

# Are We All in the Same Boat? Staging the “Invisible Majority” in the Streets of Toronto

by Carla Melo

*Whiteness is unseen, and this invisibility is how whiteness gets reproduced as the unmarked mark of the human.*

—Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness”

As I navigate through the sometimes troubled waters of becoming a Canadian immigrant, I must confess that it is a great honour to have landed in this space and be able to share my inevitably fresh perspective on the intersections of performance and human rights here in Canada—a perspective which, at this point, could not have a focus other than immigration. But before I fully ‘land,’ I should tell you where I come from, where I have been, and what baggage I bring to this discussion.

I was born and raised in Brazil, a nation where “racial democracy” is a highly resilient myth that works to sustain and legitimize extreme inequalities drawn along a spectrum of skin colour. Given this racial politics, my light olive skin, and the fact that my native country is “the world’s second largest ‘African’ nation after Nigeria,” I was placed in the white end of that spectrum (Winn 71). Ironically, when as a young adult I migrated to the melting pot of US America, I became a woman of color. For the most part, I lived in the supposedly progressive and laidback California, so it wasn’t until after 9/11 that I experienced the burden of racism—but not for being Latina nor for being mistakenly classified as Hispanic (as has often occurred), but rather for being racially profiled as Arabic. Yet it wasn’t until I landed a faculty position in Arizona that I came to witness what the legalization of such racial profiling could mean in terms of one’s “right to the city.”<sup>1</sup>

So, as one could easily imagine, this Latina was thrilled to immigrate to Canada. Certainly, I had taken the image of a society with arms wide open to immigrants with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, the positive picture I had in mind began to recede into the background, pushed there by my first impressions of Canadian immigration policies. It all seemed dangerously close to a familiar scenario of illegal detentions, deportation of refugees, and covert racial profiling.<sup>2</sup> How could those measures be reconciled with a multicultural society? What role did the notion of a “Canadian mosaic” play in these contradictions? And what performance strategies could effectively pose these questions? As I learned that I was

to now check the box “non-visible minority,” the mosaic began to look more like a puzzle, instigating a broader reflection on notions of visibility and non-visibility.

Brecht used to say that art is not a mirror but a hammer with which to reshape reality. Yet the tool he had in mind was one that reflected the invisible through the visible, that is, false ideas through material possibilities, thereby revealing the materialist basis of thought. He was thinking of theatre, not just any art—a theatre that could make what is most familiar, like the family, the nation, our carefully made choices, radically strange, and the invisible things (like ideologies) thoroughly visible. Sadly, the more I go to the theatre (especially in these Americas that arbitrarily sit on the upper half of the *mapa mundi*) the less visible these things become. That is why it was so refreshing to virtually encounter<sup>3</sup> a performance that, with a little dose of imagination, led me to re-envision the disavowed trope of the mirror. And for that I invite you, just for an instant, to put associations with mimesis, surface, illusion, and naturalism aside and imagine a mirror that instead of reproducing life as it is would reflect the unseen, allowing us to see that what we think we see sometimes remains invisible, in spite of our best efforts.

In this article, my reflections on in/visibility centre on a guerrilla performance that tackled controversial border politics through a particular mix of spectacular theatricality and public engagement in order to show how some invisible things draw their power from their very invisibility. With the intention of “put[ting] decolonial<sup>4</sup> aesthetics into action and subvert[ing] the colonial power of whiteness by *making it strange*, spectacular, and highly visible in the public imagination,” a collective of young female artists/activists of colour addressed the interconnectedness of immigration policies with a logic that is at once racist and colonial through a project that combined an urban intervention, a gallery installation, and a public dialogue (Miranda and Méndez). This hybrid endeavour was staged in downtown Toronto, in the retail, financial, and historic core of the city, on 12 August 2013.

