



The Commemorative Landscape as a Space of Anti-Racist Activism: Confronting the Legacies of Anti-Japanese Canadian Racism on Vancouver Island

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Abstract

In 1942, Japanese Canadians living in coastal British Columbia, Canada, were forcibly incarcerated in internment camps far from the Pacific coast and had their fishing boats and other property confiscated and auctioned off. At the end of World War II, they expected to return to the coast, but permission was not granted until 1949. Some were sent to Japan, and many others migrated east of the Rocky Mountains. In 1988, the Canadian federal government acknowledged the wrongs committed as part of Redress, but in more localized spaces, little was acknowledged. The silence was deafening. In this article, I consider recent anti-racist work to address the legacies of anti-Japanese Canadian racism in Central Vancouver Island. This includes: (1) advocating to change the names of a school and street in Port Alberni honorifically named after A.W. Neill, (2) removing an anti-Asian racist covenant from properties that A.W. Neill owned in Port Alberni, (3) activism to receive a public apology for a 1947 city council resolution to not allow returning Japanese Canadians in Tofino, and (4) memorializing a pre-WWII Japanese Canadian community in Cumberland. These efforts can be theorized as anti-racist work associated with Japanese Canadian spaces. This article contributes to critical human geography by emphasizing that while national level efforts to reconcile past wrongs are crucial, localized work also requires considerable attention. It is therefore necessary to be attentive to the importance of scale with regard to the geographies of anti-racist activism and the remaking of commemorative landscapes.

Keywords

Japanese Canadian, Vancouver Island, anti-racism, memorials



Introduction

In 1988, Canada's federal government publicly acknowledged the injustices perpetrated against Japanese Canadians when they were interned and restricted from living within 100 miles of the Pacific coast during and after World War II. However, there were initially few successful local efforts on Vancouver Island to publicly acknowledge or reconcile past wrongs. It was not until almost a quarter century later that the provincial government of British Columbia (BC) publicly apologized for its role in Japanese Canadian internment. On May 7, 2012, Naomi Yamamoto, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for North Vancouver Lonsdale stated, "The internment of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia during the Second World War was unjust and contrary to our core values. It is important that we apologize and work to ensure that such a historical injustice never happens again." Many felt, however, that the apology was not widely disseminated, which disappointed some Japanese Canadians (Bailey 2012), and left a sense that more needed to be done locally. Lorene Oikawa, the President of the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC), went further in her criticism, stating, "In 2012, the Japanese Canadian community was not involved in that apology, and there wasn't any meaningful follow up. There weren't any actions following from the apology" (MacLeod 2019). There continues to be a desire for reconciliation at levels lower than the national. Between April and September 2019, consultations involving the NAJC occurred with financial support from the BC provincial government. A report was produced titled, *Recommendations for Redressing Historical Wrongs against Japanese Canadians in B.C.* The main recommendations included: (1) providing a formal apology worded in consultation with the Japanese Canadian community, (2) making more efforts to tackle discrimination and racism, (3) increasing education in public schools about the history of Japanese Canadian internment, (4) creating a legacy fund to support community needs, and (5) "declaring a commemorative day and provide funds for memorial sites, museums and monuments to raise public awareness" (MacLeod 2019). New efforts are clearly needed to reconcile past wrongs at more local administrative levels than what Redress offered, including with the province of BC. As Oikawa put it, "Meaningful action is what the community wants now" (MacLeod 2019), and the BC government is certainly partially culpable for the poor treatment of Japanese Canadians, before, during and after World War II (Ward 2002). Moreover, the province did not do anything to defend the rights or interests of the Japanese Canadians when World War II came. Still, at even more localized levels, what has been done to redress the injustices against Japanese Canadians on Central Vancouver Island?

There are many ways that spaces can be given meanings, including through honorific naming, the erection of statues, and the establishment of memorial parks (Alderman and Inwood 2016). However, they also include removing racist covenants from properties as well as eliciting apologies for past community exclusionary efforts. Alderman and Inwood (2013) have emphasized that critical human geographers need to be especially attentive to the cultural politics and power relations associated with choosing particular names and the worldviews given voice through naming. In this article, four examples are presented of localized anti-racist efforts to reckon with past wrongs perpetrated against Japanese Canadians during and after World War II through acts of de-commemoration and re-commemoration. This article emphasizes that anti-racist work needs to be done at a range of geographical scales, and that while redress at the national scale has been very important for Japanese Canadians, anti-racist efforts at other more localized scales are also essential and require more attention.

