



IN THE WAKE OF THE KOMAGATA MARU

TRANSPACIFIC MIGRATION, RACE AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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VOICES FROM THE EXHIBITION RUPTURES IN ARRIVAL AND THE SYMPOSIUM DISFIGURING IDENTITY

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The following is the documentation of the exhibition Ruptures in Arrival, presented by the Surrey Art Gallery, April 12 to June 15, 2014 and the proceedings from the symposium Disfiguring Identity, hosted by Surrey Art Gallery and organized in collaboration with On Main Gallery, Kwantlen Polytechnic University Fine Arts Department, May 10 and 11, 2014.

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This publication shares the work of artists who have deeply considered the legacies of racism, discrimination and xenophobia that are part of the history of Canada. The familiar cautionary phrase, “What will people say?” was quoted by Summer Pervez as she introduced the first panel at the symposium *Disfiguring Identity: Art, Migration and Exile*. She used it to frame how difficult it can be to talk about one’s experience, not only within one’s own community, but even more so within a context of oppression. She used it to remind us that many fear expressing their experiences of injustice, fear speaking out about racism, and hesitate to take action for fear of escalating violence against those who are different.

Hearing the artists’ voices in the symposium and through the exhibition of their works reinforces how important it is to provide accessible public venues for difficult conversations, and how important artists’ work is to purposefully share with communities. Canadian identity is constructed by history, beliefs, values and attitudes, all of which are considered and thoughtfully reflected in the

art of our times. The Surrey Art Gallery is proud to share the work of artists and writers, whose contributions and perspectives are critical to understanding the implications of our social and political environments, past, present and future.

The *Disfiguring Identity: Art, Migration and Exile* symposium was presented in conjunction with the Surrey Art Gallery exhibition *Ruptures In Arrival: Art In The Wake Of The Komagata Maru*. This important exhibition profiled contemporary visual art related to the history of the Komagata Maru incident, together with works that address more recent histories of mass migration from Asia to Canada’s West Coast.

Art has always played a role in helping us to become our better selves, by challenging our capacity for empathy and imagination. The exhibition and symposium invited us to explore — through art and with artists — stories, ideas, visions and perspectives on how our identities are formed, including the struggle to be equal, to be respected and to be understood. Art can ask

difficult questions as well as answer them. As author, filmmaker and educator, Ali Kazimi responded to a question from an audience member about what we might learn from his work, “Perhaps what an artwork asks us to do is to know ourselves.”

On behalf of the Surrey Art Gallery, I would like to acknowledge the work and contributions of everyone who made these important experiences of art and ideas possible, and for lending their words and images for this publication.

Liane Davison
Director, Surrey Art Gallery

**RUPTURES IN ARRIVAL:
ART IN THE WAKE
OF THE KOMAGATA MARU
EXHIBITION**

**ROY ARDEN / AVANTIKA BAWA / ALI KAZIMI / EVAN LEE / KEN LUM / MASS ARRIVAL
RAGHAVENDRA RAO / HARIS SHEIKH / JARNAIL SINGH / PAUL WONG**

RUPTURES IN ARRIVAL: ART IN THE WAKE OF THE KOMAGATA MARU

JORDAN STROM

Artists have long been compelled to portray the plights of groups of people who risk life and livelihood traveling great distances in search of new opportunities. When these journeys lead to a better life, they are often celebrated, memorialized and commemorated as stories of resilience, triumph and universal positive social transformation. When these journeys don't succeed, they tend to be forgotten, hidden or marginalized. In some cases, these latter types of journey may survive as compelling stories of heroic-but-ultimately-failed struggle, preserved by a few and known by not many more. Bringing rich historical accounts forward requires people who care to remember, to tell the stories and to repeatedly depict the events, so the episodes may be recalled over extensive periods of time. In some rare instances these stories live on to become allegories of injustice overcome, not just for the communities whose ancestors were entangled in the original struggle, but for humanity at large.

With its inclusion in official Canadian history coming only in the final decades of the 20th century, the Komagata Maru episode falls into this last category.¹ Yet, it would be remiss to attribute this relatively more widespread familiarity with this history to shifts in state policy and educational curriculum.² In addition to the work of community historical groups, Komagata Maru family organizations and a few pioneering historians, it is the creative output of a number of dedicated playwrights, novelists and poets — writers who have imaginatively addressed and reanimated the complex histories of the Komagata

Maru episode — that has been crucial to an increased awareness of this story in all of its dimensions.³

While the significance of the literary history of the Komagata Maru episode has been increasingly recognized in the last number of years, what has been far less acknowledged is the role that visual artists have played in making the Komagata Maru story more accessible, vivid and multi-dimensional for Canadians today.⁴ The exhibition *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru* features a number of artworks that engage with this history and its contexts together with some artworks that examine similar episodes of mass migration under duress in more recent Canadian history.⁵ The exhibition seeks to show a variety of approaches to the examination of this history and it does so across a wide spectrum of media — painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, video and installation art. At the same time, the exhibition invites questions of how this art fits into a larger context of contemporary art about group migration and, in particular, recent histories of transoceanic migration by ship. How did the picturing of the incident through such forms as photography, cartoons, or journalistic writings, shape the story to reach a broader public as the events unfolded? How did these representations influence the course of events at the time of their occurrence? How does an artist's interpretation and representation of material from historical archives inform our understanding of these past events today? How can the artists use image-making to present the past to gain new insights into history, as well as into

our current conditions? Before looking at how these individual artworks tell these stories, we will need to examine the larger field of contemporary art.



According to some scholars, over the course of the past two decades contemporary artists have become more actively involved in addressing history in their art than had been the case in the postwar period — especially forgotten, lesser known, or “minor” 20th century histories.⁶ Examples range from Matthew Buckingham's conceptual investigations of forgotten historically significant places to Walid Raad and the Atlas Group's work with the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s and 1980s, and from Kara Walker's antebellum reanimations of African-American history and Luc Tuymans' paintings of Belgian colonialism in Africa to Tacita Dean's melancholic ruminations on little-known nautical history — these are but some of the more well known bodies of work that have captured this “memorial turn.” Increasingly, contemporary artists of diverse cultural backgrounds have sought to “scrutinize our relationship with the past and disentangle the process by which images are formed from the contemporary political, commercial and media scene.”⁷

Some artists have focused specifically on cultural and racial friction brought on through migration as exemplified in racist discourse; xenophobic imagery; racial discrimination and harassment; and racist public policy and legislation. British

artist Roshini Kempadoo's three-screen video installation *Arrival* (2010) presents a portrayal of women experiencing the crossing between North Africa and Spain by boat. Also working with media that offer a more multisensory and immersive experience, American Johnny Coleman's *Variation Upon a Theme: Song of the Underground Railroad* (2014) presents an installation with found materials, sound and fragrant elements, to convey the experiences of the underground railway between the United States and Canada. Much work has also been made about the Mexican-American border; in *Arte-Reembolso/Art Rebate* (1993) by David Avelos, Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco, for example, the artists handed out US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant money to Mexican migrants crossing the border by unofficial means.⁹

Critics and scholars of contemporary art have remarked on this recent turn toward the immigrant, the refugee and the exile in contemporary art. "If the exile was the figure of early modernity," Jean Fisher and Geraldo Mosquera claim, then it has been, the "diasporan or immigrant [that is] the figure of postmodernity with its decentered and deterritorialized subject."¹⁰ To a certain extent artists have been interested in this subject matter for centuries. Even so, there appears to have been an upsurge at the turn of the new millennium of artists creating images that seek to capture what Edward Said has called the "predicaments that disfigure modernity — mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession and forced migration."¹¹ While many of these artists look to a longer arc of history, just as many, if

not more, examine the very recent past. Kobena Mercer has identified claims that it was only after "the impact of ex-colonial immigration was readily acknowledged in literature and cinema [and it was not until much later that] such issues entered the visual arts." And, as Mercer has pointed out, it was through documentary photography that this most recent shift was made manifest.¹² Indeed, a recent generation of documentary film and video artists have made migration a central element of their creative practice.¹³ T.J. Demos, on the other hand, has pointed to a critical subversion of documentary that has been the crucial tendency in a new wave of art concerned with "mobilizing the image as much as imaging mobility" of the immigrant.¹⁴ It is within this variously threaded context that the works in the exhibition *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru* can be comparatively viewed.

RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES: ALI KAZIMI AND ROY ARDEN

Canadian artists Stan Douglas and Ken Lum have been recognized internationally for their important work on the dynamics of race in the 20th century city, particularly Vancouver, where they are based. Yet, it was one of their contemporaries, Vancouver-based artist Roy Arden, who was one of the first to make an artwork that related directly to the Komagata Maru. Between 1985 and 1990, Arden made several works using archival photographs. These could be broken down into three thematic groups: the subjugation of Indigenous peoples and the land by Europeans and Asians (*Mission*, 1986, portrays an early 20th century re-enactment of the Christian crucifixion drama performed by

native North Americans under the direction of missionaries); class-based struggle (*Rupture*, 1985, re-presents archival imagery from the 1938 Bloody Sunday Labour Riots in Vancouver); and lastly the racial discord and struggle between Europeans and Asians (*Komagata Maru*, 1989, represents archival photographs of the Komagata Maru episode and the modern cataloguing systems used to index them). These photo-based artworks featuring local historical photographs were seen by the artist as engaging with the main pre-World War II events in local Vancouver-area and Canadian history.

For his *Komagata Maru* (1989), Arden chose 18 photographs found in the historical photographs division of the Vancouver Public Library that were catalogued under the heading "Komagata Maru." Arden reprinted these and placed them below corresponding accession numbers that record the order in which the materials were obtained by the institution. The gaps in the accession numbers indicate that the photographs were received by the library in two groups, many years apart. This artwork speaks to the gaps, instability and changing nature of institutional archives. The work points to how we, as viewer, should constantly question the authority that we give to historical documents. While at least a couple of the photographs were taken by the professional photographer Leonard Frank, others had been taken by the migration authorities, raising questions about the motives, purposes and biases of such imagery.

Ali Kazimi's *Komagata Maru Redux* (2012) also draws from the photographic archive, but with portraits

of individuals connected to the Komagata Maru episode enlarged as the central subjects of his work. While Arden's interest lies in how these photographic media moments enter into (or remain absent from) the official record of the archive, and thus history, Kazimi uses collage to draw out relationships not present in the original pictures. These photo-collages are based on Kazimi's documentary film *Continuous Journey* (2004). The photograph that presents the faces of three individuals shows, at its centre, the face of inspector William Hopkinson, a former police officer in India who became an inspector at the Canadian Immigration Branch in Vancouver. He was actively involved in monitoring Indian immigration and Indian nationalistic opinions and outlets in North America. He was also pursuing investigations for the Criminal Intelligence Department of India. To Hopkinson's left is Bhag Singh, the leader of the Vancouver Shore Committee and the Ghadar Party member. To Hopkinson's right is Balwant Singh, one of the first *Granthis* (ceremonial readers of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib) at Vancouver's *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). An organization with a strong base on the west coast of North America, including Vancouver, the Ghadar Party agitated for rebellion and overthrow of British control of India in the second decade of the 20th Century.

The second image, with the type-written list of rations in the background presents a portrait of Husain Raheem, editor of *The Hindustanee* newspaper, member of the Ghadar Party and Komagata Maru Shore Committee member. The photograph with the two men in military uniform shows Robert Borden, who served as Prime Minister of Canada from 1911 to 1920. In British Columbia, the party ran on the slogan, "A White Canada," playing to the fears of those British Columbians who resented the increasing presence

of cheap Asian labour and the resulting depression in wages. On the right-hand side is Richard McBride, the 16th Premier of BC. In the background is the BC Regiment who were charged with escorting the Komagata Maru out of the harbour.

**SPACES OF MEMORY:
RAGHAVENDRA RAO AND ALI KAZIMI**

In his *Visions of the living past: The imaginary landscape of the Komagata Maru* (2013), Raghavendra Rao also draws from the photographic archive to create a series of portraits of people connected to the Komagata Maru episode. Yet, unlike in Kazimi's *Komagata Maru Redux*, the main figures in Rao's series of paintings are pictured at a distance, isolated from the group and centrally placed within an empty landscapeless backdrop. They are frozen in a kind of formal pose reminiscent of Mughal and other schools of miniature portraiture. The medium is acrylic, which is not normally associated with the miniature tradition. The images are of Sikh labourers in North America in the early 20th century. "We know these photographs," says Rao; "They are the kind of thing we expect to find in the archives and libraries: unnamed men facing the camera, silent and serious, but obviously recently toiling in the fields or in the mills." These unknown male workers are situated along with the Singapore-based businessman Gurdit Singh, who chartered the Komagata Maru, shown along with a portrait of Singh's son who also traveled on the ship. The artist has resituated all of the male figures apart from any identifiable context. They are "monumental, perhaps even regal... [these individuals] demand that we answer them, to account for ourselves and for them."¹⁵ A cropped image of the Komagata Maru and Vancouver's first *gurdwara* are the spiritual centre of the series.

Ali Kazimi's multimedia installation *Fair Play* (2014), like Rao's series of paintings, examines the story of the Komagata Maru beyond the more exposed imagery circulated in the mass media and history books. Kazimi and Rao deploy different forms of portraiture to explore spaces of memory, "on shore" life and, in the case of Kazimi, interpersonal relationships. *Fair Play* is a quiet, enigmatic and immersive encounter with history and technology. It is devoid of speech and the figures are mainly motionless. Set in 1914, this 7-minute long stereoscopic-3D-cinema installation turns our attention away from the ship's passengers to those South Asians already on shore. As Kazimi explains, "I wanted to bring to life these moments that have no visual record. The scenes are of ordinary people whose lives were irrevocably changed by the arrival and turning away of the Komagata Maru." The film encompasses ten quiet, meditative vignettes that provide windows into the private lives of South Asians on shore. "These seemingly ordinary scenes, located in an historical Canadian landscape, are made extraordinary," says Kazimi, "by the presence of South Asian men claiming their Canadianness." Kazimi's still-moving images borrow from some of the compositional strategies of early twentieth century American painter Edward Hopper. Kazimi has described how Hopper's images capture the loneliness and melancholy that many of these South Asian men would have experienced in the frequently isolating and, in many cases, racist settings in Vancouver.

The installation *Fair Play* also includes a small, modified, early 20th century stereoscope viewer. The visitor to the gallery peers into the viewer to see a selection of photographs of British India reproduced from the *Glimpses of India* (Keystone, 1908) stereoview series transferred onto video

slideshow inside the apparatus. With their combination of portraiture, landscapes and temple architecture, these stereoviews were commonly found in parlour rooms across the empire and would have been, in many cases, a person's only glimpse of the subcontinent, its culture and landscape. In Kazimi's *Fair Play* installation, these exotifying images provide a jarring counterpoint to the realistic everyday portrayals of Indo-Canadians in ordinary North American urban settings. The disjunction built into the artwork draws attention to the gap in understanding that fueled the events that led to the Komagata Maru episode.

Hanging on opposing walls of the installation room are the old colonial flags of the Dominion of Canada and British India, both drawn from the British naval ensign, but each made unique through the addition of the Canadian coat of arms and the Star of India. The flags evoke the colonial context of both India and Canada, which the men featured on the projection screen would have felt on a daily basis. The title of the work references the British Empire's claim of "equality and fairplay" that was frequently evoked in official speeches across the dominion, but also frequently undermined in official policy, as had been the case with the "Continuous Journey" legislation designed to keep the Komagata Maru's passengers from landing in Canada.¹⁶

Sound is a critical component of Kazimi's installation. The artist uses maritime sounds such as boat horns, seagull squawks and resonant ocean sounds to evoke the harbour beyond the frame of the camera. Yet, he does so in a way that is not naturalistic. The sounds are frequently incongruent with the visual content of the images thus drawing attention to the discrepancy between the outside world and the

alienated interior life of these mostly male individuals. But, *Fair Play* can be said to be contrapuntal in another sense described evocatively by Edward Said:

Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that — to borrow a phrase from music — is contrapuntal.¹⁷

Through its folding together of old and new media and careful compositional technique, Kazimi's video vividly captures Said's notion of a double awareness.

Another reference point for many contemporary artists who engage with history is the 18th and 19th century genre of history painting. Raghavendra Rao's *Visions of the living past, untitled 13* (2013) and *Visions of the living past, untitled 14* (2013) draw from the same photographic image pool used by several of the other artists: the archive of images circulated broadly in the news media at the time. Yet, as is common with history painting, Rao renders the figures life size so that they set up a proportional equivalent relationship with the viewer. Situated on the wall as a diptych, the right-hand painting shows a single male figure ascending a ladder about to board the ship, while in the second canvas, to the left, the figure is of a passenger on the deck of the ship waiting to disembark. The two canvases are frozen at this precarious disconnection point. Painted as they are with dye on what appears to be an old weathered and stained tarpaulin (of the kind one may expect to find on old wooden ships), the two figures appear as though about to fade forever from memory. By featuring the two

images of the two individuals (a Shore Committee member and a passenger), Rao makes them symbolic stand-ins for the whole colonially-charged situation. The artist draws attention to the power of the state to impose very real painful separation between its citizens and its others. The gap is emblematic of an intransigent border that was meant to be open to all citizens of the Empire.

STATES OF SUSPENSION: AVANTIKA BAWA, HARIS SHEIKH AND KEN LUM

As with Rao's two large dye-painted canvases, Haris Sheikh's *KMG-01* (2012) presents the Komagata Maru as both frame and container for detention. Yet, this floating symbol of tragedy is at the same time a scene infused with hope and survival. On the left of the painting, the vertical hull of the ship links the Punjab with the iconic architecture of the Harmandir Sahib (also known as the Golden Temple), the central spiritual holy site for Punjabi Sikhs, while connecting these to the profane steel and glass condominium and business towers of Vancouver represented through the pinkish bronze buildings on the right of the painting. As is common within Sheikh's paintings, distantly separated places are depicted in a manner that connects them to a web of ornate building facades built entirely of Indian style arched windows.

The hull of the ship turned on its end resembles a vertical obelisk-like monument set loose from any firm grounding. The artist intends the figures visible on the deck of the ship to symbolize the "march forward to a victory of equality of rights." Eight golden flares shoot out in various directions from the ship's hull; for Sheikh, these coiled lines represent the eight wings of Great Britain's Union Jack and thus the British Empire as an idea. These sinewy lines "like mushrooming dragons" symbolize

for the artist, the provocation of the Komagata Maru to the “most powerful and fearful empire of the 19th and early 20th century.” In Sheikh’s second work in the exhibition, *First Rupture* (2014), he creates a photomontage with the image of a brick at its centre, representing one of several thrown at the authorities from the Komagata Maru. This brick referenced in the image is one of the only remaining artifacts from the episode and is currently part of the Museum of Vancouver’s permanent collection.

As with Haris Sheikh’s painting *KMG-01*, Avantika Bawa’s sculptural drawing *Halt*. (2014) captures what Kobena Mercer has called the “vertiginous consequence of travel and migration.”¹⁸ *Halt*. distills the relationships between time, travel and the condition of homeless, stateless suspension endured by the Komagata Maru passengers. In *Halt*., two long canvas scrolls cascade down from the wall onto a large orange barrier. The routes of the Komagata Maru have been recreated on these canvas scrolls: one line represents the outbound journey and the other the return. The routes are reduced to single graphite and coloured pencil lines, and any related visual and textual references to landmasses and port cities are absent. Through this simplification, the viewer is urged to examine the poetics that evoke the infinite scope of hope of the outbound journey and the imminent despair of the return journey. The scrolls drape over a structure that resembles a highway barrier, coming to an abrupt end at its base. The imposing wall of the “barrier” makes clear the dramatic blockage that was to confront the hopeful passengers of the Komagata Maru. The length of each of the two “scrolls” is four to five meters, a measure that is an indirect reference to

a common size of Sikh turban. The choice of canvas draws attention to both the history of painting and maritime history with reference to the canvas fabrics often found employed aboard ships.

A key aspect of *Halt.376* (2014) is the stack of 376 folded posters that rest on a horizontal length of its rectangular form. On the face of each map are the routes that the Komagata Maru took to and from Canada; on the flip side of the poster are 376 digitally drawn lines, one line to mark each of the ship’s passengers. As it sits on the gallery floor several feet away from the bright orange sculpture that resembles a traffic barrier, this prone plinth resembles a ship drifting at sea or anchored in detention in the harbour. The stack of posters is supported by one freestanding brick (a reference to the bricks that were hurled by the passengers at the authorities on July 19, 2014 when the “Sea Lion” tugboat attempted to force the Komagata Maru out of Vancouver’s harbor.) The artist makes each poster a gift available for the gallery visitor to take away: a memento of the journey as linework.

While most of the artworks thus far have addressed the Komagata Maru as a central point of focus, Ken Lum’s *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White* (2001) is the first work to have been created that brings the story in line with other West Coast transpacific migrant ship histories at the end of the century. *Four Boats Stranded* is comprised of four miniature versions of historically significant boats installed at the roof corners of the Vancouver Art Gallery building (which was originally built as the provincial courthouse). Lum selected four boats, each one signifying an important moment associated with this region’s history: a First Nations’ longboat (red); Captain Vancouver’s ship, the *Discovery* (white); the

Komagata Maru (black); and the merchant vessel that brought Chinese refugees to British Columbia in 1999 (yellow). The boats are placed such that the viewer needs to circumnavigate the building in order to see the entire artwork. Placed upon the exterior of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Lum’s floating counter-monument evokes questions about territorial rights, immigration and colonization. While Lum’s dispersed monument points to the very real ongoing legacies of these histories, it is a work that is not free of irony. The boats’ quiet placement on top of the building makes them difficult to see in any detail, as though ships on the horizon.

For the exhibition, various archival materials were presented from the project including a maquette, architectural drawings and photographic documentation. The title of the work references the lyrics from a children’s Sunday school song from the American Civil War period: “Jesus loves the little children. / All the children of the world. / Red and yellow, black and white, / they are precious in his sight. / Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

Also, of note, unlike the artworks previously discussed, Lum’s artwork foregrounds the migrant ships themselves. In Lum’s hands they become signs, an architectural mnemonic and navigational compass for the viewer.¹⁹ Too large to be ignored, too small to be a replica, Lum’s multi-part artwork resists the easy categorization associated with public art, architecture and monuments. They insert questions into public space about differing perspectives on history, the impact of migration on law and the definition of what it is to be Canadian.

IMAGE/TEXT: JARNAIL SINGH AND PAUL WONG

Jarnail Singh has created well over a dozen oil

paintings that address the Komagata Maru episode. Singh's four-panel painting *Voyage of the Komagata Maru* (2014) seamlessly incorporates the artist's focused composition and realistic style that he has honed in his smaller scale portraits into the more dispersed narrative approach that he has developed with past public mural commissions. In his new work, Singh has pictorially composited key moments from the Komagata Maru episode, many of which were first represented in his earlier series *Komagata Maru Stories*, placing these images in close proximity to a variety of statements, including newspaper headlines, a decree regarding the "Continuous Journey" legislation that prevented the passengers from disembarking and a telegram to the Governor General from the ship's passengers. The first panel of Singh's painting captures the departure of one of the passengers from the Punjab to Hong Kong, the port from which the ship was ultimately to sail to Vancouver. The panel also portrays some of the early news reports and communiqués that anticipated the ship's departure. The middle two panels portray the arrival of the boat in Vancouver's harbour and the restriction prohibiting the passengers from disembarking. The final panel depicts the return of the ship and passengers to the Calcutta suburb of Budge Budge, where they were met by a police force. Violence erupted and many of the passengers were arrested and detained; nineteen were killed.

Singh's painting recalls the sweeping historical range and social realism of Ben Shahn's *The Four Freedoms* (1941), a public mural situated in a Queen's New York post office — a work that some scholars have claimed was deeply influenced by the boatload of over 900 Jewish refugees aboard the MS St. Louis that was turned back to Europe

after being denied entry by Canada, the United States and Cuba in 1939.²⁰ Singh's painting is remarkable for its use of colour and for its economy in distilling key moments of the history along with imagined scenes. As with several other works in the exhibition, Singh's painting draws attention to the way mass media portrays the tragic story of the Komagata Maru, especially the way the media portrays events through the written word.

As with Jarnail Singh's *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, Paul Wong's 3-channel video *Class of 2000* (2000) layers together image-text relationships, revealing the language of xenophobia and racism that is so often rooted in fear and misinformation. In these three short videos, Grade 12 students from Vancouver's Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School were recorded stating the following phrase: "My name is ___, I was born ___, I am a refugee, I am a ___ and I want to be ___."²¹ Wong creates a video assemblage of pictures, words, graphics and images depicting racist, sexist, political and religious social unrest, highlighting acts of institutionalized racism and xenophobia. *Class of 2000* explores the use of everyday racial, sexist and homophobic slurs that equally enforce how we, as a society, construct and apply stereotypes. With these videos the artist juxtaposes those things that are used to divide people against the hopes and dreams of individuals who strive to succeed and contribute as Canadians. Each video was originally made for presentation on television. They were produced as part of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation's "Unite Against Racism" campaign and were first aired on January 15, 2000. Evident in some of the background scenes is footage from the detention of migrants from the Fujianese ships that arrived on British Columbia's west coast in 1999.

As Hamid Naficy has pointed out, "In tandem with the globalization of capital and the mobility of peoples and goods, the integrity, security, sovereignty and protection of physical borders have assumed heightened attention, budgets and resources." According to Naficy, "National borders [increasingly] hardened into sacrosanct and highly militarized edifices over which passive but intrusive surveillance-driven cold wars, as well as active and particularistic lethal hot wars, are being waged throughout the world."²² Wong's video montage captures this shift, in addition to the equally damaging process of naming associated with xenophobia within the culture at large.

MEDIATIZED IMAGE: MASS ARRIVAL AND EVAN LEE

While the contexts and conditions differ greatly between the Komagata Maru episode and the recent episodes involving the MV Ocean Lady and the MV Sun Sea (the two boats that transported Sri Lankan migrants in 2009 and 2010 respectively), there were also a great many similarities. Elements of public reaction and law enforcement responses to the arrival of these ships were uncannily similar. As was widely reported, many of the Sri Lankan passengers were held in detention with limited access to media and restricted access to legal council. There were also parallels between the sense of moral panic generated by the ships carrying Tamil passengers and the Komagata Maru's "hindoo invasion" of a century before. This is terrain that the artist collective Mass Arrival explored in a 2013 performance and related art installation at Whippersnapper Gallery in Toronto.

In August 2010, the arrival of 492 Tamils in British Columbia in a cargo ship led to concerns over the

effectiveness of Canada's border to protect the nation from unwanted migrants seeking asylum. This situation prompted Ottawa to tighten laws against human smuggling. As an action intended to explore Canada's reception of the passengers on the MV Sun Sea, five Toronto artists enacted a performance of arrival in downtown Toronto. The performance *Mass Arrival: Queen Street* (2013) turned the events of the Tamil migrant ships on their head. *Mass Arrival* purposely drew attention to the role that the images of the crowds — especially of racial “others” — have played in elevating fear and anxiety for many Canadians about people arriving in large groups on Canada's coasts. For their participatory performance, the *Mass Arrival* artists (Farrah-Marie Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan and Nadia Saad) invited “white” people “dressed in white” to participate in filling a ship-like hull structure held together by participating members of the marching crowd. This boat-shaped march disembarked down one of Canada's busiest streets before being broken up by authorities.

This is not a re-creation of a historic conflict by a contemporary artist, such as Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2001). *Mass Arrival*'s project relies much more actively in role reversal and unintended symbolism of the civic police action mimicking the border security actions toward the ships. This “white mass arrival” in front of Hudson Bay's flagship store on Queen Street was meant to draw connections to the Tamil arrival three years earlier. It was also connected to other histories of mass arrival including the Fujianese boats that arrived on the West Coast in 1999, as well as the MS St. Louis and its 907 Jews who were turned away in 1939, and the

Komagata Maru “incident” in 1914. In their installation *Mass Arrival, Queen Street* (2013) the artists present a double video screen in the shape of a prow of a ship. Presented on the twin screens is a three-and-a-half-minute-long video that captures a series of clips from the mass performance on Queen Street. On the surrounding walls of the Surrey Art Gallery's small techLab space is a collage of newspaper clippings from the recent and deep past. This playful subversion of the aesthetics of protest has some similarities with another Toronto artist's work: Meera Sethi's *Boat People* (2010) is comprised of digital print posters based on the well-known “Ship” matchbox design. However, for *Mass Arrival*, participation by the public in a collective action was central to the artwork that later manifested in the exhibition at Whippersnapper Gallery in Toronto's Chinatown.

