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On Shitheads and Revolutionaries

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Some days I look around lonely, my memory a shallow well. This alienation I pin partly on colonial machinations that have twice displaced my ancestors over the last four generations. I cherish Mama's stories and the memories sometimes offered by my living kin. But who were the ones before? Because of these displacements—their quick succession and mortality's innate brevity—the lives and stories of my people are obscured.

I often wonder about those ancestors, the ones compelled to leave their homes to settle someone else's. It wasn't that long ago, probably around 1900-1920. When the rickety house I now live in was being built in Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki (colonially known as Halifax, Nova Scotia), my kin could have been leaving India for Uganda or Tanzania or Kenya. The Brits moved Indians they had already colonized around the empire, sometimes through indentureship, and my kin came from India to East Africa as settlers—railroad workers, labourers in resource-extraction projects, merchants, and a brown managerial class installed as a buffer between Black and white. Then, in the 1970s, my relatives came to Canada as refugees; during the Black nationalist independence movements in East Africa, Uganda's Idi Amin and others understood people of Indian descent to be part of the British colonial apparatus, which of course they were. Postcolonial independence in Uganda came with the expulsion of the Indians brought to Africa on British ships. It's a complicated lineage: we were displaced from India, settlers in East Africa, refugees from Uganda, and settlers in Canada.

I have no available grounding story older than the one of movement. Yet, living in the era of state-sponsored, essentializing multiculturalism in Canada, I am variously asked to explain my identity. I can essentialize too: all second-gen people in Canada carry immediate answers in their bodies, from eye rolls to practised explanations, for "Where are you from? No, FROM-from. Like really from."

Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) has said when she uses the word "identity" she puts it in scare quotes because it "is a poor substitute for relations": "It leans toward the individual and choice more than the collective, and it implies a property interest in said identity rather than necessarily requiring relations to exist" (TallBear 2021). This moves me to think about my own ancestry; I am hardly ever asked by Canadians to explain my relations. Maybe a good thing? The identity question has always been hard to answer, but the relations one even harder.

I thought the other day, maybe displacement is my identity. It's what I think of first, estranged from the other common aspects of "culture." I don't really have language, as the Gujarati we speak at home has been broken and poetically mended with Swahili, Hindi, and English. My digestion can't handle the traditional foods Mama cooks; each sushi roll I bring home earns me a swat. I'm estranged from religion, so I have no occasion

for the music, dance, and clothing so inextricably linked with it. The elders hold on longer to the bits they have so painstakingly gathered even while moving with nothing, the young'uns try to straddle what they've left and adapt to where they're going, and everyone who's here carries some sort of alienation from all the locations that have marked our bones.

Aside from these bits, I have no other hints about my ancestors who lived in India. Colonization erases collective memory. Its project is to disrupt lineages, and sometimes I feel like it has succeeded in my family. And yet my melanated skin certainly feels the absence of the abundant sun my ancestors could claim; I often wonder if this absence is related to my multiple sclerosis, a disease for which vitamin D deficiency is mysteriously a major factor. Displacement—what I am missing and what I don't know I am missing—is built into my system.

Are my ancestors, too?

Their story, and my identity, is importantly not only one of displacement. It is also one of settlement. Both of these processes connect me to my kin. For this story, displacement and settlement need to be considered together.

Displacement

"Displacement" feels easier to claim than settlement because the colonizers are to blame for the movement of people that bereft us of our lands and cultures. It's not me that chose to be born on stolen land, right? Phew! It's just that matter of structurally forced displacement through the theft of land and resources, calcified far into the next century through military might and famine. It's just that ongoing global atrocity of border imperialism, a term organizer Harsha Walia defines as "the processes 'by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained,' including through imperial subjugation, criminalization of migration, racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-mediated exploitation of labour" (Walia 2021, 2). My dad heard a story from another relative about why his grandfather jumped on a boat to Africa: he and his sister were impoverished children begging on a dock, no parents and no land under the British. This burning hunger and loneliness, if I take time to find it, still lives in my skin. Its memory passes on through generations in the way we treat each other: all my living Jiwas are impatient and opportunistic but brave, generous, and quick to laugh. My father's grandfather's sister coveted a passerby's bangles. He said—so audacious—"I'll bring you some bangles. I'll be right back," and found work on a British boat. Which then left for Africa.