The next section explains the concept of "anti-racist work," which is followed by a brief overview of Japanese Canadian history, particularly focusing on internment or incarceration in 1942 and its aftermath. Since Alan Webster (A.W.) Neill figures prominently, I present some details about his background. I then transition into the four case studies: changing the names of a school and street in Port Alberni, BC; removing a racist covenant from a house and property in Port Alberni; gaining a public apology in Tofino, BC; and memorializing a pre-World War II Japanese Canadian community in

Cumberland, BC. I consider some of the ways that people have tried to obstruct this anti-racist work, before concluding with a discussion of the importance of considering multiple levels of reconciliation when trying to right past wrongs.

Anti-Racism and Memory-Work

The discipline of geography has a long but often troubling history of engagement with the concepts of race and racism, dating back to the early 20th century (Tyner 2016). More recently, however, critical geographers have variously and increasingly promoted the idea of anti-racism (Pulido 2002; Nash 2003; Kobayashi 2014; Alderman and Inwood 2016; Baird 2018; 2019; Alderman et al. 2021) and “other” geographies (Eaves 2020; Oswin 2020). This includes the idea of combatting what Katherine McKittrick (2014) has called being (un)visible and (un)geographic. Using (un)visible instead of invisible is intended to highlight intentional “uning” practices put in place to make particular racialized groups (un)visible—in this case, Japanese Canadians—and this in turn results in people’s sense of place being stripped from them, making them (un)geographic.

This article deals with what Alderman and Inwood (2016) call “anti-racism work.” Anti-racism work can occur in various ways, including through revealing and criticizing racist practices (Nash 2003; Baird 2018), promoting anti-racist education (Alderman et al. 2021), conducting “memory-work” via museum theatre (Benjamin and Alderman 2018), organizing anti-racist walking tours (Truman and Springgay 2019), promoting community food movements (Slocum 2006), revealing blackness (Sweet 2021), and demonstrating how certain environmental policies are designed to create particular anti-Black spaces (Wright 2021), amongst many other possibilities. Crucially, scholars have emphasized the need to go beyond describing social injustices (Wright 2017).

Anti-racism work occurs in different ways—and at various levels—from local to the regional, national, and international. The 1988 campaign by Japanese Canadians for the federal government of Canada to acknowledge the injustices perpetrated against Japanese Canadians before and after World War II represents, in many ways, a monumental success for Japanese Canadians. However, following Glen Sean Coulthard’s (2014) argument, one must remain attentive to the fact that the recognition of past wrongs by the settler-colonial government of Canada is not nearly as important as practices that lead to self-recognition. In any case, my goal here is not to diminish the importance of Redress at the national level. However, this victory did not constitute reconciliation at all levels and in all spaces, as we view spaces quite differently at the national level as compared to the town, village, or household levels. Only recently have more localized efforts to right the wrongs of Japanese Canadian internment been taken in Central Vancouver Island (see Figure 1), which is the focus of the present article. For example, in 2019, Heritage BC documented important locally reported Japanese Canadian places in the province and has included them on a map.¹ This constituted a different kind of localized reconciliation effort, albeit not a particularly bold one.

I became involved in this research for a few reasons, which I outline in detail in other pieces that explicitly focus on Anti-Asian racism on Vancouver Island (Baird 2018, 2019, 2020). In summary, all of my family on my father’s side come from Nanaimo, BC, on central Vancouver Island (Figure 1), where some of my relatives were members of anti-Asian organizations (Baird 2018). Other relatives, however, became close friends with Japanese Canadians, both before and after World War II (Baird 2019). In addition, my family has owned a summer cabin on Cameron Lake, near Port Alberni, since 1945, and I spent a lot of time in Port Alberni as a child where I noticed the racialized divides. In addition, my

