always underneath, the everlasting story —  
*this is how we suffered* (49)

The focus on the "un/authorized" in *children of air india* begins with what has been redacted from the official discourse and what Saklikar ironizes in the text. The first piece in the collection, "Elegy for Courtroom 20, Vancouver Law Courts," begins as a found poem drawn from a 2003 description of the courtroom built especially for the Air India bombing trials. The list of the courtroom's features, including "149 seats and video monitors / three locations, allowing for unobstructed views," is countered by the "eyewitness account" by the text's narrator, recorded two years later on 16 March 2005, the day that Justice Ian Josephson found not guilty Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, the two men accused of plotting the bombing (11). The narrator's account notes the distance and estrangement fostered by the very courtroom that families were assured was built to serve their needs: "The judge a pinprick head, / far away," ruling over "a drama that was about [redacted] and not about [redacted], family / reflected, refracted, our airplane saga" (11).

The refraction of the saga also means a refraction of the text. And a refracted text is not necessarily an ineffective one; on the contrary, as Angela Failler notes about *Desperately Seeking Helen*, such a text "complicates the temporality and politics of remembering by attending to the inconclusive and fragmentary natures of memory, loss, and diasporic subjectivity" (151). So, in her text, Saklikar takes on a series of tasks, each with its own elegiac texture; *children of air india* is at once a histor-

ical elegy, a generational elegy, an elegy about a particular event, and a kind of elegy less frequently written in the twentieth century, though its cultural ubiquity prior to the twentieth century is undeniable: an elegy for children. It is no coincidence that the youth among Flight 182's passengers are often featured in journalistic reporting on the bombing. The fact is simultaneously arresting yet hard to fathom. It is a fact so galvanizing that Kim Bolan's 2005 examination of the Air India court case, *Loss of Faith: How the Air-India Bombers Got Away with Murder*, begins and ends with descriptions of the children who were passengers on Flight 182, even emphasizing the trial as a miscarriage of justice on the basis that a quarter of the victims were children under the age of twelve. Bolan reported on the Air India tragedy from the start, beginning with interviewing the families on the day of the disaster in 1985 and following through with her investigative reporting for twenty years, until the end of the trial. Her focus on the murdered children of Flight 182 proceeds directly from her work with the families of the victims. Saklikar's text does not shy away from the task of elegizing individual children, but it also implies that the "children of Air India" include those who lost their parents in the bombing as well as an entire generation of Canadians of South Asian heritage who inherited the Air India bombing as an inescapable, culturally inflected, necropolitical engagement with the Canadian government and judicial system. This includes but is not limited to Saklikar's experience as the niece of a couple who died in the bombing of Flight 182. "N," the speaking persona throughout the text, stands equally for "narrator" and "niece." Since Saklikar is a member of one of the families of the victims, her entry point into the event and its long aftermath is absolutely authorized in some ways and less so in others, for a niece's relationship to the dead is not a wife's (e.g., Lata Pada) or a child's (e.g., the unheard voice of N's cousin Irfan, whose parents were Saklikar's aunt and uncle). As Saklikar uses the documents available to her as a palimpsest for her elegiac examination of the deaths that have not been properly attended, she reforms the official text into an intimate elegy.

The idea of the "un/authorized" is finely worked over in *children of air india*; Saklikar suggests that her own right to elegize and "inherit" this elegiac drift is both appropriate and inappropriate. She confronts the "exhibit" of mourning as paradoxically anathema to and required by the elegist, and indeed the elegy as a genre has always juggled the display

of public declaration with the privacy of grief. The elegist's primary motivation is always to exhibit loss as it is both hidden and revealed by the elegy: to make public what is private and to make present what is absent. An elegy interjects detail into what has been believed "lost," creating narrative order (or a designed disorder) for an erased or suppressed event, all with an adamant refusal to capitulate to the failure of memory. Saklikar interjects herself into the mourner's persona that also functions as the elegist's persona. Struggling with the media's formula of "Story. Sorry. Saga" (56), N appears in the "Voir-Dire" section of the text as someone who interrogates — and is interrogated by — the text:

a singing tale,  
the future, unheard  
if you are N, you are twenty-three and you are willing to confess  
to curiosities about death, about who is mourned, who is effaced,  
but your confession is of little interest.  
It is June 1985 and you will resist the impulse to conflate stories of  
suffering. (64)

