

Visa Points and Bell Curves^[1] *“Mass Arrivals” and migrants^[2]* *who don't make the grade^[2]*

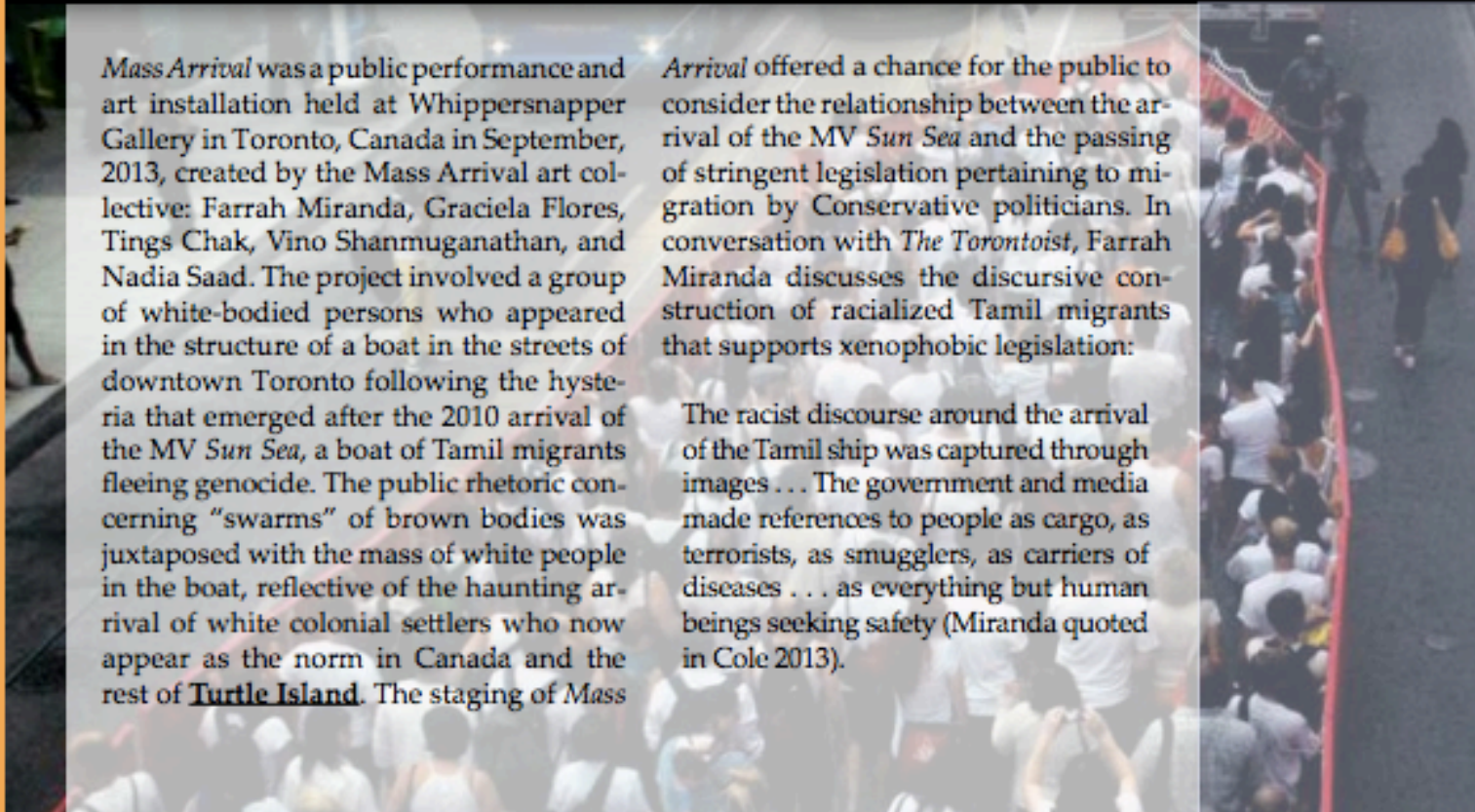
WRITTEN BY TARA ATLURI, WITH INSIGHTS FROM FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA

The mass, the multitude, the rabble, the people. They gather, they rise, dialogue, dissent, acting as spectacles of fascination and fear. In times of common-sense individualism, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the most ultimate freedom lies in the freedom not to be harassed; so he asks, what can we learn from considering forms of collective assembly (Žižek 2008)?