In the words of the artists, *Mass Arrival: The Intervention* was created in response to a history of “state-constructed crisis of irregular ‘mass arrivals’” (Miranda and Méndez) and, in particular,



to recent arrivals of Tamil migrants (in 2009 and 2010) who had been caught in a nearly three-decade bloody civil war between the state and the infamous guerrilla group Tamil Tigers. More specifically, the project marked the third anniversary of the arrival of the MV Sun Sea carrying 492 Tamil migrants to the coast of British Columbia. In spite of being legitimate asylum seekers—as suggested by the “Sri Lanka 2013 Human Rights Report” (US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor)—they were instantly targeted as terrorists. As Farrah Miranda implied in a speech made during the intervention, under the justification of border security, the event was turned into a media spectacle framed by covert xenophobia and racism. These arrivals, particularly the last one, eventually triggered and legitimized a number of regressive revisions in refugee law (*Le Collectif Échec à la guerre*).<sup>5</sup>

Challenging the often colonial narrative of historical re-enactments, the urban intervention indeed staged a “mass arrival,” but this time the ‘boat people’ were white-identified community participants. Dressed in white shirts, the volunteers stood silently inside make-shift red pieces of plywood as if these were the walls of the colossal ship that contained them as a collective body, thus creating a simple yet striking representation of a sea vessel loaded with bodies (*Kuru Selva*). The “ship” stood, as if anchored, right in front of The Bay (an abbreviation for The Hudson Bay Company), which is not only the oldest corporation in North America (Mi-

randa and Méndez) but also one that played an instrumental role in the fur trade that moved colonial practices in Canada (Keung). As the “ship” with about two hundred participants blocked a lane of traffic by Queen Street and Yonge, Miranda, one of the co-directors, speaking through a megaphone during the intervention, spelled out the message of the piece:

So three years ago today, a ship carrying Tamil refugees arrived at the coast of British Columbia. And, if you remember, the news headlines around that time called the passengers aboard that ship smugglers, terrorists, traffickers, and the media was used to create this huge public spectacle around their arrivals and to justify jailing them, deporting many of them; and so, today, on the third-year anniversary of that arrival, we’ve staged a mass arrival of our own. And if you notice, all of the people aboard this ship have something in common: They all identify as white, and this is to serve as a reminder that ships carrying white people arrived at these shores. Whiteness is not a natural thing in Canada; this is actually indigenous land, and so this is about questioning issues of Canadian identity: Who gets to belong here? Who gets to decide who belongs in this country, when you know that it’s stolen territories? (*Kuru Selva*)

Inverting the colonial practice of exhibiting exotic others, the piece placed privileged bodies on display and functioned as a mirror to that which is largely unseen: whiteness, that is, the power of



On 12 August 2013 in Toronto, around two hundred white-identified participants stood inside the replica of the MV Sun Sea blocking one direction of Queen Street traffic for about 20 minutes.  
Photo by Ben Roffelsen



that "invisible majority" otherwise known as white. Yet these bodies were not only made visible: their presence acquired a polysemic quality as they were coded with the marginalized signifier of 'boat people' while being reinserted within what Diana Taylor terms the "scenario of discovery" and thereby recoded with the colonial-settler signifier (53–78). Alison Cooley notes that the participants' bodies were also made vulnerable through display. I believe this vulnerability is complicated by their surrogation of "boat people," which simultaneously evokes helplessness and danger. Ironically, this double coding highlighted the absurdity of the othering process enacted on the unwanted bodies in recent boat arrivals and, in this manner, brought another inversion to mind: the ways in which the victims of human rights abuses were basically turned into potential human rights violators (Mason ii). The foregrounding of the label "terrorist" in Farrah's statement to the public may have stood out for some who have been racially profiled as a function of Canada's selective adoption of War on Terror discourse and practices—which, according to Michael Keefer, have played a role in the country's increasingly obstructionist attitude toward asylum and immigration. Nonetheless, for many passersby, the cleverness of the gesture could have assumed a one-liner character were it not for the many dialogical elements of the project.

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While Miranda historicized and racialized the central questions of the project, another woman led the ship with a flag that announced "#massarrival," prompting people on the streets to respond to the questions posed by the piece and engage in a public conversation. They were also prompted to tweet in response to the question passed out on flyers: "How does this arrival of white people make you feel?"<sup>6</sup> Responses on Twitter ranged from confusion, to annoyance at the obstruction of traffic, to appreciation for how the piece questioned stereotypes and combined politics and art to stage a powerful message. Interestingly, few responded directly to that question of affect, which is very telling of the level of discomfort the estrangement caused. On the ground, as noted in Desmond Cole's coverage for the *Torontoist*, a passerby evaluated the piece, at first site, as racist, while participants interviewed perceived it as an efficacious reminder of colonialism, genocide, and white privilege. The two other components of the project, an installation and a public dialogue, ensured that the conversations begun on street level continued both at the virtual and interpersonal levels.