As T.J. Demos has asserted, the “challenge” of contemporary artwork that engages with themes of migration is to “move away from the familiar spectacle of misery, from the sensationalized imagery of suffering...” Instead, Demos argues, artists need to “take up the challenge of interrogating the complex political and economic causes behind the effects of migration hysteria and the politics of border wars.” For him, “migration delineates a creative act of political transformation” and thus the artist must similarly transform the storylines of these narratives.²³ The reason artworks — such as Arden's *Komagata Maru* and *Mass Arrival*'s *Mass Arrival, Queen Street* — are so visually impactful, is due to the way they hold up a mirror to the conventions of media portrayals that tend to position these scenes as ones of invading migrant mobs aboard boats.

Another artist that is interested in these ship-bound crowd images in the mass media is Evan Lee. As with

Mass Arrival, Lee also demonstrates the revealing power of re-creation and re-construction of these groups of “foreign bodies.” In his *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, the set of objects and images that Lee has gathered together and recomposed is centered on several widely circulated press photographs, and particularly images of the four ships that carried close to 600 Chinese migrants from Fujian province to the coast of BC in 1999 and the MV Ocean Lady that transported 76 Tamil passengers to Canada's west coast in 2009.

Lee became particularly interested in the peculiarities of the digital images that frequently accompanied the extensive media coverage surrounding this event: low-res images of the passengers (faces pixilated to protect their identities) waiting on the deck of ships or being led into temporary holding cells. In one set of images, Lee depicts a number of Fujianese passengers waving and calling out from rocky shorelines to an approaching helicopter. In his *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, (2009 – present) Lee re-creates the events that these widely circulated and heavily reproduced images depict. In Lee's recreation the figures are no longer oriented on dry land as in the original photographs; instead they are recomposed against a vast seascape as though in limbo. Other artists have similarly worked from news imagery of this sort: one thinks here of Xaviera Simmons' use of media images of overflowing migrant ships crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in her series *Superunkown (Alive in The)* of 2010. Yet, unlike Simmons, Lee meticulously recreates these scenes using a combination of photography and a modest low-grade 3D digital modeling program typically used for gaming applications. Lee's *Migrant Ship Model* (2009 – present) presents a small-scale sculptural version

of the Tamil ship the MV Ocean Lady made from an early generation 3D printer. Based on media images and the artist's own photographs, this generic-looking ship sits atop a Plexiglas-crowned crate, a reference perhaps to the absent "human cargo" that is central to Lee's project.

Within his larger approach to artmaking, Lee frequently starts with found photographs that he then repurposes and transforms through other media. In this set of prints, the limitations of the 3D modeling software is evident in the narrow range of such things as clothing, body and facial types, and skin colour. Lee is interested in this technology's structural limitations considering its origins in gaming, a cultural form so often divorced from narratives of contemporary migration and its attendant politics; the artist found that it's a form that has its own built-in cultural codes and blind spots. The 3D modeling software allows the artist to view and construct the scenes from multiple angles as he re-builds a set of images around this historical moment using "fiction to fill in the gaps." In this way, Lee's adaptations and recompositions of the ship's crowded deck are evocative of Théodore Géricault's creative re-imaginings of the real-life historical figures on the frigate *Medusa* that he famously portrayed in his *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), a work in which race and the search for asylum were central features.²⁴

The strength of Lee's images is to be found in their shared influence from both art history and the popular culture of video games and animation. Lee's scene of the populated deck of the migrant ship serves somewhat like a framed mirror that when held up to our view reflects our society's core values.

In Lee's project, as in several other of the exhibited artworks, the ship's deck is a space of visibility and vulnerability to media scrutiny. These visual allegories resonate with a line of poetry about the Komagata Maru by poet Phinder Dulai: "Day turns into day and the ship becomes Vancouver's mobile marine pen zoo... both spectacle and recreation."²⁵



The artworks in *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru* provide diverse perspectives that begin to unpack the complexity of migration histories that have contributed to the formation of Canada over the last century. Sea migration journeys beginning in hope and undertaken by large groups of individuals, often only to be denied entry on reaching their destination, have continued to provoke artistic responses.

While most of the artists in *Ruptures in Arrival* eschew the documentary-subverting techniques demonstrated in Demos' study, they do share a critical interest in adapting and undermining media imagery in order to "bring visibility to those who exist in globalization's shadows."²⁶ The artworks in this exhibit make these migrants' complex multi-layered histories more visible, opening up spaces for more nuanced understanding and engagement with the past. The artworks invite our empathy through the complex experiences they are capable of producing and bring us closer to a greater understanding of our complicity in their occurrence. On the one hundredth anniversary of the Komagata Maru episode, perhaps these individually resonant artworks and the dialogues they have with each other, and with the viewer, will inspire further consideration of what it is to be

Canadian and how we participate in a continuum of migration that constantly calls for re-evaluation of who we are. All of the artworks depict, in their own ways, ruptures — tears, gaps and flash points — in the fabric of society, yet these are ruptures that the artworks, at the same time, attempt to heal.

NOTES

1. As Ali Kazimi has pointed out, the word “incident” misleadingly suggests that these events were “incidental,” when in actuality the course of events associated with the Komagata Maru in Vancouver were the “culmination of a long history of attempts to prevent South Asians from entering Canada.” Ali Kazimi, *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2012) xvii, 7.

Due to the misleading nature of the word “incident,” I have chosen to use “episode” to refer to the series of events associated with the Komagata Maru in the years leading up to and including 1914. I want to thank research curator Naveen Girn for suggesting this alternate word to capture the longer arc of history and the sequence of events that led up to and followed the Komagata Maru-related events in Vancouver in the summer of 1914.

2. While this history is now cited in many Canadian history text books, it is still only included in relatively abbreviated form. Some recent educational resources and initiatives have attempted to reverse this trend, such as Harry Lewis et al.’s “Komagata Maru” in *Immigration in the 20th Century Canada: Critical Challenges Across the Curriculum* (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University Library, 2002).

3. A number of history books have been written, but perhaps the most influential of these in Canada has been Hugh Johnston’s *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Colour Bar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979).

There have been works of theatre, fiction and poetry including Sharon Pollock’s *The Komagata Maru Incident* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1978), Ajmer Rode’s *Komagata Maru*, (Amritsar: Nanak Singh Pustak Mala, 1984), *Samundari Sher Nal Takkar*, (The Battle of the Sealion) by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal (Burnaby: *Watan — A Quarterly of Punjabi Language, Literature, and Culture*, Vol. 1, no. 1., 1989, p.1), Tariq Malik’s *Chanting Denied Shores*, (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2010) and Phinder Dulai’s *dream/arteries*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014).

4. The Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey symposium held at Simon Fraser University, Surrey, BC in March of 2012, featured many poets and playwrights in addition to other historians, sociologists and researchers. The event marked the launch of website *komagatamarujourney.ca*.

5. The idea to present artworks related directly to the Komagata Maru and artworks related to more recent episodes of migrant ship arrival, came out of discussions that I witnessed at several recent Komagata Maru incident-related events, where participants wanted more examination of how the Komagata Maru related to the our current moment.

6. Some critics have situated this shift within the rise in popularity of history novels and historical films.

7. “The process of globalization has led to a quest for identity and a more precise definition of what is unique about identity. One essential aspect of that identity is one’s own history.” Frank van der Stock, Frits Gierstberg and Flip Bool, “Introduction,” *Questioning History: Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art*, (Amsterdam: NAI Publishing, 2009).

8. *Ibid.*, 9.

9. See John C. Welchman, *Rethinking Borders*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.)

10. Jean Fisher and Geraldo Mosquera, “Introduction,” *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*. (New York and Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 2004), 3, quoted in Kobena Mercer, “Introduction,” *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*. (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts/MIT Press, 2008), 8.

For the contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben, it is the refugee, that should be considered the “central figure of our political history... an apparently modern figure, [who] unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory...” Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” (1993), *Agamben Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 22.

11. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. (New York: Vintage, 1993) 333.

12. Kobena Mercer cites the example of John Berger’s collaboration with photographer Jean Mohr in *A Seventh Man* (1975) that documents Turkish and Moroccan guest workers. Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, 9.

13. See for example Alan Grossman and Aine O’Brien, eds., *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) and T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)

14. A recent wave of artists are “confront[ing] geopolitical conflicts,” Demos argues, by “throwing documentary conventions into crisis.” He examines the films and videos of, among others, Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, Otilith Group and Hito Steyerl. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*, xvi.

15. Author’s interview with the artist.

16. The Canadian government set out to restrict Indian immigration by passing an order-in-council on January 8, 1908. This document sought to prohibit immigration of persons who “in the opinion of the Minister of the Interior” did not “come from the country of their birth or citizenship by a continuous journey and or through tickets purchased before leaving their country of their birth or nationality.” Due to the great distance required to travel from India to Canada (such trips normally made stopovers in countries like Japan and Hawaii) this legislation made it very challenging for any Indian migrants to travel to Canada legally.

17. Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile” (1984) quoted in Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, 9.

Ali Kazimi’s video is not “contrapuntal” in the sense that T.J. Demos attributes to the innovative films and videos of Steve McQueen, Otilith Group and Hito Steyerl, who instead “have challenged the unequal territorial divisions between North and South, and between East and West, by proposing a contrapuntal system of montage, which brings those divided areas into an insistent proximity.” Rather, Kazimi’s film installation dispenses with his earlier modes of documentary for a more austere still picture. See Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xvi.

18. Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, 7.
19. Melanie O'Brian relates Ken Lum's sculpture to a navigational compass in her essay "Ken Lum, Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White," (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2001).
20. Diana L. Linden, "Ben Shahn, The Four Freedoms, and the SS St. Louis." *American Jewish History*, 1998, *The Free Library*, accessed October 11, 2014:
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/BEN+SHAHN%2c+THE+FOUR+FREEDOMS%2c+AND+THE+SS+ST.+LOUIS.-a055481547BEN+SHAHN%2c+THE+FOUR+FREEDOMS%2c+AND+THE+SS+ST.+LOUIS.-a055481547>
21. The three videos are *Class of 2000* (30 seconds), *I am a Refugee* (1 minute) and *Refugee Prisoner's Lament* (2 minutes).
22. Hamid Naficy, Preface, Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien, eds., *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), xiv – xv.
23. Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 248.
24. Albert Alhadeff, *Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art and Race* (New York: Prestel, 2002).
25. Phinder Dulai, "Soujourn to the End of the Pacific," *dream / arteries* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014).
26. Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xiv.

**RUPTURES IN ARRIVAL:
ART IN THE WAKE
OF THE KOMAGATA MARU
EXHIBITION IMAGES**



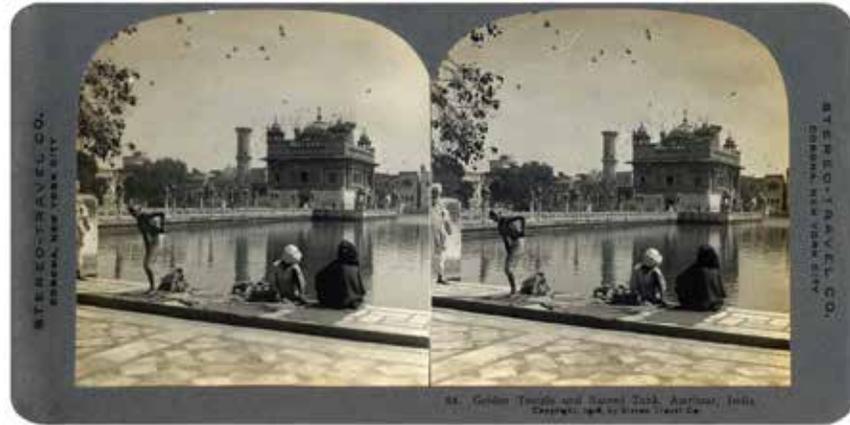
Raghavendra Rao, *Visions of the living past: The imaginary landscape of the Komagata Maru*, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Photo by Scott Massey



Roy Arden, *Komagata Maru*, 1989, gelatin silver prints and ink on card, collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia, gift of the artist, 1994. Installation photo by Scott Massey



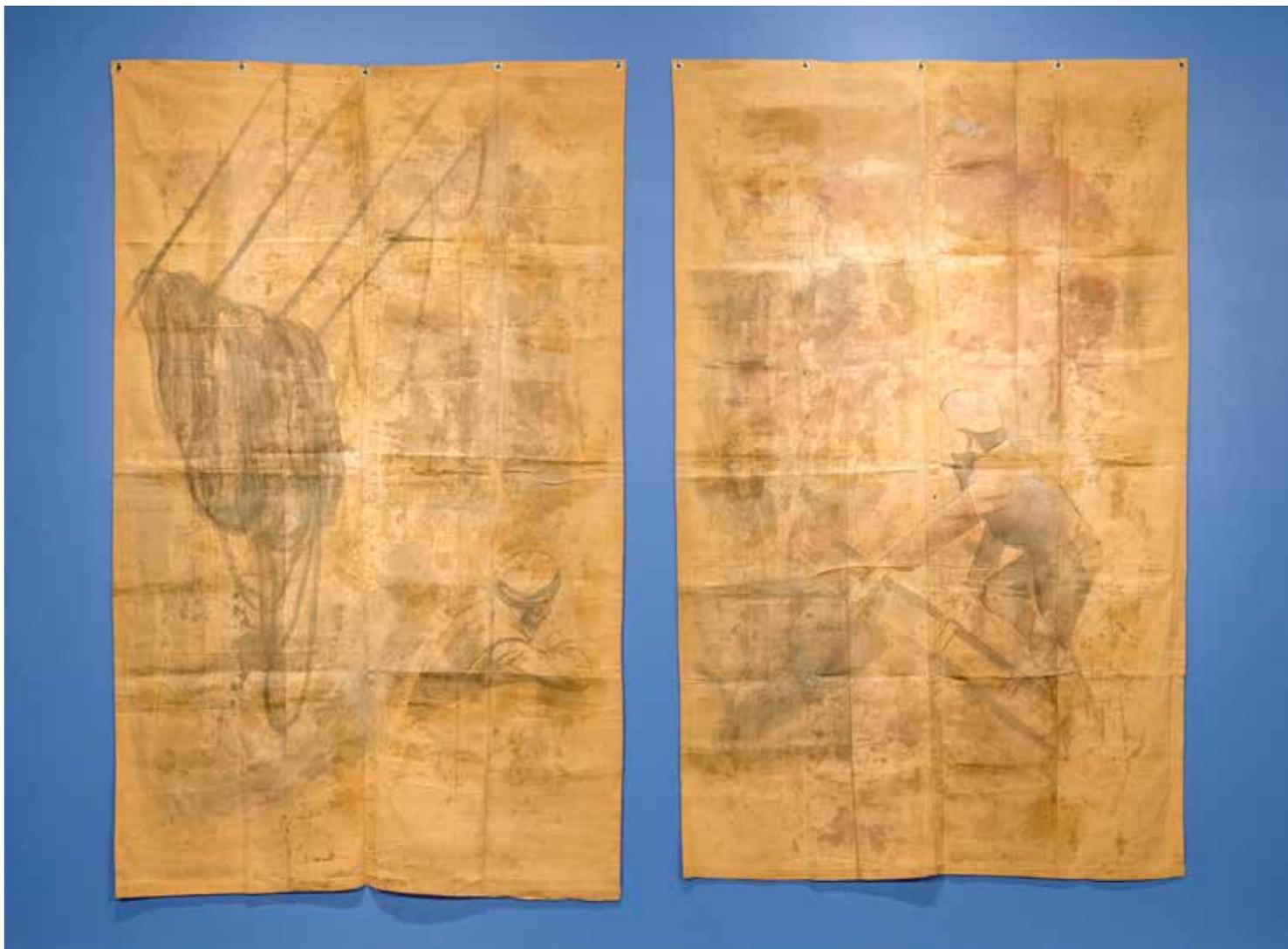
Ali Kazimi, *Fair Play*, 2014, S3D video, wooden stereoscopic viewer, iPad, active shutter glasses. Installation photo by Scott Massey



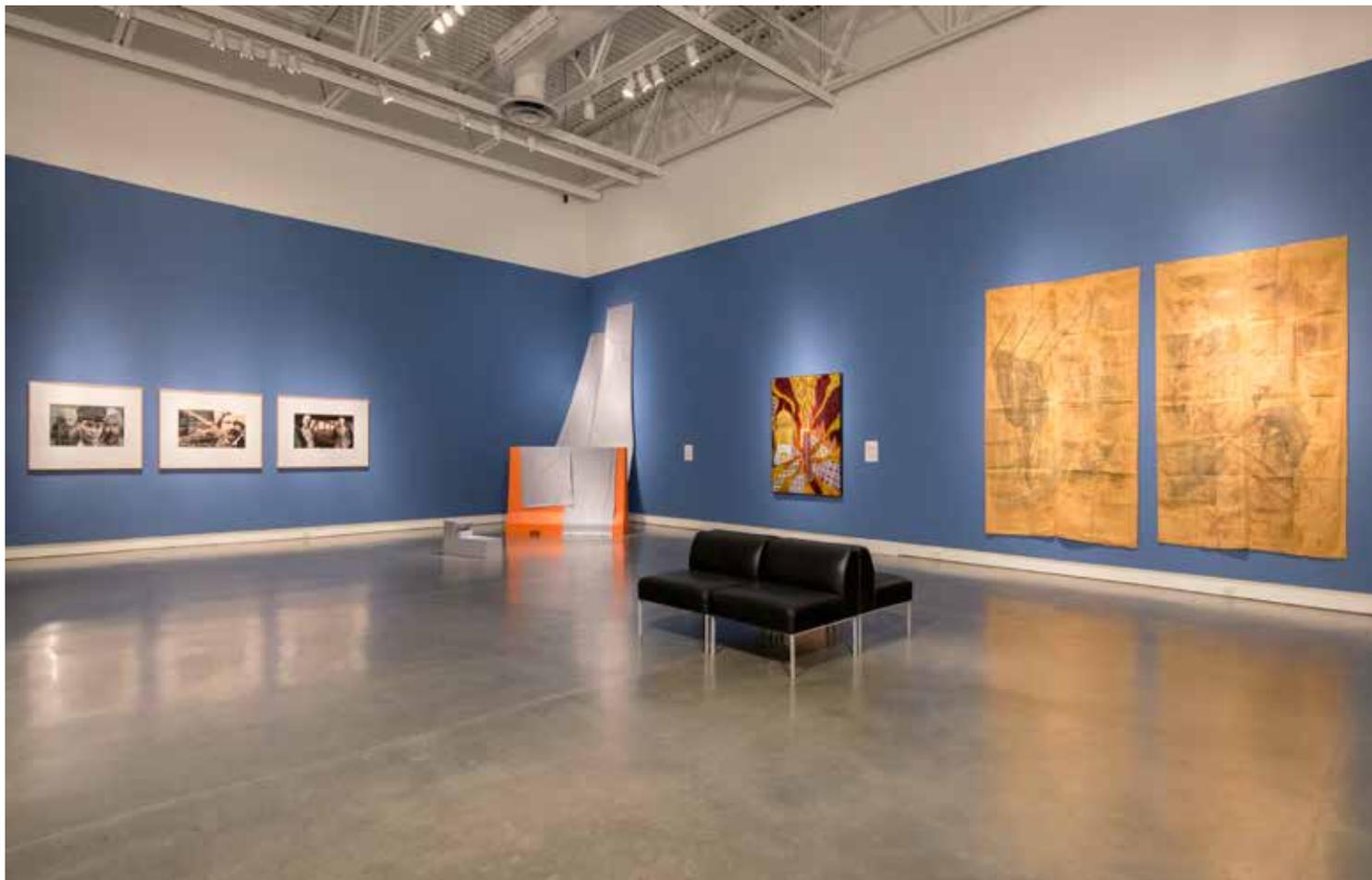
Stereoview cards by Stereo-Travel Co. Images courtesy the artist



Ali Kazimi, *Fair Play*, 2014, S3D video. Detail, installation photo by Scott Massey



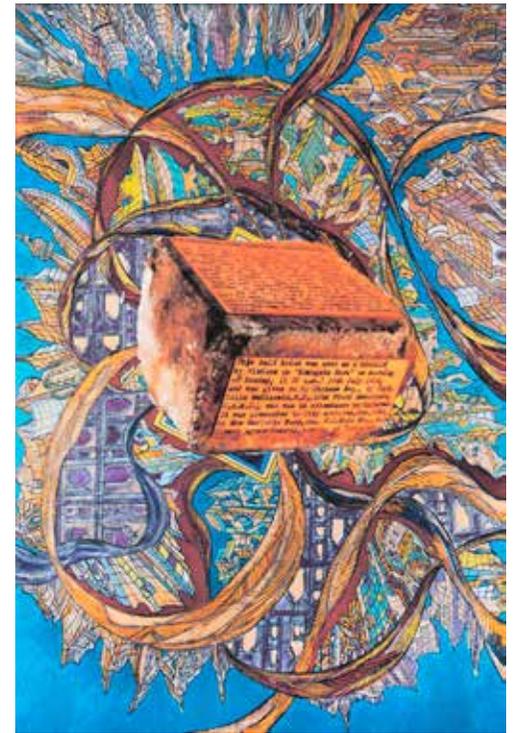
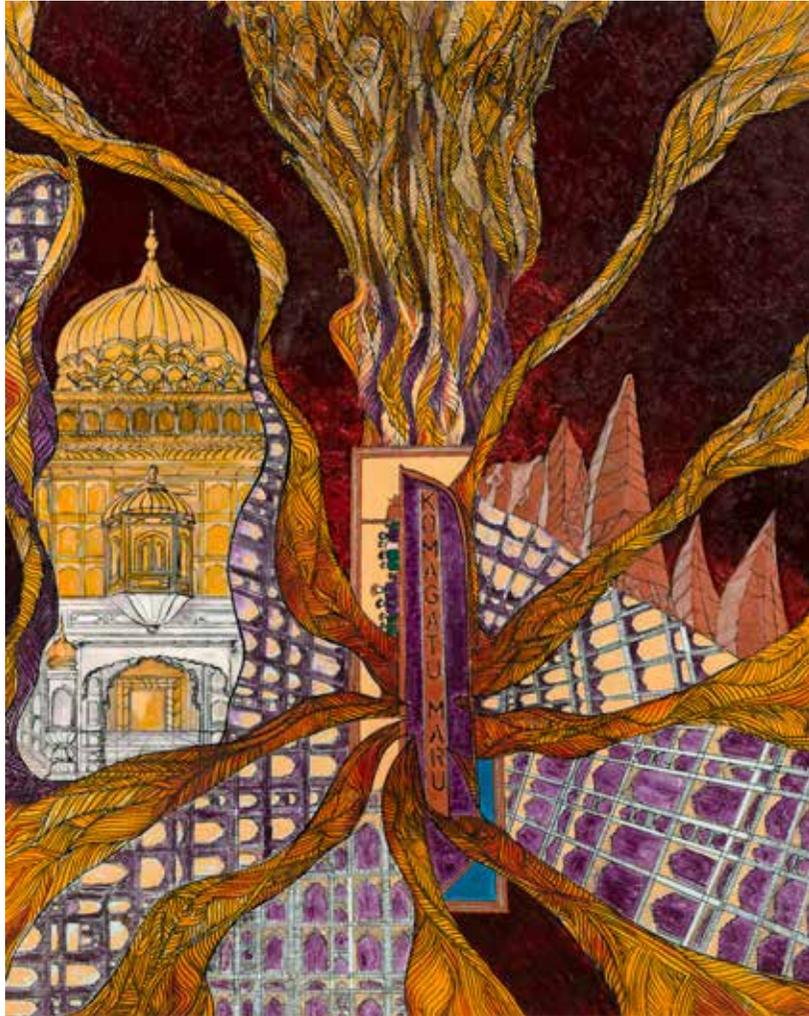
Raghavendra Rao, *Visions of the living past, untitled 13*, 2013, dye on canvas tarpaulin; *Visions of the living past, untitled 14*, 2013, dye on canvas on tarpaulin. Photo by Scott Massey



Installation photo by Scott Massey



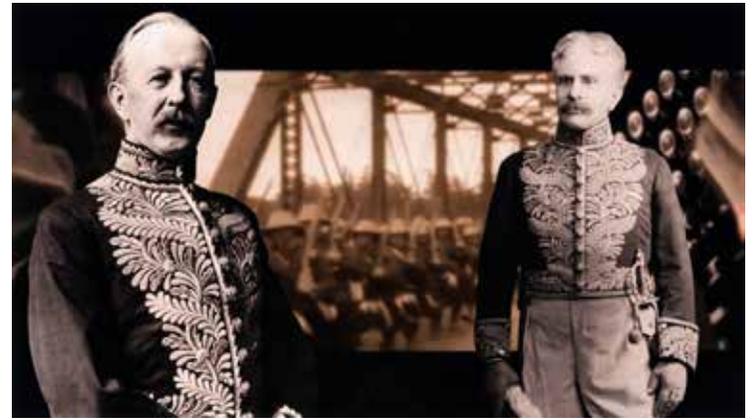
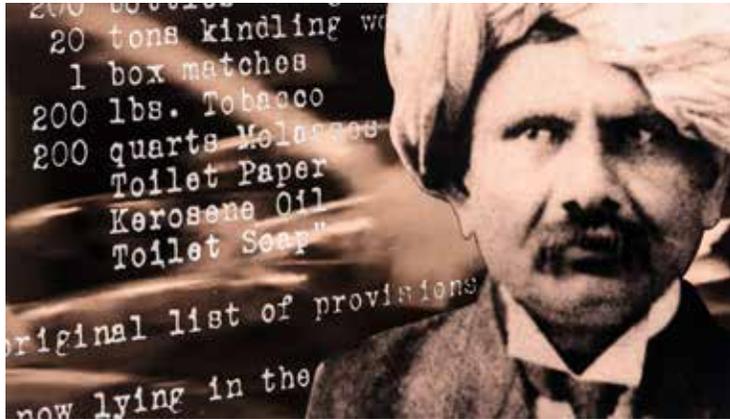
Avantika Bawa, *Halt.*, 2014, graphite and colour pencil on canvas, latex on wood and Styrofoam; *Halt.376*, 2014, 376 posters, digital print, wood, brick. Installation photo by Scott Massey; detail view courtesy of the artist



Haris Sheikh, *KMG-01*, 2012, oil on wood, with mixed media; *First Rupture*, 2014, digital collage on canvas. Photos by Scott Massey



Jarnail Singh, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 2014, oil on canvas. Photo by Scott Massey

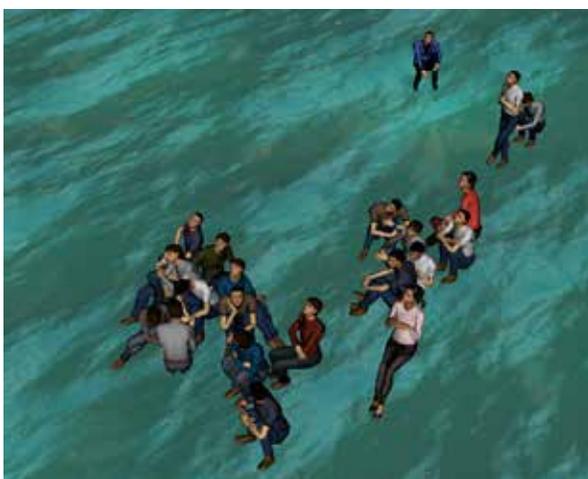


Ali Kazimi, *Komagata Maru Redux*, 2012, series of four prints, chromogenic emulsion on paper, collection of the Surrey Art Gallery. Images courtesy of the artist



Ken Lum, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*, 2000, sculpture installation on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Major Purchase Fund, the Canada Millennium Partnership Program of the Millennium Bureau of Canada and the British Columbia 2000 Community Spirit Fund. VAG 2000.25 a-d, photos courtesy of Vancouver Art Gallery

Ken Lum, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*, 2000, maquette and documentation, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery archive and Boelling Smith Design. Surrey Art Gallery installation photo by Scott Massey



Evan Lee, *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, 2009–present, (clockwise from upper left); rendering from digital 3D re-creation, archival pigment print; figure studies, archival pigment print; *Migrant Ship Model*, 3D-printed sculpture, display case and crate; rendering from digital 3D re-creation, archival pigment print. All images courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery



Paul Wong, *Class of 2000*, 2000, 3-channel video; Top: *Refugee Prisoner's Lament* (2 minutes); Bottom left: *Class of 2000* (30 seconds); Bottom right: *I am a Refugee* (1 minute); courtesy of the artist and Vtape. Installation photo by Scott Massey



Paul Wong, *Class of 2000*, 2000, 3-channel video. Images courtesy the artist



Mass Arrival [Farrah-Marie Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan, Nadia Saad], *Mass Arrival, Queen Street*, 2013, wall collage, video (duration: 3min. 30 sec.), courtesy of the artists. Installation photo by Scott Massey

DISFIGURING IDENTITY: ART, MIGRATION AND EXILE SYMPOSIUM

**AVANTIKA BAWA / SAMMY CHIEN / DANA CLAXTON / LIANE DAVISON / NEELAMJIT DHILLON
RICHARD FUNG / NAVEEN GIRN / JOHN GREYSON / AYESHA HAMEED / ALI KAZIMI
HEATHER KEUNG / EVAN LEE / KARIN LEE / DIVYA MEHRA / FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA
CINDY MOCHIZUKI / SUMMER PERVEZ / TYLER RUSSELL / VIVEK SHRAYA / JORDAN STROM
STEVEN TONG / INDU VASHIST / PAUL WONG / KIRA WU**

INTRODUCTION

PAUL WONG AND KIRA WU

PAUL WONG Twenty-five years ago, I looked around and I didn't see what I wanted to see. In some ways, I was looking for artwork that spoke to me about questions that I was asking — questions that had been denied answers by my community, my family, and particularly the art world, and the film and television industries. And so I set out to answer some of these questions and ended up producing a series of exhibitions culminating in *Yellow Peril Reconsidered* (1991) that featured twenty-five Asian Canadian photo, film and video artists. That was not an easy task; it was produced against all odds by people who did not want me asking those questions and did not want to be focusing on identity politics, racism and Chinese or Asian Canadian sensibilities. I was told by many of the artists whom I had asked to be part of the exhibition, that they didn't want to be ghettoized. I was told by the mainstream art world to stay away from that territory if I did not want to ruin my career. We went ahead with the project and we produced an exhibition that I think helped galvanize — not just for the Asian Canadian community, but for other communities as well — a sense of permission to ask questions about ourselves and others, questions that had not been part of our cultural landscape until then.