The structure of *children of air india* — with its repetitions and its frequent returns to the concept of the buried archive — is a textual enactment of Saklikar's favourite quotation from Sara Ahmed: "Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience" (239; see mclennan.). This persistent text intersects with the traditional elegiac refusal to authorize the event as fully understandable or easily assimilated into a narrative of an individual life. In fact, *children of air india* suggests strongly that what is memorable about the Air India bombing is what the official narrative has left out: that is, the lives of the victims as people rather than as statistics and the ongoing lives of the victims' families. Saklikar's narrator subverts the redaction of the court case, and the resulting elegies put pressure on the politics of erasure in disconcerting ways. For example, in the poem "un/authorized invocation," the children killed on Flight 182 are listed this way: "[name redacted] eighteen years old / [name redacted] seventeen years old; . . . [name redacted], Jr., fifteen years old," and so on (17). The elegies for individual children that describe their lives and hopes are more detailed, and they are offered as both "exhibits" and "testimony," as in the poem "Testimony: her name was [redacted]":



over, stories in compartments” (65), and in “C-A-N-A-D-A” she situates the Air India tragedy in the context of a violent Canadian narrative of settlement, even as she troubles the idea of who might be designated as the “appropriate” or model mourner:

list each band, tribe, linguistic group, hereditary chief,  
 no accounting with those names, not released to her  
 because not student enough, not seeker enough  
 not listener enough, each tale incoming  
 woven unending saga (49)

Saklikar’s account of suffering as part of a migrant narrative is at least partly satirical, but even as Saklikar parses it she comes to a version of the question about tragedy and mourning that Dionne Brand asks early in her Griffin Prize-winning collection *Ossuaries*, referencing an ambivalent response to the rhetoric of 9/11: “she had mourned enough for a thousand / broken towers, her eyesight washed immaculate and / caustic, her whole existence was mourning, so what?” (Brand 30). Like Brand, Saklikar offers the seemingly flippant “so what?” as the fulcrum of her inquiry, parsing the rhetoric of disaster and the insufficient language of aftermath in “C-A-N-A-D-A”:

incident as saga, saga as tragedy,  
 tragedy as occurrence  
 so what a plane explodes  
 so what people die, they die every day  
 in her body, blast and counter blast (*children* 48)

Saklikar’s “un/authorized exhibits and interjections” place the act of grieving against the authorized redactions of the courtroom and the media junket to interrogate the rhetoric surrounding the Air India bombing and the ways that public loss operates as an interrogation of citizenship. For example, “Elegy for Courtroom 20, Vancouver Law Courts,” offers no particularly elegiac details, but the idea that the specially constructed courtroom was intended to be a place of testimony for the families, a funereal space for people denied bodies to mourn, is inescapable and supported later in the text when N asks the judge, and herself as elegist, “What will you decide, in this case that is the saga called Air India? / Well, you have your tricks, / and your ways” (65). Some of those “tricks” are embedded in the text: the reproduction of the

acronyms used in the Air India trial as a visual poem, “Narita: hymnal-acro-nym” (61), multiple reproductions of testimony from the families of victims with their names also redacted, and a cascade of retellings of what happened in N’s Vancouver home on the morning when the news of the bombing reached her family, each iteration different and each ending with the caveat “another version of this moment exists” (68-71).