¹ https://heritagebc.ca/cultural-maps/japanese-canadian-map_

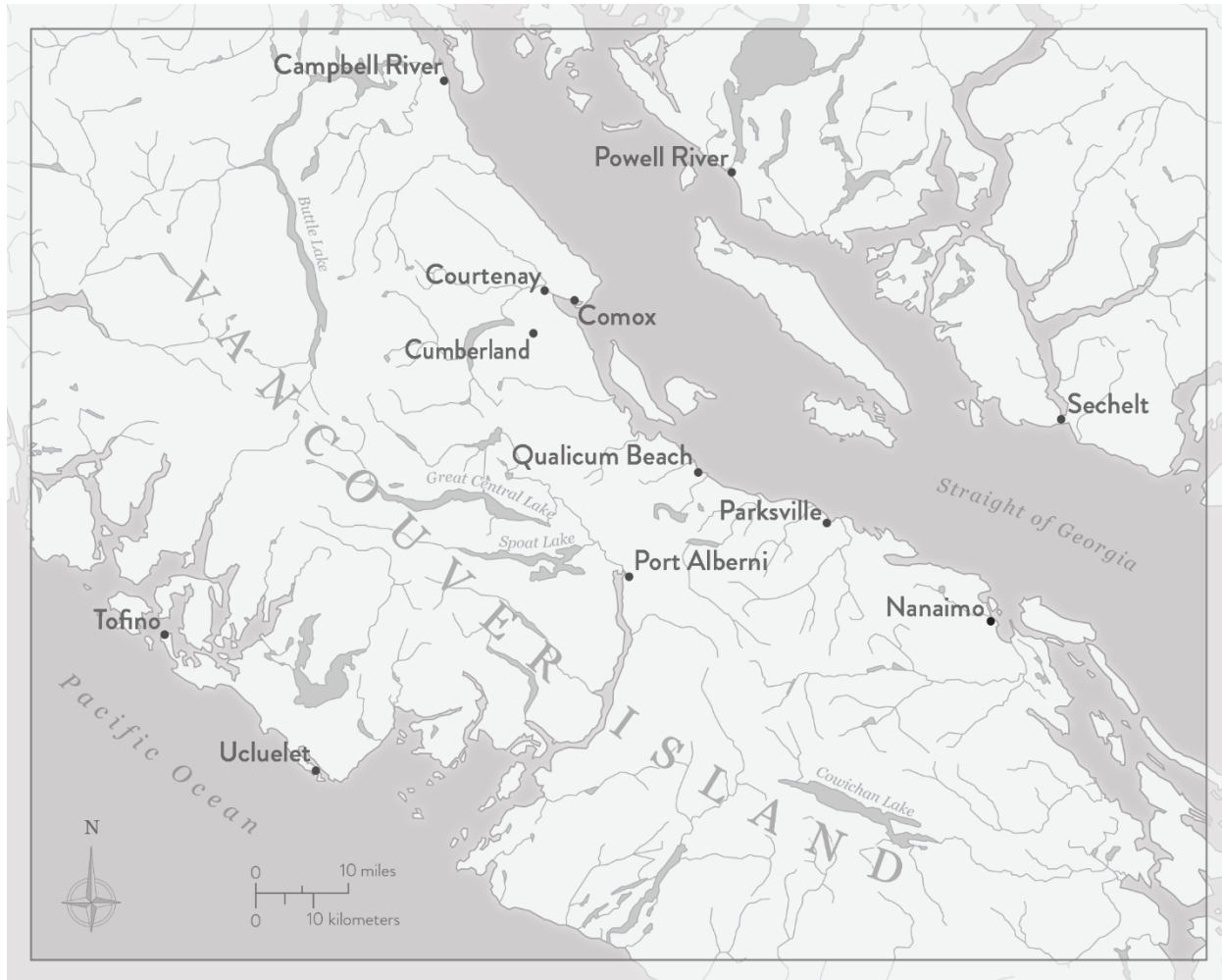


Figure 1. Central Vancouver Island (including Port Alberni, Ucluelet, Tofino and Cumberland)

partner is from Southeast Asia, and my children are growing up as mixed Asian Canadians/Americans, with the potential to be victimized through a range of racist beliefs, acts and structures. Therefore, I interviewed Japanese Canadians in Port Alberni and Ucluelet, and they encouraged me to publish this research, which is based on interviews with Japanese and other Asian Canadians, white people in the area, First Nations in Port Alberni, written sources found at the Alberni District Archives, and some contemporary media sources, which were mainly used to corroborate what informants suggested.

Japanese Canadian History

Citizens of Japan started immigrating to Canada in the late 1800s, especially to the coast of BC to fish for salmon. Others came to the west coast of Canada to work in different professions, such as logging, mining and agriculture (Roy 1989). Japanese immigration to Canada was initially unregulated. Most *Issei*, or first-generation immigrants, initially only intended to make money in Canada, before returning to Japan. Therefore, almost all of the early immigrants were young men. However, after spending some years in Canada, many decided to stay. They began bringing wives from Japan. Marriages were often arranged (Roy 1989). The new couples frequently had large families, thus resulting in the birth of many second-generation Canada-born Japanese Canadians, known as *Nisei*. The Japanese Canadian population mainly settled along the BC coast (Roy 1989; 2003).

