

# Migration, Mobility, & Displacement

Vol. 6, 2023

Jonathan Nash - "Traces and Residues of Migrant Boat Journeys:  
Reading the 'MV Sun Sea' and 'Komagata Maru'" *Migration, Mobility, &  
Displacement* 6: 61- 77

---

Migration, Mobility, & Displacement is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal. It seeks to publish original and innovative scholarly articles, juried thematic essays from migrant advocacy groups and practitioners, and visual essays that speak to migration, mobility and displacement and that relate in diverse ways to the Asia-Pacific. The journal welcomes submissions from scholars and migrant advocacy groups that are publicly engaged, and who seek to address a range of issues facing migrants, mobile and displaced persons, and especially work which explores injustices and inequalities.

We welcome submissions and inquiries from prospective authors. Please visit our website ([journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/about/submissions](http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/about/submissions)), or contact the editor for more information.

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dr. Feng Xu  
capi@uvic.ca

**Published by**

The Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives  
University of Victoria  
3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC, V8P 5C2, Canada  
[journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/index](http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/index)



Licensed under Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International.  
[creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



# Traces and Residues of Migrant Boat Journeys: Reading the 'MV Sun Sea' and 'Komagata Maru'

Jonathan Nash

**Jonathan Nash** (University of Victoria) is a PhD candidate of English at the University of Victoria, whose research investigates how refugee spaces like refugee camps, detention centres, and migrant boats are represented and contested in refugee literature and comics. He is humbled and grateful to teach, learn, and research in the place of the Ləkʷəŋən and WS'ANEC' peoples.

---

## Abstract:

*Between 2009 and 2010, two Thai ships, the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady, brought 568 Tamil asylum seekers to Canada's West Coast. Border authorities seized the ships and detained their passengers as security threats. For many criticizing this anti-migrant response, the arrivals of these ships echoed that of the Komagata Maru in 1914. This steamship entered the West Coast's Vancouver harbour, but its 376 predominantly Sikh-Punjabi passengers were denied from disembarking as British subjects entering Canada. Scholarship on these incidents often use either the Komagata Maru as a lens for attending to the MV Sun Sea or vice versa. Part of the reason is that shortly after the government had apologized for its response to the Komagata Maru, it was detaining Tamil asylum seekers and arguing for their deportation. In suggesting their link far exceeds a temporal coincidence, this paper explores what makes it possible to think of the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru together. It argues that they are interlinked by an economy of affirmation and forgetting in Canadian public and political discourse. Furthermore, this economy frames how these boats are remembered unequally in service of the Canadian nation-state.*

## Introduction:

Between late 2009 and early 2010, two Thai cargo ships called the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady brought 568 Tamil asylum seekers across the Pacific to the West Coast of Canada. Despite the government's knowledge that the ships were on their way, the passengers on board were not met with a welcoming reception upon entering Canadian waters. Border authorities seized the ships and detained their passengers on the basis that they posed a national security threat. For many scholars and activists criticizing this anti-migrant response, the arrivals of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady echoed that of the Japanese steamship, the Komagata Maru. In 1914, the steamship entered the West Coast's Vancouver harbour, but its 376 predominantly Sikh-Punjabi passengers

were denied from disembarking as British subjects immigrating to Canada. Both events ended with the federal government of Canada implementing new controls to further restrict immigrants from landing in Canada.

Even with a separation by nearly a century, the arrivals of the Thai cargo ships and the Komagata Maru have become intimately interlinked in migration discourses in Canada. A quick Google search of either or both together will yield dozens of opinion pieces, stories, and articles about their impacts on what belonging means in the Canadian national imaginary and history. Their link presents a unique case in the study of migrant boat histories in the Canadian context because, as Ashley Bradimore and Harald Bauder suggest, “the arrival of ‘boat people’ [to Canada] happens so rarely that by the time a new boat arrives, memories of the previous boat have all but faded from societal memory” (2011, 639). Part of this link emerges from the coincidental arrival of the Tamil asylum seekers during Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s offering of apologies on behalf of the federal government for Canada’s anti-migrant response toward the Komagata Maru. At the same time the federal government was asserting that Canada is a welcoming place for the diversity and strength of future newcomers, it was detaining the asylum seekers and arguing for their deportation. As such, scholarship on these two migrant boat journeys often use either the Komagata Maru as a lens for attending to the MV Sun Sea or vice versa (Hasan et al 2020, Bhandar 2018, & Molnar 2016). In suggesting that their link far exceeds a temporal coincidence, this paper explores what in fact makes it possible to think of these two events together in the first place. How do these two migrant boat journeys from different times cross the trace of each other’s paths? What happens when we bring these migrant boat journeys into the same frame of analysis? It is my argument that not only are they interlinked by an economy of affirmation and forgetting in the public and political discourse about these events, but this economy frames how these boat journeys are remembered unequally in service of the stories the Canadian nation-state tells about itself.