The *Disfiguring Identity* symposium presented an opportunity to revisit some of those challenging, difficult and harsh questions that we were asking a quarter of a century ago, a large question being that of why we were marginalized and left out of the mainstream dialogue. We faced many limits in putting together a program twenty-five years ago;

there weren't many of us speaking out and making activist works that looked at ourselves because we hadn't been allowed that option. We had been denied that voice as a community, certainly by our parents who were living in silence, living in shame, living illegally, and living as oppressed migrants, coming from a past of violence and disruption, and being in a country and a place that was not very welcoming. They were coming from a place of severe racism and in many cases were confused, uneducated and poor. I certainly grew up in a climate where things were just not spoken about for reasons of privacy, safety and denial — for reasons related to fear. Part of the process is to overcome that fear, to be able to ask those questions and to look at what's possible. It is important, as an artist, and certainly as one of the aims of this symposium, to promote the creative freedom of expression that has always been the very core of why I love art and artists, and to celebrate and respect art, activism and artists. With the Film Night, we set out to present artists who are taking risks and we programmed a selection of a few of the many works that have been produced over the last couple of decades that are asking some of those questions, and that are revisiting, rewriting and reclaiming art history.

KIRA WU The Film Night of this symposium, *Disfiguring Identity*, brought together five short film and video works that go against the grain of traditional narratives about migration and exile. Sometimes bringing together elements of nostalgia, and sometimes bringing together pieces drawn from memories, these are "historical

facts" through the lens of "the other." More often than not, we are curious or fascinated by "the other", especially as we move through our world of being connected and dis-connected simultaneously through various means of social media.

The film and video works presented here challenge our assumptions of "who", "why" and "where" we are in relation to ourselves, our world and people around us: our identities are challenged or questioned in Canada. The works included in the symposium's Film Night, Ayesha Hameed's *Fire, Fences and Flight*, Karin Lee's *SHATTERED* and Ali Kazimi's *Rex vs. Singh*, weave historical events taken from various perspectives and re-interpret these events and accounts. In both Vivek Shraya's and Divya Mehra's works, the artist/filmmaker uses his/her own body as a performing subject in order to exploit the internal contradiction of the Instagram/Facebook/YouTube era in which private moments become familiar and subversive at the same time. All these works create waves. As we look at Vancouver, our port city, we can start to imagine the undercurrents that artists are trying to grapple with to comment on their shifting or disfigured identities.

FILM SCREENINGS

ALI KAZIMI, JOHN GREYSON, RICHARD FUNG

Rex vs. Singh, 2008 (29:25)

Between 1909 and 1929, an inordinate number of men tried for sodomy in Vancouver were Sikhs. Based on a 1915 case, *Rex vs. Singh* is a speculative exploration of the interplay between homophobia and racism in this little known chapter of Canadian history. In 1915, two Sikh millworkers, Dalip Singh and Naina Singh, were entrapped by undercover police in Vancouver and accused of sodomy. This experimental video stages scenes from their trial, told four times: first as a period drama; second as a documentary investigation of the case; third as a musical-as-agitprop; and fourth, as a deconstruction of the actual court transcript. Dalip and Naina were arrested one year after the infamous Komagata Maru incident, in which the Japanese-owned ship and its 376 would-be immigrant passengers from British India, mostly Sikhs, were turned back after sitting in Vancouver harbour for two months without being allowed to land. The 376 South Asian British subjects had hoped to challenge a systemically racist regulation that required potential immigrants to undergo a “continuous journey” from their country of origin, an impossibility deliberately created as a barrier to people from the subcontinent. *Rex vs. Singh* was commissioned by the Queer History Project of Out on Screen at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. Distributor: Vtape



Image courtesy Vtape

KARIN LEE

SHATTERED: The anti-Asian riots of 1907, 2007 (22:00)

100 years after the Anti-Asian race riots in Vancouver, Canada, media artist Karin Lee questions the relationship between immigration, labour and business while commenting on the current phenomenon of globalization. *SHATTERED* brings together two historic perspectives of the riots while locating them within contemporary Vancouver. Written, directed and produced by Gemini award-winning director Karin Lee, *SHATTERED* was created during an artist-in-residency program at VIVO Media Arts Centre. It was shown as a two-channel site-specific video installation in Vancouver’s Chinatown and Japantown on the night of the 100th anniversary of the riots that took place September 7, 1907. Distributor: Video Out



Image courtesy Video Out

DIVYA MEHRA

The Importance of Being Earnest, 2009 (2:41)

With *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Divya Mehra has created a humorous juxtaposition, reworking a popular Disney song and found photographic images to create an unsettling picture of a racist, unjust and cruel society.



Image courtesy the artist

AYESHA HAMEED

Fire, Fences and Flight, 2007 (5:10)

Fire, Fences and Flight considers the relationship between migration, flight and borders. On October 27, 2005 a fire broke out in a detention centre for ‘illegal’ immigrants located in the Schiphol airport in Amsterdam. Earlier that day in a Paris suburb, two boys were electrocuted in a power substation as they hid from a random police raid in their neighborhood. This short combines grainy archival film clips depicting fires, airplanes, balloons and fences as an allegory that connects these events to the mythologies of fire, the ubiquity of fences and the utopias of flight.

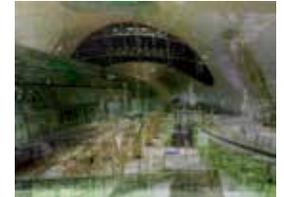


Image courtesy the artist

VIVEK SHRAYA

Seeking Single White Male, 2010 (2:20)

Seeking Single White Male is Vivek Shraya’s first short film, a study of a brown body in (queer) white spaces. In his essay about the piece, Shraya describes how the idea for the film came about: “For years, I had this idea of exploring comments I had heard in Edmonton gay bars when I first came out but it wasn’t until the summer of 2010 that it occurred to me to juxtapose those



Image courtesy the artist

statements with photos of myself 'transitioning' to whiteness—blonde hair, blue contacts—in an effort to show how the internalization of racism can manifest externally. *Seeking Single White Male* was born shortly thereafter." The video became a hit on social media sites, resonating with many who revealed similar experiences in the related online discussions that ensued.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE FILMMAKERS

ALI KAZIMI, HEATHER KEUNG, KARIN LEE AND PAUL WONG

PAUL WONG Heather Keung is an independent artist and curator, former programmer with Reel Asian. I have programmed both of these works before and I saw a lot of new stuff today seeing them side-by-side on the big screen. I've seen Karin Lee's work as an installation and I've seen Ali Kazimi's work at festivals. I have also programmed both of these works at the Chinese Classical Gardens in Vancouver. They are astonishing when viewed side-by-side and amazing in this context. You both work with historical archival materials, how did you arrive at this material and how did you decide to re-enact and present it in this way?

KARIN LEE With *SHATTERED* I wanted to commemorate the 1907 riots and looked at five different versions of the same story. In the Chinese version you see a lot of buildings with glass and, of course, in Chinatown all the buildings were shattered. Now Concord Pacific owns much of that property, which belongs to Chinese and Hong Kong interests. I utilize some of those images and re-enacted the riots based on historical materials that we had translated from Chinese records of the riot and also materials from the Japanese consulate.

I was interested in giving a voice; during my youth I was angry with my grandparents and my parents for being so complacent. I did not understand why they wouldn't fight against racism. I did not understand that it was from the generations of racism they had experienced. There was no education about any of this; there was no information passed down to me; I found this confounding. I was inspired to hear the voices of those who wanted to fight back against the rioters during the riots.

ALI KAZIMI I love the dialogue of Karin Lee's work, because when I look at the images of the riots I can hear the sound; it's about the shattered glass. I've seen the original photographs that Mackenzie King commissioned of the riots, from when he went to convey the investigation; those cyanotypes are beautiful. The glass really jumps out; the violence inherent in those broken panes of glass is absolutely visceral.

PAUL WONG In each of your works, you are playing with someone's concept of truth, you are making your own version of the truth and you are spinning together different versions of truth; so what is the truth?

ALI KAZIMI As an artist working with archives you are trying to make meaning from scraps. You are essentially trying to piece together a puzzle with huge chunks of information missing. In some circles, this is part of the objective process. I do not think it is objective at all. I think as artists what we are trying to do is to show the subjectivity of that process and certainly in *Rex vs. Singh* (2008), I was invited by John Greyson because of the work that I have done earlier on the Komagata Maru and Richard Fung was asked because of his work on early Chinese migration. When we first sat down we thought we would play the transcript first as a classical courtroom drama. We used *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) as a touchstone; this was a classical courtroom drama from the '50s. We used that as a way of setting what this notion of truth was. All the information we had was based on the transcript and this was supposed to be the ultimate

truth. This was the written document that has it all but then we realized, "Does it have it all?" What gets literally lost in translation? What does the transcriber write? What are the errors made by the transcriber? As we were re-enacting it, we discovered that the actors themselves were making errors, which we deliberately left in. If you notice the transcript in Richard's version, it doesn't quite match what the actors have said. We are playing with this varying idea of "what is truth?" I wanted to contextualize in a way that deconstructed truth and gave it a historical framework in which the other three versions could emerge.

KARIN LEE I love the three versions. So playful.

I think for *SHATTERED* the diversity of voices is truth for me. I wasn't just focusing on the Chinese or Japanese version, but to also looking at what the labourers were going through at the time. As Ali said, when you are looking at archival materials you are trying to take as much as possible to be able to give it meaning. From Canadian sources it was a very limited. There was Mackenzie King's report, and then in newspapers there were a few articles that were specific about what the riot meant. When we went to look at Chinese-language reports and what they reported in Japan and in Singapore, we were given different accounts of what had happened. It became a fuller truth for what happened at that time.

Based on some of the Chinese articles, there were a lot of divisive opinions in the community as whether to fight back or not. I also spoke to elders and asked, "Were the Chinese cowards? Why didn't they fight back?"



They said, “No, they didn’t want to incite more violence, you should not fight violence with violence.”

HEATHER KEUNG So, the lynching of the individual or, I guess, the suicide, has that ever been reopened? We recently had Christine Choy in Toronto. She revisited *Who Killed Vincent Chin*; it is a very important, layered retelling of the same narrative over and over until it unravels in a different way. I was wondering if that was influential?

KARIN LEE No. It remains an unsolved case that I haven’t revisited, maybe in the future.

ALI KAZIMI One of the interesting things about the 1907 riots in the current context of Komagata Maru is that the riot was sparked by hysteria that was building up about another ship, the Montiko that was rumored to be carrying 2,000 Asiatics that was landing imminently. The Montiko was on its way, it was carrying 1,100 people, 900 South Asians, the rest were Chinese and Japanese migrants. The ship was not allowed to land; they were held in detention while the riot was going on; they were finally allowed to land when things had quieted down. So, this idea of the dreaded ship carrying holds of people is something that continued to manifest itself. For the Komagata Maru, one of the



initial strategies by immigration authorities was to say that there would be another riot if they let these people on shore. In many ways the 1907 riots haunted the arrival of the Komagata Maru.

KARIN LEE In the Japanese version, there is a marked difference between the way that the Japanese Canadian community dealt with the rioters and the way the Chinese community responded. The Chinese didn’t use guns and they didn’t fight back; they boarded their shops from the inside. But by the time the rioters went to Japantown, barricades had already been built up and the community was ready to fight back. They had their Kendo swords and they had their guns and they had everything to keep the rioters out with the assistance of some of the police. It was a difference between what each community’s philosophy was. Also, I think for me, it was a reflection of the strength of the government, because at that time the Chinese government was very weak and the Japanese government was much stronger.

ALI KAZIMI Yes, I was going to add the way that Mackenzie King dealt with the two different communities was quite different. In the Japanese instance, every shop and every business was photographed and these are actually amazing portraits of people at the time. You can see the



trauma on their faces as they stood in front of their businesses that had been absolutely destroyed and I found these amazing little notations about people actually refusing compensation. There would be just a small line saying, “refused to accept compensation”, and you wonder what is going on there. The geopolitics of the time is very important because Japan was an ally; there was an Anglo-Japanese defence and economic treaty that protected the west coast of Canada. Japanese cruisers regularly came to Vancouver and their arrival was celebrated because they offered protection. There was a great geopolitical play also going on, Mackenzie King would not quibble with any of the claims on the Japanese side but on the Chinese side there were all these negotiations going on for the longest time. You can see in his record that he didn’t entirely believe in all the claims; as Karin said, it had to do with the power of the state at the time and their relationships with the British Empire.

HEATHER KEUNG What I thought was amazing in *Continuous Journey* (2004) is what you (Ali Kazimi) brought up about the history of the South Asian communities here in Vancouver, which was very active and involved. You were talking about the Chinese community, how they were feeling silenced, but right away the South Asian community in Vancouver was kind of a

Images: Karin Lee, *SHATTERED: The anti-Asian riots of 1907, 2007*. Images courtesy the artist

front line advocating. It is a very interesting part of the narrative; can you elaborate on that?

ALI KAZIMI A friend of mine, Johanna Ogden, has done some amazing work in terms of the relationships between the various communities. She is from Astoria, just south of the Washington-Oregon border where the South Asian revolutionary Ghadar Party emerged. Johanna wonderfully shows the way they were inspired by the organizers within the community of the Chinese Nationalists with their fundraising and political organizing that they were doing for Sun Yat-Sen, who visited the West Coast and Vancouver several times. They were also inspired by the Finnish Socialists who were doing amazing work in terms of labour relations, but who were also engaged in deep conversation about the state of the world. I think one of the things that was happening was this great cross-pollination of political ideas between the communities, and there is a lot of work being done now uncovering those histories, which for me is the next exciting step.

HEATHER KEUNG I am interested to see those various communities' plans moving forward. Do you know about that?

ALI KAZIMI Yes, the Ghadar Party, was calling for an armed revolt in India after the Komogata Maru was forced to turn back. That moment became a great catalyst for the Ghadar Party to go back and start a revolt in India. Thousands of people left and the community in Vancouver was pretty much decimated because many left for India and the rest went south to the US. Those who went to India were betrayed and the revolution itself was betrayed. The British Intelligence was on to them and most of those people were arrested

on arrival. At least two activists in Vancouver were hung for their so-called seditious speeches.

PAUL WONG Let's invite questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE 1 Karin, I want to go back to the silencing that you talked about; there was such a silencing in the community for a long time. We are now starting to unearth the silence, because people had suppressed the truth. I produced a documentary on Japanese internment; we talked to the community, and they didn't want to talk because they were ashamed of their own history. Can you elaborate on the challenges in getting people to speak and how we can honour their truth?

KARIN LEE I talked with people at the Chinese Benevolent Association, because they are the oldest organization in Vancouver's Chinese community. They said most of their records had been burned, and there were a only few elders who were young in 1907 willing to talk to us. Why did they not want to talk to us? Because it was shameful to be Chinese; because they felt that they have been targeted for decades; there was no reason to voice; there was no reason to fight for your rights, which was difficult for them. The War Vets are a completely different generation; they wanted to move forward, to get recognition and to get political franchise. It is always difficult to get older people to tell you their stories and if they do, they don't want to go public.

This was originally an installation that we mounted in Chinatown in Shanghai Alley and in Japantown at Oppenheimer Park. What I wanted to do was engage with the community so the dialect of the Chinese that you hear is the dialect that would have been spoken. It is not Mandarin or Cantonese but the



village dialects of the people living in the area at that time, we did the same with the Japanese version. I wanted to use voices in a way that would confront viewers in the community by hearing the voices of the people being threatened by the riots at that time.

AUDIENCE 2 Ali, could elaborate on the pocket music montage? How did that idea come about? I loved it, but I also want to know more because I feel like I am missing part of the joke.

ALI KAZIMI It's not in my version; it's in John's version. It is difficult to speak for John, so I will tell you what I know. John noticed in the transcript that there were a lot of references to change. The 75 cents and whose pocket the change was in. So there were references to change and pockets; lots of pockets. He started looking at how he can draw from pockets and how he could put it in multiple ways. It confounds viewers, so you need to see it multiple times to solve the puzzle. Also, he uses a lot of references to popular music; John has had a long-standing collaboration with composer David Wong, who is amazing. He can sound like anybody; he did all the voices. John rewrote all the lyrics; the lyrics were based on references to pockets and control — social and legal control under the context of Empire.

Image: Ali Kazimi, John Greyson, Richard Fung, *Rex vs. Sing*, 2008. Image courtesy the artists

PAUL WONG John Greyson is the Canadian who just served 50 days in an Egyptian jail. He is a filmmaker and great friend of ours; he will be here for the Queer Art Festival in July and will be showing his video *Prison Arabic in 50 Days* that he made of his incarceration.

All of your works have great creativity and ambiguity, which separates you from the so-called truth-makers and conventional documentarians who always purport to be the telling the truth. I think great works of art have ambiguity which force us to ask more questions. Both your works do that. They rip things open and offer more layers. Why do you think ambiguity is evident in your work?

ALI KAZIMI I think that the worst thing that history does is to make people passive recipients of facts, figures, dates; you are not supposed to question the historical narrative that you were force-fed. History becomes painful when it addresses a past that engages with the present and when it opens up spaces for audiences to ask questions. Asking questions means engagement and hopefully that is what we are trying to do.

I love *SHATTERED* because it really gives a voice for archival history that goes beyond the traditional archive that we all know of that moment and really puts us on the other side. I found that remarkably perfect.

KARIN LEE Thanks.

ALI KAZIMI Before I forget, I want to acknowledge something that Paul said right in the beginning because really we couldn't be having this conversation without the amazing hard work that

you (Paul Wong) did. I really mean it because I know in the course of making works around race, that it still continues to be a huge challenge — an enormous challenge — because there is a great discomfort around the issue of race. Mention race in a large mainstream audience and everyone starts squirming in their seats, but that squirming also reflects a kind of resistance. What you did 25 years ago was amazing and really opened up a whole set of possibilities for people, and also from the Arts Council where those conversations became really important and feisty and led to people like myself being funded, so thank you.

PAUL WONG Artists continue to blaze the trail. We do not need to get permission to speak our truths in provocative, new and different kinds of ways. I have seen what we can do with a little bit of permission that we have been given and what we have accomplished with very little. Artists are not like everyone else; we can make great mistakes in trying to find the truth. We can go to places where other forms cannot or other industries will not. Artists can take us to other imagined places; you all have done a wonderful job in doing that with your works. Thank you for being here.

**DISFIGURING IDENTITY:
ART, MIGRATION AND EXILE
SYMPOSIUM PAPERS
AND PANELS**

SYMPOSIUM INTRODUCTION

NAVEEN GIRN

In 1885, a wide-ranging debate on the nature of citizenship and racial identity took place in the nation's House of Commons. Canada's first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald stated, "If you look around the world, you will see that the Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with Africans and Asiatics. The world is filling up fast enough... But the cross of those races — like the dog and the fox — is not successful; it cannot be, it never will be." He closed his statement by arguing, "It is not desired that they come; that we should have a mongrel race; that the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed." This sentiment is consistently re-articulated throughout Canadian history. It manifests over a half-century later with Prime Minister Mackenzie King claiming if "lower races" were permitted into Canada they would "debase" Anglo-Saxon

civilization just as surely as "the baser metals tended to drive the finer metal out of circulation."

Over a century removed from Sir John A. Macdonald's comments, Edward Said outlined the "predicaments that disfigure modernity — mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession and forced migration." In illustrating and problematizing notions of forward progress, maintaining the status quo vis-à-vis inertia, and benevolent Canadian multiculturalism, this symposium disfigures "identity" itself as a central concept that must also be unpacked. The identity of the individual or group — whether projected, assumed, subverted, resisted, parodied, or any combination of these techniques and others — disrupts hegemonic state discourses that seek to ideologically, geographically and physically

confine, constrain and fix identities for racialized migrant groups and by extension people of colour.

Over the past several years there has been an increasing awareness towards modes of migration and, in particular, the spectre of migrants who arrive by boat. Whether in Canada, the United States, Italy or elsewhere, the imagery of mass arrival resonates within the psyche of a nation. Whereas the actual number of arrivals by ship is miniscule when compared to the annual arrival of migrants, there is a small degree of separation between boat migration and projecting the ideas of "invasion," "hordes," "peril," and a national loss of identity. The confluence with recent international events and Canada's own response to the arrival of the Komagata Maru one hundred years ago provides the space, the platform and the opportunity to critique these (mis)perceptions from a variety of perspectives.



Symposium audience, photo by Brian Giebelhaus

Disfiguring Identity: Art, Migration, and Exile is an extension of this rigorous engagement with the ideas of Canada and Canada coming to terms with its own history and present. This symposium brought together artists, curators and scholars from across the country to critically examine the intersection of racist discourses, exclusionary political policy, migratory stigma and visual artistic responses through three different frameworks.

Day one included the screening of short films featuring eight visionary Canadian directors. Their works engage with identity, racism and migration, and are powerful tools for sustaining and fostering dialogue. Day two included ten

speakers over three panels. In the first panel, presenters examined notions and methods of performativity in which visual and performing artists investigate and interrogate public (re) presentation of migrant histories, narratives and subjectivities. In the second panel, a number of speakers investigated institutional approaches to actively curating content for (and from) marginalized and racialized communities, and in turn, provided an avenue for counter-narratives, to “walk the talk” on a daily basis. In the final panel, presenters examined the relationship between history, memory and the colonial archive which provided an opportunity to reframe the dialogue by centring voices from liminal spaces to fracture the comfort of exclusionary “national histories” and to foster new avenues for personal and marginalized re-imaginings to occur.

Twenty-five years ago, Paul Wong curated the landmark exhibition, *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, that examined racist discourses of identity and migration. Today, with the one-hundredth anniversary of the Komagata Maru episode, we once again turn to visual artists to guide a conversation on the power of art and artists to critically address cultural stereotypes and the experiences of migration(s).



Naveen Ginn, photo by Brian Giebelhaus

WISDOM FOR ALL THROUGH IDENTITY POLITICS: A HOPEFUL IDEA

DANA CLAXTON

*When we disfigure history, we are denying justice and truth.*¹

— Edward Said

Identity is a funny thing and within the foundation of identity building in Canada lies a certain type of nested logic: a colonial logic, influenced by an imperial logic — both these ways of thinking have shaped false identity constructs that circulate within cultural interests and interpretations. This logic has existed as a totality that historically excluded all that was other and built racial hierarchies that continue to harm our country and damage our healthy social relations. Racial superiority written in law and legislation has shaped the cultural landscape of Canada so much so, that through the written law of subjugation, some communities are still seen as inferior. I am curious how colonial logic differs from Indigenous logic and I will attempt to locate this difference.

Colonial logic can be applied to systems of knowledge production and state apparatuses that have denied citizenship to Indigenous peoples and other groups — the Komagata Maru incident, the Chinese Head Tax, the Ukrainian and Japanese internment camps in the first half of the century, and then the denial of voting rights for Indigenous people until 1960 with Quebec trailing by another decade — to name a few examples. A state-sanctioned logic that refuses or denies selfhood within the parameters of who qualifies for citizenship, rights and privileges, deepens through public discourse. If one's culture and human rights have been outlawed by the state, this supremacy-based logic of refusal impacts social relations,

self-identity and, in some cases, cultural production. Culture-making outside of the Anglo-British Canadian status quo was structurally delegitimized through pedagogy, legislated authority, state apparatuses, and private and public discourse. Whether criminalizing Indigenous culture or barring access to the academy, pedagogy itself is implicated in constructing and maintaining false knowledge of the Other while denying the Other entry — this means denying entry into the very production of knowledge itself. Early Canadian racist public policy supported and created general attitudes of racial superiority, which in turn impacted cultural production in Indigenous and diverse communities. Not only was new work not being made, but also the remaining artwork or artifacts were being analyzed through a powerful gaze that shaped interpretation.²

There are a few layers of the gaze at work here in Canada when viewing the Indigenous body and art, beginning with the imperial gaze, which shapes and influences the colonial gaze. Canadian systems of knowledge production began with the Commonwealth settler nation-state; everything British was transported to “our” pedagogy and governance, which mutated into a settler gaze. And the settler gaze morphed into the Canadian gaze, which has been informed by the imperial/colonial gaze, but is very specific to the Canadian experience. The gaze deepens and grows into the imperial/colonial/settler/Canadian gaze, four layers of the gaze heaped onto Indigenous bodies

and culture — these layers of the gaze are all Eurocentric in nature. Then a fifth layer of the gaze develops upon Indigenous backs and that is the newcomer³ gaze taken on by immigrants arriving after 1965. I have selected this date as a result of the launching of the official Canadian national flag, and the then-recent changes to the Indian Act.

This adds up to the imperial/colonial/settler/Canadian/newcomer gaze. Five layers of interpretation, stereotype and power that control and filter views of Indigenous bodies and art. The imperial/colonial/settler/Canadian gaze can be applied to art from diverse cultures as well. But also these diverse cultures can contribute to judging and viewing aboriginal bodies and art through one to five of the gazes, because part of becoming Canadian is embedded in an imperial/colonial/settler logic which has a racist paternalistic view of the Indigenous body and culture.

Within the realm of the gaze is “the wound,”⁴ because the gaze is searing and can judge, harm and puncture. Something is injured within Canada's identity formation and this injury was inflicted as a result of the imperial/colonial/settler/Canadian gaze, through its position of power. The injury is a cultural wound⁵ and its broken status continues to receive healing through the production of art. The artworks in *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru* (2014); *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1991); *First Ladies* (1991); *Indigena* (1992); and *Land*,

Spirit, Power: First Nations Art at the National Gallery of Canada, (1992) — amongst other exhibitions — reveal the cultural wound. And through the reveal, the wound is being doctored and, in turn, Canada is being doctored and is healing from its imperialist racist past and present. Thankfully the gaze can be turned back (as theorized by Jacques Lacan) — or, at the very least, it can be met with a lateral glance — not as an exploitative power gaze, but rather the glance becomes a way of looking that encompasses truths and is nurturing. So, the looking back is about healing, as opposed to oppressing or harming.

The late 1980s and early '90s in Canada was a time of self-representation in the arts. Marginal voices needed to be heard to allow for self-expression, but also to inform publics about the multiple shared sites of oppression and resistance to the cultural hegemony that had shaped and defined the Canadian cultural landscape. Exposing the histories of oppressive laws to a largely ignorant art public through creative artistic expression was an emotionally charged act. When unpacking race and the body politic within a Commonwealth settler nation, emotions will always be, and should be, part of the discussion. Heart talk.⁶ Talking from the heart.

By establishing one's own agency within the "dominant" art community, Indigenous people and POCs (People of Colour) were revealing injustice and giving social, political and, in some cases, spiritual agency to their parents, grandparents and themselves, as artists and as citizens. Ancestral voices that were denied through state authority and devalued through pedagogy and stereotyping were being recognized and articulated by artists. Artists recognized that their parents and grandparents were greatly harmed, rendered

voiceless and legally oppressed. This history, as well as the current reality of oppression in Canada, is a rich and complex site to draw upon for art making. How has oppression, both as a historical fact and as a contemporary experience, been rendered into the realm of art making? What is the aesthetic of the oppressed in Canada? Do we have one? And is that aesthetic a self-rendering of the affects of legislated oppression? *The reveal. To reveal injustice.*

Within the larger field of aesthetic theory, the aesthetics of the oppressed seem well placed within a kind of peace education⁷ that advocates for an ethic of care all round. The visual in peace education has an ethical purpose. Louis Riel stated, "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them back their spirit."⁸ Perhaps this statement foreshadowed the volume of state and public oppression that Indigenous people would endure while also foresighting that the artist voice could reveal injustice.