As the story goes, more than half a century later he returned to India, used sketchy gossip networks to find his sister, and put gold bangles on her wrinkled wrists. It's told as a victorious story, almost pioneering in tone, but all I can feel are the gaps: Why were they impoverished? Where were their parents? Did he know what he was agreeing to? What did he endure during the long journey over kala pani? And what happened to her, a skinny little girl left on a dock? I imagine her sitting on mouldy wooden planks among countless other strangers, watching suited, booted legs pass day and night. I imagine him, fronting in languages he doesn't know. My imagining is informed by horrifying facts about imperial displacements, which I learned from books. But she survived into old age despite everything I can imagine. And so did he.

That kind of structured, global, forced displacement seems to leave little room for agency, which I understand as exercising power through choice. But that power is crucial to look for, especially when the available choices don't seem in any way related to freedom. Trying to find their agency in the choices they made humanizes those vast numbers of the dispossessed. They are not rendered powerless even while they are exploited due to their conditions; agency has always been practised by the oppressed, even up against the wall. It can be as monumental as running away; it can be as everyday as not speaking. It all matters, because agency is an exercise of inherent power. So, I am sure my ancestors practised agency in the process of displacement even under con-

strained choices. The stories of Indians leaving for other imperial outposts, the Caribbean, other parts of Africa, they animate the possibilities of my ancestors' choices that brought my body here today. Maybe one of them sold the land their parents grew up on for a piece of gold. Maybe they wore that legacy around their neck or hid it in their undergarments when they made the passage across vast waters to something new. Maybe they traded their homeland in that piece of gold for a dusty coffee plant, and maybe they made it grow in elsewhere's soil that they got to know over decades.

Other stories I know from living kin also only fit around the gaps that always fill them. My grandmother's friends—sometimes Black, sometimes mixed, and sometimes Indian, depending on when she tells this story and to whom—sheltered her in their hair salon when Idi Amin announced that Indians had ninety days to vacate, a single mother with nothing but her baby. On day ninety, she left on the very last Red Cross plane out of Uganda to Canada. Some Indians stayed regardless of the danger posed by racial violence, because their identities were tied to lands on which they could claim no ancestry but where they forged relations. Other lines of my family left earlier, because they could, their life in gold on their necks. Though these kin were well-off enough to employ Black "servants" in their homes, they saw collective anger against Indians building alongside resentment for the British imperials and they left, some back to South Asia and some to the UK or US. Some of these Indo-African migrants and refugees built community in Canada, like the one I grew up in. Some of them still feel wronged by Black people "back home" and they carry this into today. I know this anti-Black racism comes from embodied hurt with no historical or structural analysis, because it's also apparently okay and normal to love the royal family. Somehow the British Empire is not to blame, but those revolting against colonialism are. The hurt is a shade closer.

M.G. Vassanji has written a moving ouvre on this question of disasporic Indian-African identity, and Mahmood Mamdani has famously questioned a state of identity that is tied to states and their problematic nationalisms in his phrase "neither settler nor native" (Mamdani 2020). There is fierce debate among intellectuals, artists, and my uncles at the dinner table about whether we are Indians, Indo-Africans, Canadians, refugees, settlers. This is the diasporic condition: an identity that is always in between. But as Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker thoughtfully posit in their discussion of settler as a useful identity formation: "We want to focus on identity as something lived and embodied every day, and simultaneously something that can be mobilized to shape everything from states to systems of capital" (Battell Lowman and Barker 2025, 28). Identity is complex and is best used toward accountability in the present moment. I think there is some agency in that kind of imagining.