In the early 1920s, led by BC politicians such as A.W. Neill (see below) and Howard Green, efforts were made to limit economic opportunities for Japanese Canadians by preventing them from

entering certain professions. New policies were adopted that resulted in large numbers of fishing licenses being stripped from Japanese Canadians and reallocated to white Canadians and First Nations people (Fukawa and Fukawa 2009; Hayashi et al. 2017; Baird 2020). Limits were also put on Japanese Canadian employment in canneries, and A.W. Neill, as a Member of Parliament (MP) for Alberni-Comox, central Vancouver Island, insisted, when the pilchard fishery was preparing to open, that the fishery would only be permitted if it were an “all white fishery” (Baird 2020). Japanese Canadians and other Asian Canadians were limited in what they could do to counter this racism, as they were not allowed to vote, regardless of whether they were naturalized Canadians or Canada-born citizens, and were not re-enfranchised until 1949. Still, during WWII, they did resist through writing protest letters to the Canadian government from incarceration (Stanger-Ross et al. 2017). In addition, not all white people saw Japanese Canadians in such a negative light (see *Port Alberni News* 1926).

In the 1930s, anti-Japanese sentiment increased, especially after Japan invaded Manchuria in 1932. The war between Japan and China left many in BC sympathetic to China, and resulted in more negativity toward Japanese Canadians, even though Japan had been allied with Canada during World War I. As World War II approached, tensions intensified, especially after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. People in BC were concerned that Japan might invade the west coast of Canada (Roy 1989).

Soon after the attack, Japanese Canadians were prohibited from fishing for security reasons, and before long, their boats were confiscated. A few months later, the order came to euphemistically “evacuate” or “intern” all people of Japanese descent, regardless of whether they were citizens or not, to locations at least 100 miles from the coast. The deadline to depart from the coast was April 1st. They were also prohibited from owning radios or driving automobiles, and their telephones were cut off (*West Coast Advocate* 1942a). Some particularly targeted Canada-born Japanese Canadians. The *West Coast Advocate* (1942a) editorialized, “It is the opinion of competent observers that there are probably many more disloyal Japanese in this class [Canadian-born Canadian citizens of Japanese descent, the Nisei] than even among the ranks of the unnaturalized, it being considered that about the first thing a spy thinks about is to put himself on a legal footing as soon as it is possible” (*West Coast Advocate* 1942a). Unfounded suspicion was put on Japanese Canadians, regardless of their diverse politics and loyalties. Indeed, this sort of racist stereotyping was commonly used against Japanese Canadians at the time (Baird 2018). The 1942 order also applied to Germans and Italians, but only unnaturalized males between 18 and 45, whereas the order applied to all people of Japanese descent, regardless of age, sex, or citizenship status (*West Coast Advocate* 1942b).

Among those from Vancouver Island, over 8,000 Japanese Canadians had to stay in smelly horse stables in the Livestock Building at Hastings Park in Vancouver, which had not been adequately prepared for human habitation. Finally, they were relocated to small rural communities such as Greenwood, Slocan, Lemon Creek, and New Denver in the Interior of British Columbia. Japanese nationalists and younger men suspected of potentially being able to support the Japanese military if it invaded were sent to a Prison of War camp in Angler, Ontario, in eastern Canada. Regardless, all those forced to leave the coast could only take what they could carry in one suitcase (Adachi 1976; Sunahara 1981). Much of their remaining property would eventually be auctioned off for low prices, despite the objections of many Japanese Canadians (Stanger-Ross et al. 2017; Stanger-Ross and the Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective 2016). Those incarcerated were never found to represent actual threats to Canadian security (Adachi 1976), but wartime perceptions and already existing prejudices resulted in Japanese Canadians being treated with great suspicion.

At the end of World War II, in 1945, Japanese Canadians interned in the Interior of BC expected that they would be allowed to return to live on the coast, since a security threat no longer existed. Many hoped to resume their previous lives as fishers, but to their dismay, Japanese Canadians were initially

prevented by law from returning to the coast. They were pressured, instead, to ‘repatriate’ to Japan on ships arranged by the Canadian government. About 4,000 of the over 22,000 people incarcerated did exactly that in 1946. Most were Canada-born or naturalized Canadian citizens, but their citizenship was revoked upon their departure (Kage 2012; Kobayashi et al. 2018). Others who did not want to go to Japan were urged to move east of the Rockies.