First Nations and artists of colour were expressing their experiences as "outsiders" to the dominant culture. There was a demand for ethical accountability from the cultural brokers regarding equal representation in the arts in Canada. What voices were not being heard and why? Erasure and cultural appropriation were no longer acceptable within Canadian public cultural institutions. Ethics, or the lack thereof, were being questioned — and this meant going further than any prescribed essence of identity. Identity politics located abuses of power within the very liberal field of art.

The languages of an "activist art practice" or "activist academic" were being spoken, along with terms like "settler allies," "people of colour solidarity" and



Dana Claxton, photo by Brian Giebelhaus

"shared oppression"— these ideas and terms were seen as threatening, radical and visionary. This new language was perceived to be threatening because cultural power was being questioned and demands were being placed upon it. It was radical because the micro superstructures of Canadian art were being challenged and questions of access and inclusion were demanded. And it was visionary because the idea of critical and ethical cultural democracy in the arts had the potential to enhance public discourse and social relations through diverse and sometimes political and spiritual voices. The battle for cultural inclusion was taking place in Canada's liberal artist-run centre movement and quickly

terms like “cultural terrorists,” “hostile takeovers” and “white supremacy” sadly began circulating. And signs of neoliberalism (profit with no regulation) in parts of artist-run culture became very apparent. First Nations and POCs asked the artist-run centre movement to share cultural space and power ; reactions ranged from fear to an eager readiness to participate. There was an attempt to lead with distinct cultural concerns as forms of “resistance” to Western aesthetics and interpretive hegemony—and not as reductive essentialism, but as strategic essentialism to indicate that our forms of cultural production are valuable and that the Euro-Settler Canadian art institutions needed to acknowledge the gaps and reconsider what Canadian visual culture is and should be: a place for all artists.

Pedagogy has played a key role in the structural dehumanization of Indigenous culture and bodies. The bias implied right in the category “non-Western art” subordinated anything deemed to be outside of “Western art;” thus “non-Western art” was implied to be inferior and denied entry into the timeline of official art history. Indigenous knowledges have been left out of philosophy and science; Indigenous spiritual knowledge is excluded from the conventional field of religious studies. Compounded by the criminalization of Indigenous culture for 80 years, Indigenous knowledges have been left out of the very production of knowledge and meaning in Canada. And the delegitimization of our knowledge has supported the stereotype and the negative identity constructs that have a deeper history. This violence of delegitimization has done much damage tragically within Indigenous communities as well.

Identity politics, as it is called, and which apparently included my art practice, allowed many artists to

articulate and contextualize their own silenced histories within the larger field of colonial history. Identity politics resides within the realm of the cultural wound and has curative elements. Identity politics for me are a gift, a healing and a cure: a gift because artists gave generously, a healing because truth heals and a cure because the oppressed have spoken to the wound.

Historically, education supported the stereotype — identity politics allowed for a space to deconstruct the stereotype and to reveal how it worked while exposing systems of false knowledge production that maintained authority over and defined the other. This false knowledge and authority gave rise to an ideology of racial superiority with racialized hierarchies. Hidden within this ideology, there was a legitimization of the expansion of the means to reproduce capital, which in Canada has impacted many First Nations communities who live well below the poverty line. The stereotype assisted and assists with keeping Indigenous people in poverty. In terms of class privilege, discussion of class is often seen as a departure from the struggle for cultural equity for First Nations artists and POCs, but we share the burden of historical oppression imposed by the state and maintained through public discourse and perhaps desire, and we are all subjected to the functioning of the stereotype.

Yet against this backdrop, Indigenous artists and artists of colour have increasingly played a significant role in shaping the Canadian art and visual studies schema. Through persistence and a will to be heard and seen, many artists who engaged with the topic of race and the body politic in their practices have contributed to discussions of anti-racism within the very production of art and

culture in our country. These efforts and others have reshaped arts funding bodies as well, where it became unacceptable and even undemocratic not to have a diversity of voices at all levels of assessment. In the last 15 years there has been a tremendous influx of Indigenous art history courses and material-based art making classes.

Identity politics in art have contributed to unpacking colonial histories and inserting a first person narrative for marginal voices. This articulation presented both a theoretical rupture and an intervention of difference through the actions of subordinated groups. For some, art practice changed to praxis and a way of life — it became a way of living a political life that meant making political choices and voicing political concerns within the realm of art and culture and further into pedagogy and how we teach art.

The hegemony (or “total social authority,” as theorized by Antonio Gramsci), both through coercion and consent, within the superstructure of art history, was being questioned. Interpretative power was being critiqued and the influence of Euro-Canada’s stronghold on Canadian art history and exhibition space was in question. A crisis of representation and authority has visibly taken place and expert knowledge reassessed. The problem that remains is that even through locating and establishing one’s own agency, a marginal identity is still “the Other” and perhaps because of the nature of “the Other” and of power, we will always reside as “the Other,” within the stereotype, with limited power — hence, the persistently high poverty levels in the aboriginal community.

As Other, Indigenous art continues to be at the service of the consumptive nature of pedagogy

and the market — Indigenous cultural production is either a research subject or a commodity object. Through exhibition, collection and production, Indigenous art has firmly established agency, but at the same time this agency exists within the realm of the perverse commodity or research fetish. Along with racial oppression, Indigenous people still endure class struggles which are not fought in the gallery space. Further, the superstructure of the regime of capital doesn't allow for Indigenous voices to be valued in any politically meaningful way, or even for the artists' voices to be heard. Within these superstructures of political power, art circulates as capital, but generally detached from the artist's (raced or gendered) body or (political) voice. And when the artist's body matters, it's generally to say, the artist is young, old or dead, but never as the speaking subject. The artist body, regardless of class, race or gender, at some point doesn't matter in matters of capital. Class, race or gender privilege has played a significant role in the commerce of art, but at some point in the superstructure of art, it's about art as capital, severed from the gendered/raced/classed body. (Of course, we mustn't forget the plea of the Guerrilla Girls in all of this).

As capital, art reproduces class over and over again, and certainly regarding the Indigenous community, class structures and struggles haunt the devaluation of the people; in other words, Indigenous bodies are delegitimized through class oppression. Class continues to play a significant role in de/valuing Indigenous people; also, class maintains interpretative art power in general. As in Karl Marx's well-known definition of superstructure, art is blatantly a commodity — the vulgarities of the final stages of capitalism¹⁰ could be said to be encrusted in artist Damien Hirst's notorious diamond skull, *For the*

Love of God (2007). Although I don't predict an end to art as a result of art objects like Hirst's diamond skull, it seems this highly calculated commodity is suggesting the end of art as non-commodity — art in certain class structures can now only circulate as commodity after the diamond skull. If this is taken as a fact, then where does this development place Indigenous art and art by POC? Of course artists will always make art for the love of art. But the capitalistic models of accumulation and consumption of art and Indigenous aesthetics need to be considered, as art is placed within the realm of commodity and use value.

Canada, as a settler nation and Commonwealth country with institutions based in Anglo-British models, subjects all non-Western immigrant cultures to a Euro-Canadian dominance in art discourses and interpretation. What and who gives racism a concrete material force? Books? The text? Movies? State policy? And how do these practices legitimate the continuation of multiple oppressions and racism? Are we still teaching the stereotype?

I suspect that art proper still largely belongs to the West; communities of colour or First Nations who wish to circulate in art's arena must define their own rules of engagement knowing that the field is dynamic and complex with Western imperialist roots. And through cross-fertilization, all roots can be enhanced and the rhizomes expanded — connectivity through difference.

Thankfully there are traces of identity politics in twenty-first century art. Discussions of race should always be welcomed as these discussions are still needed, and will be needed as long as racism persists. The reality of co-existence, not as a two-world duality or binary, but as the Whole,

interests me — the Circle — and not to diminish difference, but to acknowledge and understand different histories and reference points.

Canada's racist legacy purported that difference was a threat and identity politics countered that we could engage in our difference without violence or oppression. Canada's historical and current relationship with Empire haunts and informs culture-making in general. And colonial logic and power have influenced how culture, bodies and peoples are valued. Thankfully, power is not *manna*, and I use *manna* here as a nurturing spiritual entity. *Manna* is wisdom and what seems to be the fundamental difference between imperial logic and Indigenous logic is wisdom. I don't see wisdom in power. So, if knowledge is power — wisdom is *manna*. I am hopeful, that as our young country called Canada grows, it will become wise, like the ancient Indigenous knowledges that haunt this land. And through wisdom, justice will prevail.

Wopila, pila maya, Mitakuye Oyasin

To the east

Wopila — I give thanks

Pila maya — you have honoured me

Mitakuye Oyasin — everything is related

To the east — where the sun begins the day.

NOTES

1. Edward Said, Concluding lecture at the Orientalism conference, Columbia University, April 16, 2003: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JncXpQoZAo>
2. Several theories of “the gaze” are at work here: Jean-Paul Sartre’s gaze as the crux of self awareness in the moment one is viewed by another; Michel Foucault’s gaze of power and authority; Ann Kaplan’s imperial gaze; and some extend this to Edward Said’s postcolonial gaze. I am combining all these theories of the gaze to establish the layers of the gaze upon Indigenous bodies and POCs, and the art made by these communities.
3. “Newcomer” as a term was used to describe the first Europeans who came to North America, but now it has shifted to refer to new immigrants to Canada, perhaps as a way of establishing a sense of homeland for generations of old newcomers and situating the new newcomers essentially as recent foreigners.
5. I am using the term “the wound” in the sense of an infliction.
6. The “cultural wound” is a result of centuries of denial, ignorance and racial hierarchies that haunt the Canadian landscape.
7. Artist and Professor Lisa Steele wrote that my writing style is a form of “*heartalk*.” In her words, “*Heartalk* is the perfect commingling of three words that, together, begin to adequately speak of the delicate yet probing vision that Dana Claxton has applied... *heartalk* reflects her ability to write in the same voice that she speaks in...” Lisa Steele, Introduction, Dana Claxton, “Aboriginal Screen Culture: celebrating 10 years of imagineNATIVE,” imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, October 14-18, 2009, Vtape, Toronto.
8. “Peace education is the process of acquiring the values, the knowledge and developing the attitudes, skills and behaviors to live in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the natural environment.”
“Peace education”, Wikipedia, last modified August 15, 2014: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_education
9. “Louis Riel Quotes,” Manitoba Metis Federation: http://www.mmf.mb.ca/louis_riel_quotes.php
11. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels the final stages of capitalism happens when there is a universal commodification of the world market. I am applying this loosely to the international art market.
12. “The Whole” is the circle of life, the universe — everything is connected.

KOMAGATA MARU: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE ARTS

NEELAMJIT DHILLON

As a first generation Indo-Canadian, my identity resides at the intersection of my Canadian and Indian selves. These two identities, coupled with my Sikh religious identity, provide multiple vantage points from which to view the world. In the past I strove to keep these identities separate, but as I mature artistically, these identities have melded together into a unique worldview. This merging of identities inspired my artistic work, *Komagata Maru*, which uses music to explore themes of social justice and activism. The work marks the centenary of the Komagata Maru incident of 1914, when 376 passengers from India traveled by ship to Canada but were barred from immigrating because of racist laws.

Drawing artistic influence from seemingly dissimilar sources has become more commonplace, as technologies such as the Internet connect individuals globally; however, the lexicon to describe such movements has progressed only minimally. In music, the dreaded “f-word,” fusion, is often used as a catchall term for any type of inter-genre practice. This word is often mistakenly used to define simple collaboration rather than a true melding of multiple elements to create a single entity as the word fusion suggests. Rather than perpetuate the misuse of “fusion,” this paper seeks to contextualize the term “intersectionality,” while exploring how it establishes a framework within which to contextualize my artistic practice.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Noted UCLA and Columbia Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”

to examine race and gender politics (and later class, sexual orientation, age and color) as they pertain to the experience of Black women in America.¹ Crenshaw uses this term in order to counteract the distortion of a “single axis-analysis” of experience with that of “the multidimensionality of Black... experiences.”² The act of distilling an individual’s experience down to a single word misrepresents that experience, as no one term can fully capture the complexity of a personal narrative — this often occurs through generalizations related to gender or race, for example.

Crenshaw’s above statement about “multidimensionality” can be said to exist in the definitions found in musical genres and practices. The term “jazz,” for instance, can be used to describe many types of music from Dixieland to free improvisation. Simply using the term jazz as a descriptor is not enough to describe anyone’s music. Nathaniel Mackey, in the book *Jazz Among the Discourses*, points out that:

The recent ascendancy of cultural studies in academia tends to privilege collectivity and group definition over individual agency and self-expression, to see individual expression as a reflection of group definition. In relating the two, however, we should remember that in matters of artistic othering, individual expression both reflects and redefines the collective, realigns, refracts it.³

Thus, the study of jazz history, in this case, is not one of collective movements, but rather that of the individual. Any description of a type of music

that is unidimensional, or reliant on one oversimplified category, is grossly insufficient. Utilizing Crenshaw’s term “intersectionality” is particularly useful in describing multidimensional artwork and pays respect to the individual’s unique experience. In the Indian classical tradition, one learns within a *gharana* (a school of music with a set of characteristic stylistic features),⁴ but this training does not simply create artistic carbon copies of one’s teacher. One’s individuality is always present and compels the artist to find his or her own way through the tradition.

INDIAN CLASSICAL AND JAZZ

The use of intersectionality in the *Komagata Maru* work can be seen in two ways. The first way is concerned with the process in which Indian classical and jazz elements manifest musically. Both styles set improvisation within parameters that outline melodic and rhythmic structures within which the musician is free to spontaneously create. The melodic framework — the notes available from which to draw one’s melodic choices — in Indian classical music is



Neelamjit Dhillon, promotional image for *Komagata Maru*, August 2013. Photo by Hamin Honari with photo from Vancouver Public Library archives; layout by Preet Mangat; image courtesy the artist

Album covers: Max Roach, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane and Leo Smith

called *raag* and in jazz is represented by the concept of harmony. The rhythmic framework, the beat cycle within which to create, is called *taal* in Indian classical music; in jazz it is represented by the formal structure of a piece. One can improvise within a twelve beat rhythmic cycle in Indian classical music the same way that one creates melodies upon a twelve-bar blues form. Within the music for *Komagata Maru*, harmonic structures are used to create chords that reflect the rules of the *raag* in which a piece has been set and Indian rhythmic cycles create forms upon which to improvise. The movement *Crossing the Pacific* is set in *raag* Yeman and *taal* Pancham Swari of 15 beats. For me, *raag* Yeman expresses the moods of hope and optimism, which the passengers may have felt, and the 15-beat rhythmic cycle depicts the perils involved in the journey.



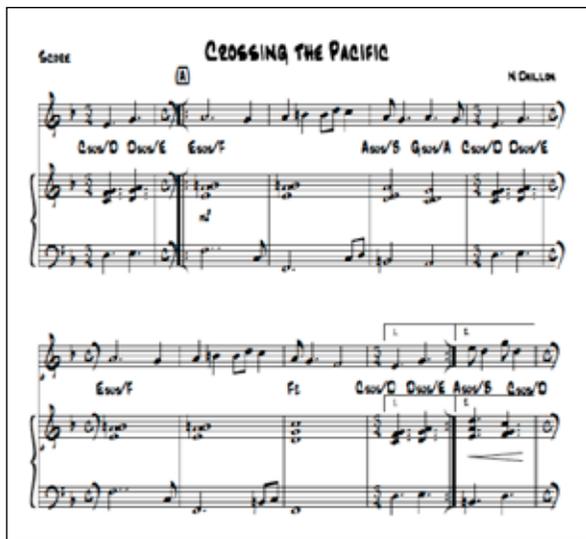
JAZZ AND SIKHISM

The second way my work, *Komagata Maru*, makes use of intersectionality is through jazz and Sikhism. Jazz was used as a voice for the civil rights movement and many works such as the album *We Insist!* by Max Roach, the piece *Fables of Faubus* by Charles Mingus, the piece *Alabama* by John Coltrane and the four-disc box set *Ten Freedom*

Summers by Wadada Leo Smith, as well as countless others, employ music as a vehicle for activism and as a method for commenting on and raising awareness for the struggle for equal rights. Sikhism is a theology that also encourages the pursuit of social justice. As stated in the Guru Granth Sahib, "Recognize the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no classes or castes in the world hereafter."⁵ The teaching of the Sikh gurus exemplifies equality amongst all people regardless of background, which provides context for me to create activist works. I seek to bring awareness to social justice issues through music

in order to give audiences an opportunity to consider another perspective by reflecting on these concepts through a different lens. From that experience, I hope that the common intersections among people will galvanize us and help us realize our similarities rather than our differences.

My art is a reflection of my life and is born out of the intersection of my various identities and the ways in which those identities interact and influence one another. By using the languages of Indian classical music and jazz, improvisation becomes the medium with which to comment, in real time, on the present experience. My artistic practice, either demonstrated by my piece *Wisconsin* about the 2012 shooting at the Oak Creek *gurdwara* (Sikh house of worship) or by my *Komagata Maru* suite, provides me an outlet with which to express what it means to be an Indo-Canadian Sikh and how, through music, that experience can help others understand the intersection of their own lives and enable a more equitable society. *Komagata Maru* not only reflects upon what happened a century ago, but also delivers a call to action so that such a deed is never again perpetrated against any marginalized community.



Neelamjit Dhillon, first section of *Crossing the Pacific* from *Komagata Maru*



Neelamjit Dhillon Quartet, Museum of Vancouver, Indian Summer Festival, July 6, 2014, photo by Tom Delamere

NOTES

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 1.
2. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *U. Chi. Legal F.*, 1989, 1.
3. Nathaniel Mackey, "Jazz: From Noun to Verb," in Krin Gabbard, *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Duke University Press, 1995), 97.
4. Sandeep Bagchee, *Nad: Understanding Raga Music*, 1st edition (Mumbai: Eshwar, 1998), 329329.
5. Guru Nanak, "SikhiToTheMAX," accessed May 15, 2014: <http://www.sikhithothemax.com/page.asp?ShabadID=1372>.

Images courtesy the author

IN SEARCH OF UNIVERSALITY: SOCIAL MOVEMENT, INTERDISCIPLINARY ART AND EXPANDED MEDIA

SAMMY CHIEN

When I first came to Canada about 15 years ago, I moved to a small town on the East Coast. Being one of the only visible minority people in town wasn't easy. I found Hip Hop as a shelter for my discomfort and utilized it as a form of expression that withstands racial stereotypes. Looking back, much of my earlier work between 2003 and 2006 revolves around themes of racism, identity and migration. I became aware of these issues through the experience of being in Canada while having come from an ambiguous country; I was born in Taiwan, a place still struggling for its identity as well.

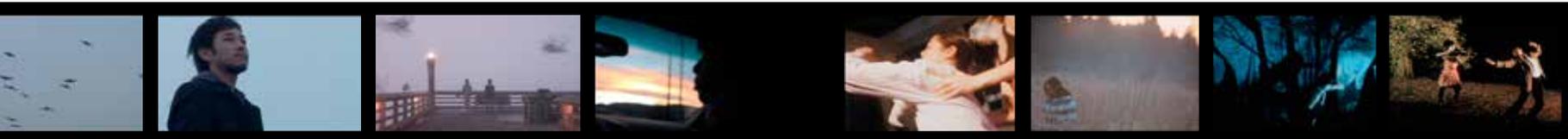
After playing with music and painting, I encountered film, a medium that seemed the most versatile and multidisciplinary for me at that time. Through the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative's scholarship, I made my first 16mm short film, *Scratchhh* (2004). The main theme of this work is racism. In the film, all the characters' eyes are scratched off. The main character despises these characters throughout the film, until he realizes that his eyes are also missing. Executing the frame-by-frame scratch animation technique marked my increasing dedication to art, especially in how it voices desires for social justice and equality. (One night, I spent eight hours straight scratching the film so that the characters' eyes could convey metaphorically the idea that we need to awaken our true vision for this world.)

Soon after, I made *Beneath the Surface* (2006), a film about discrimination. The main character is bullied due to her appearance — messy hair, oversized clothing and an odd black box that she carries around with her. We discover that the box contains beautiful photos connected with her memories that remain unknown to the viewer. Another film, *Gradient* (2006), is about two young men meeting at the harbour — one is returning from a journey and one is just about to depart. The two share their stories, revealing anticipation for the departure and harsh disillusionment of the journey. In the end they stand in the harbour and await the break of dawn. The film took on a more poetic and magical realist approach in its dialogue and imagery than the conventional narrative films, in the hopes of eliciting the viewer's imagination and sensorial perception in cinema, as well as in the context of our everyday lives. I was fascinated by phenomenology, which encourages viewers to take a primordial and non-prejudiced view of the world and to re-embody our senses with our surroundings. The impetus of this film had come from a very harsh romantic love encounter that my film collaborator, Jimmy Hsu, and I were facing at that time. It is clear to me now that these films seek to voice the values that exist deeply within each one of us. They ask us to look beyond our banal senses and transcend conventional social values.

In my later film works, *Oceanic* (2009) and *Patterns of Liquid Stars* (2011), I created characters that were ambiguous in terms of gender, race, cultural background and social class. I strive to break the common rules for screenwriting in the hopes of challenging the viewers to see beyond the stereotypes that are so prevalent in our screen culture today, especially after the excruciating disaster of Hollywood cinema. In conventional screenwriting, we're taught to create characters that are as obvious as possible in order for the spectators to identify and relate to them. The pitfall of this convention is the resulting vicious cycle of stereotypes and clichéd character representations. Growing up in places that are unconsciously dominated by Hollywood stereotypes, I noticed how Asian males entail impressions of non-romantic and flat characters who are only relevant to martial arts or comedic roles. The result of this has brought tremendous hardship and prejudice against this particular ethnic group in real life. Asian males continue to be under-represented in the Western mainstream media, not to mention how other ethnic groups are misrepresented; such things are noticed only when watching with a culturally cultivated eye. Hence, I strive to ameliorate this situation at the point where screen culture begins: screen writing. I wanted to change what's happening with our screen culture in the present.



Images this page and facing page: Sammy Chien, performance, painting and film stills, courtesy of the artist



While it's an ambitious undertaking, I felt it worth experimenting rather than just conforming to the injustices embedded in the cultural apparatus.

Oceanic and *Patterns of Liquid Stars* move along in a dreamlike, trancelike and surreal spatiotemporal logic. If our dreams are able to transcend reality, then why can't we filmmakers free ourselves from the conventions of cinema restraining our creative vision? Are we merely slaves to our ideologies, or are we able to deconstruct our pre-existing identities? One way to challenge these limits is through integrating different elements, mediums and methods; the insurmountable conventions and constraints may then begin to disintegrate. Hence, these two films combine digital video, analogue film techniques, digital projection, interactive media, contemporary dance, theatrical mise-en-scène and hand drawn animation. I believe that if the conventional viewpoints that define cinema are challenged, preconceived ideas may begin to dissolve and new perceptual doors may begin to open up.

This idea of dissolving formats and genres is closely connected with my encounters in new media arts and technology. It was a revelation that I didn't need to rely on traditional tools to make art any more. Instead, artists can make our

own vehicles to convey our vision. I went on to participate in numerous collaborations involving new media technologies in various settings, so often that people wondered, "Are you a filmmaker, musician, visual artist or computer programmer?"

To take the interdisciplinary and intercultural idea even further, I have danced onstage with dance master Wen Wei Wang in the ongoing collaboration *Made In China*. With this project, we are exploring our personal memories, heritages and migrations through the process of interdisciplinary collaboration. Moreover, we seek to challenge viewers about their impressions of China by using traditional practices in a contemporary context. Although it's an ongoing experiment, I discovered a scathing review condemning the performance. On one hand, I could ignore the unthinking and conservative views of the writer; on the other hand, the review has raised some simmering questions for me about whether our spectators today still harbour conservative perspectives on cultural representations. Every ethnicity has already been predetermined for the public by mainstream representations of ethnic cultures. Are we able to escape this "cultural gaze" that is forced upon us? Do we still need to ask ourselves if we are "exotic" or "cultural" enough for our audience? I naively believe that art is a universal language that is licensed

to unfetter us from the ideology of mainstream consumerism and the entertainment apparatus.

In March 2014, I made a trip back to Taiwan, where I was born. Just when I was about to return to Canada, a very profound social movement happened. They called it the Sunflower Movement. It started as a student movement occupying Taiwan's parliament building and exposing the government's plan to push through a major trade deal with China — a deal with tremendous economic, cultural and political issues at stake. As one example, the changes would allow Chinese citizens to immigrate and make investments in Taiwan much more easily. As an immigrant, an Asian-Canadian and a global-minded artist, I didn't think it was an issue. My skepticism with politics had me wondering if the protest was merely a form of xenophobia and discrimination against the Mainland Chinese. I was ambivalent about supporting this occupation until I stopped watching the news and started physically visiting the site — it turned out to be one of the most fascinating protests I've ever witnessed.

Ian Rowen compares the Sunflower Movement with Burning Man and Occupy, noting that, "The polite conduct, festive atmosphere, filial relationship with police, sophisticated use of high-tech tools, commitment to sanitation and recycling, and a high





degree of order in this dynamic environment recalls Burning Man more than Occupy, which lacked a consistent leadership core.¹ Rowen describes how almost everywhere within the occupation zone you can find creative use of visual and performance arts by the protesters to articulate and spread their messages. He continues, "In fact, it could also be argued that the parliamentary occupation itself was a kind of avant-garde performance art, in which students refashioned a failing and derelict public institution into a model of efficiency and high-tech coordination. This was a people's Parliament that engaged in deeper discussion of the law than it did when run under normal auspices."² In this respect, the students and activists were using artistic means to educate elected lawmakers as to their duties and obligations.

American writer Karen Bender was impressed by the Sunflower Movement and particularly by "how they used art and creativity in ways to connect and motivate one another. The fact that protesters organized this peaceful occupation under the shadow of a country that does not support free speech, is brave in a way that could inspire Americans to speak up for their own interests."³ The anxiety of losing free speech is their biggest fear! By actually being inside the scene, I was able to perceive more factual information. One of the

main goals for protesters is to protect the Taiwanese lower and middle classes from the likelihood of larger corporations and investors superseding the rights of the people from outside of Taiwan. Moreover, there's the fear of losing freedom of speech due to the Chinese communist government's control of publishing and media. Primarily, the protesters strongly state that the future of their nation should be decided by the people, not only by the members of one political party. Yet, being on the outside, the only way to receive information was through mass media or social networks. The media distorted it as an uncivilized riot and even falsely reported the goal of the protest. As a result, Taiwanese citizens took extreme sides, which caused tremendous tension and discrimination against each position. To me, they were all victims under the control of the media and politicians. I realize that it's human nature that we function by stereotypes and self-identity, something that can potentially lead to larger issues such as xenophobia and racism. However, I also realize that mainstream media constantly aggravate this condition — they often over-simplify, generalize and exaggerate information, which leads the viewers from ignorance to prejudice on discourses that may require deeper perspectives.

While I was touched by the students and the activists, I knew that something was missing — an alternative

portal that connects everyone together, something that channels to the rest of the world. I decided to create a net art project with my collective Chimerik 似不像 called *I Hear Your Voice.com*⁴ which utilizes websites as alternative platforms for people to voice themselves and to listen to each other. We implemented code from experimental sound synthesizers and used evocative wording to guide the participants inward (for each one to find his or her own voice), while guiding them away from superficial thoughts and aggressive comments. Once your voice gets sent out, someone somewhere in this world may receive and respond to your message. In the end, the participant leaves with a surprise image with their voice and a response from someone unknown. We can see this as an image of our inner voices conjuring with the positive spirits of the movement. The user is left with a digital postcard from the efforts of someone from somewhere in this world, while knowing that there are presumably numerous people waiting for their voices to be heard. What can we do for them?

I know that deep down there is always something universal within each one of us — the values of culture, civilization, justice, liberty and great spirits. Yet, often we are stuck on the surface level: our look, our clothes, our skin colour, our gender, our social class, our profits, as well as our views



Chimerik 似不像, *I Hear Your Voice.com*, 2014, detail (screenshots)

on politics, nationalism and religion. I believe that art is the alternative door that channels us to a deeper realm, and also connects us on a human-to-human level that we may have yet to experience.

In looking back, from my very first black and white experimental film to my latest new media net art project, I noticed something important. Although the evolution of technology has made the forms and possibilities apparently very different from work to work, I realized the essence of each of these artworks still resonates across media. These works share similarities in redefining identity, breaking boundaries, looking inward and looking beyond surface semblance; perhaps there is one very important thing that we may be forgetting — the love for humanity and the love for this world — this should be universal.