Scholars thinking through particular migrant boat histories, such as that of the Komagata Maru (Dhamoon et al. 2019 & Mawani 2018) or the Vietnamese and Cambodian boat people (Troeng 2015 & Chan 2011), are disentangling these histories from the totalizing perspectives that anchor them. Recent work on the Komagata Maru, for example, is decentering the Canadian centric history of the vessel in order to better understand its links and stories across Pacific trajectories. The landing on Canada’s West Coast is neither the beginning nor the ending of the Komagata Maru’s story. Furthermore, as the editors of *Unmooring The Komagata Maru* write, “the journey of [this Japanese steamship] cannot be contained within a single national perspective, even a pro-Indian perspective” (Dhamoon et al. 2019, 9). The editors rightfully argue that its trajectory is imbricated with not only British imperialism taking place in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. It is imbricated with the formation of the Canadian nation-state and its borders and thus most importantly the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous nations from their lands. As they put it, Canada’s “land treaties processes and the persistent forms of regulation of immigration are not isolated decisions but [concomitant] practices of colonial possession” (2020, 9). In the same

edited volume, Nadia Hasan et al. read the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady through the history and reception of the Komagata Maru. They conclude that “colonial networks of power” both “connect” and “wedge” these disparate histories, exceptionalizing those narratives that render the nation-state as tolerant, multicultural, and diverse while marginalizing others (2020, 123). This paper builds on this prior scholarship and theorizing to understand the “unspoken intimacies” (Lowe 2015, 35) and connections between the newcomers represented by the Komagata Maru and the MV Sun Sea. Further, it examines these connections by attending to the migrant boat as cross-textual object that appears across an archive of displacement and holds a multitude of migrant histories and experiences. As such, this paper reads migrant journeys of different times and places alongside the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru without imposing a geo-spatial, national, or chronological hierarchy on them.

In both momentous journeys, the Canadian nation-state responded with anti-migrant discourses and enacted radical changes to its immigration policy. While the Komagata Maru has since been commemorated and the subject of two apologies from the Canadian government, Canada’s reception of the MV Sun Sea contradicted its apology and commitment to newcomers. Drawing from Lise Lowe’s theorisation of the liberal nation-state in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, this paper demonstrates how the Canadian nation-state conceals its anti-migrant responses to affirm its liberal values as a welcoming state for hard-working newcomers and immigrants. Reading the representation of the two migrant boat journeys across Stephen Harper’s apology and later 2011 re-election campaign, this paper also shows how the migrant boat as a cross-textual object reveals the contradictions and incoherencies of the liberal Canadian nation-state. Thus, this paper brings the scholarship of migration to a better understanding of how other economies of representation and discursive productions of migrant objects, other than the migrant body, affect state policy-making and public receptions of precarious migrants.

### **A Method for Reading Across Canada’s Liberal Economy of Affirmation and Forgetting**

I want to think through what Lisa Lowe calls a “liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting” (2015, 3) in relation to the stark distinctions made by the remembrance of the Komagata Maru and the public and governmental reception of the MV Sun Sea in Canada. For Lowe, the modern European and North American nation-state produces a liberal culture, government, and political economy that affirms narratives of freedom and progress from its founding violences of Black slavery, indentured servitude, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Ongoing beneath this progress, however, are new formations of these violences. Put another way, liberal political economies do not so much “contradict colonial rule but rather [accommodate] it” (2015, 15) by forgetting ongoing and historical colonial violences through narratives of progress. This economy advances ideals of universal human rights and individual freedoms while the state exercises its sovereignty through a monopoly on violence (i.e.

the police and the military) that infringe upon these rights and freedoms. Thus, the liberal nation state contains an incoherency that it must conceal to maintain its fictions of progress (Mbembe 2019, Sharpe 2016 & Browne 2015, Agamben 1998). This economy circulates the motifs and language of freedom and equality before the law in liberal narratives, discourses, and images. In doing so, it functions to elide histories and experiences of the founding violence, which is the condition of possibility for these ideals. Moreover, there are a multitude of incoherencies, which manifest differently and unequally, on the one hand, historically through the colonies and the Atlantic Slave Trade and, on the other hand, contemporarily through indefinite migrant detention and a military-carceral industrial complex targeting Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies globally. These incoherencies are often concealed through appeals to a universal humanism or humanitarian promises of which are rarely fulfilled (Walcott 2018, Puar 2017 & Walia 2013).

Lowe examines this economy within a colonial archive found predominantly in the Euro-American canon of political thought and archives holding government records, correspondences, and documents of colonial empire. She develops a method of “reading across” (2015, 6) to “[unsettle] the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development” (2015, 6). In reading across, Lowe is able to uncover the shared histories and experiences within the colonial archive that have been forgotten or concealed by the way this archive has been organized. Crucial to Lowe’s method is understanding how the organisation of these colonial archives as well as knowledge production about their objects disconnects and isolates these histories through the very process of archiving and producing knowledge. Put differently, the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting frames histories in ways that, to borrow the parlance of Judith Butler, construct certain versions of reality and exclude others (2009, xiii), ultimately disavowing the shared histories and experiences of colonialism. By bringing this method to the differently recorded histories of and cultural and public responses toward migrant boat journeys in Canada, we can not only reveal the commons between them but identify how the boat disrupts this economy.

