

What was the Komagata Maru?

- The Komagata Maru was a ship sailed by 376 passengers mostly from Punjab, travelling from Hong Kong to Shanghai, Moji to Yokohama, all the way to x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ territories ("Vancouver") on May 23rd 1914, as an act of ongoing resistance to Canada's sovereignty.
 - The passengers that left Punjab on the Komagata Maru were not a uniform group. Some were immigrants, some were political activists - they had a range of political and religious beliefs.
- The journey made by these passengers actively challenged the discriminatory amendments to Canada's Immigration Act that required migrants arrive by means of a "continuous journey" (meaning you could not enter unless you arrived directly from the lands which you were born) which was put in place to target, limit, and eventually stop migration from India to the lands now known as "Canada"
- The passengers were forcibly detained in the "Vancouver" harbour in treacherous living conditions and faced continual violence by police and government officials for over two months until July 23, 1914, they were denied entry and turned away
- When passengers arrived in Calcutta in September 1914 after this devastating journey, they were met with further violence as British 'authorities' deemed them undesirables who engaged in anticolonial activities overseas, who would only bring anticolonial ideas back to India
- On September 26, 1914, the British 'authorities' and Bengal police began executing passengers upon their arrival, directly murdering at a minimum 26 people and wounding many more (a horrifying event labelled the "Budge Budge Massacre")

The Complex History of the Komagata Maru

Based on "Specters of Indigeneity" by Renisa Mawani and "White Canada Forever?" Lecture by Georgia Sitara

Canada's ongoing sovereignty Project

The Komagata Maru is a story of migration that is inseparable from the ongoing process of dispossessing Indigenous peoples. It is integral to understand the denial of access of the Komagata Maru and Canada's Immigration Act as interlocking with the ongoing process of colonization on Turtle Island. Moreover, by excluding British-Indians Canada simultaneously attempts to supersede Indigenous law and sovereignty by working to represent themselves as the "new natives." In other words, by gatekeeping British-Indians, Canada (as per usual) attempts to give themselves constructed authority over Indigenous lands, working to grant themselves sovereignty by producing a fictional "indigeneity" to these lands with the self-proclaimed right to say who belongs and who does not, therefore disrespecting and disregarding Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

"Densely Knotted Histories" (Mawani, p. 371)

The history of the Komagata Maru is entirely knotted. This means it is not a single story or one nation's history, but rather, transnational stories and intertwined histories (plural!) tied together through "seemingly distinct colonial projects" (Mawani, p.371). Moreover, these histories and narratives are not confined to the constructed borders of a single nation. They are histories which span across and interconnect India, South Africa, the United States, Britain, and Canada, producing multiple lived experiences and ongoing consequences.

Debates of Racial Inclusion and Exclusion

As the British-Indians aboard the Komagata Maru challenged Canada's racial exclusion by demanding that Britain live up to its claim for rights of mobility across the Empire as all other British subjects, debates of who could belong in "Canada" ensued within colonial courts. While Canada worked to exclude British-Indians, the passengers argued that they too belong in "Canada" as they are "akin to the English," (Mawani, p.385) claiming that they are 'superior' to Natives of Africa. In doing so, these active resisters of Canadian sovereignty also worked to create inclusion by means of excluding and inferiorizing peoples of Africa, directly placing themselves within the constructed racial hierarchy as superior along with the British, with the suggestion that they too are "Caucasian" (a constructed category). This is highly significant as we can see how racism cannot be separated from the construction of "race" itself as divisions of exclusion and inclusion are actively produced, and in asking for inclusion, one simultaneously excludes.

What makes this history so beautifully complex?



One for all: "The Mark of the Plural" (Memmi, p.85)

Since the Komagata Maru was one of many ships which came to Turtle Island (lands known as North America) to actively resist Canada's racist exclusions of fellow British subjects, Canada had come to better target and ensure exclusion by consistently creating closed loopholes within the colonial courts so that the next challengers would not get in. In this case, Canadian politicians and immigration officials knew that all 376 passengers would gain access if they allowed them to go in front of the colonial courts as individuals. Therefore Canada declared that they would do a "test case" in which only one passenger's case would determine the fate of all 376 British-Indians aboard. Thus, one man named Munshi Singh, a 26 year old farmer, stood in for all of the passengers. In doing so, not only did Canada deny all 376 people access based on the one man not fitting Canada's targeted Immigration Act requirements (that he must have \$200 in his possession, he did not engage in a "continuous journey" and Canada imposed the idea that he would inevitably be an "unskilled labourer") they also actively engaged in marking British-Indian bodies as a category of exclusion and inferiority, by producing one individual as representative of this entire group of people aboard. This is what Albert Memmi called "the Mark of the Plural".

Why is this history so important?



It tells us about the active production of "race" and the ways in which "race" is a regime of power

- The stories of the Komagata Maru showcase the ways in which "race" is constructed, constantly in production, generative, politicized, and debated.
- We can see this negotiation and production of "race" in the colonial courts debate over who can be included and excluded in "Canada." This debate showcases how "race" is both an expression and a result of power as the lines of who supposedly belongs and who does not are always in the process of being drawn and groups are actively manufactured to embody those divisions by assigning meanings onto their bodies. Thus, these assigned meanings both inform the lines of inclusion and exclusion and are produced by the lines of inclusion and exclusion.
- This history showcases "race" as a "modern strategy of power" outlining how "race" imposed, established, and "gave meaning to somatic, psychic, historical, and cultural differentiations, often through coercion and violent effect" (Mawani, p.392). Moreover, this history outlines how racialized meanings assigned to bodies are fictional and simultaneously significant as they are socially produced whilst bearing material consequences and outcomes. ie. the British-Indians aboard the Komagata Maru faced material outcomes due to imposed meanings constructed by the British who placed themselves at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, resulting in horrible living conditions, discrimination, violence against bodies, denial of access onto lands, and for many, even death upon their arrival to Calcutta for those aboard the Komagata Maru.
- During the active inferiorization of Natives of Africa by these British-Indians, we can also see how this regime of power is internalized as one situates one's self as inferior and superior in relation to other produced groups. In this case, these British-Indian's imagined themselves "through the disavowal of Blackness" (Mawani, p.395), showcasing the internalization of the imposed racial hierarchy that works to regulate one's self and each other.

It illustrates a history of the present

Not only do the consequences of excluding the British-Indians aboard the Komagata Maru continue today, but the combined process of racialized exclusion and the ongoing construction of Canada's supposed sovereignty as seen within this history has never ceased. This is the history of the present as we are still within the same structure of racialized exclusion and simultaneous efforts to supersede Indigenous sovereignty, as Canada continues to work to write their own sovereignty into the past, as though it has always existed and continues to.

Sources

Mawani, Renisa. "Specters of Indigeneity in British-Indian Migration, 1994." *Law and Society Review* 46.2 (2012): 369-403.

Memmi, Albert. *The colonizer and the colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.