In addition to an actual conversation with the artists,<sup>7</sup> hosted over a month after the intervention, the installation at Whippersnapper, an artist-run gallery, was perhaps the most dialogical site of the project. Before one entered the gallery, the connection to

the intervention was already established through strong visual signifiers. One of them was a segment of the ship, which hung above the outside of the door and expanded the concept of turning the audience into participants by welcoming them into yet another permutation of the ship. The framing of the windows with red curtains was another theatrical element, intended to invite "visitors to critically examine 'mass arrival' discourse as a form of state-sponsored theatre" (Miranda and Méndez). Once inside, the visitors were encouraged to navigate through and interact with loads of textual and visual information either plastered on the walls or displayed on video screens. While three television sets displayed loops of past mass arrivals along with footage of the urban intervention, the walls behind them were entirely covered with black-and-white printouts of news and images concerning these arrivals. These juxtapositions incited visitors to draw comparisons between other historical mass arrivals and the one in question. As Miranda and Méndez pointed out, these comparisons stood in sharp contrast to another wall, also covered from floor to ceiling but with texts primarily consisting of excerpts from *Canada: A People's History*. In spite of acknowledging the violence of Canada's colonial history, the book tends to heroicize settlers and legitimize their mass arrivals.



Farrah Miranda engaging with an audience member at the opening reception of the exhibition portion of *Mass Arrival: The Intervention* (2013), which took place at Toronto's Whippersnapper Gallery on 12 September 2013.

Photo by Mohammad Rezaei, courtesy of Farrah Miranda

Yet another wall provided space for direct dialogue by inviting visitors to respond in red pencil to the virtual dialogues that had taken place in response to the urban intervention, materialized here in the form of printed and displayed messages that had been posted on social media and sent via email. One fourth of the written comments (which displayed the identity of the writer) sided with the tightening of borders; some of them even found the piece racist.<sup>8</sup> As critical race theorists have pointed out, any project whose goal is to make whiteness visible runs the risk of reifying it "as a fixed category of experience" (Fine et al. xi). A few responses proved this essentializing danger to be true. Thus, while the piece clearly steered the boat toward a decolonial gesture, it took risks and allowed the audience to find their own way through the waves of information, form their own positions, and intervene in the debate. *Mass Arrival's* performativity also stemmed from its dialogi-



cal and spectacular theatricality and the ways in which it was able to produce various live and virtual sites of engagement, as well as distinct yet interconnected socio-critical spaces.

In addition, the urban intervention also had a ring of site specificity to it, as it took place right in front of The Bay, a location loaded with colonial signifiers. While using the department store as a backdrop may not have effectively resignified its traditional cultural capital, it may have, for those who knew its history, helped to situate the critique of mass arrivals within a broader historical frame. Most importantly, the staging of an intervention in Toronto that "celebrated" the anniversary of a contentious incident taking place in British Columbia begs a question concerning the city's performativity. The choice to turn the racially marked and colonially coded signifier of mass arrivals on its head in "the most ethnically diverse city in Canada" carries a number of implications (Scott 31). Not only does it serve as a means of constructing a broader decolonial critique of Canadian immigration policies in general and refugee law in particular, but it also activates certain dormant social tensions.

The first, as Harini Sivalingam reminds us, stems from the mobilizing power of the significant local Tamil population, demonstrated in the protests of early 2009 in the wake of more violence in Sri Lanka. The public perception of these protests was mixed, ranging from acceptance to blatant racism, with the latter often legitimized as concerns about obstruction of traffic flow and fear of homegrown terrorism (70).