My reading begins, firstly, within Prime Minister Harper’s apology for Canada’s anti-migrant response to the Komagata Maru and the way he framed the MV Sun Sea incident in his re-election campaign as justification for stronger immigration controls. Secondly, this paper explores how Bala’s *The Boat People* surfaces histories and memories of displacement common to Canada to resist what the Canadian nation-state desires to be forgotten. In reading across different cultural and political codifications of boat journeys in Canada, this paper identifies the migrant boat as a cross-textual object that reveals the incoherencies of the narratives affirming Canada as a welcoming place for newcomers while forgetting a long history of anti-migrant policies. In the case of the Komagata Maru and the MV Sun Sea, while they are separated by nearly a century, they arrive at the same place and encounter a nation-state that enacts colonial violence to keep them out. As the anecdote that introduces this paper suggests, the boat brings their histories, discourses, and narratives into proximity. Thus, reading across can engender novel

connections and routes for reading across and recovering a commons shared between different histories of boat journeys.

Furthermore, the migrant boat can be interpreted as a residual artifact in these discourses to better understand not only how liberal economies of affirmation and forgetting function to disconnect these histories but also how these connections across differing times and places endure and resist liberal economies. Indeed, these economies cannot erase or obscure entirely the incoherencies of the liberal nation-state because there always remains a trace or residue of what it desires to forget. And as much as this economy tries to foreclose the unspoken connections between different histories and experiences, their connections nevertheless can remain in the form of residual traces. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the residual as a “a remainder” after something is “subtracted” or taken away (“residual, n.” 2010). If forgetting is a kind of concealment or subtraction, then the residual is the remaining traces of what it tries to forget: the lived histories and experiences of its violences. Here, it is useful to attend to Lowe’s interpretation and modification of literary critic Raymond Williams’s terms “the residual” and “the emergent” (Williams 1977). As Lowe elaborates, while modern liberal nation-states in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made “declarations of independence and emancipation” (Lowe 2015, 19), the paradigms of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Indigenous dispossession, and South Asian indentured servitude persisted in muted or new formations. The residual describes the persistence of these older formations through their “[articulation] by and within” (Lowe 2015, 19) new or emergent formations. Put otherwise, as new formations of colonialism and global capitalism emerge—often under the liberal guise of emancipation and progress—they bear the residual of previous formations. For example, North-American liberal nation-states’ use of police and the industrial carceral complex contain the residual formations of colonial frontiers and slave economies even though they advertise these institutions as protecting and enforcing the law for the benefit of society (Mbembe 2019, Browne 2015, Razack 2002). By reading across with the migrant boat, this paper shows how the experiences and histories of the Komagata Maru are rearticulated through the MV Sun Sea’s and Ocean Lady’s encounters with the border of the Canadian nation-state.

### **The Landings of the MV Sun Sea and Komagata Maru:**

In the summer of 2010, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) seized the MV Sun Sea, a Thai cargo ship bringing 492 Tamil asylum seekers to the West Coast of British Columbia. The previous year, the MV Ocean Lady with 76 Tamil passengers was also seized (Molnar 2016). Like so many other forced migrant boat journeys that trace the history of the Pacific Ocean and Indian Sea, the Tamil migrants had made the impossible decision to leave their homes. They were escaping the catastrophic conclusion of a decades long civil war between the Sri Lanka government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Migrant boat journeys of this kind are not unique to either of Canada’s coasts, but the arrivals of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady engendered a particularly paranoid response by the Government of Canada as

well as the public. Recognizing these ships as “illegal” and the Tamil migrants as either “queue jumpers” or “terrorists” (Bradimore & Bauder 2011), the Immigration Minister of Canada Jason Kenney mobilised this landing as an opportunity to further securitize Canada’s borders and tighten its immigration policy. He introduced Bill C-4, “The Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada’s Immigration System Act,” which grossly extended the minister’s power to detain refugees for up to 12 months. This bill was highly criticized, and it contradicted not only Canada’s signed commitments to the UNCHR but its own Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Matas 2011, 52). With these extraordinary legal powers, the government subjected passengers to “prolonged detention, intensive interrogation and energetic efforts to exclude them from the refugee process” (“Sun Sea” 2015, 1). In some instances, the government contested asylum cases outright “if they succeeded in entering the refugee process” (“Sun Sea” 2015, 1). Overall, the arrival of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady sparked an anti-migrant response from the Government of Canada, which renewed a troubled narrative about Canada as a “nation of immigrants with a proud history and tradition of welcoming refugees” (Kenney qtd in Colin 2011, par. 4) and what it means to possess Canadian citizenship.