Settlement

Even in displacement, agency exists. However, there seems to be more agency connoted through "settlement" with its implication of an ongoing, purposeful violence. For many Canadians, it's a difficult reckoning to trace the movements of our ancestors that brought our bodies here to participate in settler colonialism on Indigenous lands. And for racialized refugees and coerced migrants, it may not be as easy to accept as part of the story of displacement.

Forced migration complicates the term "settler" for many folks, because it can eschew the important nuances of how people got t/here. I can easily imagine the defensive bristle of my living kin if they were to read this—what agency would they readily claim in the process of their displacement from East Africa? That bristling is self-protection, understandable when there is so much hurt and loss in the recent past. Movement often continues, and is continuous, for so many migrants.

It's worth thinking through how to encompass the nuances of movement in words that describe identity; for example, Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel uses "non-Black people of colour" because "non-European migrants do not have the power to bring with them their laws and customs, which they then apply to the rest of the

peoples living in Canada" (Vowel 2016, 16-17). She uses settler as shorthand for settler colonials, while acknowledging Black descendants of kidnapped and enslaved Africans fall outside of this categorization. Similarly, Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck uses "immigrant" because only settlers can "implement their own laws and understandings of the world onto stolen land" (Tuck n.d.). Métis scholar Emma LaRocque uses this language in a very different way: "Native peoples were the original settlers, in the sense of being a deeply rooted and settled Indigenous presence on this land we now call Canada" and as such, she refers to everyone else as "immigrant 're-settlers'" (LaRocque 2010, 7). A Palestinian friend told me when she identified as a settler in Cree-Métis law professor Tracey Lindberg's class, she was asked to consider the language of "treaty beneficiary" to describe herself because Palestine is also currently under settler occupation. Another thoughtful term comes from Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite and Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd: "arrivants" differentiates settler colonials from forced migrants, either through enslavement or other ongoing imperial violences, but also highlights the arrivant's necessary complicity in the system of settler colonialism (Brathwaite 1973; Byrd 2011).

What does that mean for those of us with no available grounding story other than the one of movement? Movement is built into my system now too, just like the absence of vitamin D. Maybe more sunshine would make me a healthier person, keep multiple sclerosis at bay, protect my brain from more scarring—but MS symptoms also flare with exposure to heat. I've been to India only once and, heartbreakingly, it was incredibly difficult for my body to be there. I thrive in cool Northern crispness, as does my child. My mother who grew up in Uganda, however, will only spend time outdoors during August heatwaves. Each of the many coats she wears reminds her of the first one, a red puffer handed to her when she arrived in snowy Montreal over fifty years ago.

To hold the intricacies of displacement and settlement together, perhaps the right term for us would be "non-Black im/migrant-settlers." The migrant pays tribute to the centrality of movement. And I'll still keep settler centrally in there because Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's discussion of why he uses the term settler, despite its numerous complications, is compelling in how to describe my fraught lineage: regardless of forced migration, indentureship, legitimate alliances, and even strong relationships built over time with Indigenous people, groups of settlers "very often displaced Indigenous peoples and, in many cases, laid claim to the land and took its resources for their own" (Justice 2018, 11). This feels like an undeniable fact, as it's still happening today. I understand settler as descriptive of where we collectively are now, regardless of how we came or where we will go. For my family, I think that applies to both Uganda and Canada. Simply by living t/here, my family and I participate in settler colonial systems even if they do not serve us, even if they oppress us, and even as we work in various ways to dismantle them and rebuild alongside Indigenous Peoples.