In 1949, the order preventing Japanese Canadians from coming to the coast was finally rescinded, and some Japanese Canadians began returning. By 1950, many Japanese Canadians were back fishing in coastal BC. Some returned after being recruited by fishing companies, such as BC Packers and Nelson Bros., who wanted excellent Japanese Canadian fishermen to work with them (Fukawa and Fukawa 2009; Hayashi et al. 2017; Baird 2019).

After years in Japan, many Nisei started looking for ways to return to Canada, since their status as Canadian citizens had been restored. Some Japanese Canadians went to the coast to resume fishing, while others moved to live near or with relatives in other parts of Canada (Baird 2019). Little was said about the injustices that had been committed during and after World War II. Many Issei were ashamed, although they had done nothing wrong. Others did not want their children to have a negative perception of Canada and therefore chose to stay silent. However, in the 1970s some Issei and Nisei started to advocate to have these injustices acknowledged by the Canadian government, and finally—but only after the US government took the lead (Daniels et al. 1991; Irons 1993)—the Canadian government agreed in 1988 to acknowledge past injustices, and \$21,000 was provided to each Japanese Canadian directly impacted by internment during and after World War II. Some funding was also allocated for the Japanese Canadian community as a whole (Miki and Kobayashi 1991; Kobayashi 1992).

While the 1988 Redress was a tremendous victory for Japanese Canadians (Miki 2004), it only involved the federal government located in faraway Ottawa, Ontario, and did not include any efforts by provincial or municipal governments in BC. Little changed in the communities along the coast of BC in terms of reconciling the injustices of the past, even though some close relationships between returning Japanese Canadian fishers and former white friends were re-established in the 1950s and 1960s (Baird 2019).

Alan Webster Neill

Alan Webster (A.W.) Neill was born in Scotland. He immigrated to New Zealand, but in 1891, at the age of 23, he decided to go to Canada, where he initially homesteaded in the Alberni Valley of central Vancouver Island. In 1898, Neill unexpectedly entered provincial politics and was elected as a provincial Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), remaining in office until 1903. He left provincial politics to become the federal Indian Agent for the Alberni Valley from 1903 to 1913, and he served briefly as an Alderman in Alberni, and as Mayor of Alberni. In 1921, he decided to enter federal politics and was elected as an Independent MP for Comox-Alberni—serving for five terms. Upon his retirement from politics in 1945, Neill returned to the Alberni Valley, where he worked as a notary. He finally passed away in Port Alberni in 1960 at the age of 91 (Baird 2020).

A.W. Neill was a remarkably successful politician, despite being an Independent. He had considerable influence in federal politics. Although he often supported the Liberals in the House of Commons during votes, at times he also voted for Conservative bills. He was a witty orator, and over time he became an expert in Canadian Parliamentary procedure. During his time in the House of Commons, Neill emerged as a key advocate for the adoption of Old Age pension in 1927. Neill also played a crucial role in the adoption of a Veterans Day (later Remembrance Day) in Canada. He strongly supported the white working class, including loggers and fishers (Baird 2020).

Despite Neill’s political achievements, his record was badly tarnished by his staunch anti-Asian politics, even if the majority of BC politicians at the time were racists (Roy 2003). From the beginning

of his political career, Neill argued for total “Asian Exclusion” from the coast of Canada. He openly advocated for a “white BC,” as did many others (Ward 2012). He argued strongly to stop all immigration from Asia, particularly Japanese (Baird 2020). He was an essentialist when it came to his views about race and he believed that Japanese Canadians could never assimilate into Canadian society, or be truly loyal to Canada, and neither did he want them to intermarry or assimilate with white Canadians. He did not distinguish between Japanese from Japan and those born in Canada. During World War II, he especially argued that preparations should be made to deport everyone of Japanese descent to Japan as soon as the war was over.

In 1957, a Port Alberni school was named in Neill’s honour. Prior to this, a street in Port Alberni was named after him. To this day, the street continues to honour A.W. Neill’s name, despite his extreme anti-Asian politics (Baird 2020). The first two case studies that follow relate directly to the legacy of A.W. Neill; of note, all four are within his former electoral district.

Attempts to Rename Neill Street and A.W. Neill School in Port Alberni

In 2016, a former resident of Port Alberni, Chris Stevenson, started educating friends, including two Port Alberni politicians, City Councilor Chris Alemany and School Board Trustee Rosemarie Buchanan, about how much of a racist A.W. Neill actually was. After additional investigation, Alemany and Buchanan strategized to change the eponymously named street and school. However, their plan was revealed prematurely, and ignited controversy in Port Alberni, with people on both sides holding strong opinions. The views spread on social media in Port Alberni were frequently strongly worded and divisive, and by the time the City Council met to decide what to do about the street name, in January 2018, over 50 people on both sides had submitted comments about the name-change proposal. Finally, however, the vote ended up being 5-2 against changing the street name, thus ending the effort to rename Neill Street (Hamilton 2018).