My intuition guided me to interdisciplinary art and technology possibly because interdisciplinary art disfigures identity and new media is the vehicle that can take us to new places that can still elevate up from the growth of mass media. We can then keep searching for doors that may lead us to deeper places, to where our soul and spirits belong: somewhere that shares universal values; somewhere that is transracial, transnational and transcultural. Finally, we can then smile, embrace our differences and celebrate ambiguity.

NOTES

1. Ian Rowen is one of the core members of the movement as well as Burning Man's regional contact for China and Taiwan, "Inside Taiwan's Sunflower Movement — Where Asia's Largest Student Uprising is Blooming," Occupy.com, accessed April 2, 2014:
<http://www.occupy.com/article/inside-taiwans-sunflower-movement-%E2%80%93-where-asias-largest-student-uprising-blooming>
2. Ian Rowen, e-mail message to author, May 7, 2014.
3. Karen Bender, e-mail message to author, May 7, 2014.
4. *I Hear Your Voice.com* is created by Chimerik 似不像 with Trippo 山人整合創新 and contributors Hsieh Tai-ju 謝岱汝, Andria SUN Chih-shi 孫志熙, Chen Wei 陳瑋, initiated in the group exhibition Produce, Consume curated by Matt Troy at Grunt Gallery, funded by the Canada Council's Project Grants to Media Arts Organizations, Groups and Collectives, Audain Foundation, City of Vancouver, and the British Columbia Arts Council. <http://ihearthyourvoice.com>

All images courtesy the author. The images were made possible by the generosity of Alex Balkam and Julie MacRae of AFCCOOP, Betty Apple, Shang-Han Chien, Daidai Tai-ju Hsieh, Andy Lee and Sophia Wolfe.

DISFIGURING CANADA: LAYING SIEGE TO ITS SINGLE STORY

FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA

Fierce, femme-novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us of the “danger of the single story.” She plainly tells us that, “stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also be used to repair that broken dignity.”¹

If there’s anything I have learned in my ten years of migrant justice work, it is that Canadian borders have been constructed and reinforced through many versions of a single story. Occupying the role of narrator, “whiteness” seeks to set the stage of social meaning, deciding which characters to introduce and how. With unequivocal authority, it has shaped dominant narratives on residential schools, the slave trade and the Komagata Maru incident; on Japanese internment camps; and more recently, on boat arrivals of migrants from Vietnam, China and Sri Lanka. Premised on a logic that renders whiteness natural and invisible, Indigenous people as extinguished or extinguishable, and [im]migrants as dangerous and deportable, it’s the simplicity of this story and the consistency with which it’s told that make it so effective.

Confronted with the danger of the single story, I’ve worked alongside migrant justice artists and organizers from coast to coast to carve out space for counter-narratives to be told. Over a decade ago, I co-facilitated an art group for women and children detainees at an immigration jail in Toronto. Behind layers of Plexiglas, barred windows and

wooden fencing, I heard painful stories of how detainees ended up inside. Some were rounded up by immigration enforcement authorities while others were reported by exploitative employers, service providers and abusive male partners. By way of these stories, I came to understand nation-state borders as more than just a delineation of geographies, but as a creative, violent and disruptive force through which ordinary people become implicated in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and in the



Photo by Jonathan Hayward, The Canadian Press

detention, deportation and death of migrants.

By way of the stories told through the art, campaigns for migrant justice emerged. Fights to stop deportations were waged and collective organizing efforts provided the steam needed to build real spaces of solidarity and refuge. In Toronto, and more recently across Canada, migrant justice organizers have launched fights to push border authorities out of schools, shelters, daycares, food banks, malls and

neighbourhoods, working site by site to unravel localized manifestations of the colonial border.

In 2009 and 2010, several years after the detention center art group had been shut down, I watched in horror as images fastened themselves to television screens and front pages across the country: Tamil asylum seekers aboard the MV Ocean Lady and the MV Sun Sea, who had traveled for many months aboard these ships to arrive here, were implicated to be dangerous and disease-carrying; connected with terrorists, human smugglers and law breakers; and accused of violating the sanctity of Canadian borders.

In 2010, just after the arrival of the MV Sun Sea, the *Globe and Mail* reported, “In an online survey of just over 1,000 Canadians, 48 percent of those polled would deport the passengers from the Sun Sea, even if the refugee claims are found to be legitimate. 35 percent of those surveyed would allow them to stay in Canada as refugees if their claims are found legitimate.”²



Photo by Master Cpl. Angela Abbey, Canadian Forces Combat Camera/Files

Sitting in a friend's living room ranting about the growing climate of fear and exclusion, I caustically remarked, "We should build a ship, fill it till it's overflowing with white people and leave it in an intersection." My friends and I chuckled at the concept and left it at that. Two years later, at a time when I was not able to attend political organizing meetings or participate in decision making around campaigns that I'd worked on for years — at a time when my identity as an organizer was very much falling apart — the idea for *Mass Arrival* resurfaced. In my experience, it's in moments of deep feeling that creativity has the chance to emerge. Mine certainly did.

For a long time I didn't think of it as art. It was only when considering how to get support for the project, that it dawned on me that calling it "art" might do the trick. Pretending to be an artist, I applied to Whippersnapper, a Toronto gallery known for featuring emerging artists who make socially engaged works. I invited four friends — Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan and Nadia Saad — to form the team for *Mass Arrival* and to help bring the project to life.



Mass Arrival, 2013, Toronto, Ontario. Photo by Tings Chak

On the 12th of August, 2013, the anniversary of the 2010 MV Sun Sea arrival off the BC coast, we staged a mass arrival of our own. Forcing a plywood ship packed tight with approximately 200 white-identified bodies into an already crowded downtown intersection, we sought to subvert "the colonial power of whiteness by making it strange, spectacular and highly visible in the public imagination."³ Docked in front of the Hudson Bay Company's flagship store, our ship served to disrupt, dislocate and problematize whiteness as the "natural backdrop to which *Others* arrive."⁴ As Graciela Flores Méndez and I have noted:

The image of a ship brimming with white bodies, fixed at the foot of this colonial giant, was our way of dragging Canada's selective amnesia regarding white "mass arrivals" into public consciousness. Passengers aboard the ship stood in somber silence, facing a large white waving flag, inscribed with the text: #massarrival. Using the *Mass Arrival* hashtag, performers and spectators took to social media, using status updates and tweets to engage in public debates and discussions around the politics of settler colonialism, race and national identity.⁵

In recent years, since the arrival of Tamil migrants, meticulously orchestrated workplace raids have emerged as the Conservative Party's theatre of choice. Barging onto farms, factory floors and construction sites, border thugs have and continue to conduct mass roundups of undocumented and temporary migrant workers.

Inviting the presence of news cameras — and more recently, reality TV crews from the Vancouver-based show, *Border Security* — Canada performs its power to punish [im]migrants on a national stage. Similar to police-style press conferences with guns and drugs on the table, these highly visibilized immigration raids allow border enforcement authorities to claim a job well done by beaming images of captured migrants into living rooms across the country. Xenophobia is at the root of these raids. Migrants — those among the most vulnerable of workers — are deemed terrorists and smugglers, are taught to be afraid, are made to know their place, and are forced to remember it through these burning images that seem to prove that their lives here are permanently temporary. Similarly, restaurant workers employed under Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program have faced an onslaught of public shame in recent weeks, often accused of stealing Canadian jobs. This manufactured crisis has led to a federal government ban prohibiting the restaurant industry from using the program — or what migrant worker advocates, Chris Ramsaroop and Adrian Smith call "policy-by-panic."⁶

Understanding events such as workplace raids, increasingly stringent border controls and media vilifications of migrants as calculated storytelling performances, my concern in both art and organizing is to rattle the logic of the single story; to find, widen and create ruptures in its rigid fabric; and to allow counter-narratives to emerge. Art has the power to echo society's subjugated voices, debunk national myths and forge relationships across state-, self- and community-imposed categories of identity and belonging.

Gloria Anzaldúa once told us that the border is the place where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”⁷ Engaging her articulation, we must ask, can art stop the bleeding? Can it restore some of what we’ve lost? Can it heal our wounds, as different as they may be? And most importantly, can it lay siege to the real and imaginary fences that impale us? Let us dream so.

NOTES

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PANEL ONE

PERFORMATIVITY AND EXPANDED MEDIA

Moderator: Summer Pervez / Panelists: Sammy Chien, Neelamjit Dhillon, Farrah-Marie Miranda

SUMMER PERVEZ Music is something that I'm also intimately connected with in terms of classical music and American rock-and-roll — I liked what you said in your talk, Neelamjit, about the connections between the roots of jazz and about your own background as a Sikh activist. I'm guessing this is why you chose this particular forum, going beyond an idea that jazz just aesthetically appeals to you. Can you speak a little more to that?

NEELAMJIT DHILLON Definitely the forms of music are linked and I think improvisation forms that connection: how do we comment on an experience? How is jazz the voice of the black experience? How can it be a voice for my own experience? And also, they just kind of happened, too. As much as I'd love to say, "Yes! This was my divine vision for this music," it was more that as a brown kid growing up in Coquitlam, it's kind of just what happened. I went to band class and played in band and then I went home, went to the *gurdwara* and learned *tabla*; I kept them far apart from each other for a long time. It's only now that I'm comfortable enough and strong enough artistically to make a true intersection of these styles of music, a connection that is informed in the firm rooting of both. A lot of the times collaboration ends up being misinformed because people don't have a strong enough background to really combine them in an informed way.

AUDIENCE 1 I was really interested in your point, Farrah, when you said how difficult it is to make whiteness strange. In my case, I came into activism because I was jaded about contemporary art. You mentioned satire as a strategy and

one image I always keep in mind is this t-shirt: it has Native Americans holding guns with the slogan "Homeland Security." It's going back to this use of satire as a strategy. I was wondering what other strategies you have found to work in "making whiteness strange" or perceivable?

FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA I have been thinking a lot about how to deal with "the gaze" and this project tries not to speak back to whiteness, but to reverse the gaze. And that is a concept I am thinking about in some of the other work I am trying to develop. In the left we don't laugh enough. There was a tension in organizing this project: there was a lot of incredible support for it, but there was also tension from organizing spaces and art spaces in different ways. The use of satire without having any particular political demands or goals was something that was critiqued. At the same time, I heard from the arts community that this project was too didactic, and that it's shoving political messages down people's throats. So, I think satire became kind of a redeeming quality in the piece because, those critiques aside, at least people could laugh. It's a playful intervention.

AUDIENCE 2 Sammy, as a filmmaker, I was interested in your representation of how we go into a story with preconceived notions framing what the story might be and then discovering that there are other truths to it. You talked about your experience with Taiwan, can you maybe elaborate a bit more about that process of discovery of what really went on in Taiwan? Could you give some idea of what it might mean and what you learned from the context?

SAMMY CHIEN I also think of film as an art form that unfolds untold truth or alternative reality. Like any other form of art, it needs to continue to exist in order to bridge the gaps that the mass media and the social ideology are creating. I've learnt more clearly that the mass media is a tool for profit-making and the profit-makers! This is why I see new media, art and technology are such important vehicles for our future; they function as new portals that connect everyone to authenticity, truth, or at least alternative perspectives. There is this hacktivism group in Taiwan called g0V (kind of like Anonymous), which were the biggest tech support team for the Sunflower social movement; they're doing exactly what I'm describing. Here's a thought: if this is happening in this small island on the other side of the globe, what else is going on in the rest of the world that we may be missing and need to pay more attention to?



Top: Emilio Rojas, Tyler Russell; Mandeep Kaur Wirk (centre), with symposium audience

Bottom: Indu Vashist, Sammy Chien (on screen); Farrah-Marie Miranda; Farrah-Marie Miranda, Summer Pervez, Neelamjit Dhillon. Photos by Brian Giebelhaus

NAVIGATING

AVANTIKA BAWA

As an artist, I constantly navigate the borders between painting and sculpture, the digital and the analogue, perfection and distortion, and most recently, the rupture in identity that is a result of having a United States passport and an Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) card. Visually, I am interested in transforming the act of drawing into sculptural gestures that react formally and also conceptually to architectural spaces and their histories. This process emerges in part due to my relationship to the legacy of Minimalism and its emphasis on reductive form, modularity and literal scale. My approach explores the tensions between wholeness and fragmentation, gravity and suspension, and containment and dispersal. Ultimately, my installations reflect the regional, cultural and geographic influences of the time and space in which I am working. I define a new territory that allows for subtlety, anti-monumentality and unexpected levels of candour. Perhaps this comes from my ability to navigate the borders between sculpture and painting, reticence and ambition, and Punjabi and English.

Halt., the work that I created for the Ruptures in Arrival exhibition, is a meditative and conceptual response to the routes that the Komagata Maru took from Hong Kong to Vancouver and back to Calcutta and the political implications of this 1914 voyage. Mapping, travel and psychogeography¹ are subjects I deal with frequently in my practice, examining them from cultural, political, formal and absurdist points of view. In an effort to situate and contextualize *Halt.*, I would like to discuss three other projects that orbit these same concerns.

Aquamapping

Aquamapping (2013–14) is a series of three art interventions in three different locations, each responding to a site's coastal history, topography and climate. Part one, *Aquamapping (Kochi)*, engages with the routes of maritime trade in southern India, as well the routes of the local fishing vessels and passenger ferries. An oversized buoy-like form was towed behind or carried on a passenger ferry, a local wooden boat, and a motorboat. The route that each of these vessels took was closely informed by their normal paths and in some cases the historic spice route. The journeys took place over several days around the coast and backwaters of Kochi, India. Each documented journey, presented through a combination of still photos and a time-lapse video projection, attempts to actualize the dotted lines that serve as signifiers for these routes on maps. With *Aquamapping*, I was interested in what happens when these conceptual markers and borders — reminders of past and present geographic, military



Avantika Bawa, *Aquamapping (Kochi)*, 2013–2014, video still. Image courtesy the artist and Kochi-Muziris Biennale Foundation

and cultural boundaries — become part of the physical landscape. The next two iterations of the project will examine and respond to the rugged coastline of Astoria, Oregon and later the economic diversity along the harbors of Baltimore, Maryland.

At Owners Risk

At Owners Risk (2012) was a site-responsive installation that addressed the structure and function of Suyama Space as an architectural firm and gallery, while also reflecting on the previous history of the space as an auto body shop and livery stable. By applying simple design tactics, seemingly obvious materials and colours were repurposed to create a platform in which the past and present collided. The installation included imitation hydraulic lifts (like those seen in auto body shops), oversized troughs of faux motor oil and blueprint-like drawings. A diagonal graphite line that spanned one wall and a thin wooden ramp created a visual rhyme with the space's architecture and acted as framing devices. Craig Drennen, in his catalogue essay, wrote, "The slope of the ramp mimics the gentle decline of the graphite line drawing that spans three of the perimeter walls of the room... [it] is the largest single gesture in the installation, but also the most quiet. It links visually and conceptually with the ramp to provide an ideological room tone that gently references Seattle's Denny Regrade. The Denny Regrade was one of the most radical instances of urban alteration in the United States as the country shifted from the 19th- into the 20th-century. Downtown Seattle's Denny Hill — and later nearby Jackson Hill — was leveled to create an hospitable city topography more



Avantika Bawa, *At Owners Risk*, 2012, Suyama Space, Seattle. Image courtesy the artist; photo by Mark Woods

friendly to road travel, port access and residential living.”² The formal elements of *At Owners Risk* — line, scale and color — created a visual system to which one could relate both the figurative path of history and the literal flattening of the city streets.

Mathesis: dub, dub, dub

Mathesis: dub, dub, dub (2009) was an installation that addressed the architecture of Gallery Maskara, its history as a warehouse and the psychogeography of its locale. Located in southern Mumbai, the gallery’s surroundings include a naval base (where I grew up), an international port and a robust business district. In this work, I brought construction and packaging materials (cardboard boxes and crates) into the gallery in a way that invaded the space with authority and elegance. The modular quality of boxes and their everydayness fit my aesthetic sensibility well. For me, they implied movement (shipping) while

also being rather stoic, static and cold. The boxes’ quotidian scale contrasted with the vastness of the space as they were stacked and piled, creating a formal tension as one walked around the space.

Some of the packaging came from neighboring galleries and businesses and was returned once the show was over. So, in a sense, the work had an afterlife as the materials were repurposed and moved elsewhere. The use of a relatively limited blue-grey colour palette was informed to an extent by water, shipping materials and the aesthetics of the naval base. The title suggests a sense of calculable and personal logic: “Mathesis,” from science, meaning “the process of learning” and the repetition of “dub dub dub” alluding to randomness, sound and movement.

Halt.

Halt. is a sculptural drawing. Two long canvas scrolls cascade down from the wall onto a large orange barrier. The routes of the Komagata Maru have been visually recreated on these scrolls: one representing



Avantika Bawa, *Mathesis: dub, dub, dub*, 2009, Gallery Maskara, Mumbai. Image courtesy the artist; photo by David De Souza

the outbound journey and the other delineating the return. The routes were reduced to single, graphite lines and any related visual and textual information of landmasses and port cities is absent. Through this simplification, the audience is urged to examine the poetics implicit in the infinite scope of hope for the outbound journey and the heavy despair of the return journey. The abrupt end of the scrolls on the barrier is a conceptual reference to the “barriers” experienced by the eager passengers of the Komagata Maru. The length and drape of the two scrolls is four to five meters, as an indirect reference to the traditional material for Sikh turbans. The use of raw canvas draws attention to both the history of painting and maritime history as the most common utilitarian fabric aboard a ship is canvas. Accompanying this work is *Halt.376*, a stack of 376 map prints that rest on a horizontal plinth. One face of each print shows the routes of the Komagata Maru while the flip side features 376 digitally drawn lines, each line acting as an homage to a passenger. While *Halt.* employs a similar aesthetic and ways of making as my previous work, it differs in that it is in response to a specific history. Nonetheless, the story of the Komagata Maru carries for me many of the concerns that are the undercurrent of all my work.

My practice borrows from the history and tenets of Minimalism, a movement dedicated to the pursuit of the intrinsic or absolute nature of objects or materials and the absence of external narrative. I diverge from this history by citing the interconnectedness of current and past cultural, political and geographical climates, using techniques like site-responsiveness, incorporation of subtle narratives, an embrace of

the distorted and the imperfect and a conscious use of impermanent materials. In *Halt.376*, for example, I simplified the image of the Komagata Maru's voyages by eliminating all the typical marks of a map, maintaining only the drawn line of the ship's route itself. In this way, I draw attention to what I see as the most important element of the story, while minimizing extraneous information. The image and concept are stripped to their barest bones, where perhaps a purer or deeper sensation of the hardship faced by the Komagata Maru's passengers can be accessed.

Although the story of the Komagata Maru is often thought of as a part of Canadian history, it is an eternally and globally relevant story that is repeated constantly throughout the world. It has resonated with me on a number of levels, provoking questions of travel, immigration, dreams and what it means to be a true Sikh. As a child of the Indian Navy,

ships and their voyages have always been an important presence in my life. My father, who commanded a number of ships and submarines, would often narrate for us various stories of the sea, often tales of commitment and hardship. The voyages of the Komagata Maru were ones that we talked of often, and still do.

NOTES

1. Psychogeography is a concept that originated with Dada and Situationist artists and thinkers. It deals with the mental and physical connection between the walker or traverser of space and the space (geography) itself. A common psychogeographic exercise was the *dérive*, a walk taken through the city without a particular goal or endpoint, for the purposes of realizing a playful physical and mental engagement with the route.
2. Craig Drennen, "At Owners Risk," catalogue essay, *At Owners Risk* installation by Avantika Bawa, Suyama Space, Seattle, WA. May 2012.



Avantika Bawa, *Halt. 376*, 2014. Image courtesy the artist

RE-CREATION, REALISM AND RACE IN POST-DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

EVAN LEE

This text brings together some loosely connected thoughts on my project, a multi-media re-creation of a migrant ship's arrival at the coast of British Columbia, Canada. I intend to argue that photography, in spite of its recent technological advances and democratization, has devolved inadequately to address the significance of its subjects, in particular where it concerns photojournalism and subjects of race and migration. I propose artistic re-creation as an alternative to straight photography — re-creation has the potential to retain the political gravity of important events. Finally, I will relate how I was surprised to discover a form of digital racism in a piece of software used in my creative process.

1

I am a photo-based artist who works in a tenuous relationship with photography. I now rarely make photographs as a finished form. I started working with photography at a time when digital photography started to become pervasive. By this, I don't mean that digital photography simply replaced the function of film or analogue photography. Rather, digital imaging has irreversibly and fundamentally changed our lives and our relationships to images. I began noticing a change in how news media were using photography to illustrate articles. At first, I noticed the increased use of file photographs, such as a typical stock image of handcuffs or the usual police tape accompanying nearly any given crime story. Then, I frequently saw that amateur and low-resolution photography, such as the kind made on a phone or captured from security camera footage, was supplanting the more aesthetic practices

of photojournalism historically exemplified by figures such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lee Miller, or more recently, the war zone embedded freelance photographer. The professional/auteur was quickly finding him- or herself replaced by crowd-sourcing and automated drones. It could be argued that this signals the democratization of photography and that these images bring attention to stories that might otherwise go unnoticed, but it also sometimes seems that the increasingly casual and passive direction of these practices and images does not do justice to the gravity of the stories and the events they are intended to depict, and furthermore, might devalue these stories and events.¹

2

This downward shift in photographic quality is one point of entry into my *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, in progress since 2009. My work here is comprised of a model ship and several renderings of figures made using 3D software. These works are a part of a larger, unfinished, and still largely undefined project to re-interpret and re-create such a press image, one that was used to illustrate an important event that concerns race and migration.²

In 2009, Canadian authorities seized the MV Ocean Lady in the waters near Victoria, British Columbia and detained its crew and passengers who undertook a dangerous journey to seek asylum in Canada. There was, and continues to be, massive public debate and speculation over the legality of their claims and the practice of human smuggling. A climate of xenophobia has developed amidst accusations of immigration "queue-jumping" and fears of terrorism.

The extensive media coverage of the Ocean Lady story was frequently accompanied by a particular low-resolution digital photograph that depicts the passengers on the deck of the ship. I found this photograph very compelling despite (or perhaps because of) its lack of quality and information. I found this image especially interesting in contrast to other photographs of related events such as the Komagata Maru incident or the migrant ships from Fujian, China in 1999.

The first thing that struck me about this image was the unusual overhead angle, indicating it was likely taken from a helicopter or by a drone. It seems oddly and arbitrarily cropped, perhaps also suggesting there is more to the image than was released to the public. Moreover, there is a compressed sense of perspective making everything look flat. All of this contributes to a depiction that contrasts with the conventional eye-level viewpoint that dominates most photography. The second thing I noticed is the heavily compressed, pixilated nature of the image. Until most recently, photography has been dominated by an impulse to produce ever sharper and clearer images. The pixilated quality increases the contrast and saturation of the image, making it look somewhat cartoonish. My third observation is that this severe pixilation and subsequent blurring removes the individuals' identities. It could be said that their particular features, as represented by a collection of pixels, are reduced to a common "brown" wash that paints each migrant with the same brush. And yet I could still easily make out details such as clothing and hairstyles. I could still read the expressions on their faces, imagine what they look like and understand their gestures.

Evan Lee, *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, 2009–present, detail



By my count there are forty-some figures shown, appearing completely candid and unposed. There is nothing deliberate, and therefore nothing unifying, in their appearance or actions. The scene seems random and uneventful, despite the grave circumstances. Perhaps inexplicably, I felt this photograph was problematic if it was to be the only record of this moment.³ This led me to re-imagine and re-create this event as an artwork with hopes of restoring some of the gravity of the situation along with unseen qualities of the moment and other neglected aspects.

3

During my research, I started looking at Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, which depicts the last survivors from the French naval ship *Medusa*, which ran aground off the coast of West Africa in 1816. After 13 days of starvation, disease and desperation, which reportedly led to cannibalism, the survivors on this makeshift raft vainly attempt to flag a passing

ship.⁴ My intention is not to make a comparison between *The Raft of the Medusa* and the MV *Ocean Lady*, but to suggest the former as an example of how to successfully memorialize an important and potentially sensitive event through the act of re-creation, rather than capturing it as a passive recording of an event.

Géricault made the unexpected choice of taking a relatively contemporary news story as a subject during a

time when paintings were normally made to celebrate classical and/or grand historical events. Instead of relying on classical forms and models, Géricault chose to re-create his scene from scratch, and in doing so, he arguably achieved a unique sense of realism. With no pre-existing depictions of the event, the artist had to rely on the accounts of the survivors for descriptions and details. He had carpenters build a replica of the raft and then he posed both models and corpses in his studio.

There is an unmistakable and theatrical drama present in this painting that is difficult to buy into as being real with our post-photo/post-digital eyes and it stands in stark contrast to the banal realism of the MV *Ocean Lady* press image. However, if the technology were available 200 years ago, at the time and place of the *Medusa* shipwreck, would a photographer with a camera,

let alone a flying drone or someone sailing by with an iPhone, make a better picture?

4

On one level, my project proposes a critique of photography's current state, but it is really more concerned with migration and racism. Admittedly, the screen of photography gives me the opportunity to work with a history that isn't directly mine; I am not a migrant, but most of my family and friends are, and so the issues, and where they overlap those of race and identity, are close to me.

Another aspect of my project was to work creatively with very limited source materials and strategies to reconstruct, not only the situation on the ship not visible in the press image, but also the blurred-out faces of the individuals on the ship. At first I tried to interpolate from what features I thought I could see in the pixels from the original press image and apply those somewhat-imagined features to



Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819

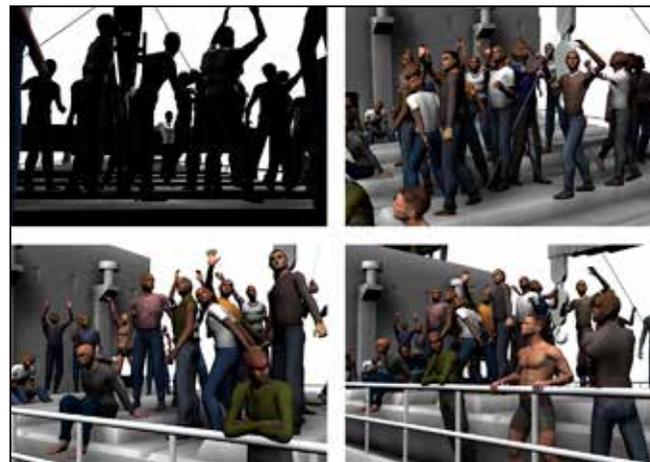
3D-modeled figures. Then I went looking online for reference images. As time passed, new and uncensored images of the migrants emerged. I began combining all this material to make portraits of migrants that are actually ongoing composites of fact and invention, real and virtual.

My initial reason for turning to software to make a 3D model was to change the very odd viewpoint of this picture. I thought a more conventional point of view would bring the audience into a more meaningful relationship with the scene. This is something we see in Géricault and in some of the archival Komagata Maru photographs. Using software, I re-created the scene in the original press image by creating, placing and posing figures. Having accomplished this, I could then rotate, zoom and view the scene from any angle. The posing software works like this: let's say I need to draw or visualize a figure — rather than build a unique person from scratch, I select a figure from a number of prototypes, such as "Victoria," "Aiko" or "Mike, whose bodies tend to be idealized by default, serving the superhero or fantasy art genre, or gaming and animation needs. Posing with digital software functions much like working with an actual wooden artist's mannequin, but the software poses provide much greater detail, including movements for each finger joint and the ability to change the shape of the mouth to speak specific sounds and to make facial expressions such as a smile.

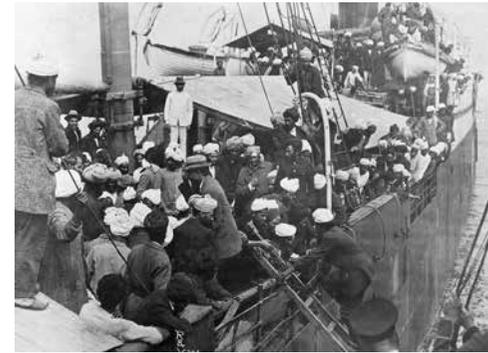
Although the possibilities of such technologies are almost limitless, as demonstrated by movies

and video games, there was only a limited amount of customization available to me given the steep learning curve and the limits of the software, which was a free download. Because originally I was only interested in a reference for visualizing and sketching in the studio, I wasn't really interested in creating a hyper-realistic, immersive 3D world. I discovered that I sort of liked how the figures were all stiff looking clones of one another, like in older video games.