Complicity

I'm careful of claiming displacement as the sole identity, because I don't want it to support a move to innocence (Tuck and Yang 2012)—alleviating my own sense of complicity in settler colonialism does nothing to meaningfully mitigate ongoing harm to Indigenous communities. I am descended from victims of colonial processes with which we are also complicit, which continue to oppress us in various ways, and from which we continue to benefit on stolen lands. After a thoughtful engagement with the terminology of settler, social work professor Elizabeth Carlson-Manathara and Muskego Inniniw scholar Gladys Rowe observe, "It is true that we exist in multiple matrices of privilege and oppression. It is also true that being oppressed in one area does not necessarily exempt one from experiencing colonial privilege and benefiting from Indigenous dispossession" (Carlson-Manathara and Rowe 2021, 36). I think this is doubly applicable for my lineage, displaced twice but also participating in the same British imperial project in Africa and Turtle Island. Their movement was not their fault and probably would not have been their choice given other options, but when displacement is connected so intimately with settlement for us, it gets complicated.

My position as a refugee settler's child is fraught. How can I work against a sense of entitlement to someone else's lands and cultures just because I can't know mine? After all, I have lost them due to the same processes that brought me here.

My people came from Gujarat, I think, the Indian state that might be associated with both Gandhi and anti-Muslim violence. What was it like to be there then? The British colonizers strategically deployed divide-and-rule tactics, and this is how I understand their moving my kin from already-occupied Gujarat to East Africa, which they were newly colonizing. My ancestors and their communities were moved in as scaffolding to the racial structure of imperialism and capitalism. When I say racial capitalism, I'm referring to the thinking of Black Marxists like C.L.R James, Eric Williams, and Cedric J. Robinson who documented the exploitation and colonization of racialized people as the foundation of industrial capitalism. Robinson makes a point that's directly pertinent to our displacement from India: "British imperialism required the organization of colonial subjects for their own subjugation and that of others" (Robinson 2019, 30). Scaffolding, then—we helped prop up the tenuous project of British imperialism. This is how tension between browns and Blacks was purposefully sown. And even years later, anti-Black racism is rampant in South Asian diasporic communities, especially those once installed on African or Caribbean lands.

How did my father's grandfather end up on that dock? What were the conditions of colonial rule under which my kin lived in India? Were any of them happy to move, was movement liberating? Did they believe they were better than those only just browner than we are in East Africa, possibly informed by pre-existing hierarchies of caste and shadism? Did they believe the lies about the "Red Indian" being uncivilized, so Turtle Island was indeed *terra nullius* for the Europeans? Were there stories of when the same colonizers came to their own land in India? Did they resent the whites? Did they want to be white?

This last question is one I have struggled with in my own body. Wanting to be white, or at least emphasizing being less brown, is a condition through which South Asians become a "model minority" under multiculturalism in Canada, which is to me at once completely understandable and palpably scab behaviour. Their working hard to survive and succeed in racial capitalism is both the reason for my existence and, at the same time, can work to thwart solidarity among non-whites. It's a well-understood joke these days how postcolonial or immigrant parents wanted us to be lawyers and not artists, but it's not really funny; it demonstrates in a nutshell how colonially informed ideologies of "progress" and "civilization" have been deeply engrained over generations as the only way to succeed. Sometimes it feels like my ancestors have been pawns co-opted into the occupier's project, historic and contemporary, imperialism outright or the same in the form of official multiculturalism. One requires a managerial class; the other a model minority. Indian historian Vijay Prashad has questioned this complicity in *The Karma of Brown Folk* when—in response to W.E.B. Du Bois's question "How does it feel to be a problem?"—he asks Asians, "How does it feel to be the solution?" in the context of being used as a "weapon" against Black liberation struggles in the US (Prashad 2000).

But Prashad's book also spends much time celebrating Black and Asian alliances throughout history. I also know from the few stories available to me that some Indians resisted colonial oppression alongside their Black neighbours in Uganda, as some South Asians have resisted alongside Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island. And while often mired in precarious, low-wage labour under racial capitalism, migrants and refugees globally are some of the most prominent voices calling out the overlapping injustices of border imperialism while seeking emancipation from these oppressive structures.

I might also choose to draw kinship from these tangible histories of deep solidarity between racialized peoples. I might remember the hair salon in which my grandmother's friends hid her, where she swept up, made food for breaks, and eventually learned how to braid kinky curls before taking an airplane to a colder land.

