Monday, August 12, 2013
Toronto

It was during rush hour when two hundred white-identified individuals in a forty-foot wood-framed boat descended onto the streets of Toronto. The people were dressed in white t-shirts and the boat was wrapped in canvas painted red and blue. Together they crossed Queen Street West and occupied four lanes of traffic in one of the busiest commercial districts of the city. The ship ‘docked’ outside of the flagship store of the Hudson Bay Company — a former fur-trading corporation that was once the de facto colonial ruler of the region. Unlike any other mass action I had been to, the crowd seemed to take over the intersection effortlessly. During the fifteen minutes that they held the site, there was no police intimidation, no harassment from onlookers, and only mild frustration from the ebbing crowds.

This street occupation was called Mass Arrival, an art intervention staged by a collective of migrant women of color, of which I was privileged to be a part. As the name might suggest, this project was a critical response to the “mass arrival” of migrants aboard ships in Canada and an examination of the national fear induced by their arrival. The intervention, moreover, aimed to interrogate the myth of Whiteness in the construction of Canadian identity, and how that myth gets disrupted and unsettled by the arrival of ships, specifically those carrying migrants of color. Perhaps because Canada’s mostly uninhabited and unguarded landmass is bordered by three oceans, the image of the ship holds particular weight in the national social imaginary. Here are some of my reflections, through unpacking the experiences of this intervention, on the notion of Whiteness in national belonging, the imagined body of the Canadian state, and

1 Hudson Bay Company remains one of the only companies that has operated continuously into the present.

2 I have chosen to capitalize White, Black, and Brown to highlight the fact that racialization is a process by which difference is constructed (categorized into “races”) to justify domination over and violence inflicted on a grouping of people.
public space as sites of border production used to control, regulate, and police migrant bodies of color.

*Mass Arrival* was held on the third anniversary of the arrival of the *MV Sun Sea* on the coast of British Columbia. Denied entry into Canada, the 492 Tamil passengers on board were immediately incarcerated — men, women, and children included. They were called terrorists, human smugglers, queue jumpers, illegals, and bogus refugees. They were greeted with signs that read, “Tigers don’t unpack, send them back!” A flurry of racist hysteria enveloped the country, reminiscent of a century earlier when the *Komagata Maru* steamship carrying 376 migrants from Indian Punjab was denied entry into British Columbia. After being held incommunicado for two months aboard the *Komagata Maru*, the migrants were forcibly deported on the basis of the exclusionary “continuous journey” laws. Many of the passengers were sent back to imprisonment and some to their deaths.

Boats arriving on the shores of Canada (colonized Turtle Island) is not a new phenomenon. Historically, every non-Indigenous person on these lands has (or their ancestors have) arrived as a migrant on a boat. This includes all White settlers whose long history of arriving by sea dates back from the first colonial ships to the Great Migration of the 19th century. Likewise, White refugees have been celebrated as heroes and brave survivors in Canadian history books, entrenching the idea of Canada as the generous land of immigrants. A case in point is the *SS Walnut*, which arrived in Nova Scotia in 1948 with 347 Estonian refugees on board. Immigration officials welcomed them without hesitation, saying, “You came to a good country. There is room for you here.” Therefore, the fear of the “mass arrival” that threatens the integrity of state borders and national identity is not so much a fear of migrants or ships but is the fear of ships carrying the wrong kinds of migrants.

Just as the *SS Walnut* was welcomed onto Canadian shores, the *Mass Arrival* ship carrying the hundreds of White participants was welcomed on the streets of Toronto — it did not disrupt, offend, nor cross the accepted thresholds of how and by whom our public space gets used. This “occupation” revealed to me the fact that ownership over one’s own body in public space is a privilege, not a right. At the most basic level, the White (cisgender male) body is the frame of

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3 Under the continuous journey laws, migrants arriving by boat were only be admitted if they travelled directly from their country of origin to Canada. These laws were the basis for refusing entry to the *Komagata Maru*, which set sail from Hong Kong rather than directly from India. The “Safe Third Country Agreement” introduced in 2004 is alarmingly reminiscent of these archaic, racist laws.

4 Contrary to popular belief that we are presently experiencing unprecedented immigration to the global North, the largest wave of immigration was during the second half of the 19th century, carrying boatloads of European settlers who were welcomed with “free” (stolen) land.
reference for public space that regulates the appropriate shape, size, skin tone, and movement of the bodies that inhabit it. This is further reinforced by social, cultural, and physical constraints; from the scale of the doorways and the height of steps to popular representations of what civic life ought to look like. It comes as no surprise then that while 200 White people participating in a public art project is permitted and even celebrated, a gathering of a few dozen people of color may be cause for suspicion. And this is because Whiteness is not marked and does not need to be feared. Whiteness has a place in our public spaces and on our streets. Whiteness belongs here.

- 1492: Columbus “discovers” the New World aboard the Santa Clara.
- 492: The number of Tamil migrants aboard the MV Sun Sea, denied entry and detained.

