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Seeing Whiteness in the Margins

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It was a crisp Fall morning and I was peacocking my way across a playground, rocking my pleather jacket. In my head I was so damn cool, just like Maverick from Top Gun. I would have been two when that film first came out, but at the ripe old age of five, it still had a suspiciously strong influence on me. I was living my best life at the tail end of the 1980s as a student at Michael Wallace Elementary School in Nova Scotia. My mom and baby brother dropped me off ahead of class so I could score some playground time.

When ten kids from the "big kid" side of the playground encircled me, I assumed they liked my jacket too. (Maybe one of them wanted to be my wingman, Goose?) The looming figures were sneering and laughing, but some of them were looking away too. There was at least one girl among them, but the rest were boys. Into the circle they shoved another kid; his skin was lighter than mine but darker than theirs. I didn't like the heavy feeling in my body, so I tried to run. Faces blurred with hands and arms, shoving me back into the center, and although I was desperately searching for them, I couldn't catch anyone's eyes. Me and the other Other looked at each other, trapped in this disorienting forcefield, and it slowly dawned on us that we were expected to fight like caged animals for their amusement.

Twenty-seven years later, I was invited to interview for a job at Dalhousie University. I couldn't believe my luck, not least of all because I assumed I had totally blown the first online interview because of my roommate's ornate but excessively large bong in the background.

"We'll need you to give us a teaching demonstration based on whatever is being covered in class the week of your interview," the chair of the hiring committee told me.

"No problem!" I responded.

The class was called "Halifax in the World," a first-year course with an auditorium full of undergraduate students, and the topic of the week was African Nova Scotian history. This was a subject I knew nothing about, trained as I was in the international relations of Asia generally and colonial state formation in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka more specifically.

Problem.

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I had the weekend to prepare, but I was also prepping my own class in Ottawa and had just come off another job interview in a totally unrelated field. Typical ABD hustle.

On Tuesday morning, I nursed my Canada Dry Club Soda and tried to pretend like I was comfortable making notes in an airplane seat. I was doing the readings for the class I was about to lecture to. I learned that the African Nova Scotian man, William Hall, was the first person of African ancestry in the British Empire to win the Victoria Cross for bravery, but it was where he won it that kept me tapping on the side of the Canada Dry can. He won his medal during the First War of Indian Independence in 1857. The article was written by my future colleague, Isaac Saney:

> Transfixed between the British command behind him and the Indian freedom fighters in front of him, Hall stays at his post, repeatedly firing his cannon until a fortress wall is breached, allowing the British troops to enter. While rewarded for his heroism, Hall eventually dies penniless and forgotten. What is often ignored in accounts of Hall's life is the striking and sad irony of one subject people being used against another.[2]

The turbulence at 37,000 feet jolted me out of the article, and I spilled my rationed club soda on Saney's article. The "irony of one subject people being used against another" was a foundational irony for me as a descendant of Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad, where I later learned Saney also hailed from.

Sighing, I looked out the window to see the evidence of the old seigneurial system of land distribution marking so-called "New France." The land was neatly carved into straight lines, each property touching the river. Colonizers could never understand the complexity and interdependence of what they called nature and sought to bring their kind of imported order to land that wasn't theirs to order. Colonial international relations have scarred every corner of this territory, and it is dramatically visible 37,000 feet above the province of Quebec. I closed the window shade and tried to return to the Saney text. The paper was saturated with Canada Dry and unreadable. Sigh.

My mind drifted back to the battle at Lucknow, and to a chain of events that led me to my Maverick day in elementary school in 1989. I thought about my ancestors, penniless and without English language, marking their X on the indentureship papers that took them across the *kala pani* and anchored them to sugar plantations in *Kairi*, or what the lost Spaniard Columbus insisted was Trinidad. The earliest indentured Indians came long before the battle at Lucknow during the first war of Independence — the British East India Company that preceded the formal British Raj in India had a long head start in the underdevelopment and de-industrialization of the subcontinent. What little I know of my ancestors tells me that they couldn't possibly have crossed over until the 1860s.

[2] Isaac Saney, "The Black Nova Scotian odyssey: a chronology" *Race and Class* 40 no.1 (1998): 78 - 91.

As I struggled to think about how to perform my teaching assignment, it struck me as significant that in 1989, 132 years after William Hall was coerced to lay siege to Lucknow, someone who could very well be his descendent was coerced to lay siege to me, someone who could very well be descended from those who fought the British in 1857.

Later that day, as I stood in front of the auditorium to lecture, I thought again of when my reluctant African-Nova Scotian opponent landed his first blow to the cheers of the all-white cell that had trapped us. His fist carried the strength of William Hall, my gut crumbled like the walls in Lucknow, and in 1857 and 1989 the African and the Indian were forced to fight for the enjoyment of the European.

Before my unwilling sparring partner could land a second blow, my mother had emerged to intercept the beating, dressed in a robe and slippers from our wood-panelled minivan. The mother of four non-white boys in Canada, she knew no one but her was looking out for us and always stayed until the bell rang and the kids entered the school. She took us both to the principal's office and asked him what he intended to do about it. "Boys will be boys," he told my mother.

Refusing to accept this explanation, my mother called my father at work. He stormed out of his workplace at the CBC and caught enough buses to get him to the school to educate the principal on multiculturalism, liberal pluralism, and the need to confront racism directly. (We were an immigrant family studying for the citizenship exam so the enormous gap between Canada on paper and Canada as a lived experience was always front and centre for us.) The principal met these points with a shrug and an invitation to join the Parent Teacher Association. So my father did, and then he drafted and introduced a Multiculturalism policy framework for the Dartmouth School Board in a year's time. Based on my younger brother's experiences growing up a few years after me, it's clear they didn't do much to implement the policies, but my parents made sure the school board couldn't pretend they didn't know.

I always see in my parents the fierceness of generations of anticolonial struggle, even if they wouldn't phrase it that way. My mother is like Malcom X and my father like Martin Luther King Jr, or to draw analogy with the subcontinent from which we originate, my mother is like Bhagat Singh and my father more like Mohandas Gandhi. The courage to act in the now and the wisdom to do it strategically.

This colonial knot of imperial relations folded together William Hall, his could-be descendent, myself, and my could-be ancestors, while connecting the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries in Halifax and Lucknow. That's the only story I could tell during that lecture at Dalhousie.

Just the other day, I asked my mother if she remembered. She did, but from her vantage point, she only remembered that me and the African-Nova Scotian kid fought. Although she'd have had to charge right through that forcefield of whiteness to reach us in the moment, the white kids drifted into the margins -- that invisible space that borders and imprisons narrative -- leaving two troubled kids to be disciplined.