Mass Arrival was a public performance and art installation held at Whippersnapper Gallery in Toronto, Canada in September, 2013, created by the Mass Arrival art collective: Farrah Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan, and Nadia Saad. The project involved a group of white-bodied persons who appeared in the structure of a boat in the streets of downtown Toronto following the hysteria that emerged after the 2010 arrival of the MV *Sun Sea*, a boat of Tamil migrants fleeing genocide. The public rhetoric concerning “swarms” of brown bodies was juxtaposed with the mass of white people in the boat, reflective of the haunting arrival of white colonial settlers who now appear as the norm in Canada and the rest of Turtle Island. The staging of *Mass*

Arrival offered a chance for the public to consider the relationship between the arrival of the MV *Sun Sea* and the passing of stringent legislation pertaining to migration by Conservative politicians. In conversation with *The Torontoist*, Farrah Miranda discusses the discursive construction of racialized Tamil migrants that supports xenophobic legislation:

The racist discourse around the arrival of the Tamil ship was captured through images . . . The government and media made references to people as cargo, as terrorists, as smugglers, as carriers of diseases . . . as everything but human beings seeking safety (Miranda quoted in Cole 2013).



The racialized, impoverished Tamil migrant was simply another “boat person,” part of the cargo, associated with a rabble that lies beyond the human.

SYMPTOMS AND SETTLERS

Global capitalism, white settler ideology, and the damned body of the migrant

In a state governed by **common-sense neoliberalism**, high security brought about by the global “war on terror,” and times of political conservatism the migrant becomes an example of a perpetually excluded marginalia. The experience of a migrant body in a neoliberal state finds resonance in Žižek’s theorization of the symptom. As follows, he states:

A symptom, however, is an element which—although the non-realization of the universal principle in it appears to hinge on contingent circumstances has to remain an exception, that is, the point of suspension of the universal principle: if the universal principle were to apply also to this point, the universal system itself would disintegrate (Žižek 2008, 127).

What Žižek describes is the presence of the radically excluded: those who remain out of the bounds of meritocratic, capitalist structures, to the point that their basic rights to life are suspended. Drawing on Hegel’s work regarding the dialectics of

universalism and the symptom, Žižek proceeds:

... the inherent structural dynamic of civil society necessarily gives rise to a class which is excluded from its benefits (work, personal dignity, etc.)—a class deprived of elementary human rights, and therefore also exempt from duties towards society, an element within civil society which negates its universal principle, a kind of ‘non-Reason inherent in Reason itself—in short, its *symptom* ... (Žižek 2008, 127).

The arrival of the MV *Sun Sea* on Canadian shores highlighted the presence of an unspeakable symptom on “polite” white settler shores. From the colonial genocide of Aboriginals to the contemporary “war on terror” and increased production of stateless populations that exist within liminal spaces of humanity, fair has never been fair. Miranda states:

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.' 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' (Miranda 2014, 59).

It is perhaps interesting to think of the notion of the revolving door immigration policy in relation to Žižek's symptom, as a continually recurring feature of phantasmatic universalism that keeps mythologies of white secular capital in place.

There is, perhaps, a perpetual ghost that haunts the colonial landscape—a recurring haunting that appears like a monster in the mirror, revealing the racist rage lurking beneath the apparent image of peace and order.

Original acts of colonial genocide that cause the Aboriginal to be a perpetual symp-

tom gesture to the failures of Universalist multicultural mythology, in which "diversity" is celebrated as saleable exoticism (Žižek 1997). This "multicultural" marketing scheme occurs at the same time as growing numbers of Indigenous women go "missing," subject to brutal forms of sexual violence and ongoing racism. *Mass Arrival* visually carved out new markings on the landscape, leaving lingering images in the parchment that constitutes what Jacqui Alexander terms a palimpsest of colonial time and space (Alexander 2006).

ART SCHOOL IN THE STREETS

Public intellectual culture and public art

At the height of protests against the Euro zone's austerity measures, Slavoj Žižek suggested that the immediacy of political concerns should not be met



with an abandonment of the patient act of intellectual reflection. Rather, he discussed the importance of the use of Kant's idea of "public reason" in navigating ongoing political struggle (Žižek 2010). One might consider public art as a form of intellectual culture divorced from institutionalised education; while ivory towers are policed based on "citizenship" and high tuition costs, *Mass Arrival* was a philosophical questioning regarding one's ethical responsibility to respond to racism, presented to the general public in the streets.

Visual culture scholar Irit Rogoff discusses how curatorial and artistic practice offers an interesting model for thinking through some of the most pressing political issues of our time, such as national citizenship. Rogoff offers a poignant

questioning of how "smuggled" artistic practices comprising a huddled mass of ideas can lead to forms of "embodied criticality," which describes movement away from critique in favour of a more engaged criticality. Rogoff writes:

The term 'smuggling' here extends far beyond a series of adventurous gambits. It reflects the search for a practice that goes beyond conjunctures such as those that bring together 'art and politics,' or 'theory and practice,' or 'analysis and action' (Rogoff 2006, 1).