Despite the government’s extreme measures toward the Tamil refugees, barely two years prior in 2008 Prime Minister Harper offered a hallow apology to the South Asian and Sikh communities of British Columbia’s lower mainland for Canada’s similar anti-migrant response toward the Komagata Maru in 1914. His apology celebrated the contributions newcomers had and continue to have on the success and diversity of Canada. It also envisioned the nation as a welcoming and tolerant society. In the same place of the West Coast where the Tamil passengers landed, nearly a hundred years before, 364 Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu passengers were seeking immigration to the Dominion of Canada as British subjects. They believed their citizenship of British empire would grant them free passage to Canada. However, branded as criminals and vagrants by politicians and popular media (Roy 2017, 121), upon their arrival in Vancouver the British Columbian government barred the passengers from disembarking the ship. For a month, the passengers under the leadership of Gurdit Singh resisted the governments attempts to have the ship removed and tried to have their claims to rightful entry into Canada heard by the legal system. With no access to resources, the Komagata Maru was eventually forced to leave and was escorted out of the harbour where it would end its journey in Kolkata, India (Johnston 2006). The incident was formative for Canada, expanding its self-governing powers and creating new legal distinctions in British empire “between settler colonies and colonies of exploitation” (Almy 2014, 305). Yet, this is not what the incident is often remembered for. Instead, it is narrated as a testament to South Asian resilience and the progress and multiculturalism of the Canadian nation-state through both commemoration and apology discourses (Kwak 2019 & McElhinny 2016).

The responses by the Government of Canada to the arrival of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady articulate residual anti-migrant formations within the nation-state, which can be traced back to the Komagata Maru. The government’s response, further to reshaping Canadian immigration law to be even tougher, purposefully did not recognize

the status of the Tamil passengers as refugees. In the making of new laws to protect its sovereign borders and extend its powers against international agreements, it created new legal distinctions between illegal migrants, refugees, and smugglers. This echoes the history of the Komagata Maru in disturbing ways, especially after an apology that celebrated the strength and resilience of newcomers to Canadian society. This conceptualisation of the residual here opens a possible genealogical reading of Canada's liberalism in the context of immigration law. However, it is worth asking how the residual can disrupt, speak back to, or even be reclaimed in order to interrogate both old and contemporary formations of global capitalism and colonialism. The residual is much more than a signifier of a forgotten history or a relic of old liberal formations. It can be a force that ruptures the contradictory logics of modern Euro-American nation-state liberalism. By way of example, we can interrogate the liberal economy animating Harper's 2008 apology towards South Asian communities, coming to a better understanding of how it works to forget the colonial violence in its promotion of Canadian exceptionalism. Moreover, we can think through how "in retrospect" (Lowe 2015, 19) the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady become an unexpected and unintended residual within the discourse of Harper's apology. It is part of my argument that the migrant boat articulates these residues and traces in profound ways.

In his apology, Harper proclaims,

*"A lot of [...] promise stems from the confidence, the ideas, and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers drawn to our shores by the promise of a new and better life. Canada is renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants" (qtd. in Somani 2011, 16).*

Harper's contribution to apology discourses in Canada (Gaertner 2020, Coulthard 2014, Somani 2011), an apology which is reiterated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Parliament eight years later, circulates the language of Canada as a nation-state that promises freedom to all newcomers. It is important to note how a liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting organizes the logic of Harper's speech. Directed to a small audience of South Asian community members in Surrey, BC, Harper offers a vision for all Canadians going forward:

*"I also wish to acknowledge my own colleagues, Nina and Gurmant Grewal, Parliamentary Secretary Jim Abbot, and Minister Jason Kenney for the work they have done to help all Canadians come to terms with this sad chapter in our history. We cannot change the events of the past; we cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country, and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future." (qtd in Somani 2011, 16).*

In her analysis of Harper's apology, Alia Somani suggests that this speech functions as part of a "state mechanism" to manage "unruly minority subjects" (2011, 2). While I agree, I want to extend this notion to a larger Canadian nation-state mechanism



of managing migrant experiences and histories. With the above excerpt from the transcript of his speech, Harper's words construct Canada as having progressed into a multicultural nation-state. Thus, Harper's speech depends upon a temporal framing that can distinguish between a future-oriented Canada that has progressed from its violent, colonial past while positioning the violence of the Komagata Maru as a distant "historic event." With these "misdeeds" enclosed within a "sad chapter" of Canadian history, Harper's speech engenders an alibi for forgetting the violence of the historic event because there is nothing that can be done 'now.' After closing this chapter, Harper proceeds to emphasise, albeit vaguely, the desire of "unity" and "to build an even stronger Canada." This language of affirmation, then, attempts to persuade its listeners to not focus on injustices—either past or present—and instead focus on a universal project that is Canada. Lastly, the deliberate refusal by Harper to name anything specific about the arrival of the Komagata Maru, such as the people and communities who lived the experience or how it shaped Canadian immigration law, further commits these stories to forgetting.