As this aspect of the project developed, I was rather surprised to discover inadvertent racism in the design of the 3D software. With some dials located on the side panel, I could adjust the figures to take on a variety of characteristics: tall, short, fat, skinny or more muscular. I could give them different hairstyles or put them in different clothes. I could also change their overall skin colour. Here



Evan Lee, *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, 2009–present, studies



Komagata Maru, Vancouver, Burrard Inlet, 1914, Library and Archives Canada

lie some potentially troubling racial implications: not only could I change their pigmentation at the push of a button, I could also "dial in" how "Chinese" or "African" the facial features will be. Going past 100 percent — which the program does allow — results in racial caricatures or stereotypes as features such as the shapes of the eyes, nose and lips become grossly exaggerated. One can only assume, from the appearance of the original figure and the absence of any other adjustments for ethnicity, that the default setting was Caucasian. I assume the creators didn't intend for their program to be scrutinized like this, but they probably also didn't think it would be used to re-create a politically charged historical event. However, for the purposes of the present text and the accompanying symposium with the title, *Disfiguring Identity*, I couldn't help but briefly address this disturbing discovery that held implications for how my project would turn out.



Evan Lee, *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*, 2009–present, studies

I began this project with a singular vision of how I would re-create a found news photograph of the Ocean Lady migrant ship and address what I perceived as the media's (as well as the medium's) shortcomings in presenting its story. As the migrants' stories continue to unfold while racist attitudes towards them remain unchanged and new prejudices emerge, my unfinished project continues to evolve in response, taking on myriad and unexpected forms. Migrants will continue to move from one part of the world to another, where they will be welcomed by some, but resisted by others. There will be another imaging or recording technology that will frame their history in a particular way while purporting to present the truth about it, and so we need alternative ways of presenting these stories. It may go against reason that a creative and oblique approach would be less biased, but as we have seen from my research and use of digital photography and 3D modeling, there are peculiar and often overlooked constraints and features embedded in the technologies themselves that deeply affect the appearance of the scenes they depict. Nevertheless, innovative works of art that simultaneously embrace and critique such

technology — or in the case of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, which perhaps did not challenge the limitations of its medium so much as those of its academically prescribed genre — can present surprisingly acute perspectives on these events.

NOTES

1. Take for example the ubiquitous security camera stills showing Trayvon Martin in a convenience store before his shooting, or, more locally, phone images of a toddler urinating into a trash receptacle at a shopping mall and of a man vandalizing the Komagata Maru monument in Coal Harbour that widely circulated in first social, then mainstream media.
2. I've also expanded this project to include a re-creation of a similar press image from 1999 depicting the arrival of migrants from Fujian, China. The work in the present exhibition includes materials from both events.
3. I'm interested in images of this moment of first contact, as opposed to images made after the ship had been detained, boarded, etc.
4. Incidentally, there have been many interpretations of this work that are centered on discussions of race and the artist's role as an abolitionist.

RETURNING TO THE ARCHIVE: THE AFTERIMAGE AND MEMORY WORK

CINDY MOCHIZUKI

Over the years my body of work has looked into the family archive as a departure point for various artistic projects that have explored the intersections of memory and history. When one arrives at the edge of the archive, one is often confronted with images from the past that are difficult to capture, grasp, or even re-imagine. As an artist working through the material of memory, I often feel the burden of history and the ethical responsibility to care for these images and stories. The challenge is to consider new existences for them alongside the mainstream cultural production of “commemoration” that limits how history and memory are understood. In three of my most current works, *Panorama Series I* (2011), *Yokai & Other Spirits* (2012) and *Mörkö* (2012), there lies an engagement with the familial archive and its objects, images, ephemera and stories. Each project bears a different commitment to the ways in which we remember and forget.

Panorama Series I

The year 2012 marked the 70th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian internment — the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby, British Columbia invited me to create a new installation to be included in a group exhibition called *Yo-In Reverberation*.¹ *Panorama Series I* is a work utilizing video projection and a series of three small museum plinths displaying small, intimate personal photographs taken during the internment. These photos belonged to my father’s family and had been kept hidden away in an album. The photographs in this album contain



no written details and it was the first time I had seen these images of their experiences in the camps.

In 1942, under the Canadian government of Mackenzie King, all people of Japanese ancestry living along the west coast of Canada were to be uprooted from their homes. The BC Security Commission carried out the incarceration of nearly 23,000 men, women and children who were categorized as “enemy aliens” of which 75 percent of these people were either Canadian-born or naturalized citizens.² At the end of World War II, Japanese Canadians were given the so-called choice to go “east of the Rockies” or to “repatriate” to Japan.

Approximately 4,000 of these Japanese Canadians, or *kika-nisei* (returned second generation), were dispatched to Japan on “repatriation ships.”³ My family chose to repatriate to Japan experiencing another level of racism and discrimination, this time as “Canadian foreigners”⁴ in Shizuoka and Fukuoka prefectures under conditions of extreme poverty and economic upheaval in postwar Japan.

In the installation, a video projection of a topographical view of the internment camp site is projected onto a 3’x3’ wedge that is placed onto the ground to confront the viewer in the space. RCMP officer John W. Duggan took the source photograph presenting the view from above. The camera glides across this black and white photograph from right to left in a slow pan as if to trace the viewpoint of the RCMP officer surveying the area. These photographs, much like postcards from the past, present an austere and distanced perspective, a melancholic representation of Canada’s dark past. The photograph depicts orderly rows and rows of wooden houses buried deep within the landscape of the interior of BC.

These snapshots of the camps were juxtaposed with four small displays of photographs that were taken with a more intimate gaze and proximity. Gathered from my family’s private collection of images, we see an image of my father and my uncle, the Walnut Grove berry farm that was confiscated and a snapshot of camp life with my grandfather and his children out for a walk in Slokan Valley. These images are placed alongside ephemera including

Images on this page and facing page: Cindy Mochizuki, *Panorama Series I*, 2011, installation views from exhibition at Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre, Burnaby

a small digital projection of a video I made in 2004 of the river in Slocan. All of the still images are lit by a small LED light that casts shadows in and around the figures in the photographs — all the figures in each photograph are slightly raised using a paper-cut technique. Some of the photographs of the camp experiences were taken by an unnamed photographer using a pinhole camera. Other images were taken by what I would assume were smuggled cameras — all cameras and recording devices were confiscated from families⁵ during the internment.

In making this work, I am presented once again with the difficulty of making sense of these images and the events that were told to me through the voices of now-aging relatives. To return to the family archive is to be asked once again to re-enter the narrative of trauma and to re-imagine these sites of memory. At the same time I am concerned with a very complex understanding of the commodification of memory through commemoration and remembrance. How do I fill the space of absence without monumentalizing history? When there are several forms of cultural productions and public artworks that are created for the purpose of monumentalization, one needs to consider the ways in which remembrance is performed. Does the artwork perform the memory work for you or is the audience able to actively engage in the acts of remembrance?

I position my practice within the context of a generation that speaks after the fact. Marianne Hirsch describes this process as *postmemory*, a term used to describe the generation that has no direct



experience to the historical event/trauma itself. Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before. They “remember” only by means of the stories, images, behaviors and silences among which they grew up. These relational experiences were transmitted to them so deeply that they seem to constitute memories in their own right. The form of remembrance makes the connection to its source — it is mediated not through recollection but by imaginative investment and creation.⁶

Yokai & Other Spirits

Another of my multimedia installations that explores a movement through archives is the installation, *Yokai & Other Spirits* (2011).⁷ The commissioned project offered another methodology of working in the archive that provided me with another form for dealing with the historical material. Rather than the direct witnessing of historical

images, this process allowed me to move into the archive by way of the hand-drawn line. In this example, the artist, rather than circling the parameter of the archive in search of meaning, passes through the material by direct tracing.

Yokai & Other Spirits was originally commissioned by Reel Asian and LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto) as part of The Lost Secrets of the Royal project. Four Asian Canadian artists were asked to respond to Colin Geddes’ donation of an archive of incomplete and decaying 35 mm films from Hong Kong that were salvaged from the basement of what is now Toronto’s Royal Cinema. The only stipulation was that the items within this collection were to be used and transformed into new works.

In this installation, I decided to work with analogue methods of film production and experimented with the form of rotoscoping. Rotoscoping is the animation technique of tracing original frames (24 frames a second) from the 35mm film using the Oxberry stand. Through this method of re-documenting, I would draw each frame by hand, leading to thousands of traced images from the film. The cut of the film was determined by where the archival material would get jammed or break apart, in effect stopping the linear path of tracing each scene. The hand-drawn frames are then individually scanned and digitally output as animation or moving images. *Yokai & Other Spirits* is a reworking of a pivotal moment in the movie *Happy Ghost 3* (a 1986 comedy directed by Johnnie To) where the young pop star, a ghost played

by Maggie Cheung, calls “home” through various phone booths in the city. The installation, which no longer bears much surface resemblance to the source film, echoes my artistic interests in trying to create the immersiveness of the key moment in the film and also speaks to the impossibility of re-creating the linearity of this disintegrating form.

These kinds of spaces of cultural production and opportunity gave me new ways to enter this discourse of history and to remain open to its capacity to transform through the imagination. The installation offered a shift in the way I now navigate through the flows of memory work and the way we perform acts of remembrance. The archive is a process rather than a repository and it is a place that I will return to from time to time, but always with the intention to turn the archive from its inside out. Rather than standing back to observe the archival items, as an artist I will materially move through and work with the objects and images, giving them a sense of life and recovery.



Cindy Mochizuki, *Mörkö*, 2012. Russian Hall, Vancouver. Photo by Tim Matheson

Mörkö

Based on a collection of interviews from a wide range of 30 Vancouver residents about “monsters”, I worked with an artistic team to create *Mörkö* (2012),⁸ a 40-minute performance that shapes a portrait of a city through the “monstrous”—a space, creature or thing of fear that we often conjure in our everyday lives when faced with the unknown. Through combining audio, animation and performance, I looked at a collective response to contemporary forms and notions of fear. I am the sole performer, building a landscape using only the audio recordings from the interviews and objects found in a basement closet of my childhood home. The room was once the family photographic dark room. Later it became a storage space filled with knick-knacks and other long forgotten cast-offs. The performance invited an intimate audience of 30 to engage in a space of listening and watching. At the heart of the soundtrack is a recorded conversation between my mother and I about what objects to keep and what to let go. The work reveals the complex realities of familial dislocation; my mother, as a first generation immigrant, has tirelessly collected everything from our childhood—a collection that reveals plenty about class, race, language and the complex reality of dislocation through immigration. These objects include a collection of old Nancy Drew murder mystery books, plastic Slurpee and rare Dixie cups, a Mattel toy car set and miniature tea sets.

Annette Kuhn refers to the practice of memory work as “the active practice of remembrance which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its reconstruction as memory.”⁹ Images of the past and of “history” have always haunted me, causing a certain paralysis



Cindy Mochizuki, *Yokai & Other Spirits*, 2012. Blackwood Gallery, the elgallery, Mississauga, Ontario. Photo by Robin Li

when it came to considering possibilities for ethical ways to bring these images and stories forward into the contemporary present with a sense of care. Both *Yokai & Other Spirits* and *Mörkö* released me from that impasse by giving me the agency to move through subsequent archival work with a sense of ease.

My current work in production is a multimedia installation called *dawn to dust*, a fictional memoir based on the lives of family members who chose repatriation to Japan. In this return to the narrative of the Japanese Canadian internment, I use animation as a form to open up a space for imagining another place and time and to create another lens to re-witness history. As part of my process, I work with testimonies of family members who were exiled from Canada as children to postwar Japan. I combine hand-made creatures, puppets, sets, rotoscoped animations and video, using magical realism to tell stories of survival that challenge narrative notions of “truth.” The ability to transform mundane reality into something strange-but-believable is possible through the medium of animation. Animation offers the potential to bring elements of beauty, hope and change into what is perceived at the same time as a heightened space of racism.

The conventional methodologies of commemoration often perpetuate an act of forgetting, instead of considering the ways in which the viewer can continue to remember. Often times a monument or a plaque can present a monumentalized form of history that already provides the audience with cues as to how to “commemorate.” In contrast to these ways of remembrance, my practice attempts to challenge convention and bring ways of witnessing that actively engage memory work and provide other ways of facing historical trauma.

The archive is an ongoing site for critical investigation where one can reconstruct one’s identity and connect with a sense of shared origin and place. When factors such as home and identity are affected by traumatic events and shaped by racism, the ability to connect becomes burdened by the weight of history. A family album has the capacity to “gather us together to enact communal ties” and to “shape our collective identities, symbolize the values and goals we share, and form the basis for imagining and planning a future together.”¹⁰ Here, the ghost within the archive then becomes the spirit to move us forward, to imagine new possibilities of remembrance and memory work, and to move towards the possibility of transformation and change.

NOTES

1. Yo In Reverberation, group exhibition, Nikkei National Museum, Burnaby, BC. May – August 2012.
2. Roy Miki, *Redress Inside the Japanese Call for Justice*, (Vancouver: Raincoast books, 2004), 2.
3. Tatsuo Kage, *Uprooted Again Japanese Canadians Move to Japan After World War II*, Translated by Kathleen Chisato Merken, (Toronto: Ti Jean Press, 2013), 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 102.
5. Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*, (Talon Books: Vancouver, 1991), 24.
6. Marianne Hirsch, “Mourning and Postmemory” and “Past Lives” in *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22, 49.
7. Lost Secrets of the Royal, four-person exhibition, Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga, ON. November – December 2011. Commissioned by LIFT and Toronto International Reel Asian Film Festival.
8. *Mörkö* is an interdisciplinary performance integrating sound by Emma Hendrix and live video and animations by Cindy Mochizuki with direction by James Long.
9. Annette Kuhn, “A Journey Through Memory,” *Memory and Methodology*, Edited by Susannah Radstone, (New York: Berg, 2000), 186.
10. Kirsten McAllister, *Terrain of Memory A Japanese Canadian Memorial Project*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 12.

Images courtesy the author

SYMPOSIUM



Top: Ali Kazimi, Paul Wong, Trevor Discoe, Kenneth Yuen; Tyler Russell, Indu Vashist, Heather Keung, Steven Tong
Bottom: Indu Vashist, Jordan Strom; Indu Vashist; Ali Kazimi, Paul Wong. Photos by Brian Giebelhaus

PANEL TWO

NEW DEPARTURES: ORGANIZATIONS AND ARRIVAL HISTORIES

Moderator: Steven Tong

Panelists: Heather Keung, Tyler Russell, Indu Vashist

STEVEN TONG One of the first questions I want to ask is not as much for the panelists, but I was thinking about this question beforehand, considering Paul Wong's comment that it has been 20 years since Yellow Peril and then he talked about change. So, my question is for Paul as well as the panel: what do you think has changed in the last 20 years or even the last 10 years?

INDU VASHIST Well I think a lot of things have changed — I think the climate of this country has completely changed in the last 20 years. I think it has been becoming far more conservative; or maybe it has been becoming more outwardly conservative.

Secondly, as an institution that has been around for as long as we have at SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre), and going through the process of moving from a collective to an institution, we see things ossify in some ways. There have been many conversations today about a place for identity politics and a vibrancy around conversations of race, ethnicity, identity, etc. — so, I wouldn't say that these conversations don't exist; they exist in very different forms. But I think that through the process of institutionalization, the fierceness has been dulled in the name of being more complex in some sense.

At least some of the problem is the decreased funding available to people of colour to make

works, and this funding decreased in some ways because the conversation is not at the forefront as much. I think about the Juno Diaz quote earlier where she said something like, "making stuff about identity is somehow political and that's not cool" — I think that's something that's happening right now.

HEATHER KEUNG The agenda is very different for artists today from what sparked Yellow Peril and a lot of this conversation in the '80s and '90s. I think now artists are not necessarily interested in their own representation; they are more interested in commercial success or an industry focus. It could be that organizations are putting on a lot of pressure to be all these things, such as "educational," but also for a film festival, the pressure is on to help "professionalize" the artists and the filmmakers, and that means to secure private funding, to gain private support from individual donors and from corporations, to have commercial success and to have recognition within mainstream media.

PAUL WONG Not long ago, maybe within the last two years, a Facebook friend, an artist I know a little bit, Kevin Lee Burton, asked me, "What happened to the Asian Canadians? The Avant-Garde Asian thing. Why aren't you as interesting and as high profile as the current contemporary aboriginal artists, considering your trajectories started at the same time?" We're not sexy. The aboriginal community has somehow managed to galvanize and it's particularly this kind of a spiritual practice or

a historical thing, but I think a lot of it had to do with that they were angry, hungry, desperate, more radical and I think more experimental. We ended up kind of discussing the problem and made comparisons about how every commercial gallery now has to have a contemporary aboriginal artist if they're "hip." Commodification is another trajectory that we were talking about. I think that the whole international scene around the avant-garde Chinese artists in China has also played a key part in suppressing and not recognizing these other kinds of more localized, "non-sexy" Canadian avant-garde practices.

Artists are very conservative now I think. There was all that anger, when we started doing this stuff 25 years ago and that anger has been institutionalized, problematized and formulized through education and curatorial practices, cataloging and through writing.

AUDIENCE My question is for Indu Vashist about the funding models and in response to what Paul Wong was saying as well. How is that lexicon of "graduating" a creative form of censorship? And what about the radicalness of certain projects that your organization is working on? As an organization and as an activist, how do we feed into capitalist models that censor the art that people are trying to make? And are there alternatives to the grant writing process or private sector funding? Are there possibilities to create a new system or model for artists?

INDU VASHIST You bring up a lot of important questions. To date SAVAC hasn't taken any corporate money and that has been a political stance of ours. I don't know how sustainable it is. I am a huge advocate of public funding. We need to fight for increased public funding for the arts from every level: municipal, provincial and federal. So, when I think about grant writing, the grants being developed in the current phase are following certain kinds of corporate models; they want "performance indicators." It's based on a capitalist model of productivity, production and consumption. That is fundamentally a problem, because it doesn't make art for art's sake, and I think artist-run culture should be able to exist without having to compete within a commercial market, but that is becoming much more difficult.

HEATHER KEUNG I think of audience numbers and fundraising. It's pressure from the arts funding bodies.

INDU VASHIST One thing that we have done recently, was a complete experiment. I come from an activist background and was like, "What?! I have a budget of \$150,000! Woohoo!" I thought it was so much money, but then I realized that we need to engage communities. I do think we need to increase numbers, but we need to increase numbers of an engaged community. We need to build community around us. Recently I started holding a monthly pop-up bar in our space and we would make innovative South Asian themed drinks and snacks. We worked

with this chef, we created these things and that approach created a scene. People wanted to come and hang out and it brought in a bit of money. So, it was a fundraising model that was based in community outreach and engaging the community. I think that it is an exciting way of going about it. It's not that financially successful — you can't keep tapping your community for money; you have to go find it elsewhere. We need to advocate with our representational bodies. We pay dues to these bodies and we need to push them. Most arts organizations right now are not willing to advocate because they are trying to avoid the chopping block. But I do feel there are umbrella organizations that can advocate for more money for the arts and I think as member organizations of those umbrella bodies we need to push them to push for us to have more money.

MAINTAINING AN ARTISTIC DIRECTION: FROM REPRESENTATION TO PROFESSIONALIZATION

HEATHER KEUNG

As the Artistic Director of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival (RA) from 2006 to 2013, I had inherited a heavy responsibility to further a discussion about Asian Canadian identity. The organization was created in 1997 during a peak in the Canadian multiculturalism movement and was a response to the lack of Asian representation both on screen and behind the camera in Canada. The goal was to foster an appreciation and understanding of the diverse film and video work emerging from artists from Asia and the Asian diaspora. As the Artistic Director, I believed it was integral to maintain an inclusive and transparent selection process that considers the artistic merit of the work and its contribution to the form, its greater socio-political relevance and its relationship to the local community. RA would of course need public and private funding, but more importantly it would need ongoing participation from local audiences and artistic communities. With this support came many ambitious expectations and measures of success that continue to influence the direction of the organization. The following highlights how a festival like RA responded to many issues brought up in 1990s, the core activities and creative solutions that have taken place and some of the current challenges RA faces.

In *Yellow Peril Reconsidered* (1990), writer Monika Kin Gagnon highlighted key time periods in Canadian History that specifically targeted Asian Canadians such as the Chinese Head Tax (1885–1923) and

the Japanese Canadian Internment (1941–1949).¹ However, even though Asian Canadian communities had actively advocated for recognition and redress for decades, few artists made work that represented a distinctly Asian Canadian perspective until many years later. In 1988, the National Association of Japanese Canadians succeeded in negotiating a redress settlement with the federal government and in the same year the Canadian government initiated the Multiculturalism Act. The 1990s spawned films, organizations and heated debates devoted to a discussion around diversity and identity politics. In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an official apology for the Chinese Head Tax and the Canadian government established a fund for community projects aimed at acknowledging the impact of past wartime measures and immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities. Debate across Chinese Canadian communities escalated and filmmakers who took on publically funded projects dealing with the issue faced accusations of propaganda. By 2006, when RA celebrated its 10th anniversary (and I started my eight-year career as the programmer), there was already so much scrutiny around the multiculturalism agenda and backlash/resistance from the creative community and the community at large. These tensions pointed out the problems of multiculturalism initiatives, questioning how film and media perpetuated the victimization, appropriation, tokenism, or worse —superficial celebration of race. There was clearly a resentful sentiment from generations of artists who were

exhausted by the burden of representation and the complex sensitivity around identity politics.

RA started as a small grassroots screening series and has since grown to be Canada's largest pan-Asian film festival. Toronto's Asian community alone makes up over 30 percent of the city's population and RA has expanded its reach beyond downtown to the Toronto suburbs, achieving attendance of more than 12,000 people over 10 days. RA offers a combination of Canadian and international films; however, it is not sufficient to simply present a diverse slate of work. It is essential to actively approach activities in diverse and accessible ways; to maintain a flexibility that is fresh, engaging and exciting; and all the while to be professionally organized and respectful to RA's founding core values and the values of its funders. RA has taken on year-round education programs in public schools, outreach to new communities, professional development (panels, workshops and networking), and the support of the creation of new work through commissions and awards.

The predicament of the organization is to serve all of its constituents. While trying to cover a range of issues affecting the Asian region and people of Asian heritage around the world with the programming, the art work must also be representative of a Canadian perspective. The annual Asian Canadian Spotlight is a core program at the festival, featuring both emerging and established filmmakers and artists including: Wayne Yung, Ann Marie Flemming,

Midi Onodera, Mary Stephen, Simon Chung, Ho Tam, Lesley Chan, Paul Wong, Desiree Lim, Lily Eng, Michael Fukushima and Richard Fung. To consider some examples, Richard Fung, Paul Wong and Lily Eng each have a distinct body of work; however, I would like to describe some similar sensibilities that have helped forward the discussion around Asian Canadian identity. These films tend to unravel master narratives through challenging conventions of form while exploring perspectives by turning toward the body to expose uncomfortable realities. They unpack problematic notions of national identity while avoiding the trap of perpetuating simplified power dynamics and singular timelines that keep Western theory at the centre. They break open stereotypes that imply that visible minorities have another place of origin, another place to which they belong. They make room for ongoing conversations and challenge viewers as active participants in the discourse.

In *Rex vs. Singh* (2008), Richard Fung and his collaborators Ali Kazimi and John Greyson deconstruct a court transcript from a 1915 trial that took place during a 20-year period when an inordinate number of men tried for sodomy in Vancouver were Sikhs. Staging scenes from a trial in four different ways—first as a period drama, second as a documentary investigation of the case, third as a musical and fourth as a deconstruction of text—the video reveals not only a history of systemic homophobia and racism in Canada, but also how one moment in time can be explored and interpreted from a wide range of angles. The importance of experimenting outside of conventions in order to establish space for new discourse has never been more evident. Intentionally questioning mainstream cinematic tropes is an act of defiance in itself and perhaps provides a more

accurate reflection of society today. Spotlight on Paul Wong in 2008 celebrated Wong's uninhibited appreciation for the abundance, accessibility and limitlessness of the medium and included a vast range of presentation components including a bus tour with video and performance, public library and gallery installations, and several screenings. Spotlight on performance artist Lily Eng looked at the Asian Canadian identity from the female perspective and highlighted a traveling exhibit that she spearheaded titled *But Women Did Come: 150 Years of Chinese Women in North America*. Her body of work is an intense hybrid form that was influenced by her formal training as a ballet dancer and kung-fu martial artist. This combination of East and West, a fusion of Asian Canadian identity, was quite taboo at the time—now such an approach to art practice is embraced for uniqueness and innovation.

Since 2007, I have been successful in launching a number of community collaboration projects with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts as part of RA. The projects include: *Sprung* (2013), *Suite Suite Chinatown* (2010) and *Empty Orchestra* (2008). Each rendition had a live component and brought filmmakers together with unique performing artists representing a range of hybrid forms. Collaboration was a central component as the purpose was to build stronger ties across artistic disciplines. The experience

gave participants a rare opportunity to work together outside of their usual roles, in order to learn about each other's processes and art forms. These relationships developed into an expanded dialogue about how both media and performing art forms represent cultures, histories and identities. The projects were seen as refreshing and original while they also touched on so many themes including, gender/sexuality, youth subculture, hip hop, migrant workers, mental illness, family, nostalgia, transformation, individual expression, collective identity, commodification of culture and resistance. Due to the fun, youthful and collaborative nature of these projects, the experience was not necessarily political and instead allowed for all audiences to engage at a wide range of different levels. While I am concerned by a shift away from the more direct and independent socio-political



Sprung, 2013, Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. *Sprung* Commission 2013: *Waack Revolt* — *A Dance Film* by Sonia Hong, Emily Law, Diana Reyes, *Between Us* by Randall Okita and Andrea Nann, *Paruparo* by Sasha Nakhai and Catherine Hernandez, *Friend Dance* by Tad Hozumi and Mark Cabuena, and *Restorative Structure* by Dean Vargas and Lauren Cook

nature that was apparent in the work of many of the Asian Canadian Spotlights, these recent commissions prove to be promising in today's context, as they are artistically focused, innovative and successfully engaging new communities.

To understand the Asian Canadian context, it was essential to take on a more transnational perspective. The impact of forced migration, systematic racism and oppression is definitely not exclusive to a Canadian history. The work presented at the festival covered a huge range of issues and histories — in just one festival the conversation could span from Asian American activism, North Korean defectors, industrialization in China, race riots in Malaysia, sex workers in Japan, illegal migrant workers from Burma, and so on. There has recently been more internationally successful Asian Canadian filmmakers who have made documentaries about socio-political issues in Asia, such as *Up the Yangtze* by Yung Chang, *Last Train Home* by Li Xin and *The Defector* by Ann Shin. While there has been a decline in interest in work that focuses specifically on the Asian Canadian experience, it is positive to see that Asian Canadians have the agency to make and distribute films about political issues abroad and to further the focus on international human rights issues. However, there is definitely a reason to be wary about the impact these works have on the understanding of Asian Canadian identity. There is a danger that these films reiterate images of countries in Asia as impoverished, abusive to human rights, corrupt and/or under political turmoil. Through an international perspective, the investigation into how Asian identities are created and understood through film is even more complex. There is a global need to revisit discourse



Suite Suite Chinatown, 2010, Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. Aram Siu Wai Collier, Lesley Loksi Chan, Lillian Chan, Heather Keung, Serena Lee, Howie Shia, and Joyce Wong

around the creation of identity and racism in media, even as artists aim to define ourselves as distinct from our colonial past and oppressive histories.

As the injustices of the Canadian past are ameliorated through apologies and forgotten by new generations, and as model “visible minorities” have become more recognized and reputable in the mainstream, public support for the multiculturalism agenda in the arts fades; there is increased pressure for arts organizations to secure more support outside of public Canadian funding. Therefore, organizations must prove their significance not only by increasing their profiles through media coverage, educational activities and industry professionalization of the artists represented, but also by the reporting of large and diverse demographic numbers. All of this is somehow diffusing our distinctly Asian Canadian identity and resulting in one of the festival's biggest challenges: what is the organization's identity and how does its identity influence its supporters and

potential supporters? Contrary to the independent work of artists like Richard Fung, Paul Wong and Lily Eng, who broke apart restrictive ties to countries of origin, RA has become increasingly focused on presenting an international identity, one that appeals to larger audiences and private sponsors. These new audiences and sponsors have become key stakeholders, and therefore a part of the community which the organization is responsible to represent. A few big blockbuster films with well-known names are sure to bring in bigger audiences, more media coverage and increased financial support. This solution may seem manageable, but has the tendency to dominate over all of the more independent and artistic works at the festival.

As curators, we aim to provide a platform for insightful and unique works, but also we are in the position of needing to be deliberately mindful of the agendas of our supporters, sponsors and funders, and how their involvement influences

decision-making. As the festival is under increasing pressure to present more mainstream audience-friendly films, it is essential for our communities make greater efforts to actively support innovative programming that champions originality, independence and politically conscious perspectives.