When Saklikar invokes “that old shibboleth of our nation — west, divided from east” (112), she is referring to divisions within Canada as well as to the spectre of xenophobia, underscoring the idea that in 1985 the Air India tragedy was considered by the Canadian government to be a terrible event but a “foreign tragedy”: one that occurred as a result of events far from Canada, took place outside Canada above the Irish Sea, and involved victims who, because of their South Asian heritage, were not “Canadian enough” to be considered citizens, forgetting that the passenger manifest was made up of 80 percent Canadian citizens. The Indo-Canadian population of the plane, including Canadian-born children on trips to visit relatives in India as rewards for doing well in Canadian schools, was recast by the Canadian government as “foreigners” until 2005, when, in the person of Prime Minister Paul Martin, the government referred to the Air India bombing as “a Canadian tragedy” at the twentieth anniversary ceremonies for the victims at Ahakista, Ireland.

In “Elegy: what it feels like after,” Saklikar’s figure of the mourning daughter in *children of air india* — the audacious mourner, the visitor to the archive, and the adamant refuser of the role of model mourner — splits herself in two to speak on both sides of the elegiac inquiry and interrogates her own position as singer of the mourning song:

n: Do not listen to this daughter. With a finger she will stroke the skin of the mother.

N: Rigid memories produce ill-fitting songs. This is no song.

n: And of dreams, before the bombing?

N: Find she who is mother who was sister. What kind of daughter refuses all songs?

n: Why not consult the record that is the saga of the bombing of the plane?

N: It is all there. There is nothing. (55)



As a genre, the elegy takes time. It requires the accrual of mourning to render it a literary artifact while refining a sense of inquiry. But even this accrual cannot always be trusted: “Rigid memories produce ill-fitting songs,” warns Saklikar. In *children of air india*, she shows that memory is not only malleable but also fallible, subject to ossification by official forces and vulnerable to all kinds of abuses. However, the elegiac impulse — be it slow to come to fruition or impossible to harness — remains the cultural and social purview of the victims’ families, and the lost beloveds require names:

n: What will always be missing?  
 N: Sing. Do not sing(h). (55)

The choice to sing or not to sing brings us back to Milton’s question in his 1638 elegy for Edward King — “Who would not sing for Lycidas?” — the cultural imperative to sing for the dead, and the power that comes with the refusal to sing the official song. Saklikar’s appropriation of the injunction by placing the “h” on Sing(h) to invoke the middle name taken by devout Sikh men to connote the courage of their religious devotion (meaning “lion” in Punjabi) echoes the reportage of the names of the two accused men, when the appellate acquired a more sinister association, as the accused perpetrators’ names were embedded into public consciousness while the names of the victims never were. “What kind of daughter refuses all songs?” asks Saklikar, invoking Rose’s politically reinventive female mourner, and with this question we can see that N’s refusal is not so much a refusal to mourn the dead as a refusal of the official narrative told by “the model mourner,” also the model immigrant or model “child of Air India.” This model child is bereaved but silent and perpetually in the position to inherit without the power of actual inheritance, without the power of naming “what will always be missing.” The title *children of air india* is literal — a reference and an address to the eighty-two dead children on board Flight 182 — but it is not solely literal, for the title also refers to the generation that has grown to adulthood since 23 June 1985. The thirty years since the tragedy have produced many “children” of the event: a generation of Canadians of South Asian heritage whose relationship with the government of Canada has been filtered through these killings and a generation of Canadians from a variety of heritages whose discourses with and understandings of

the bombing have been distanced by the government's initial treatment of the deaths as a "foreign tragedy."

As Saklikar points out, any close scrutiny of the Air India trial with its redactions and elisions only repeats the question of *authority* in both senses of the word: that which is explicitly authored as fact and that which has the power to calcify a version of events. But when Peter Sacks reminds us in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* that "the right to mourn was from the earliest times legally connected to the right to inherit" (37), he refers not solely to financial inheritance but also to inheritance of memory, of mourning duty and ritual. The literary and other artistic manifestations of such mourning, and the philosophical injunctions to challenge and trouble the law through persistent mourning, are central to the project that drives *children of air india*: to "write the names all the way through" (113).

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