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The Work of Contemporary Art and Commemoration: Reading Ali Kazimi's Fair Play (2014)

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In response to this issue's call to "engage aesthetic processes of remembering," this paper analyses *Fair Play* (2014), a stereoscopic 3-D cinema installation by Toronto-based filmmaker Ali Kazimi. Produced in conjunction with the centennial anniversary of the arrival and detainment of the *Komagata Maru* steamship in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, the installation engages in an act of critical commemoration by imagining the lives of members of the South Asian diaspora affected by this incident. I argue that by centering affect within the formal and conceptual framework of the installation, Kazimi produces a decolonial aesthetic that restructures our relationship to this past, bringing to the fore ways of living and knowing that had previously been devalued and violently erased by colonial agendas and neoliberal art historical critiques.

The 23rd of May 2014 marked the centennial anniversary of the journey of the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steamship chartered by Sikh businessman Gurdit Singh to carry 376 passengers—mostly Punjabi men and some women—from Hong Kong to Vancouver. The passengers seeking entry to Canada were barred from disembarking upon their arrival due to the "Continuous Journey" rule, a 1908 amendment to the Immigration Act. This rule enforced the arrival of migrants directly from their nation of origin, disproportionately affecting South Asians because, in 1914, there were no direct routes or arrangements between India and Canada.[1] The *Komagata Maru* and its passengers were detained in the Vancouver harbor for two months. Passengers were not told the reasons for their detention and were driven to the brink of starvation. The steamship was eventually forced to return to India where, upon arrival in Budge Budge, a port near Kolkata, passengers were shot, detained, or kept under surveillance. In the intervening years the plight of the *Komagata Maru* has been the subject of various acts of memory, including personal archival projects, art installations, works of theater and fiction, and documentaries that seek to trace how the incident resonates within discriminatory politics both then and now. Evidencing the aims to build Canada as a "white man's country," the legacy of the *Komagata Maru* "transcends the specific agendas and politics of both Canadian and Indian nation states to suggest a wider imperial network of domination and resistance."[2]

Toronto-based filmmaker Ali Kazimi produced *Fair Play* (2014), a stereoscopic 3D cinema installation, in conjunction with the centennial anniversary of the *Komagata Maru*. The installation calls into question the "fairness" of Canada's immigration laws and its myth of multicultural tolerance, challenging the problematic framing of Canada as a proud "nation of immigrants" and exposing the structural effects of exclusionary nation-building. Official multiculturalism, a federal policy developed through the 1970s and 1980s, supports "the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians," providing measures to protect against discrimination and ensure that citizens from marginalized groups "shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own

language."[3] However, it also asserts that multiculturalism is foundational to the fabric of the nation, obscuring earlier legalizations of racial discrimination and exclusion. Through ten silent vignettes, *Fair Play* imagines the lives of members of the South Asian diaspora affected by the incident of the *Komagata Maru*, which happens off screen. Kazimi's characters, imagined with the aid of archival materials, help him stage "[moments] that have no visual record."[4]

This essay examines the installation's decolonial aesthetics, placing *Fair Play* in the context of critical commemorations of the *Komagata Maru*. The use of the term *decolonial aesthetics* here references the penultimate issue of the now defunct *Fuse* magazine.[5] Editor Gina Badger and members of the arts collective e-fagia relay a framework for decolonial aesthetics, stating that the pairing of the terms *decolonial* and *aesthetics* "acknowledges and subverts the presence of colonial power and control in the realm of the senses."[6] A decolonial approach, they state, "refers to a theoretical, practical or methodological choice geared toward delinking aesthetics, at the epistemic level, from the discourse of colonialism that is embedded in modernity itself."[7] In *Fair Play*, Kazimi re-contextualizes the *Komagata Maru* by situating it within broader histories of South Asian immigration and activism in Canada. He further subverts the aesthetic and conceptual languages of Vancouver photoconceptualism, a regional "school" of photography that developed through artists' interests in forms of countercultural critique as they attempted to embed the social issues of the early stages of late capitalism in photographic form. Photoconceptualism came about in the context of the City of Vancouver's "rise" from a periphery to a major center for global finance and contemporary art, starting in the 1970s and moving through the 80s and 90s. In her recent book, *Engendering an Avant-Garde: The Unsettled Landscapes of Vancouver Photo-Conceptualism* (2018) Leah Modigliani applies pressure to the Vancouver School's conceptual origins, suggesting that they "[demonstrate] the tenacity of male European avant-garde tropes to replicate at the fringes of colonial empires, affirming hegemonic power relations even as they claimed to do otherwise."[8] By restaging histories that have been erased by hegemonic whiteness, capitalism, and neoliberalism, in an art language produced through these discursive frameworks, Kazimi notably undermines the power of photoconceptualism to flatten the "structures of feeling" and lived experiences of racial inequality. *Fair Play* exposes the damaging effects of empire that resonate psychically, spatially, and temporally, centering the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" as part of historical inquiry.[9] Examining how Kazimi embeds the human tolls of injustice in photographic form, I question what is at stake in telling the history of the *Komagata Maru* through contemporary art. How does Kazimi's approach challenge dominant constructions of art, nation, and empire? And what role can contemporary projects of memory play in restructuring "the very temporal relationship between the past and [those of us in the] present?"[10]