The next day, the proposal to change the name of A.W. Neill Elementary School was taken up at an Alberni Valley School Board meeting. Some School Board Trustees opposed the idea. Ultimately, it was decided to develop guidelines for how to handle these issues (Hamilton 2018; 2019; Baird 2020), ones which were only finalized in early 2019 (Rardon 2019).

In early Fall 2019, Rosemarie Buchanan brought changing the name up again with her fellow School Board Trustees,² shortly after a news story appeared in the local Port Alberni newspaper regarding the removal of an A.W. Neill-initiated covenant in Port Alberni (Youds 2019; see section below). This story favourably influenced school board trustees who were previously less supportive of changing the name of A.W. Neill Elementary School. Training they received in relation to reconciliation efforts with First Nations in recent years especially influenced them.³ Thus, in late 2019, the School Board decided to move ahead with soliciting public comments regarding the school name change issue (Craig 2019).

While the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the change, the school was finally renamed in September 2021. Because there is a lot of emphasis in Port Alberni associated with reconciliation efforts with local First Nations, the school’s new name is Tsuma-as, which is the Nuu-chah-nulth name for the Somass River (Rardon 2021). This indicates how name changing is not only related to Neill’s past racism but also to reconciliation efforts with First Nations. Indeed, critical geographers need to be attentive to intersecting issues when pursuing anti-racism agendas.

Efforts are clearly being made to reconstitute and give new meaning to particular spaces in Port Alberni, even if these efforts have been disputed by some (Hamilton 2019; Hills 2019; Meissner 2019).

² Rosemarie Buchanan, *pers. comm.*, September 13, 2019.

³ Rosemarie Buchanan, *pers. comm.*, December 15, 2019.

In any case, those involved in the name-changing effort have sent a strong message that part of the population of Port Alberni wants to move away from honouring anti-Asian racists such as A.W. Neill. They have been conducting local anti-racist work to create more inclusive and racially tolerant spaces. Anti-racism is defined here as fighting against racism in its various forms, including individual racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic racism (Smithsonian n.d.). I contend that the type of anti-racist work outlined in this article, while not seeming to be particularly radical, can together as a whole contribute to understanding how anti-racist efforts can lead to change, including the reconstitution of meaning associated with particular spaces linked to historical events and present-day practices.

Removing a Racist Covenant from A.W. Neill's Former House in Port Alberni

Covenants, which are sometimes referred to as “easements”, are restrictions added to the deeds of houses and properties by their owners (National Park Service 2010). Sometimes they are put on properties to conserve wildlife populations and habitat (Loukidelis and Hillyer 1992), and they are also frequently used to protect heritage properties (National Park Service 2010). However, this case relates to A.W. Neill, and his work to establish a certain type of legal racist legacy in Port Alberni, and the efforts of local citizens to publicly negate Neill's anti-Asian property covenants.

In 2018, Valerie Harrison, a retired schoolteacher whose daughter is a teacher in Port Alberni, decided to buy a house in town. Once she made an offer, she learned that the house had a restrictive covenant on it. As someone with an archeology background, Harrison was excited, imagining that the covenant might relate to a First Nations archeological site, or maybe it was associated with protecting biodiversity. However, when the details arrived, she was shocked and disappointed to learn that the title was paid for—at significant cost—by none other than A.W. Neill. There were covenants on two of his properties in Port Alberni, one placed in 1909 and the other in 1912,⁴ and they stipulated that the properties were never to be sold to “Orientals,” and that Asians could only live on the properties as servants. The covenants also stipulated that the properties could not be utilized for the distribution of alcohol (Harrison 2019; Youds 2019; CBC 2019).