When these multiplicities fill my brain, and with obscured access to embodied answers, I get stuck on the central, troubling question: Were my ancestors complicit with settler colonialism, or did they resist and practise solidarity?

An awareness of complicity can be a generative condition if one can move past the paralyzing performance of it, often expressed as guilt. An old mentor once told me, "Guilt is not a feeling; it is a judgement." I often return to this observation. While guilt as a feeling reveals no path forward, guilt as a judgement is something I can work with. It's useful in determining my position and my next actions. In this way, as poet and scholar Smaro Kamboureli theorizes, "Identifying complicity is not about moralizing, but about the possibility of creating productive sites" (Kamboureli 2008, 31-48). What can I *do* with all of these considerations? Here in Mi'kma'ki, I'm far away from my living kin. Complicity with the colonial condition looks different here than it does where most of my family lives now, on Coast Salish land, or where our ancestors were brought to, on African land, or where we came from in India, which is complex in its own myriad ways. There's complicity in all of these conditions because colonialism and racial capitalism has structured everything about how we live for at least five hundred years—even something as simple as feeding myself is caught up in this web of oppression. I'm not sure that my awareness of this makes me any less complicit than my kin, even if I support the Grassroots Grandmothers defending the Sipekne'katik River (Waldron 2018) while my relatives buy investment property.

Claiming My Displaced Kin

Feminist philosopher Alexis Shotwell talks about the importance of "claiming bad kin" as a way of owning the uncomfortable but generative space of complicity. She asks, "What could it mean for those who benefit from oppression—white people, and settlers more generally—to claim kin with oppressors? If we are complicit in the pain of this suffering world, how might we take responsibility for our bad kin?" (Shotwell 2019, 8-11). While she speaks specifically to white people as beneficiaries of white supremacy and colonial displacement, her question moves me to think about the nuances of who benefits and supports this structure. I don't know if my ancestors or my living kin are "bad," but I do know that racial capitalism and settler colonialism draw every kind of person into their net, and some of us fall for its false promises of comfort at the expense of a multitude of other beings and, in the end, our own collective survival.

I have to remind myself constantly and against my Eurocentric training: while binaries may initially be a useful way to trace the contours of a complex thought, they are a very limited way of understanding the depth of the problem. Did my kin resist colonial structures or did they uncritically benefit from them? Were we "good" imperial subjects or "bad" ones? On the flip side, were we morally "good" because we resisted or were we "bad" because we didn't? There are in-betweens to these central troubling questions, and a "both-and" answer will always be more generative and useful: my ancestors were likely *both* desperate due to colonial conditions *and* complicit within colonial conditions. While desperation breeds complicity sometimes, perhaps desperation breeds resistance, too.

While ruminating on the connections between displacement and settlement and incessantly repeating so many tender, unanswerable questions, I have begun experimenting with a thought that feels okay: maybe I don't really need to know the answers to these questions to know what to do now.

In not knowing, I can own complicity in the "bad" and solidarity with the resistance that must make up the "good." I can focus on white supremacy and ongoing settler colonialism as the central problems to address, rather than judging with incomplete information the limited choices dispossessed people of colour might make.

Maybe it's enough to just ask those questions about my ancestors, not necessarily seeking the answers, because asking those questions creates the condition for being a non-Black im/migrant-settler here on Turtle Island, both complicit and resistant. Yet again, at least a second time, living on someone else's land, again conscripted into racial capitalism, and probably again trying to find a way out of it through relationship. Relating—that's central to how complicity can be generative; it can inform my responsibilities in many different kinds of relationships. It stays as a principle even with the possibility of further movement.

Not knowing but claiming in my kin the probability of shitheads *and* revolutionaries, and probably everything in between, is a condition from which I can seek answers to a more present question—not what is my heritage, or what is my identity, but how am I relating, now? To this land I find myself on, these Peoples, and the descendants of all those who were and continue to be dispossessed, displaced, stolen, and settled here through imperial movements. To my child, my future ancestors. To our future movements.

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