Rogoff suggests that criticality involves embodying a problem, not as an informed expert who feigns an authority that allows them to stand at a distance, but as a subject that lives within a problem.

The critique of the global “war on terror,” made from a place of theoretical inquiry, cannot account for the affective ways that “terror” comes to attach itself to Tamil migrants in Canada. Rogoff explains as follows:

While being able to exercise critical judgement is clearly important, it operates by providing a series of sign posts and warnings but does not actualise people’s inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it (Rogoff 2006, 1).

The ways the artists who produced *Mass Arrival* inhabited the issue of racist paranoia succeeded in reflecting upon the complex subject position of politicized artists, activists, and feminists in Canada.

MASS HYSTERIA AND HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER

The Parody of Whiteness

The arrival of the racialized subject on the shores of the white settler colony is a theatrical arrival, haunted by the constant traffic of migration, xenophobia, and deportation that defines Canadian political history. And yet, the re-staging of this moment through the mis-recognition of whiteness as foreign, as a mass

of undifferentiated rabble, illustrates the possibilities of performance-based art in making the familiar seem strange. *Mass Arrival* is a parody of both the racist panic that surrounded the MV *Sun Sea* and the first moment of colonial contact. Whiteness—marked, named, and amassed through the installation of large numbers of white bodies in a boat—comes to be spectacular in its humorous banality.

In his essay “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,” Sigmund Freud discusses the relationship between the joke and the collective unconscious. The joke serves to both reveal and conceal the unconscious anxiety that curtails the dominant order (Freud 1960, 5-106). If according to Freud, a slip of the tongue or joke reveals deeper libidinal desires and drives, one can speculate that in *Mass Arrival* nothing is as simple as it seems. The white man’s body, figured within the socio-symbolic as representative of the phallic order of white male colonial power, is made to appear foreign and out of place. The uhomeliness of the Tamil migrant, depicted in mainstream media representations and deemed by conservative public outcry as unwelcome, is juxtaposed with images of the white settler (who was also not welcomed with open arms by Indigenous populations).

Ann Pellegrini draws on Freud’s writings



between the tendentious joke and satisfaction to argue:

‘Tendentious’ jokes make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile in the face of an obstacle that stands in the way.) They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draws pleasure from a source, which the obstacle had made inaccessible (Pellegrini, 2001, 180).

Freud further writes that, “...the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud cited in Pellegrini 2001, 180). The pleasures of laughing at the strangeness of white bodies was made possible by *Mass Arrival*, leaving spectators to experience a shared laugh and following sigh at the continuous obstacle of unspoken racism that often undercuts political discourses around migration. Miranda also writes of the relationship between emotion and creative process:

In 2010 . . . *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 . . . 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 . . . In my experience, it’s in moments of deep feeling that creativity has the chance to emerge (Miranda 2014, 59).

As Pellegrini suggests while discussing the work of feminist performance artist Holly Hughes, “In the space of...embodied performance, laughter re-returns to the fresh work of renewing and remaking a social world” (Pellegrini, 2001, 189). The use of parody to unmask the banal truths of racism is strengthened by a resilient refusal to play the victim, and to laugh in the face of great odds. Indeed, comedy often borders on tragedy.

Welcome, home?!



TARA ATLURI has a PhD in Sociology and is currently a Lecturer at OCAD University in Toronto, Canada. She previously worked as a researcher with *Oecumene: Citizenship after Orientalism* at the Open University in the United Kingdom. As part of her involvement with *Oecumene* she conducted research regarding gender and social movements in the Indian subcontinent. She joined *Oecumene* as part of a postdoctoral project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

FARRAH-MARIE MIRANDA's artworks emphasize the power of ordinary people to enact change. Drawing on a decade of organizing within migrant justice movements, *Farrah-Marie* founded and co-directed *Mass Arrival* in 2013. The project mobilizes public interventions into the discourse of illegality surrounding migrant boat arrivals to the West. Acclaimed for its synthesis of performance, new media, and the law, *Mass Arrival* has exhibited internationally. Reviews of *Farrah-Marie*'s work have been featured in publications as diverse as *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Canadian Art Magazine*, *the Toronto Star*, *the Torontoist*, *FUSE Magazine*, *This Magazine* and in the anthology, *Wildfire: Art as Activism*. *Farrah-Marie*'s writing appears widely, including the book, *Art in the Wake of the Komagatamaru: Transpacific Migration, Race and Contemporary Art*.

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