NOTES

1. Monika Kin Gagnon, "Belonging in Exclusion," *Yellow Peril Reconsidered*, (On Edge, Vancouver: 1990), 13.

Images courtesy the author

FROM COLLECTIVE TO INSTITUTION

INDU VASHIST

The dark one in the land I was born in
In the land across the seas
I am that Ceylon Refugee girl
In central Lanka, I'm Damala
In the island north, the woman from the east
On the eastern shores where the fish sing
I am that hill-girl
And in the hill country, the woman from Muthur
In this island, stolen from its indigenous people
In this refugee-land
Thank god, I am, like before
the dark one.¹

The South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC) emerged out of the Desh Pardesh, a multidisciplinary arts festival which operated from 1988 to 2001, dedicated to providing a venue for under-represented and marginalized voices within the South Asian diasporic community. Desh Pardesh came with a two-pronged mandate: first, to respond to the racism of the art world by creating a platform to showcase South Asian contemporary art; and second, to create a space for diasporic South Asians who were marginalized or exiled from the South Asian communities as queer and/or queer positive, social-justice-oriented people. SAVAC began as a curatorial collective within Desh Pardesh.

Twenty years later, SAVAC has been institutionalized. In 2008, in its 15th year, SAVAC changed its name from South Asian Visual Arts Collective to South Asian Visual Arts Centre to more accurately reflect its organizational purpose and structure as an artist-run centre. Today, SAVAC continues to be the only non-profit artist-run centre in Canada dedicated to

the development and presentation of contemporary visual art by South Asian artists. Our mission is to produce innovative programs that critically explore issues and ideas shaping South Asian identities and experiences both locally and internationally as well as to facilitate a transnational conversation. SAVAC develops and produces exhibitions and a range of contemporary visual art interventions and programs. We work without a gallery space and typically in collaboration with other artist-run centres, public galleries and visual arts organizations.² This collaborative process allows us to intervene in multiple spaces with our unique perspectives.

The move from collective to institution rose out of an increased dependency on funding from the arts councils. Desh Pardesh operated as a community-funded festival for many years. In the final stages of the festival, as it could not sustain itself on the amount of funding that the collective was able to muster, many entities within Desh Pardesh splintered to form other organisations such as ASAAP (Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention). SAVAC sought funding from the various arts councils. Dependency on that funding created the need for SAVAC to adhere to the demands of the councils. For example, the councils prefer that funded organisations prioritize paying Canadian artists and for programming planned within Canada. For an organisation that has a mandate to facilitate transnational dialogues, that requirement dampens our ability to fulfill that aspect of our mandate. As extensions of the state, the arts councils are implicated in implementing multicultural policy in Canada. For an organisation like SAVAC, our concern

is not only to have a stake within the art world in Canada, but also to continue to engage with what is happening within the contemporary art scene internationally, especially on the subcontinent. Additionally, while multiyear funding enables organisations to plan for three years in advance, it also locks organisations into programming and makes it difficult to remain fresh because planning must be done far into the future. Organisations in other countries do not tend to plan programming for more than a year in advance. Thus, it becomes far more difficult as a funded institution to work with organisations abroad due to a variety of factors.

In SAVAC's twenty years, locally, we have dealt with xenophobia, racism, exclusion and migration in three ways: through programming and interacting with the general public, by advocating for a space for people of colour within the art world and art institutions, and by providing our members with the support that they do not receive in other venues.

PROGRAMMING

In 2003, while SAVAC was still a collective, it produced a project called *Peace Taxi* that involved fourteen artists from different cultural backgrounds who produced work in response to globalisation and the threat to civil liberties around the world. These works were mounted in taxis around the city of Toronto. Taxi drivers, often immigrant workers, are always more vulnerable to racism and hate crimes; these issues were particularly hard in the years following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001. This project used the tiny space of the taxi to make a public intervention



and start conversations between taxi drivers and their clients. One of the primary ways in which SAVAC has resisted the pitfalls of institutionalisation is that we still maintain the ability to work in multiple and unusual venues such as this because we do not have a physical gallery space. This model allows us to partner with a range of spaces, from taxis to other artist run spaces to public galleries.

In 2013, SAVAC collaborated with PAMA (Peel Art Gallery Museum + Archives) in Brampton, Ontario for a show called *Study for a Glass House*. Brampton, now a heavily Punjabi suburb of Toronto, was once called “Flower Town” because it housed the third largest cut flower industry in the world. Artist Abbas Akhavan created a site-specific installation in the form of archival vitrines that also resemble greenhouses within PAMA. Within this vitrine, on one side he planted flowers and plants that are indigenous to the area, while on the other side he placed historical materials and reproductions from the PAMA archives. As the plants grew throughout the duration of the installation, they created hostile conditions for the textual and photographic materials. By the end of the show, the colonial archival materials had deteriorated while

the indigenous flowers grew. As Marina Roy put it, this show is “paying respect to the stifled voices and suffering lives that are at the foundation of industry, civilization, and archives; it lays bare the colonial violence that quietly unfolds across reams of mulched plant life and coal dust, ink on paper.”³

Brampton — much like Surrey, British Columbia — continues to be an agricultural community where many Punjabis work on the farms. For the opening of *Study for a Glass House*, we reached out to local YouTube star Chef LeTigre⁴ to pay homage to the current population who lives in the area. Chef LeTigre, born and brought up in Brampton, has a comedy cooking show on YouTube where he puts a Punjabi twist on North American classics. For the opening, he created three signature dishes using ingredients grown locally. This formula of having a live event involving fusion food has become a SAVAC mainstay. We create an open, inclusive environment where people feel comfortable to stay, chat, snack and drink for hours.

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Since I have been Executive Director of SAVAC, my vision for our social justice mandate has been to

counter the barriers that artists of colour face within art institutions. As an artist-run centre, our members are the backbone of our organisation. At SAVAC, we are prioritising supporting artists of colour by providing professional development workshops and opportunities. In a recent article in *The New Yorker* called “MFA VS. POC”, writer Junot Diaz describes the barriers for people of colour that come up *before* they even apply to an MFA program, let alone the alienation and isolation that they feel while they are there. It is worth quoting at length here:

Too white as in Cornell had almost no POC — no people of color — in it. Too white as in the MFA had no faculty of color in the fiction program — like none — and neither the faculty nor the administration saw that lack of color as a big problem. (At least the students are diverse, they told us.) Too white as in my workshop reproduced exactly the dominant culture’s blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc). In my workshop there was an almost lunatical belief that race was no longer a major social force (it’s class!) In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing — at all. Never got any kind of instruction in that area — at

Images: Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Glasshouse*, 2013, PAMA, Brampton, Ontario. Photos by Elise Windsor; images courtesy the artist

all. Shit, in my workshop we never talked about race except on the rare occasion someone wanted to argue that “race discussions” were exactly the discussion a serious writer should not be having.

From what I saw the plurality of students and faculty had been educated exclusively in the tradition of writers like William Gaddis, Francine Prose, or Alice Munro — and not at all in the traditions of Toni Morrison, Cherrie Moraga, Maxine Hong-Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Edwidge Danticat, Alice Walker, or Jamaica Kincaid. . . . Race was the unfortunate condition of nonwhite people that had nothing to do with white people and as such was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature.⁵

In the last few years, many young (mostly women) art students and emerging artists have been coming to SAVAC with complaints similar to those articulated by Diaz. We have found that art institutions do not provide the types of support that these students require. Earlier this year, we provided our members with a free portfolio review. We asked two of our long-standing, mid-career artists to sit as jurors to provide feedback to these artists. An art student who also interns with SAVAC showed a very rough cut of a video that she shot in Pakistan. She had been wrestling with this work for four months. She had shown different versions of this video in her classes and received negative feedback on the work from her teachers and her peers. The video that she shot was an argument between a domestic worker and her employer. She managed to catch an extremely

complicated dynamic between two women who have a professional-yet-intimate relationship that is mediated by class. The video is difficult to watch because emotions are high and there is a sense that some sort of grave injustice is being done, yet it is not clear to whom this injustice is being done.

The jury and the rest of people taking part in the portfolio review were astounded by the potential of this work. We were able to provide her with the constructive criticism and feedback she needed in order to be able to take her work to the next level. It is through such activities that I feel that the mandate of SAVAC is realized. These students come to us when they feel like they have run out of options for mentors and teachers who can push their work further.

As artists of colour, students often are pushed by art schools and institutions to make work that is about identity framed by Canadian multiculturalism. In fact, there is a push to portray culture and identity in digestible ways that reference a Canadian multiculturalism’s flattened version of who they are. Within these institutions there is little space to articulate nuanced, self-determined explorations of self.

On the flipside, the other barrier that many young artists encounter is that of their families. It is very often that these students live with their families who disapprove of their choice of career path. One of our Toronto Art Council grant officers who teaches at an art school in Toronto directed one of his young students to us. This young woman’s parents (who had fled war) wanted to keep their daughter very close to them. They did not approve of her studying art — in fact she had to study two other disciplines

to be able to continue in the art program. She was not allowed to stay out past 7pm, nor come downtown for any reason. This meant that she could not attend any openings or see much art outside of the classroom. When she would come to the office, she would unload all of her personal life. I spoke to her mother to reassure her that coming to SAVAC would help her in her career. Rather than getting her to do office work when she would come in, I would make a list of all the shows that she should see and gave her a journal to write down her thoughts about the works that she saw. I explained that if you don’t see art, it is difficult to make art and understand yourself as an artist.

While working through our members’ moments of personal crisis is not directly in SAVAC’s mandate, having come out of Desh Pardesh, it is clear that supporting people who are marginalized within the South Asian community is an absolute imperative for an organisation with an identity-based mandate. Additionally, this type of emotional labour is difficult to quantify or even describe in grant applications for funding and is yet another form of work that is unacknowledged within the current art system.

INTERVENING IN ART INSTITUTIONS

In the final days of Desh Pardesh, which was a community-funded festival, SAVAC applied for funding from the Toronto Arts Council. Currently, SAVAC receives funding from municipal, provincial and federal bodies. It is interfacing with a granting system that forces organisations to institutionalize. First off, there is granting language that must be used to define oneself. For instance, SAVAC does not define South Asia as just simply Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh,

Bhutan, Myanmar, the Maldives and Tibet — we acknowledge that these borders are very recent in the history of the region. SAVAC maintains an open and inclusive definition of “South Asian” that is based in the complexities within the region itself: amongst the various diasporic communities in places like the Caribbean, East Africa and South East Asia; and within diasporic populations in the South Asian region. Within the diaspora, notions of home and identity become as blurred and complicated as the concept of South Asia itself. Given the complexity of South Asia, SAVAC is not limited by political boundaries drawn onto maps and resists the temptation of overdefining and being overdetermined by a land mass whose borders have been persistently renegotiated. Instead, SAVAC prioritizes themes that relate to the historical and lived realities that South Asian people have encountered over time. Tangibly, we work with artists from neighbouring geographical regions as well because there has been exchange between these peoples for centuries.

Now, how to explain the complexity of South Asia in a few words in a grant application? We expend much energy to make our work understandable to a jury who might be completely unfamiliar with the complexity of the region — this is a complexity that exceeds the fact that these borders are simultaneously meaningful and meaningless. Given the difficulty in explaining our programming, the artistic merit of the work gets overshadowed by the contextualisation that is required to frame it. This results in our work being underexposed and underanalysed. Arts writers will write about community arts because such projects are more easily made digestible to

a general public as community arts organizations often use the language and formula of state multicultural policies as their framework; SAVAC’s work is rarely written about because the arts writer must do the work of understanding the complex and unfamiliar context, a problem that is as much about systematic exclusion as it is about the lack of training within arts schools as alluded above.

While SAVAC’s work within the art world is to advocate for a nuanced understanding of the context from which people work, as well as to create a space for this type of work, we are often asked to do more. We are approached by many galleries who want to host our shows in order to meet demands from the arts councils to show works from diverse communities. The difficulty is that many curators and gallerists prefer to have us do much of the intellectual work for these shows rather than do the research required to understand the works or the context from which the artists work, while they receive the credit and cultural currency for hosting these shows. The assumption is that an identity-based organisation such as SAVAC exists to perform this intellectual labour so that the arts community as a whole can benefit from it. The unfortunate consequence is that the partner organisations are not necessarily required to be aware of the ways in which they function, whether it be hiring or curatorial practices. While the incentive from equity mandates put in place by the arts councils, like the Ontario Arts Council, to show works by artists of colour is welcome, one outcome is more work for organisations like ours. We need to train more curators and critics of colour and provide training within art schools on how to research, write about and read the works made by artists of colour. As



Amin Rehman, *Peace Taxi* (2003), Toronto. Image courtesy the artist

Junot Diaz elucidates in the quote above, students in art schools are rarely taught about works by people of colour. To paraphrase the Senior Curator at the Royal Ontario Museum, Deepali Dewan, in a recent talk about photography in the British Empire, “You cannot just add a chapter about South Asian photography into a book, you have to rewrite the whole book to write our narrative and perspective into it.”⁶ People who are familiar with these ideas need to be employed within these institutions in order to adequately change these systems of art.

The creation of programs like the Ontario Art Council’s Access and Career Development grants are incredible for artists and arts administrators of colour, but they are just scratching the surface for equity within the arts. As I have mentioned before, one must be well-versed not only in written English, but also in the granting language. At SAVAC, we have been hosting an information session and grant writing workshop for this specific grant; our staff end up doing the bulk of the work to publicize the existence of the grant, as well as the work required to facilitate the grant writing itself.

I started off this paper by quoting Aazhiyal, a Sri Lankan Tamil poet who writes about how her identity is perceived due to where she is and how the systems that surround her define her. In Canada, where we are fortunate enough to still have funding for the arts, we, as artists of colour, need to wrestle with the beast of multiculturalism as the framework within which we are expected to perform our identities. In the words of Vijay Prashad: "Multiculturalism, in my estimation, emerged as the liberal doctrine designed to undercut the radicalism of anti-racism. Instead of anti-racism, we are fed a diet of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity. The history of oppression and the fact of exploitation are shunted aside in favour of a celebration of difference and of the experiences of individuals who can narrate their ethnicity for the consumption of others."⁷ Implementation of state multicultural policies within arts organisations can be difficult, but not impossible. Over the course of the last year, identity politics within the arts has been revisited in multiple fora like the State of Blackness conference in Toronto and the Disfiguring Identity symposium in Surrey. These dialogues identified the need for people of colour to re-create spaces for ourselves where self-representation and deeper conversation about representation within the systems in which we live can be re-activated.

NOTES

1. Poem by Aazhiyal, a Sri Lankan Tamil poet now living in Australia. This poem was featured in a play called *Karuppi*, a production of Madras-based Marapachchi Theatre collective. This unpublished play featured a collection of writings by and about Tamil speaking women who migrated across oceans from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka for work. The stories were compiled and translated by V. Geetha.
2. SAVAC website, "About" page, accessed July 21, 2014: <http://savac.net/about>.
3. SAVAC website, exhibition page, "Abbas Akhavan: Study for a Glasshouse", accessed May 5, 2014: <http://savac.net/abbas-akhavan-study-for-a-glasshouse/>
4. Chef Le Tigre, YouTube page, accessed July 15, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/user/ChefLeTigre>.
5. Junot Diaz, "MFA vs. POC", *New Yorker*, April 30, 2014, accessed May 9, 2014: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2014/04/mfa-vs-poc.html>.
6. Deepali Dewan, "Messy Photography & the Crucible of India", Goldfarb Lecture in Visual Arts, (York University, March 7, 2013).
7. Vijay Prashad, "From Multiculture to Polyculture in South Asian American Studies," *Diaspora: The Journal of Transnational Studies*, 8:2 (1999): 189.

SAYING “ASIAN”: CONSIDERING STRATEGIES TO EMBRACE DIVERSITY WHILE CONFRONTING PROBLEMS OF ESSENTIALISATION AND OTHERING

TYLER RUSSELL

The other day, Chris Lee, Director of the University of British Columbia’s brand new Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies Program, came to Chinatown for tea. Congratulating him on the birth of his then one-week old department, I asked how they defined “Asian Canadian.” With a bit of a chuckle, Chris shrugged his shoulders and said, “We’ve given up!”

The relationship between “Asian” and “Canadian” has a fraught and complicated history. Official policies of exclusion, such as the Chinese Head Tax, The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 (also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act) and the Continuous Journey Regulation formalized the complication. And, even in the repeal of these policies, racism persisted.

There will, I am sure, be general agreement with the view that the people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental alteration in the character of our population. Large-scale immigration from the Orient would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population.¹

This is an excerpt from the May 1, 1947 speech to Parliament that saw the repeal of Canada’s racial immigration exclusion laws. The speaker, in this case, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King, defined Asia as something exterior to the self and the nation, the cultural influence of which must be tempered in relationship to the object of his jurisdiction: Canada. The legacy of MacKenzie

King’s posture is an arguably problematic power dynamic where, in this Euro-lingual state, a strong transatlantic bias persists and, regardless of real demographic change or any hype around the “Rise of Asia” or the “Dawn of a Pacific Century,” the position of “Asian” within Canada continues to be subject to moderation and Othering.

Etymologically speaking, the word “Asia” comes from ancient Greece and refers to all places east of the Bosphorus, or beyond the Aegean Sea’s eastern shore. Using the term “Asia”, therefore, is about as precise as pointing towards Turkey and saying, “Those unknown, perhaps magical, potentially threatening places over there.” Importantly, it places Europe at the centre, figuratively and discursively, buttressing assumptions that Europe is a privileged point of reference from which identities may be mapped and defined. As has been well elucidated by others (such as Edward Said² and Umberto Eco³), the loose reference, “them over there,” has led to misunderstandings, gross generalizations and, especially since the dawn of the industrial age, unhealthy power dynamics. When a European centre uses language like “Asian” or “Oriental,” those it is assumed occupy those categories are pushed to a cultural and geographic exterior in a way that exotifies, objectifies and negates humanity.

Correspondingly, a problem emerges when my white face, which implies a relationship to Europe, utters the word “Asian” in English, or, “Asiatique” in French. It is far too easy for the

reader or listener to hear an application of exotifying mystique referring to an unknowable or inevitably emergent Other, rather than the precise lives, places and experiences I may intend.

On the other hand, when saying “Asian” in Asian languages, Japanese or Korean for example, there is a sense of empowerment that accompanies the term. In Japanese, uttering “Asia” may evoke the baggage of colonial pursuits and the nefarious results of early 20th century policies aimed at forcing Japan-centred Asian unity. However, depending on the context, it can also trigger aspirational pan-Asian dreams of a broad and powerful culture-scape with Hindu-Buddhist cultural/religious roots. It can also be a means for Othering that, in certain conversational contexts might refer to South East Asia. In Korean, with an underlay of shuddering colonial memory, the term offers a tempered dose of invigoration, implying independence from American or European dominance and the possibility of power through skillfully negotiated regional relationships.

Not only does “Asian” have different implications when uttered by different people in different linguistic and socio-cultural contexts, but it can de-humanize on both sides. Suggesting a white man is interested in Asia, for instance, has all kinds of discomfiting implications. Often, when I am introduced as the Executive Director of Centre A, I am asked how I got interested in Asia, and particularly in Asian art. It is never assumed that since

the age of 16 I have spent nearly a decade living on the other side of the Pacific; that I spend a significant amount of my lived time speaking languages other than English; or that I began working with professional artists while living in Korea and Japan, not because I was interested in Asia as a thing, but because I happened to be there. It is generally assumed that “Asian” is something fundamentally and necessarily other to myself. It is never assumed that the cultural scenes of New York, Berlin and even Vancouver might be more exotic and unknown to me than Seoul, Fukuoka or Chiang Mai. With squints of suspicion, envy or disinterest I am made to justify the geography of my cultural experience. However you frame it, to name something Asian means it is “ours” to some and “other” to others, rarely mundane, rarely shared and even more rarely seen to have the universality applied to things European.

Since its foundation, Centre A has dealt with the question of its own relationship to the word “Asian.” Through two conferences entitled *Twisting the Box* (2000) and *Twisting the Box Again* (2010), numerous board retreats and Strategic Planning sessions, Centre A has productively tackled the question, though never to resolution. In the end, the institution runs on questions, rather than conclusions about what the term “Asian” might imply.

Through curatorial and artistic practice, Centre A has taken it upon itself to facilitate cultural exchange; confront the idea that Asian is other; and to dig into the gritty cultural work that deals with the aspirations and concerns available to us as a result of the centuries-long history of transpacific migration, travel, communication and exchange. A huge amount of our programming attests to this purpose, including Centre A’s first exhibition *The Bubble*

Tea Club: Vancouver Identity from a Contemporary Asian Art Perspective (2000), and later, *Chinatown Modern* (2003), *Redress Express* (2007), *China Trade* (2006), *World Tea Party* (2010), *Yellow Signal* (2012), *Limits of Tolerance: Re-Framing Multicultural State Policy* (2007), and *Showroom* (2008), as well as many other early and more recent exhibitions. Through my own curatorial practice, I am eager to engage Vancouver’s publics in the important work of local and transpacific cultural development while seeking to re-imagine the intercultural power structure inherited from the likes of MacKenzie King.

My first exhibition as curator of Centre A was an art and community initiative entitled, *M’Goi/Doh Jeh: Sites, Rites and Gratitude*. It ran from April 26 to June 14, 2014. With this show I wanted to express a desire for inclusive, intergenerational and cross-cultural conviviality that shows gratitude and respect to Chinatown, the place that Centre A now calls home. The posture of the show, rather than demonstrating the clarion confidence of an authoritative curator sharing famed treasures of the contemporary “East,” celebrating emergent heroes, elucidating the ivory tower’s freshest theory or offering a social analysis, was more participatory in character. Following a mode of engagement premised on notions of neighbourhood-based cultural production, language was a serious point of consideration. Not only did linguistic gesture figure in the individual artworks, but it was also present in the application of curatorial discourse strategy. The approach was somewhat modeled on the inquisitive deference one might find in an eager outgroup junior encountering an established, predominantly older community in the throes of intergenerational and cultural change. The sort of discourse strategy and curatorial posture employed was a



M’Goi/Doh Jeh: Sites, Rites and Gratitude, 2014, Centre A, Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo by Sora Park

variation on the junior-senior/ingroup-outgroup interactions embedded in many Asian languages.⁴

In this exhibition, my and Centre A’s status as newcomers to Chinatown — “outgroup-juniors” entering a landscape of more established cultural institutions and actors — necessitated that we take on an outgroup-junior posture. In my interpretation this implies that we engage in an inquisitive manner and take care not to be too bold or refined or to emphasize our own individuality in institutional, curatorial or individual terms, leaving ample entry points for participants and viewers alike. It’s akin to choosing to say, “I think the food was kind of delicious, you?” instead of saying, “The food was delicious.” While the second phrase is dependent on the primacy and authority of the individual, the first, leaving room for the other, is more deferential and signals interest in social connection.

I believe posture and discourse strategy are curation’s third dimension. Typically the curator

applies artwork to a substrate (i.e. gallery space, public square or social context) and suggests a justification as to why the artist(s)' work ought to be selected and installed. The standard method of discourse in curatorial practice is heavily laden with cultural assumptions — even when practiced using non-European languages, the language of curation most often articulates itself in a particular manner that finds roots in a European art system. In the Canadian case, as funding is so dependent on a peer jury system, assumptions about the interests, cultural vocabulary and grammar of the predominantly Eurolingual, transatlantic-leaning elite who participate in arts council juries then become an important consideration for those who are, or aspire to be, publicly-funded curators. This rests as a limit to inclusivity and to the realm of possibility, a structural impediment to developing languages of curation that are relevant to and legible in the polyglot, multi-sectoral neighbourhoods and communities that make up the real experience of Canadian life. It is therefore all the more important to raise the issue of considering the socio-linguistic aspects of a curator's posture and discourse strategy.



Lydia Kwa, *Game of Couplets*, 2014, Centre A. Photo by Natalie Tan

Exploring equally mundane, differently formulaic and hopefully less predictable approaches is essential to fostering diversity and opening space for varied linguistic styles in curatorial practice. My intent in foregrounding discourse strategy is to find means to permit comfort with voices that don't necessarily conform to Euro-centric structures of cultural grammar, particularly as it pertains to visual art.

Building on this curatorial direction, M'Goi/Doh Jeh: Sites, Rites and Gratitude involved three particular initiatives: first, we changed our gallery signage under the direction of a neighbourhood elder; then we meditated on history and poetic possibility in the face of technological and neighbourhood change with a local writer; and next, we invigorated, imagined and considered the community through language learning and mapping with an energetic community builder.

One day, Mrs. Chang, a proudly 96-year-old woman who lives just a couple of blocks up from Centre A's East Georgia Street home, came by wondering what we were. As my co-worker, Natalie Tan, attempted

to explain to her in Cantonese, Mrs. Chang quickly instructed us that we should have Chinese language signage and that — in Chinese as well as in English — we should boldly let the public know that we are an art gallery and that they are welcome in the space. In particular she said that in big, bold lettering we should write “歡迎參觀” (“welcome” or “feel free to come in and see”) on our front window. We are a public gallery. The public needs

to know they are welcome to come in! We followed her lead. Meanwhile, inside the gallery, the two other artists created a combination of meditative and community-engaged installations.

I met Lydia Kwa, an established poet/writer, on a March afternoon while purchasing *pu'erh* at Treasure Green, the tea shop right next door to Centre A. She was a bit standoffish at first. Critical of Centre A's cool atmosphere and poor feng shui, she quipped, “I haven't been there in a while.” Regardless, we quickly connected around shared struggle to grapple with the significance of the rolling drum beat of gentrification in the neighbourhood, in particular the impending closing of our East Georgia Street neighbour Ho Sun Hing. Canada's oldest Chinese language print shop, Ho Sun Hing was slated to close after 106 years in business.⁵ The chops and logos, pamphlets and wedding invitations created and printed there had defined the typography of the neighbourhood for a century. By the time of our encounter, Lydia had been stopping in to the print shop for nearly two years, building a relationship with the owner, Hilda Lam and her family, and collecting trays of foundry type. With the type, she created a series of mixed media print works, meditations on transformations in the publishing industry and the cultural technologies of Chinatown. Later, Lydia wrote couplets to accompany each piece and self-published a little unbound book entitled *Linguistic Tantrums*. Olivia, the owner of Treasure Green Tea, happened to have a copy on hand. Impressed, I invited Lydia to participate in the exhibition immediately. We showed the original mixed media works and invited the public to reflect on the work, write couplets of their own and drop them into a special wall-mounted box that we had purchased from Ho Sun Hing. Lydia then invited



Youth Community Film Screening, 2014, Centre A, photo by Kathryn Lennon

Hilda Lam to join us for a beautiful afternoon where the audience's couplets were revealed and paired with Lydia's works. It was called *A Game of Couplets*.

The evening after I had met Lydia at Treasure Green, I was surfing around the internet looking into all things Chinatown, especially Ho Sun Hing and the then-recent activism that had been taking place around the Ming Sun-Uchida Building. Long having provided low-income housing to local seniors and having a history as a clan-based benevolent association and reading room society on Powell Street, Ming Sun had recently faced the threat of being torn down. In that evening Google journey, I came across the blog of Kathryn Gwun-Yeen Lennon, a spoken-word poet and community builder active on Ming Sun and other issues facing the community. She was also keen on enhancing her Cantonese language capacity. I invited her for tea in one email and quickly found that she was cc'd in communication from Lydia regarding Ho Sun Hing! A couple of days later, over tea at Centre A, I invited Kathryn to create a space for Cantonese language learning and to curate a series of neighbourhood-specific language classes. Cantonese is the lingua franca of Chinatown. She

went above and beyond with *Saturday School*, a collaboration with language instructor Zoe Lam. These classes brought an engaged cross-cultural, intergenerational community on a language learning adventure that saw them using Cantonese, meeting people in the neighbourhood and learning oodles about this historic community. Classes were hosted in an interior gallery space Kathryn called the *Living Language Studio*. An ad hoc, temporary community centre of sorts, the *Living Language Studio* invited the public to share and map community memories, learn language, make friends and discuss the future of the community. The space hosted a myriad of events, including a Youth Community Film Screening; a fundraiser for the Hua Foundation, a local culture and food security activist group; as well as various other community meetings. Thanks to Kathryn's initiatives, the gallery was a hotbed of community activity for the duration of the show.

With this constellation of linguistic gestures, I sought to consider an alternative to the intensely Anglo-centric and transatlantic nature of the cultural scene in Vancouver, while creating a site for uncanonical contemporary culture-making that avoids essentializing tendencies. Through inclusive cross-cultural community building and providing mechanisms for the institutional and personal internalization of neighbourhood-relevant cultural technologies, I hoped to overcome the "us" and "them" problems of being identified as an "Asian" gallery, not to mention problems of sectoral discrimination, while confronting the realities of present life in Vancouver's Chinatown. From here on, building on Centre A's history and acknowledging our current Chinatown home, I hope to set a tone that fosters a linguistically diverse and aggressively inclusive approach to

culture-making, one that avoids siloes of race, language, sector and medium as we work with myriad collaborators to tackle the vital questions of our time. It is intended that this approach will help us play our role as an agent of transpacific cultural development while being less encumbered by the problems incumbent with uttering the word "Asian."