The *Komagata Maru* and South Asian Immigration in Canada

Fair Play is a key part of Kazimi's work on the *Komagata Maru*, which he has analyzed in a number of contexts, including the documentary film *Continuous Journey* (2004), the book *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (2012), and the video project (produced in collaboration with artists Richard Fung and John Greyson) *Rex vs. Singh* (2008). These projects make visible the complicated ways in which South Asians in Canada have been classified as not belonging to the nation. *Fair Play* was part of the exhibition *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru at the Surrey Art Gallery* (Surrey, British Columbia, Canada) from April 12 to June 15, 2014. The show opened concurrently with other critical commemoration projects organized by community groups, art galleries and museums, and scholars, including (but not limited to) a digital archive project at Simon Fraser University (komagatamarujourney.ca), online exhibitions by the Sikh Heritage Museum of Canada (shmc.ca), and the re-enactment of three plays written by English and Punjabi playwrights staged as a single production at the University of British Columbia and the Surrey Arts Centre.[11] *Ruptures in Arrival* examined the

enduring effects of the incident and its address in “official” histories. Until the 1990s the *Komagata Maru* was largely studied through the efforts of only a handful of scholars and through creative reimaginings by artists, playwrights, and fiction writers. Following these outputs, *Ruptures in Arrival* sought to examine the role of contemporary art within projects of memory. The central concern was how artistic representations of the *Komagata Maru* “[fit] into a larger context of contemporary art about group migration” and connect to “recent histories of transoceanic migration by ship,” such as the controversies surrounding the incidents from 2009 and 2010 of the *MV Ocean Lady and MV Sun Sea* (both transported Tamil asylum seekers and refugees from Sri Lanka to Canada).[12] Anne Ring Petersen writes that, in recent decades “migration has come ‘into art’ as a thematic and condition that many artists are engaging with.”[13] Contemporary artists relate notions of belonging, visibility/invisibility, and recognition through a range of aesthetic responses, transforming “the dominant order” imposed by national borders and global cultural flows.[14] *Fair Play* and *Ruptures in Arrival* are part of this artistic discourse on migration that intersects with the multiple constructions of nation, history, and identity that migratory movements and settlements put into flux. The installation pictures the conditions of South Asian diasporic belonging and signals to moments that have constituted South Asian Canadian as a political position.[15]

Kazimi asserts that the *Komagata Maru* was not an isolated incident of discrimination against South Asian migrants. It was, rather, symptomatic of federal policy that delineated the terms of “desirable” and “undesirable” citizenship and immigration, with the differentiation between these two categories predicated by colonial racism.[16] South Asian migration began en masse in the early nineteenth century through networks of indentured labor established between Britain’s colonies. Laborers were recruited by the British East India Company from impoverished provinces in the eastern and southern regions of the subcontinent and were sent overseas via contracts to work on sugar, rubber, and tea plantations in the Caribbean, South Africa, and the Pacific. Recruiters appealed to the migrants’ dire situations and their desire to provide for their families, promising that they could return after a short contract of a few years. In reality, most South Asian laborers were never able to return.[17]

The establishment of the British Raj in 1858 opened up new pathways for South Asian immigration to parts of the empire that were not directly part of the network of colonial labor. It was through these pathways that the first South Asian migrants arrived in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. The earliest migrants in Canada were veterans of the British Indian Army who made the harrowing journey from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) to Hong Kong and then to the ports of Vancouver and Victoria in the province of British Columbia. Immigration increased rapidly between the years 1904 and 1908, building from a total of 45 migrants in 1904 to 2,623 in 1908.[18] Upon arriving in Canada, South Asians faced an atmosphere of explicit anti-Asian hostility. As subjects of the British Empire their presence and claims to equal rights posed a threat to the declared superiority of whiteness as a condition of British and Canadian identity. White settler Canadians feared that this steady increase would drastically restrict their own opportunities for professional and social betterment, and the Canadian government therefore acted to limit the rights and freedoms of South Asians. Efforts to manage this population had to be carefully executed. While the British government had declared the common rights of its subjects throughout empire in theory, “In reality, coloured colonials had little protection against discriminatory treatment.”[19] Asserting legal independence as a self-governing dominion, the Canadian government was able to enact measures to curb immigration from India, such as removing direct routes between the two nations and instituting the “Continuous Journey” rule, as well as to disenfranchise already settled communities. “The implications of these actions were far-reaching. Until 1947, South Asians would remain excluded from the political process in British Columbia and from becoming [full] Canadian citizens.”[20]