Valerie Harrison learned that the covenants, since they were explicitly racist, were not valid according to Section 222 of the Land Titles Act of BC (1978) (BC Land Title and Survey 2019; Graham 2019), but she was still troubled by what the covenant on her property symbolized. However, she did not simply want to have the covenant removed quietly and behind the scenes. She was particularly troubled because she had previously lived in Vietnam. As an educator, she wanted others to learn from the process. She contacted Anne Oswald, the Social Justice teacher for grade 12 in Port Alberni, to see if she could recruit students to help officially remove the racist part of the covenant. Anne proposed the project to her students, and in October 2018, Justin MacFadden, Sarah Higginson, and Katie Sara agreed to take it on. It took some effort to familiarize themselves with the issue, including learning how to remove the covenant. However, they eventually helped Harrison prepare the appropriate documentation, and submitted it to the BC Land Title and Survey,⁵ which considered the request and agreed to cross out the racially offensive portion of the covenant on the original document (Graham 2019). An arrow was added to a reference to the racist portion of the covenant being removed following the Land Titles Act of 1978 (Section 222). The project was completed in March 2019 (Harrison 2019; CBC 2019; Youds 2019).

Even though racist covenants have received some attention in other parts of BC (Borszcz 2011; CBC 2014; Hopper 2014; O'Malley 2016; Kendall 2019), they were something new to people in Port Alberni (Youds 2019). Crucially, Valerie Harrison, in the spirit of anti-racist efforts, got involved and made the issue publicly known (Youds 2019), including by writing a short op-ed, which was published

⁴ Valerie Harrison, *pers. comm.*, August 8, 2019.

⁵ Valerie Harrison, *pers. comm.*, August 8, 2019.

in the *Alberni Valley News* (Harrison 2019). If Harrison had simply ignored the covenant, or had just removed it quietly, her anti-racist efforts would not have been as effective. Instead, she used educational opportunities and the media to publicly refute racism, thus giving new meaning to a formerly racist space through narrative and practice. Tuck and Yang (2012: 9) might refer to Harrison's efforts as a form of "settler moves to innocence" based on guilt about past injustices associated with white people, of which she is one, even if she was not directly responsible for past injustices. Harrison's efforts did constitute "virtual signaling," when someone frames others as racist (in this case A.W. Neill) and oneself as non-racist, but this work still has value for raising awareness among white people about past racist acts against Asian Canadians.

Tofino Mayor Apologizes to Japanese Canadians

The third case study relates to a sort of community covenant, one that the City Council of Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, put in place to exclude Japanese Canadians from returning to their community after World War II. A resolution of council was passed that was designed to prevent Japanese Canadians from either buying property in Tofino or conducting business there. In recent years, members of the Japanese Canadian community have sought to convince Tofino's City Council to apologize to the Japanese Canadian community for the 1947 resolution.

In 1949, the ban was lifted and Japanese Canadians could return to the west coast. Tommy Kimoto, a fisher who had lived at Storm Bay on Clayoquot Sound in Tofino with other Japanese Canadian families before World War II (see Bossin 1981), was one of the first to arrive. He returned to commercial fishing on the coast with his wife Mary in the fall of 1950. They initially planned to settle in Tofino, as Tommy had lived in Storm Bay before the war, but once they were warned that the City Council, during their absence, had passed a motion banning Japanese Canadians from owning property or doing business in Tofino, they reconsidered, and moved to Ucluelet, a nearby community that had not banned returning Japanese Canadians.⁶ As Mary Kimoto told the press, "We looked for a place in Tofino but [Japanese Canadians] were banned, so that's how we landed in Spring Cove [Ucluelet] here." She explained to me that it is not that the Japanese Canadians were totally welcomed in Ucluelet, but at least the animosity was not so open. The Kimotos made a concerted effort to mix with the community, and eventually tensions abated (Bailey 2012).

Tom Gibson, Tofino's Chairman of Commissioners between 1944 and 1950, led the move to prevent Japanese Canadians from returning to Tofino (Bailey 2012). However, efforts began even before he took up his position. On February 10, 1942, Tofino's Board of Trade passed a resolution calling for Japanese Canadians to be "expatriated to Japan," a copy of which was sent to their MP, A.W. Neill. The reasons given for wanting to deport people of Japanese descent were that their primary allegiance, so it was claimed, was to Japan (see, also, Baird 2018). The standard of living of Japanese Canadians was also said to be lower than that of white people; therefore, Japanese Canadians represented unfair competition to whites. On December 10, 1945, Tofino's Board of Trade passed a motion to "vigorously protest the return of persons of Japanese origin to the West Coast." They also decided to warn of possible danger if Japanese Canadians returned to the west coast, "as people in these parts are determined on this matter [to keep Japanese Canadians from returning]."