NOTES

1. House of Commons, Debates, May 1, 1947, 2644-2546.
 2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
 3. Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*. Mariner Books, 1999.
 4. Ingroup/outgroup, junior/senior distinctions are more than merely social custom—these distinctions are deeply embedded in some languages such as two I am fairly familiar with, Korean and Japanese. Through these distinctions there are specific modes of address employed that structure social relationships. In addition to demanding the use of honorific vocabulary, ingroup/outgroup and junior/senior distinctions also affect phrasing, altering the manner by which an individual might assert themselves. This is not necessarily to the negation of personal expression, or the contribution of ideas, but causes alternative strategies to be employed.
- One book that informed my thinking about discourse strategy is: Ron Scollon, Suzanne B.K. Scollon, and Rodney H. Jones, *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. John Wiley & Sons. 2012.
5. John Mackie, "Canada's Oldest Chinese Print Shop Closes at 6 p.m. Today, after 106 Years in Business." *Vancouver Sun*, March 28, 2014. Accessed August 18, 2014. http://www.vancouver.sun.com/Canada_oldest_Chinese_print_shop_closes_today_after_years_business/9671160/story.html

Images courtesy the author and Centre A

SYMPOSIUM



Top: Paul Wong, Emily Lougheed, with symposium audience; Cindy Mochizuki, Farrah-Marie Miranda, with symposium audience; Evan Lee
Bottom: New Departures panel — Indu Vashist, Heather Keung, Steven Tong, Tyler Russell (at podium); Paul Wong, Dana Claxton, Kira Wu

Symposium group photo:

Back row: Naveen Girn, Ingrid Kolt, Neelamjit Dhillon, Farrah-Marie Miranda, Paul Wong, Ali Kazimi, Liane Davison

Middle row: Evan Lee, Summer Pervez, Cindy Mochizuki, Dana Claxton, Kira Wu

Front row: Jordan Strom, Indu Vashist, Heather Keung, Tyler Russell, Steven Tong.

Photos by Brian Giebelhaus

PANEL THREE

DRAWN FROM HISTORY/MEMORY

Moderator: Jordan Strom

Panelists: Avantika Bawa, Evan Lee, Cindy Mochizuki

JORDAN STROM For all three artists, one of the things that resonated for me is this idea of suspension and how people who are in a state of extreme stress and dire circumstances often fall outside the rule of law and the protections of the basic rights of citizenship. Avantika, with your Komagata Maru, the use of the banner, the textile that you had drawn upon to drape between the barrier, suggests not just the suspension of being across the ocean, but the suspension of the harbour of Vancouver and the condition of the passengers of the Komagata Maru. Cindy, with your use of the archive in relation to the internment camps, there's this state of suspension which is very strange and also an extremely stressful and harmful sort of space. And with you, Evan, I think of those images of the Sri Lankan men in the buses of the portraits that you recreated from some of the imagery, and also those images of scenes on the deck of the ship, the MV Ocean Lady. But there are different levels of your own for each of these examples; I am curious because I know that you bring your personal experiences in different ways into your practice.

Evan, I would like to hear about how you bring in the personal aspects that you talked about, the experiences with your connections, with your family and with your friends, who had been through situations somewhat comparable, in trying to identify or empathize with your subjects as somebody who hasn't been through that sort of situation personally. Cindy, you bring the personal

into your work around family stories quite often. Avantika, I feel like the personal is almost covered over to some extent — it is very much there, as you discussed, but there is also this shared experience through your engagement with modernism and sort of the universal aspects. Maybe with your use of the line and sculpture you capture the Komagata Maru specifics but also this condition of suspension that may exist in other histories or other circumstances. So, how does the personal inform your work when you engage with history and memory?

CINDY MOCHIZUKI I think it's very obvious in my work. It's interesting: when I built the *Yokai* piece, those were images given to me — they are images that I didn't have any kind of familial connection to. But when I go into the archive, it really becomes sort of a mirror back. I find myself waiting for something that's going to call out to me that I am going to work with. So, for me, it does connect back to the body and bodies of trauma and the effects of that.

EVAN LEE For me, I think it has to do with how much time I spend with the project. In the case of this Ocean Lady project that I started in 2009, shortly after the event — and I am still working on it — in a way it's like building the model; I mean, it's kind of like playing with dolls or like playing video games in a way. But it was a very involved and long process. It took me about a year to create the 3D model. So, this kind of living-through-by-working is how there is a bit of personal investment there. But also,

I was going to mention that I have a few bodies of work where I use my father's photography; he is kind of an unwilling collaborator — unwilling in the sense of... he obviously knew that I was doing it, but he didn't know why. I do work with his images and I think of my position as not being a migrant, but instead kind of living through other people's stories of migration. My dad's photographs are more interesting than mine because I really don't have that kind of stuff that has happened to me. I am envious of people with migrant stories in some ways; they won't all be negative and difficult stories.

AVANTIKA BAWA When you first approached me to be in the show, I was immediately interested in the periods of having been a passenger on a ship similar in some ways to the Komagata Maru and memories of always having to move from place to place and wondering whether the new place will be one where I'm going to be accepted, even when the move was from North India to South India. Thinking about this on a much larger scale, the undecided and the unknown were really interesting to me and thinking again about the bits of possibility in traveling from one country to another. I relate to that very much, to what the passenger might have been thinking about a hundred years ago when they took this route. When I was making this work and drawing that line, it was a painfully long line to draw and it's not that large. So, thinking about the line as a water route over the course of three months, it really hit hard. I positioned myself in

the role of those passengers, imagining what they might have gone through and it was bittersweet.

AUDIENCE I am also interested in personal roles and also site specificity as a technique, or a strategy of response that is very contemporary and also this burden of creating out of this site specificity. I feel like there are different ways of doing it that are very personal, like what Cindy is doing, and finding the specificity of materials, which I wondered about. What is the responsibility that we have as artists, with regards to both memory and history that are linked to meta-narratives, but also to the personal erasure of histories? I'm thinking also how we are —based on our identities — asked to respond within this structure, whether Latino, or Asian, or something else. How could this be a strategy and how do we escape it and deconstruct it?

CINDY MOCHIZUKI People are telling their stories, and there is a lot of documentary work being done. As an artist, I am conscious of what I am adding to that and I think part of the reason why sometimes I can't let go of a work, is because there's an ethical responsibility; it's about how you lead your audience into your memory and who your audience is and where and why. So, I think about those things when I get placed in a position where I need to represent history or community.

AVANTIKA BAWA I may have mentioned in the presentation that there is always this desire to satisfy this image of India, or this idea of the exotic. The reality is that there are so many ways of responding to that and I feel my work more recently plays more

inside the history, and in this case, with the piece that I did for Ruptures in Arrival, I was thinking about this journey from a more conceptual standpoint through cartography and a military logic. So, I think there is no one way of representing your own identity and your background. If there was only one way, then it would be very limiting and I've been exploring many ways through the language of Minimalism.

CLOSING REMARKS

ALI KAZIMI

Thanks for inviting me to be the respondent for this deeply moving and invigorating discussion. I feel like one of the old folks in the room who has become part of the history being discussed, which is great because I see myself as part of a continuum that started from Komagata Maru. It is important to see the episode within the context of what was happening onshore, which continues — we are living in its legacy today. There was a struggle for civil rights in Canada that continued until both Chinese and South Asians in Canada got the right to vote on April 2, 1948. The struggle continues to where we are today, in terms of trying to see equal representation and our rightful place within institutions and within the cultural landscape. In speaking to that, I have been part of this struggle for resolution both as a filmmaker and an artist, but also as an activist working with groups like Canadian Independent Film Caucus.

Many of the things that Dana Claxton talked about, were also discussed way back in a conference in 1992 called “About Face About Frame,” which was the first gathering of filmmakers of colour along with Aboriginal artists. As part of the larger context today, we have to remember those long discussions, what happened and what changed. Part of what happened — Indu Vashist mentioned this earlier — is that the country became increasingly conservative. It’s important to recall that part of the process of becoming conservative was the relentless attack on the arts. For example, one of the ways the Reform Party of Canada sought to gain attention in the 1990s was by attacking the Canada Council, picking several

projects as the focus of attacks — and those attacks made headlines. Those attacks continued with the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance and they continue in different ways with the Conservative Party of Canada. Two more big changes happened: one was in Ontario with the rise of Mike Harris, who completely devastated and decimated the arts; then, in short order 9/11 happened. 9/11 gave rise to a particular kind of reaffirmation of white patriarchy with the undermining of gains made by both feminists and people of colour — a reaffirmation covered over by the notion of the security state. These critical events provide a larger context for what has happened and combine with *uber-capitalism* and globalization. Also, Paul Wong mentioned how Chinese artists from Mainland China become “hot” at the cost of what is happening here. This is a colonial model that we are reliving within the context of this new empire. Given the context, the work that we do becomes even more important. The work Dana Claxton and Paul Wong did in outlining the earlier organizing work is important — it is important to remember, because part of what gets lost in the current cultural climate is our own cultural memories of the battles that had been fought.

Many important institutions like Reel Asian International Film Festival and SAVAC: South Asian Visual Arts Centre came out of the power of identity politics and numerous changes happened in Telefilm Canada through that power. Often within the art world, we are our own worst enemy — we divide and undermine ourselves. I share your discomfort when we hear about



Ali Kazimi, Closing Remarks, photo by Brian Giebelhaus

someone saying, “Oh! That is just identity politics.” I’ve seen people of colour do this as well and it’s shocking to me. I’m glad that the F-word was used and I am glad the other two words were not used: “political correctness” — which functions as another way of undercutting and undermining discussions of race. These attitudes and terms have often been appropriated, ingested and used by people of colour. This is terminology that was thrown at us by the right with a deliberate agenda to undermine our aims and our gains. We have to be cautious and very cognizant of how we use these words and to engage with them in a way that reflects on historical memory.

As an educator of colour, I am constantly reminding my students of colour who often shy away from notions of identity. It is very painful, at times, to see the levels of shame, the shying away and the rejection of one’s own state of being. I have a South Asian student currently who does not want to deal with anything around being South Asian. I have a

First Nations student who insists that he is Canadian, while denying his Indigenous ancestry. It is really interesting to see the insidious ways that systems of exclusion play out, re-enter and start affecting young people. So, it is heartening to see so many young artists here and young panelists who are doing amazing work—you are really inspiring. I would like to thank all of you and the Surrey Art Gallery for holding one of these rare symposiums around race. These events don't happen often enough. Such an event has not happened for a very long time, with the exception of The State of Blackness conference in Toronto earlier this year. So, I am glad that my long-standing journey with my film *Continuous Journey* and the Komagata Maru merges over here with this other part of my life, which is the art world.

BIOGRAPHIES

ROY ARDEN is world-renown for his photographic practice, which often features representations of history and the archive. He received a diploma from Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1972, and studied under Jeff Wall at the University of British Columbia before receiving his MFA in 1990. His work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions worldwide, including a major career survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2007. In addition to his art practice, which also makes use of found materials, collage and digital files, Arden has lectured in Vancouver, Helsinki, Zurich and Leipzig; curated several exhibitions; and published a range of texts about the work of other artists. He lives and works in Vancouver.

AVANTIKA BAWA is an artist, curator and academic. She has an MFA in Painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1998) and a BFA in the same from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India (1995). She was a participant at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine, the Vermont Studio Center, Milepost 5 in Portland and Jentel Artist Residency Program in Wyoming.

SAMMY CHIEN is a Vancouver-based interdisciplinary media artist who seeks to merge cinema, sound art, new media and dance performances techniques. His background is in experimental film, electroacoustic music and digital technology. He began his new media dance performance journey with Dr. Henry Daniel and Troika Ranch (in Touched, T2, Imprint MoA, Imprint II). Since then, he frequently collaborates both visually and aurally in multidisciplinary projects ranging from

film, dance, improvised audiovisual performance, live electronics, concert, theatre, video installation, art exhibitions and interdisciplinary collaborative-performance. Sammy Chien is a co-founder/ artistic director of Chimerik collective. Outside of the rigorous art world he also VJs and DJs for art shows, bars, underground parties and concerts.

DANA CLAXTON is an interdisciplinary artist whose work includes film and video, installation, performance and photography. Her work is held in public collections, including the Vancouver Art Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Art Bank of Canada. Her work has been screened internationally, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis. Her work has been screened at the Sundance Festival and at Microwave in Hong Kong. Claxton is an active member in the arts community and has participated in panel discussions, juries, curatorial projects, advisory committees, mentoring youth and young artists. She is of Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux ancestry and her family reserve is Wood Mountain.

LIANE DAVISON has curated over 100 exhibitions on contemporary art practice from interactive media through to lawn ornaments. Her writing has been published in over 30 catalogues and her work supporting digital art has been recognized internationally. In 1998 she initiated the Surrey Art Gallery's TechLab, a unique venue dedicated to supporting the production and presentation of digital art forms, including artist's residencies and exhibitions featuring ceramics, fibre and technology. She is currently the Director of the Surrey Art Gallery,

and as Surrey's Manager of Visual and Community Art, directs the City's public art program.

NEELAMJIT DHILLON is a professional musician equally versed in both Eastern and Western traditions. This firm rooting in two distinct styles gives him a unique perspective into the universality of music. His project, *Komagata Maru*, brings together four of Canada's most dynamic musicians to tell a century old tale of Canada's dark past. It combines Jazz with Classical Indian music to create an unusual story of xenophobia and social injustice set against the backdrop of the Canadian cultural mosaic. He has also written a brilliant piece in response to the shooting on August 5, 2012 at the Oak Creek *gurdwara* at Wisconsin as a way to remember the incident and the resulting discussion in the aftermath of the tragedy.

RICHARD FUNG is a Toronto-based video artist, writer, theorist and educator. He holds University of Toronto degrees in cinema studies and in sociology and cultural studies. His work comprises of a series of challenging videos on subjects ranging from the role of the Asian male in gay pornography to colonialism, immigration, racism, homophobia, AIDS and his own family history. His works, *My Mother's Place* (1990), *Sea in the Blood* (2000) and *Uncomfortable* (2005), have been widely screened and collected internationally, and have been broadcast in Canada and the United States. Richard is a past Rockefeller Fellow at New York University and has received the Bell Canada Award for Lifetime Achievement in Video and the Toronto Arts Award for Media Art. Richard is a public intellectual who has pushed forward the

debates about queer sexuality, Asian identity and the uneasy borderlands of culture and politics.

NAVEEN GIRN is a cultural researcher and community engagement specialist whose interests center on Vancouver's South Asian community, intercultural oral history and curation. Naveen was co-curator for the Museum of Vancouver's exhibit, "Bhangra.me: Vancouver's Bhangra Story" which received an Award for Excellence from the Canadian Museum Association. He was the cultural researcher for SFU's Komagata Maru project and curated several exhibitions on the Komagata Maru for the centennial commemoration in 2014 including the Museum of Vancouver and Surrey Museum. As principal at Digital Handloom, Naveen leads a community storytelling practice that engages with and shares untold community stories.

JOHN GREYSON is a filmmaker, video artist, writer, activist and educator whose productions have won accolades at festivals throughout the world. He is a professor at York University, where he teaches film and video theory and film production and editing. Greyson is the recipient of the 2000 Toronto Arts Award for film/video and the 2007 Bell Award in Video Art. Feature films include *Urinal*, *Zero Patience* and *Packin'*. Greyson is active in various anti-censorship, AIDS, peace and queer activist media projects, including The Olive Project, Deep Dish TV, Blah Blah Blah and AIDS Action Now.

AYESHA HAMEED is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Research Architecture. Her PhD was completed at the Graduate Program in Social &

Political Thought at York University, where her dissertation "Bricks and Blood. The Dialectical Image of The Black Atlantic in The Colonial Metropolis" was nominated for the Faculty of Graduate Studies Dissertation Prize. A member of the No One Is Illegal network in Montréal, Hameed's video and performance work focuses on borders in the context of *sans-papiers* organizing and migrant subjectivity. She has presented her work at the Banff Centre for the Arts, OBORO Gallery Montréal, Montréal Arts Interculturels (MAI), the HTMlles Festival, International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) and elsewhere.

ALI KAZIMI is one of Canada's leading documentary filmmakers and winner of the Donald Brittain Gemini Award for Best Social/Political documentary for *Runaway Grooms* in 2005. His widely screened films have received two Genie Award nominations as well as numerous national and international honours and awards. He teaches film and video at York University in Toronto. Kazimi's most recent publication is the book *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2012), expanding on his film on the same subject, *Continuous Journey*. He has guest-lectured internationally and has been invited to serve on numerous national and international film juries. He has served as president of the Independent Film and Video Alliance and co-Chair of the Canadian Independent Film Caucus – Toronto, and is a member of the Director's Guild of Canada.

HEATHER KEUNG has a BFA from the Ontario College of Art & Design. Her recent video,

installation and performance art practice is inspired by physical labour, involuntary actions, and the training of the mind and body. Her work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally. Keung is the Artistic Director of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival.

EVAN LEE received an MFA from University of British Columbia in 2000. Evan is known for his work with photography but he is increasingly expanding into many different media and subjects beyond his previous works of still life, portraiture, and landscape photography. He has been in exhibitions such as "Again and Again and Again" at the Vancouver Art Gallery and "Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of Komagata Maru" at the Surrey Art Gallery. He also recently had a solo exhibition at the Richmond Art Gallery titled "Elders and Roots." Lee was shortlisted for the 2014 Sobey Art Award and exhibited with the other finalists at the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

KARIN LEE is a Gemini award-winning filmmaker. A descendant of Barkerville's Chinese settlers, her great-grandparents lived in Barkerville from the late 1870s to 1915. Lee has been making film and video works for the last 25 years and has exhibited in galleries and festivals around the world, including London, Taipei, Leipzig, Los Angeles and New York. Her works have been broadcast in Canada and the US. Lee's films explore the history of the Chinese diaspora in North America and feminism in China. She has taught as a sessional instructor at Simon Fraser University in the Asia-Canada Program in the department of Humanities, as well as at the University of British Columbia in the Department

of History. She is currently a Master of Fine Arts Candidate in the Department of Film Production and Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia.

KEN LUM is a prominent artist, editor, critic, curator and lecturer. He graduated with an MFA from the University of British Columbia in 1985, and has since exhibited his works globally. His research and practice emphasizes the relationship between colonialism, consumerism and corporatism. His artwork was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2011. Among his other accomplishments are his foundational role in the Chinese art journal *Yishu*, his public art installations across Vancouver, for which he received a Mayor's Arts Award in 2013, and his lecturing positions at the University of British Columbia, L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, where he is currently director of the undergraduate program.

MASS ARRIVAL artist's collective was responsible for staging the *Mass Arrival* project in Toronto in August 2013, which consisted of a public intervention, in protest of Canada's anti-immigration policies, as well as associated gallery programming at Whippersnapper Gallery. The Mass Arrival team consists of Farrah-Marie Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan, Nadia Saad, Jose Anzoategui and Tobias Vargas.

DIVYA MEHRA earned an MFA at Columbia University, New York. Her research-fueled practice often explores marginalization, otherness and the empty promise of diversity. Through appropriating,

editing and reassembling a variety of literary, comedic and musical sources, she creates an acerbic dialogue on the commandeering, consumption and construction of race and identity politics. Often foregrounding the ongoing struggle with her personal diasporic identity and cultural expectations, she calls into question our unexamined beliefs. Mehra's work has been included in a number of exhibitions and screenings across North America and overseas. Mehra is represented in Toronto by Georgia Scherman Projects and currently divides her time between Winnipeg, Delhi and New York.

FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA is an immigrant rights and feminist organizer in Toronto who has organized against regressive immigration and security policies since 2002. She has been part of No One Is Illegal - Toronto's successful campaigns to push immigration enforcement out of Toronto district schools and organized and won the removal of immigration enforcement from greater Toronto area anti-violence against women agencies. Though this policy was eventually reneged, she continues to be part of No One Is Illegal - Toronto campaigns to build a sanctuary city with full social services for all people irrespective of immigration status and the fight for permanent status on landing for immigrant workers and full regularization for undocumented people in the country.

CINDY MOCHIZUKI is an interdisciplinary artist with a practice that moves across several forms including drawing, animation, multimedia installation, collaborations, performance and community-engaged projects. Her works often explore the

space between the fictional and the documentary, integrating archival sources and interviews as a common thread within the process of her work. Her short films have been screened in Holland, Korea, Canada, and the US. Recent exhibitions include: *On the Subject of Ghosts*, Hamilton Artists Inc (2013), *Yokai & Other Spirits*, Toronto Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (2013), and *To|From BC Electric Railway 100 Years*, Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (2012).

SUMMER PERVEZ is a filmmaker, screenwriter, poet, photographer and professor. Born in Saudi Arabia, Summer obtained her BA and MA from the University of Western Ontario and her PhD in English Literature from the University of Ottawa in 2007. Her first feature screenplay, *1947*, has been doing well in international screenwriting competitions, including earning places as a semi-finalist in the 2013 Praxis Feature Screenplay Competition and the 2013 ScreenCraft Screenwriting Fellowship. Pervez also wrote and produced the short films *Shame* (2013) and *The Address* (2014) both of which are competing at several international film festivals.

RAGHAVENDRA RAO was born and raised in Bangalore, India where he attended the Ken School of Art. After completing his diploma in painting, he received a fellowship in painting at the Kanoria Centre for Arts in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. His artwork frequently refers to the context in which it is placed. He has played a central role in bringing installation art to India, and has participated in numerous solo and group shows in India, Europe and North America. Rao has undertaken residencies

in Switzerland, Scotland, Mauritius and India itself, as well as at a collaborative art festival in Lille, France. He has taught for the past thirteen years at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. Rao splits his time between Bangalore and Vancouver. He is also a musician and scholar.

TYLER RUSSELL is Director and Curator of Centre A Gallery in Vancouver. He engages questions relating to art's role in the cultural development of communities in inter-communal and trans-cultural relations and is deeply interested in polyglot cultural spaces and trans-national identities. He organized the 2001 and 2002 Korea-Japan arts camps as well as facilitating Picnic on the Ocean, a collaborative project with PS1 residency alumni Murai Hironori and Seung Young Kim. In 2006, working with artist Navin Rawanchikul, he co-curated an art project called Navin Party in Beijing. He is also the co-founder of the Café for Contemporary Art in Vancouver.

HARIS SHEIKH is a documentarian, artist and writer from Lahore, Pakistan. He received Masters degrees in both Fine Art and Political Science from the University of the Punjab, and after immigrating to Toronto in 2000, further pursued Film, TV Production, 3D Computer Animation studies at Toronto Film School, and journalism at Sheridan College. His work has focused extensively on the intersection between politics, religion and art. In 2005, he assistant produced a documentary about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in 2010, he directed a documentary about Muslim responses to Danish cartoons of the

Prophet Muhammad. His paintings, which have been the subject of multiple solo exhibitions, explore themes of Sufism, solitude and immigration.

VIVEK SHRAYA is a Toronto-based artist working in the media of music, performance, literature and film. His first short film, *Seeking Single White Male*, was featured at international film festivals throughout 2011. His film *What I LOVE about being QUEER* has expanded to include an online project and book with contributions from around the world, and was featured on *Buzzfeed*, *The Huffington Post*, and in *ELLE Magazine India*. *Holy Mother My Mother*, his fourth short film, was released in 2014. Shraya has performed and read at shows and festivals internationally, sharing the stage with Tegan and Sara, Dragonette, and Melissa Ferrick, and appearing at NXNE, CMW, and Word on the Street. A two-time Lambda Literary Award finalist, he was nominated for LGBTQ Person of the Year in the 2012 INSPIRE Awards, and was #1 on Nightlife's list of "Reasons 2011 was a Queer Year."

JARNAIL SINGH is an artist, illustrator, designer, photographer and art journalist. Originally from Zira in Punjab province, he developed a successful career as a figurative painter in India before immigrating to Canada in 2000. Jarnail's areas of interest include traditional Punjabi peoples, narratives, and folklore, as well as representations of the British Columbian landscape. He is widely respected for his work both as a painter and as an author, and is an active participant in the Surrey arts community. In 2008, he was given the very first Surrey Civic Treasure award for lifetime achievement; in the same year the *Vancouver Sun* included him in

their list of 100 prominent South Asians who have made a significant contribution to life in British Columbia. His most recent project involves the illustration for *A Journey with the Endless Eye: The Komogatu Maru Incident*, written by Ajmer Rode..

JORDAN STROM is Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at the Surrey Art Gallery. He has curated solo exhibitions by Sarindar Dhaliwal, Cao Fei, Brendan Fernandes, Ryoji Ikeda, among others. Recent group exhibitions have addressed South Asian song and dance (Spectacular Sangeet, 2013, co-curated with Naveen Girn), contemporary artist self-portraiture (Scenes of Selves, Occasions for Ruses, 2012), and the proto-cinematic (Vision Machine: Etienne Zack and Marianne Nicolson, 2012). Jordan has worked on previous curatorial exhibitions and projects for the Vancouver Art Gallery, Kamloops Art Gallery, Presentation House Gallery, Republic Gallery and Dadabase. From 2004 to 2008, Jordan worked as editor at *Fillip*, a journal of contemporary art. He holds a Master of Arts, Art History (Critical Curatorial Studies) from the University of British Columbia.

STEVEN TONG is an independent curator and the co-director of CSAspace, a small self-funded project space in Vancouver, with Christopher Brayshaw, Adam Harrison and Steffanie Ling. He has worked for years in the arts within both the commercial and non-profit environments in various capacities. He worked as a gallery assistant at Art Beatus, a commercial gallery with a focus on contemporary Chinese art, before moving on to Centre A, the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, as well as the grunt gallery as a part

of its archival team. He also sits on Vancouver's Public Art Committee. Working and volunteering in Vancouver's artist-run community led him to start his own project spaces, the first of which was 69pender, a studio/project space in the heart of Chinatown that he co-directed with Sally Lee. After 69pender shut its doors, he enjoyed a brief moment of sanity before being asked to embark on the creation of CSAspace, which has been active on Vancouver's Eastside for over a decade.

INDU VASHIST is Executive Director of the South Asian Visual Art Centre in Toronto. She was born and raised on the Coast Salish territory on the land of the Cowichan people where the community of Punjab had settled for over a century. Vashist holds a Master of Arts from Concordia University in Montréal. Her MA thesis was called "Between Canadian Racism and Indian Repression: The Air India Bombing and filmic representations of Sikh Diasporic identity in Canada." She worked as a staff member at a non-profit organization in Montréal for five years. Her work in Montréal focused on social justice issues with special attention to migrant justice.

PAUL WONG Programming, curating and facilitating the work of other artists has always been an equally strong parallel activity to Paul Wong's own artistic practice. He is a co-founding director of VIVO (Satellite Video Exchange Society est. 1973) and On Main (On The Cutting Edge Productions Society est. 1985). Both of these non-profit artist-run organizations have been important foundations to develop and present innovative projects. Over the last four decades Wong has

collaborated with hundreds of artists and produced exhibitions nationally and internationally, including the groundbreaking exhibitions and publications Living Art Performance Festival (1979), Yellow Peril: Reconsidered (1990) and most recently Thru The Trapdoor (2014) at the Vancouver Art Gallery's FUSE: Revolution Counter Revolution 2014. Paul Wong is the artistic director of On Main Gallery.

KIRA WU is a visual artist, who works with video, installation art and photography. Born in Hong Kong, Wu immigrated to Canada in 1976 with her family and grew up in Alberta. She attended undergraduate studies at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary. She received her MFA from the graduate program at the School for the Contemporary Arts, at Simon Fraser University. Wu's art explores the intersection between personal narratives, memory and cultural identity. Her video works and art installations have been shown locally as well as internationally. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions over the years, including Re-dress Express at Centre A in Vancouver; New Canadian Video, Museum of Modern Art in New York; and Interferences, Multimedia and Digital Art Festival in Belfort, France. Wu is a founding member of the South of the Fraser Inter-Arts Collective (SOFIA/C). She is currently the Chair of the Fine Arts Department, and teaches photography, video and studio art at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

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Gallery Curator of Exhibitions and Collections Jordan Strom would like to thank Naveen Girm, Satwinder Bains, Phinder Dulai and Sarindar Dhaliwal for their generous feedback throughout the development of this exhibition. Jordan would also like to thank curatorial intern Rhys Edwards for his copyediting contribution in the final stages of the publication.

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The symposium would not have been as engaging without the thoughtful sound contributions Hussein Alidina and Don Chow, along with Patrick Daggitt and Nahm Thai Bistro.

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