South Asian communities have established strong activist networks despite

these imposed terms of “undesirable” subjectivity in both Canada and British India. They have vocally opposed the limits to their freedoms and have advocated for equal rights. According to Hugh J.M. Johnson, the *Komagata Maru* was in part a direct challenge to the barriers put in place to deny South Asians a sense of belonging within the complicated spaces of empire.[21] Other forms of protest and challenges to the nation’s racist legal policies have helped inform South Asian Canadian as a political position, one constituted through complicated histories and politics that overlap regional, national, and transnational scales.

Fair Play and other works on the *Komagata Maru* restage these historical formations, bringing into sharp focus the many ways South Asians have been rendered both visible and invisible in mainstream history and cultural discourse. By taking history as its subject, the installation tests the temporal parameters of the nation, which has, since its inception, always followed a linear, teleological historiography of progress, moving from an era of exclusion to an era of benevolent tolerance for the Other. Seeing the situations of the characters in the installation unfold in front of us—within “our” sense of historical time—compels contemporary viewers to feel their experiences and recognize their social positions as relational, tied to particular (constructed) terms of belonging and notions of citizenship, which are constantly in flux. Commemorative projects like *Fair Play* therefore do not simply “challenge dominant national histories that marginalize minorities and obscure realities of racism” (an act that risks leading to a false sense of righting a past that cannot be righted).[22] Rather, they reflect a longer view of history. Witnessing historical resonances in the present, contemporary art initiates a complex relationship with past and ongoing migrant struggles and conditions of being.

Photoconceptualism and Decolonial Aesthetics

In *Fair Play*, Kazimi portrays the psychic lives of his subjects as they witness the event and feel the after effects of the *Komagata Maru* from their positions on shore. The installation consists of a number of components, including the ten cinematic vignettes played in a video loop on a large screen, a wooden stereoscopic viewer with digitized archival images of colonial Punjab, and the first Canadian Red Ensign (the flag used between 1868 and 1921) draped on a wall. The actual image of the steamship is never included in the installation itself. Rather, it is hinted at through sound recordings of boat horns, seagulls, and other nondescript ocean noises that reverberate through the exhibition space, signaling the Vancouver harbor—the site of the incident—outside of each frame. Reading similar strategies in Kazimi’s documentary film *Continuous Journey*, which employed animated images to fill in archival gaps, Ayesha Hameed and Tamara Vukov suggest that “the plays of absence and presence … create a space of emergence for buried histories whose representational traces have been neglected or destroyed.”[23] Further, the formal negotiations between what is present and what is absent “mimic and actualize the virtual operations and workings of racialized exclusions in Canadian immigration practices.”[24] The characters staged within each frame carry the representational weights of these practices. They bring form to something that is often considered formless.

The ten cinematic vignettes in *Fair Play* are staged in a particular way and through a particular aesthetic language that heightens their affective qualities. Kazimi’s direct reference is the work of Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio, whose chiaroscuro techniques added intensity to already dramatic scenes. The reference to Baroque painting helps monumentalize the situations staged in the vignettes, amplifying quotidian scenes, such as those of a businessman sitting in his office, of a couple sitting on a bed in a sparsely furnished bedroom, or of two men silently sharing a meal, in a manner that attends to their historical significance. Building from this reference, the scenes staged in *Fair Play* relate to the conceptual properties of Vancouver photoconceptualism, defined by its proponents, artists Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace, as an avant-garde practice that defies genres and histories of art-making. Like the Baroque’s rejection of the measured rationality of Renaissance painting, photoconceptualism refused dominant regional themes and modes of art

making, experimenting with photography, cinematography, and other forms of media. The Vancouver artists rejected “an idealized local landscape in favour of an anti-theatrical image of Vancouver as a modern centre of industry,” seeking to recuperate “the avant-garde politics of the early twentieth century into the formal aspects of later twentieth century modernism.”[25] Wall, in particular, staged photographic scenes that reflected issues of urban decay and industrialism, blurring the boundaries between genres in his work, as well as evoking art historical references, such as Édouard Manet’s *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882) in his *Picture for Women* (1979), and Katsushika Hokusai’s *Yejiri Station, Province of Suruga* (c. 1832) in *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* (1990).