The second tension, crucial to grappling with Toronto's performativity within the piece, has to do with the ways in which its diversity is lived, imagined, and packaged. In an insightful critique of Toronto's urban development, Laura Levin and Kim Solga posit that the city has been staged following a "creative script" that co-opts and "embraces diversity only to obscure the inequities, ambivalences, and outright hostilities true difference brings" (42). In other words, the construction of such a narrative necessitates that diversity be depoliticized and reduced to a product, often equated with creativity. In this sense, I argue that *Mass Arrival* not only performs an important decolonial gesture but also constitutes a major *departure* from the "creative script" of the city. The piece's spectacular yet confrontational political character radically differs from the glossy spectacles largely characteristic of urban installations that constitute corporate-sponsored events such as Nuit Blanche.

Under several layers of the creative-city script lies the notion of the Canadian mosaic as the "discursive and political foundation for official multiculturalism" (Smith 57). If Mason is correct in asserting that the arrival of the MV Sun Sea "activate[d] historical consciousness in regards to other mass arrivals" (8), I posit that *Mass Arrival* achieved that while making them strange, thereby exposing a long history of discriminatory practices that problematize the historical legitimacy of the Canadian mosaic. The issues the project raises reveal what the myth attempts to hide: that the "mosaic metaphor" (Smith 57) was a "framework" used "to organize ethnic and racial difference within a performance of national racial homogeneity," (39) which "served to both describe and contain ... diversity in the early decades of the twentieth-century" (37) but which still informs the current discourse of multiculturalism (57). Thus, Smith's argument is that the myth has not simply veiled in-

equalities; it has been instrumental in producing and maintaining them, as well as in securing white hegemony.

*The myth of multiculturalism has not simply veiled inequalities; it has been instrumental in producing and maintaining them, as well as in securing white hegemony.*

Nonetheless, can we (I, the artists, other reviewers) argue that *Mass Arrival* managed to make this invisible hegemony visible without asking: To whom? As Sara Ahmed reminds us, "whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard not to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere." Would her claim imply that this process of making whiteness visible renders "visible" and "non-visible minorities" passive agents in the making of a more decolonial world? And does the exposure of white privilege constitute a decolonial action in itself? In an interview with Miranda (also a longtime activist with the immigrants' rights group No One Is Illegal), she revealed that she was initially surprised by what she deemed an unusual cooperation of the police with transgressive occupations of public space, yet she soon concluded that their cooperative stance must have resulted from the fact that the bodies obstructing traffic were white and from the participants' assertion that what they were doing was "art." Although this may seem too simplistic an explanation, the fact is that white privilege was deployed toward the undoing of itself. But unlike community-based practices where minority people are led solely by white folks, the action was conceptualized and orchestrated by minority women. In this sense, the project not only performed a decolonial gesture by foregrounding the contingency of white privilege, racism, and colonial practices but also relied on a decolonial creative process. Both the (up until then) invisible majority and those deliberately designated on the basis of visibility and non-visibility were thus reminded that racism needs to be seen as a structural issue, not simply a psychological one, and that it will take a lot more collaboration and dialogue to envision and fight for systemic and epistemic changes. Although both white settlers and the minorities (soon to be majorities in the case of Toronto) arrived in boats, they were never the same; in fact, we are still far from being in the same boat as long as the ocean remains the same.

## Notes

- 1 See Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City." This concept has become an axiom within a number of disciplines dealing with issues of socio-spatial justice. It envisions a post-Marxist city and urban life, centred on the rights of its residents (with emphasis on its working class) to inhabit, appropriate, and produce a new city—a city that would be based on use rather than exchange value.
- 2 According to Michael Keefer this scenario began to shift after 9/11 and more radically since 2006 under the current administration.
- 3 I learned about the piece through a presentation made at the Symposium on Decolonial Aesthetics from the Americas, organized



by the e-fagia visual and media arts organization and held at the University of Toronto in October 2013. My research is based on archives, reviews, and interviews.

- 4 See both works by Walter Mignolo.
- 5 For greater details on changes to refugee law see "Concerns about Changes to the Refugee Determination System" by the Canadian Council for Refugees.
- 6 Detailed descriptions of the project were gathered in interview with Farrah Miranda.
- 7 This conversation was held at the multi-use arts space Double Double Land on 18 September 2013.
- 8 These conclusions are drawn from correspondence and social network communication emailed to me by Miranda.

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