How does this economy open possibilities for the nation-state to enact policies and laws that, when examined closely, seemingly contradict the values it affirms? Michel Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics* that freedom is not so much inherent to all persons under the liberal art of governing but rather produced by it. But in producing this freedom, liberal governing must also "arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals" (2008, 66). Therefore, inasmuch as Harper's apology produces freedom for all newcomers to Canada, this freedom is limited by the necessity to securitize and protect not just the individual within the bounds of the nation-state but the sovereign border itself. This would become apparent when two years after the apology, the Canadian government viewed the passengers of the MV Sun Sea as potential terrorist threats and disavowed the freedom and rights of the passengers to seek a "new life" in Canada. This turn away from promises of freedom and better life, however, relied on the justification that, in the words of Jason Kenney, "We are not going to be a doormat for the dangerous crime of human smuggling" (qtd in Freeze, 2011). An incoherency emerges, then, where the affirmation of freedom, hospitality, and human rights is conjoined with the denial of these very ideals to the Tamil newcomers by declaring the need to safe-guard them from dangerous migrants. The production of Canada as a safe haven for freedom and human rights paradoxically makes way for the capacity to eclipse, erase, or forget these values. Hence, liberalism can always accommodate the colonial legacies from which it claims to emancipate the individual.

The language of Prime Minister Harper's apology would juxtapose images of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady during his campaign for re-election in 2011. In the same breath that he remarked on the importance of newcomers and immigrants to Canadian identity and society, Harper advanced anti-migrant sentiment in TV ads, party pamphlets, and print media. Harper promised to "welcome new hardworking Canadians" as well as "crackdown" on "crooked" immigration ("Here for Canada" 2011, 34). His immigrant platform was predominantly advertised as securing Canada for law-abiding citizens and immigrants from "human smugglers," evoking those accusations that

labelled the Tamil refugees as “criminals,” “illegals” and “terrorists” (“Here for Canada” 2011, 34). Combating human smuggling became a cornerstone of Harper’s campaign, and after all was said and done, Harper and his Conservative Party of Canada won a majority government. With a newly formed parliament, Harper was able to successfully pass immigration reform through “The Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada’s Immigration System Act,” and begin to redefine what it meant to arrive in Canada as a precarious migrant or refugee. On the one hand, the success of his platform and its proceeding legislation reinforced the narrative that Canada was a place for “legitimate” or “authenticate” newcomers who had the potential to become “hardworking Canadians” within the gaze of the state. On the other hand, it also entrenched the idea that Canada was no place at all for newcomers who could not prove their authenticity or did not take legitimate means for arriving in Canada.

This either/or dichotomy is produced and maintained by the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting. In this economy where migrant identities are negotiated through narrative and law, ‘good migrants’ come to represent Canadian values whereas ‘bad migrants’ represent a threat or lack of these values. Take for example a commemoration event for the Komagata Maru that took place after Prime Minister Harper’s apology and campaign. During this event, a participant made a clear and unprompted distinction between the newcomers of the Komagata Maru and the Tamil Asylum seekers of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady. For the participant, the rejection of the passengers aboard the Komagata Maru by the Canadian Government was a mistake because they represented ‘good migrants’ who would benefit Canada, having served the British empire. The Tamil passengers, on the other hand, represented instead ‘bad migrants’ because they were “terrorists,” and therefore the Government’s response to detain and deport many of the asylum seekers was justified (Hasan et al. 2020). In this dichotomy, not only are the human stories and experiences of the Tamil passengers forgotten by association with ‘bad migrants,’ but the dichotomy conceals the shared histories and experiences of violence when encountering the Canadian nation-state.

Indeed, a century long history of anti-migrant representation and immigration reform that traces back, partially at least, to the Komagata Maru, resonating not only with the fragments of Harper’s apologies but his re-election campaign. Alongside his party’s campaign ads that promised to halt human smuggling, one ad stood out for its use of “an unidentified image of the Komagata Maru” (Hasan et al. 2020, 133). The appearance of the Komagata Maru in the ad demonstrates how the residual reveals the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting underpinning Harper’s apology and election discourses. They hinged upon a series of unresolvable incoherencies that the migrant boat renders present against a desire to conceal these incoherencies. Even though he apologised for Canada’s response to the Komagata Maru and branded Canada as a pro-migrant and diverse nation, the image of the Komagata Maru returns as an anti-migrant image linked to human smuggling. The takeaway here is that the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting is not efficient or precise. It is quite the opposite in fact, producing a plethora of ruptures, contradictions, and exceptions between policy, discourse, and history. In this case, it brings together two different encounters through the ongoing

making of the Canadian nation-state, separated by nearly a century. By attending to this discourse and apology, we can see these unspoken connections through the residue of the other and thus their respective narratives are entangled. In this way, the migrant boat surfaces as a transhistorical marker that brings into focus and relation these traces and residues.