According to Modigliani, the Vancouver’s school’s dismissal of landscape in favor of images and concepts that were “dialectical” inscribed urban experiences as more viably modern, and following in the European avant-garde tradition, undoubtedly white and masculine. “Such a dismissal implicitly asserts a settler colonial perspective that works in the realm of culture to disempower [indigenous] legal claims to land rights by imagining such responses as nostalgic, old-fashioned, or not critical enough.”[26] It further stakes a representational claim to the kinds of urban spaces typically populated by immigrant communities. Wall’s photograph *Mimic* (1982), for example, depicts a confrontation between an East Asian man and a white heterosexual couple set against the post-industrial backdrop of a working-class neighborhood in Vancouver. The man in the couple attempts to taunt the East Asian man by imitating the shape of his eyes. For Wall, *Mimic* is not intended to be a statement against anti-Asian racism, though it depicts an instance of such. Instead, the photograph restages this encounter, which Wall states he witnessed as a bystander. The work takes on the conceptual framework of documentary street photography without regard for the genre’s focus on raising awareness for social issues. It aestheticizes the racism that Asian Canadians face in their daily lives, refusing to actually speak out against it. With an aim to stage artistic engagements with the realities of social life in an era of late capitalism, Wall’s brand of photoconceptualism excludes the very groups that have directly felt the effects of Vancouver’s emergence as a “global city” shaped through the import of capital and the export of highly aestheticized photographic images.

The photoconceptual tactics of *Fair Play* directly challenge these exclusions and insert new forms of historical knowledge, thereby subverting the impetus of photoconceptualism to only acknowledge social issues and historical conditions on a surface level. One particularly evocative frame locates two male figures inside a bunkhouse. While one man sleeps, his face hidden by shadows, the other sits by a window attempting to read a piece of paper—perhaps a letter from home or news about the detention of the *Komagata Maru*—with the aid of exterior lighting. The window casts long beams of light against the dilapidated wall and across the floor to reveal the meagre surroundings of these men. This scene stages the lived experiences of indentured labor; the cramped and dingy spaces of bunkhouses were the places in which South Asian laborers, who arrived in Canada to work in lumberyards or on farms in the interior of British Columbia, experienced a sense of nonbelonging. The demand for cheap labor in the province drove most of these men to leave their homes and take up residence in these unwelcoming spaces, where up to fifty workers could live together at one time. Here, South Asian migrants could save money by living communally (many sent money back to their families), a fact that white labor groups opposed because they believed that the presence and willingness of these men to work for meagre wages effectively threatened their livelihoods.[27] The realities of this double sense of alienation—both of being removed from the familiar surroundings of family and home, and of inhabiting a body whose presence was deemed troubling to the nation—are evoked here through the aesthetic encounter. The cinematic qualities of this scene embed affective connections that are not recounted in mainstream histories of South Asian immigration but are nonetheless required to fully understand this history.

Viewers are called to actively engage with this history, to sit with each silent frame as it passes by, and to acknowledge how narrative shapes our experience of time. Without understanding both aspects of feeling and knowing, the whole story of the *Komagata Maru* becomes distorted. More than simply producing an artful experience of a social reality, *Fair Play* probes the depths of diasporic consciousness to reframe narratives and representations of South Asian history and to view how they have been shaped through unbalanced practices of knowledge production. Kazimi constructs photoconceptualist images that use aesthetics to illustrate the potential for diaspora to challenge static and existing forms of representation. By allowing his characters to enact their own stories, visually highlighting the affective realities of their experiences, Kazimi does not set out to rewrite the history of the *Komagata Maru* but rather to illustrate ways of understanding that provide new insights and draw new connections across time and space. The decolonial aesthetics of *Fair Play*, which are witnessed on a cinematic loop, continuously reinscribe ways of living and knowing that had previously been devalued and violently erased by colonial agendas and neoliberal art historical critiques.

Contemporary Art and the Long View of History

Commemorating the histories of injustice is a task complicated by the fact that colonial violence can never be reversed. In May 2016 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a formal apology for the *Komagata Maru* from the House of Commons. In his speech, Trudeau acknowledged that “Just as we apologize for past wrongs, so too must we commit ourselves to positive action—to learning from the mistakes of the past, and to making sure that we never repeat them.”[28] Yet, as is evidenced by many of the projects marking the centennial anniversary of the *Komagata Maru*, this is a past that cannot easily be “learned from,” especially given ongoing discriminatory practices against immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Works like *Fair Play* acknowledge the impossibility of completely overcoming the past and instead picture and thereby propose new ways of knowing. Subverting the dominant aesthetic and conceptual languages of photoconceptualism, *Fair Play* stages a kind of decolonial aesthetics that can help us map new forms of relation between diasporic pasts, presents, and futures.