More than a coincidence of numbers, these two intersecting events — one we revere and one we revile — form the basis of Canada’s national creation story as a place founded by and for White European settlers. This national myth has been produced and reproduced, from the **Chinese Head Tax and the Exclusion Act**, which barred Chinese immigration once the labor of the railway workers had been fully exploited, to today’s **Temporary Foreign Worker Programs**, which ensure that while migrants of color are good enough to work here they are not good enough to stay.\(^5\) And though the bones of our ancestors may lay scattered across the land as a result of generations of stolen labor, people of color remain othered, always arriving and never belonging. The MV Sun Sea is but one testament to the myth of the White body — the body-politic of the state — that forever fears the penetration and contamination by Black and Brown bodies.

The body of the state is perceived to be a vulnerable one — its extremities are unprotected and its skin is soft and porous. The necessary fortification of its borders means that, at the same time, borders become imprinted onto the bodies of people of color. The exclusion and fear associated with migrants — inscribed into our very skin — become habituated and reinforced to ensure that migrants remain marginalized; bounded, bordered, and safely out of sight. If bodies are the objects of state regulation, then public space is a key tool. Beyond externalized ports of entry, borders are internalized through the policing of each other and of ourselves. Urban checkpoints are not abstract spaces but are found in every public space — the library, the school, the public square, the streets. Each of these sites determines where, how, and on whose bodies enforcement rituals

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5 The **Chinese Immigration Act**, now known as the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, first took the form of a Head Tax, a $50 levy on all Chinese migrants entering Canada after 1895, when the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed and the thousands of migrant workers were no longer needed. This was increased to $500 by 1903, followed by a subsequent ban of virtually all Chinese migration in 1923. Families were separated for two decades until the Act was repealed in 1947.
are performed on a daily basis, through state policing, profiling, harassment, and the distribution of services, healthy food, affordable housing, and so on. The Mass Arrival street intervention was one attempt to highlight the privilege of Whiteness in our public spaces and the ways in which racialized bodies act as sites of bordering. Beyond this action, these racialized rituals are met with everyday resistance. There are always ways to slip through each checkpoint and there are seams at every border. Every time a non-status woman tries to enroll her child at a school and every time an undocumented man accesses a food bank, it is a challenge to immigration regimes. Simply inhabiting public space as migrants can be an act of resistance against state borders.

On February 21, 2013, the City of Toronto became Canada’s first “Sanctuary City,” which means that all residents, regardless of immigration status, can access municipal services without fear of detention and deportation. This movement was built from the ground up through decades of organizing work involving different campaigns, direct actions, case support, mass mobilization, and popular education among migrant communities and social service providers. Led by migrants directly affected, the strategy was to take back public spaces and build “sanctuary” (or solidarity) zones in our communities, beginning with schools, food banks, shelters, and health clinics. Creating solidarity zones at service sites is one step towards dismantling state imposed borders, improving the material realities of migrants living undocumented, and unravelling the myth of Whiteness in belonging. In claiming public spaces in our communities we are slowly unravelling this national birthing story that forces hyphenated identities onto people of color, whose subjectivity is always bracketed, never considered whole. In supporting land defense struggles, and with every blockade, we are dismantling the myth that invisibilizes the history of genocide and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. In demanding status for all, we are challenging the myth that justifies the commodification and exploitation of human labor, illegalizes migrants, and marks people of color as displaceable, detainable, and deportable.

It is said that prior to their departure, many of the Komagata Maru passengers were held in sanctuary in a Sikh Gurdwara in Hong Kong, the place where I was born. There, they prayed together before setting sail on their seven-week journey across the Pacific. For me, discovering this historical footnote speaks to how intertwined the struggles against colonization, displacement, and borders are. One hundred years after the migrants aboard the Komagata Maru were barred from entering a White-only Canada, I take inspiration from its legacy in the struggle against an exclusionary, exploitative, and racist immigration system. Resistance looks different and takes on myriad forms, from demanding access to a library to crossing a
border and to occupying the streets in forty-foot boat. Through honoring migrants and celebrating our bodies, we continue to challenge the integrity of borders imposed by the Canadian state and resist the myth of Whiteness upon which it was built. Whatever happens, our bodies are not to blame. The myth is unravelling because it has to for our very survival.

Mother tiptoes through the days,
guarding everything she holds dear,
to evade detection, to remain unseen,
to relinquish her political body,
for a provisional place in this world.
As she says,
“If there’s one thing we are good at, it’s mimicry.”
A way to eat, move, and sleep,
a way to revere, destroy, and dream.
I ask her if we are getting any closer.
Racialized geographies, are not just lines in the sands
but are daily performances her body does not forget.
They are sites, they take shape,
they speak the where and how,
and on whose bodies violence is felt.
She is the sexualized, denied and detained.
Her body is not hers,
no bleach nor shrouds to shun the sun
can fulfill the desire of her body to be unmarked.
She is not getting any closer.
She no longer spits on the ground,
shouts to be heard, squats when she’s tired
even if her body knows best.
She no longer talks when she’s eating,
eats when she’s talking, or eats from the earth.
She no longer pees in the park, sleeps in the park,
intuits and walks undisciplined in the park.
Out of place, and in her place,
she performs these enforcement rituals,
she knows that she is not any closer.
What is taken can never be returned whole,
a way to feel the sting of a pinch,
to bare our arms and welcome the sun,
to find wholeness on this land.
Let us undo, unravel, unlearn, and untame,
take refuge in and through and with all living bodies,
sully this body in order to love our own.
Then we might know a world in which she no longer tiptoes through her days.