### **“In another time, we were these people”: resisting and refusing national forgetting**

Nearly ten years after its landing, the Canadian Border Services Agency contracted the West Coast based company Canadian Maritime Engineering Ltd. to take apart the MV Sun Sea for 4.1 million dollars (Sciarpelletti 2019, par. 3). Learning of its fate, the Canadian Tamil Congress requested from the government a piece of the ship to keep for archival purposes. However, the government refused. With the dismantling of the ship decided, the story of the MV Sun Sea was framed as another sad chapter in history and the “end of an era” (Sciarpelletti 2019, par. 11) in the imaginary of Canadian news media. Both this discourse and the ship’s dismantling continue an overall Canadian prerogative to disappear and forget the voices, experiences, and histories of precarious migrants. Indeed, upon arrival, Canada swiftly hid away from public view via prisons the Tamil asylum seekers. As Carrie Dawson argues, Canada’s prison infrastructure and anti-migrant policy are deliberate in their attempts at making invisible and silent those the Canadian nation-state identifies as illegitimate migrants (Dawson 2016, 128-29). This making silent is further compounded by the difficulties for asylum seekers to speak out about their experiences and stories while simultaneously being tangled up within the legal processes of claiming asylum and lacking access to a platform and receptive audience (Nguyen 2018, 20). In the context of the Tamil asylum seekers in 2010, it has taken upwards of a decade for their asylum claims to be reviewed let alone accepted. These factors point to the ways in which the nation-state actively engineers forgetting through a multitude of strategies, which pose challenges to the documenting, archiving, and memorializing of these stories. What forms can a resistance to or even refusal of forgetting take?

This paper now turns to Sharon Bala’s novel *The Boat People* as both an important and instructive example of what speaking back to Canada’s liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting can look like. Focusing on the story of the MV Sun Sea and *Ocean Lady* from the perspective of its passengers, Bala’s novel is critical within the unfolding discourse about boat journeys to Canada in part because at its time of publication in 2018, the voices and experiences of the Tamil passengers were ignored by most accounts. In writing the novel, Bala sifted through a cultural and media archive to “provide a microphone” (2018, 391) to the Tamil asylum seekers and their stories, identities, and voices. “For all the press coverage and opinion pieces, details about the actual people who made the voyage were scant and the bread crumbs I found,” writes Bala, “were [...] sparring and bland” (2018, 392). While *The Boat People* begins with the story of the Tamil asylum seekers’ arrival to the West Coast of Canada, it links this incident to

a much longer history of migration and displacement within the makings of Canadian national belonging. These histories and their stories, however, are not framed through official documentation or state sanctioned narratives. Instead, they emerge through the family storytelling of its central characters: Mahindan, a Tamil asylum seeker; Priya, a second-generation Tamil Canadian; and Grace, a third-generation Japanese Canadian. These characters are intertwined not only by their encounter with the boat in the novel but their own familial histories and memories of displacement and migration by boat to Canada. By threading together their family stories through the image of the boat, Bala engenders novel connections between different histories of migration in order to make sense and articulate the events of the MV Sun Sea and Ocean Lady when the voices and testimonies of their passengers have been made silent and invisible.

Across the novel, Priya's and Grace's forgotten family stories and memories surface alongside the boat. As she works on Mahindan's case, for example, Priya begins to reconnect with her Tamil roots. While she knew the stories of how her mother and father came to Canada, "Uncle's history was fuzzier" (2018, 224). Curious one Christmas evening, she asks Uncle, "Do you ever miss Sri Lanka [...] since coming to Canada" (2018, 224)? Uncle begins to tell Priya stories about what it was like growing up as a Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Much like Mahindan and the other asylum seekers, Uncle's story is one of displacement, as he recounts the transformation of Ceylon into Sri Lanka and the rise of Sinhalese supremacy in 1972. Ostracized, her family was forced to leave their homes behind in Colombo and take a boat to the northernmost city, Jaffna. He tells Priya, "That was their plan, you know [...] They wanted us to leave the capital. They were the ones who arranged for the boat. They wanted all the Tamils in one small corner, trapped like animals" (2018, 230). Much later in the novel, Uncle confesses to Priya that "there was more to the story" (2018, 313). Although her parents chose to emigrate to Canada to avoid the burgeoning conflict between the Sinhalese and the LTTE, Uncle stayed behind to join the resistance. He imagined the possibility of an independent Tamil state, but he was not prepared for the violence that would unfold the years following. These memories remain painful for Uncle to reveal and for Priya to learn. Yet, they necessarily complicate the either/or dichotomy 'bad migrants' and 'good migrants' disseminated by the media and the asylum adjudication process. Before her Uncle's story, Priya had been using this logic to navigate her own diaspora identity as well as her clients' stories of displacement.