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1 Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland Steward Ltd., 1985), 23.

2 Anjali Gera Roy and Ajaya K. Sahoo, “The Journey of the Komagata Maru: National, Transnational, Diasporic,” *South Asian Diaspora* , 8.2 (2016): 87.

3 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, R.S.C., 1985, c. 24, 4th Supp. (Can.), http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-18.7/page-1.html.

4 Kazimi in Jordan Strom, “Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru,” in *Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru*, eds. Jordan Strom and Lisa Marshall (Surrey, BC: Surrey Art Gallery, 2015), 10.

5 *Fuse* was a Toronto-based publication that, from 1979 to 2013, formed the backbone of Canadian cultural criticism by offering a platform for engagements with contemporary art, media, and politics.

6 Gina Badger and e-fagia, “Editorial: States of Post-Coloniality/Decolonial Aesthetics,” *Fuse* 36.4 (Fall 2013): 2. e-fagia is a Toronto-based organization of artists with a mandate to create, produce, and disseminate visual and media art projects by contemporary Canadian and Latin American artists. This cited issue of *Fuse* was produced in collaboration with e-fagia and centers on discussions that took place during their cosponsored conference “Decolonial Aesthetics,” which took place in Toronto from October 10 to 12, 2013.

7 Badger and e-fagia, “Editorial,” 2.

8 Leah Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-Garde: The Unsettled Landscapes of Vancouver Photo-Conceptualism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 17.

9 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–135.

10 Christopher Lee, “Asian Canadian Critical Practice as Commemoration,” in *Cultural Grammars of Nation, Diaspora, and Indigeneity in Canada*, eds. Christine Kim, Sophie McCall, and Melina Baum Singer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 123.

11 Anne Murphy, “Performing the *Komagata Maru*: Theatre and the Work of Memory,” in *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature Canadienne*, 40.1 (2015): 46–48. The plays included in this production were *The Komagata Maru* by Sharon Pollock (1976; in English), *Kāmāgātā Mārū* by Ajmer Rode (1979; in Punjabi) and *Samundarī Sher Nāl Takkar* (The conflict with the *Sea Lion*) by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal (1989; in Punjabi).

12 Strom, “Ruptures in Arrival,” 8.

13 Anne Ring Petersen, *Migration into Art: Transcultural Identities and Art-making in a Globalised World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 10.

14 Petersen, *Migration*, 33.

15 The term “South Asian” refers to those who were born in or have ancestral ties to sub-Himalayan SAARC nations, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. I use this regrettably general term to acknowledge those from the many cultural, linguistic, and religious groups that make up the current demographics of South Asian Canadian.

16 Ali Kazimi, *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012), 8.

17 Kazimi, *Undesirables*, 21–22.

18 Buchignani et al., *Continuous Journey*, 7.

19 Hugh J. M. Johnson, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Colour Bar* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 7–8.

20 Sarjeet Singh Jagpal, *Becoming Canadians: Pioneer Sikhs in Their Own Words* (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 1994), 24.

21 Johnson, *The Voyage*, 9.

22 Lee, “Asian Canadian Critical Practice,” 131.

23 Ayesha Hameed and Tamara Vukov, “Animating Exclusions: Ali Kazimi’s Continuous Journey and the Virtualities of Racialized Exclusion,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (Spring 2007): 90.

24 Hameed and Vukov, “Animating Exclusions,” 90.

25 Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-Garde*, 3.

26 Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-Garde*, 12.

27 Kazimi, *Undesirables*, 32–33.

28 The 2016 apology significantly addressed the lack of official acknowledgement of the *Komagata Maru*. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave an unofficial apology to the Sikh community in Surrey, British Columbia. Yet many activists lobbying for redress for the *Komagata Maru* felt that this first apology was not sufficient. First, the incident did not just affect members of the Sikh community; some passengers on board the ship were Muslim and Hindu. And second, apologies for other injustices committed by the Canadian government, such as the internment of Japanese Canadians and the Chinese head tax, had been delivered from the House of Commons. A video of Trudeau’s later apology is available on the CBC. See Amy Husser, “Komagata Maru Apology: Ship’s Story Represents ‘Dark Chapter’ of Canada’s Past,” *CBC News*, May 17, 2016. Last access: August 22, 2019, URL: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/komagata-maru-backgrounder-apology-1.3584372.