Similarly for Grace, her usually silent mother Kumi who suffers from Alzheimer's becomes a storyteller after the arrival of the migrant boat. Unlike Priya, however, Grace resists Kumi and her stories for much of the novel. After hearing about how the Canadian nation-state detained the Tamil asylum seekers, Kumi remembers starkly her experiences of internment as Japanese Canadians during WWII alongside her mother and father. She wants to return to her childhood home that was stolen by the Canadian nation-state, and she tries to find the official deeds in Grace's attic to no avail. Grace tells her mother to stop with this new obsession, but Kumi responds, "They took everything from us. Our homes, our jobs, our dignity [...] Our childhoods" (2018, 52). Grace continues to be dismissive toward Kumi and believes that they should be

grateful for what they have now. Nevertheless, Kumi continues to recount their family's history to Grace and her grandkids because she wants them to keep this memory of the family alive. Toward the end of the novel, Kumi's memory and mind fade even further from Alzheimer's, and she is unable to finish these stories. Although we never see Grace change her disposition, Kumi's stories and voice become a residual formation in Grace's own memories after Kumi is gone. While adjudicating the final Tamil asylum claim in the novel, a memory of Kumi's voice says: "in another time, we were these people" (2018, 375).

Kumi's words along with the title of the novel—the boat people—gesture toward a multitude of histories outside its text and thus demonstrates how the migrant boat becomes a cross-textual object that bears the residues and races of many stories of forced displacement. To be sure, the title evokes the pejorative "boat people," a noun commonly associated with the history of the Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants to North America. This term was used to categorize and differentiate these people in order for the nation-state to avoid recognizing them as refugees within the cultural imaginary, concealing its own responsibilities and duties—namely contributing to the displacement of millions in the region of the South Pacific (Tsamenyi, 1983). In today's parlance, the term has shifted from connoting the ineligible or inadequate to connoting the illegal. Bala resists this pejorative language by opening the words up to include and make present a multitude of experiences and stories, and as such "the boat people" becomes a cacophonous, multiplicitous, and plural image that creates a commons between differing experiences and histories of Pacific journeys.

On August 13, 2020 in front of the BC Legislature, human rights activist and Liberal MP Gary Anandasangaree held a small commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the *MV Sun Sea's* arrival. A little under a hundred people attended, including representatives of the Liberal and NDP parties of Canada and members of the Tamil community. During the event, Tamil asylum seekers shared their stories and their visions of a more just and welcoming future for refugees in Canada. Alongside these voices, some politicians lamented Canada's discriminatory response to the 492 passengers and reiterated the country's commitment to supporting refugees globally. In one such speech, NDP MP Laurel Collins reflected on what this event meant for Canada:

Anniversaries give us an opportunity to pause, to reflect, and to acknowledge—and this is an important moment for us to learn from the stories that we've heard today—to recognize the hardship that asylum seekers face but also to acknowledge the resilience and the value that asylum seekers embody and bring to Canada. Today's also an important moment to pause and to recommit ourselves to learning from our shared history and also most importantly to ensure that we are on the right side of history moving forward [...] Canada must do better. We must do better. ("MV SUN SEA 10th Anniversary...")

Although her short speech was not prefaced as an apology, it nevertheless rearticulates the language and narrative of Prime Minister Harper's apology for the *Komagata Maru* discussed above. Much like Harper's discourse, Collins evokes a notion of a unified

Canada through the pronouns “we” and “us,” progressing from a “shared history” to “move forward” toward seemingly a better future. As I have argued in this paper, these stories of boat journeys and the nation-state’s responses continue to be framed through a liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting, which often conceal, elide, or evade both historical and ongoing state violence. In the case of Collins’ speech, as well intended as her words might be, they borrow from this economy and thus risk displacing the story of the *MV Sun Sea* and its passengers to a distant past in order to affirm a cohesive and progressive narrative about Canada. In stark contrast, one Tamil refugee who continues to make his way through a slow immigration process, Piranavan Thangavel, remarked during the event: “people are still waiting for their permanent residency [...] I don’t know why it takes so long” (“MV SUN SEA 10th Anniversary...”). In an interview with the news paper the *Tamil Guardian*, Thangavel explained further that “I am happy to be here [...] but I can’t move on until I get my permanent residency” (quoted in “10 years later”). In reiterating this notion of moving forward, the Canadian imaginary downplays the ways in which the nation-state continues to implement or uphold violent policy and bureaucratic structures that inhibit many precarious migrants who now call Canada home from “moving on.”



## References:

- “10 years later MV Sun Sea’s Tamil refugees continue to be failed by Canada.” *Tamil Guardian*, September 7, 2020. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/10-years-later-mv-sun-sea%E2%80%99s-tamil-refugees-continue-be-failed-canada%C2%A0>
- “MV SUN SEA 10th Anniversary Victoria BC Canada 13 August 2020.” Recorded live via Zoom August 13, 2020. Published to YouTube September 24, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jb-SJty8MQ>
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford University Press.
- Almy, Ruth L. 2018. “‘More Hateful Because of Its Hypocrisy’: Indians, Britain and Canadian Law in the Komagata Maru Incident of 1914.” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46 (2): 304–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1438964>.
- Bala, Sharon. 2018. *The Boat People*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Bhandar, Davina. 2018. “Arrivals: Marking Time.” *BC Studies* 200: 107–10. <https://doi.org/10.14288/bcs.v0i200.191466>.
- Bradimore, Ashley, and Harald Bauder. 2012. “Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People: Tamil Refugee Migration in the Newsprint Media.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (4): 637–61. <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2011v36n4a2466>.
- Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark Matters: On The Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso.
- Chan, Yuk Wah. 2011. “Revisiting the Vietnamese Refugee Era: An Asian Perspective from Hong Kong.” In *The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora Revisiting the Boat People*, 1–17. Routledge.
- Coulthard, Glen. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minnesota Press.
- Dawson, Carrie. 2016. “In Plain Sight: Documenting Immigration Detention in Canada.” *Migration, Mobility and Displacement* 2 (2): 126–140. <https://doi.org/10.18357/mmd22201615451>
- Dhamoon, Rita Kaur, Davina Bhandar, Renisa Mawani, and Satwinder Kaur Bains, eds. 2019. *Unmooring the Komagata Maru: Charting Colonial Trajectories*. UBC Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978 - 1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Picador.
- Freeze, Colin. 2011. “Was Another Tamil Ship Really Headed for Canada? Don’t Ask Jason Kenney.” *The Globe and Mail*, July 22, 2011. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-notebook/was-another-tamil-ship-really-headed-for-canada-dont-ask-jason-kenney/article616162/>.

- Gaertner, David. 2020. *The Theatre of Regret: Literature, Art, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Canada*. University of British Columbia Press.
- Hasan, Nadia, Sailaja Krishnamurti, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nayani Thiyagarajah, and Nishant Upadhyay. 2020. "Borders, Boats, and Brown Bodies: Reading Tamil 'Irregular Arrivals' through the History of the Komagata Maru." In *Unmooring The Komagata Maru: Charting Colonial Trajectories*, 121–40. UBC Press.
- "Here for Canada: Stephen Harper's Low-Tax Plan for Jobs and Economic Growth." 2011. *Progressive Conservative Party of Canada*.
- Johnston, Hugh. 2006. "Komagata Maru." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/komagata-maru>.
- Kwak, Laura J. 2017. "Race, Apology, and the Conservative Ethnic Media Strategy: Representing Asian Canadians in the 2011 Federal Election Campaign" 43 (2): 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.17953/aj.43.2.79-98>.
- Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press.
- Mannik, Lynda, ed. 2016. *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*. Vol. 35. Forced Migration. Berghahn Books.
- Matas, David. 2011. "Asylum Policy Debate: Protecting Boat People." *Refuge* 28 (2): 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.36475>.
- Mawani, Renisa. 2018. *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire*. Duke University Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Duke University Press.
- McElhinny, Bonnie. 2016. "Reparations and Racism, Discourse and Diversity: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the Canadian Age of Apologies." *Language & Communication* 51 (September): 50–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2016.07.003>.
- Molnar, Petra. n.d. "The Boy on the Beach: The Fragility of Canada's Discourses on the Syrian Refugee 'Crisis.'" *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 4 (1): 67–75. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cont.2016.040106>.
- Molnar, Petra. 2016. "Immigration Detention in Canada." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/immigration-detention>.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2018. *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. Abrams Press.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2017. *The Right To Maim: Debility, Capacity, and Disability*. Duke University Press.
- Razack, Sherene H., ed. 2002. *Race, Space, and The Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*. Between The Lines.



- "residual, n." 2021. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Roy, Anjali Gera. 2017. *Imperialism and Sikh Migration: The Komagata Maru Incident*. Routledge.
- Sciarpelletti, Laura. 2019. "After 9 years idle, MV Sun Sea heads to Nanaimo, B.C., to be dismantled." *CBC News*, August 30, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/after-9-years-idle-mv-sun-sea-is-removed-from-fraser-river-waters-for-dismantling-1.5265959>
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.
- Somani, Alia. 2011. "The Apology and Its Aftermath: National Atonement or the Management of Minorities?" *Postcolonial Text* 6 (1): 1–18.
- "Sun Sea: Five Years Later." 2015. Conseil canadien pour les réfugiés Canadian Council for Refugees. <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/sun-sea-five-years-later.pdf>.
- Troeung, Y-Dang. n.d. "Buried History and Transpacific Pedagogy: Teaching the Vietnamese Boat People's Hong Kong Passage." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 46 (2): 239–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2015.0014>.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. 2018. *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Insomniac Press.
- Walia, Harsha. 2013. *Undoing Border Imperialism*. AK Press & The Institute for Anarchist Studies.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford Paperbacks.