However, the "resolution re Orientals" of the Tofino Commissioners was especially damaging. On January 24, 1947, "The Commissioners of the Corporation of the village of Tofino, hereby resolve[d] that, at the request of the residents of the Village of Tofino, all Orientals be excluded completely from this Municipality, and shall be prevented from owning property or carrying on business directly or indirectly within the Municipality." While the resolution—that was clearly aimed at Japanese

⁶ Mary Toshiko Kimoto, *pers. comm.*, August 24, 2018.

Canadians—would probably not have held up under legal challenge, it certainly sent a message regarding Tofino’s intent. It was not until 1997 that the resolution was challenged. A Japanese Canadian named Sadakusu Sato learned of the 1947 resolution when he tried to buy property in Tofino. By this time, Tofino had no desire to uphold the resolution, and so quietly rescinded it, since it was not legally valid anyway. However, a formal apology was not forthcoming.⁷

Still, the resolution continued to gnaw at the Kimotos, and in 2012 Ellen Crowe-Swords nee Kimoto—Tommy and Mary’s niece—told a local reporter that she was still awaiting an official apology from Tofino’s City Council. As she put it at the time, “Tofino council never got up and said they were sorry. I think that would be the honourable thing to do” (Bailey 2012). However, it would take years to receive such an apology.

Years later, Ellen raised the issue when she had lunch with Tofino’s mayor at the time, Josie Osborne, and another member of the Tofino City Council, Dorothy Baert. Ellen took the opportunity to discuss the injustices done to Japanese Canadians in Tofino and suggest that a formal apology was warranted. The Mayor and Council member said that they would propose the idea to the rest of Council, but Ellen did not hear back for a couple of years.⁸

In early 2019, a non-profit organization, the Pacific Rim Arts Society, decided to sponsor 10 days of events devoted to Japanese Canadian culture. They had previously organized a whale festival, but they wanted something new. The Japanese Canadian community got involved, and Ellen saw an opportunity to push the apology issue further through anti-racist work. During an organizing meeting in Tofino, Ellen informed Josie Osborne that no events could be held in Tofino, as there was still “a black cloud hanging over the town.” Osborne immediately understood what she was referring to, but Council apparently did not agree to apologize. Therefore, Ellen’s Port Alberni-based cousin, Marlene Mortenson nee Madokoro, whose mother was also a Kimoto from Storm Bay/Tofino, reached out for support from Japanese Canadian organizations across Canada. Before long, others also demanded an apology.⁹

The pressure was building, and Josie Osborne told Ellen that Council had changed its collective mind and decided to apologize, but they proposed a private apology after a meeting of Council, so as not to embarrass Tofino. Ellen consulted with the leadership of the NAJC in Winnipeg, Art and Keiko Miki, and then responded that a private apology would not be acceptable, as the public practice of apology was clearly important. Finally, Tofino City Council agreed for Mayor Osborne to deliver a public apology. Members of the Japanese Canadian community with links to Tofino were invited to attend.¹⁰

On May 28, 2019, Josie Osborne publicly apologized to the Japanese Canadian community for efforts by the City Council of Tofino in 1947 to prevent incarcerated Japanese Canadians from returning to live in or do business in Tofino. By all accounts, Mayor Osborne’s apology was heartfelt (Bailey 2019; Miki 2019; Tofino City 2019; Wiwchar 2019), and as Ellen later told me, “There was not a dry eye in the house,” demonstrating the embodied results of her anti-racist work. Ultimately, the apology served to satisfy the Japanese Canadian community, and the relationship with Tofino moved ahead positively. In addition, Ellen supported efforts by the Tofino Museum to organize walking tours with tourists designed to investigate the history of the Japanese Canadian community in Tofino before World War II,¹¹ yet another embodied practice. In these ways, the City of Tofino has turned an awkward situation,

⁷ Ellen Crowe-Swords, *pers. comm.*, August 24, 2018.

⁸ Ellen Crowe-Swords, *pers. comm.*, December 3, 2019.

⁹ Ellen Crowe-Swords, *pers. comm.*, December 3, 2019.

¹⁰ Ellen Crowe-Swords, *pers. comm.*, December 3, 2019.

¹¹ Ellen Crowe-Swords, *pers. comm.*, December 3, 2019.

and a difficult apology, into something positive, including an opportunity for supporting heritage tourism in Tofino.

Memorializing No. 1 Japanese Town through the Development of Coal Creek Historic Park in Cumberland

The fourth and final case study relates to efforts in the Village of Cumberland, on the east coast of Vancouver Island, to turn a particular property into Coal Creek Historic Park that memorializes No. 1 Japanese Town, a pre-World War II Japanese Canadian community.

People of Japanese descent began living in Cumberland, and working in the mines, beginning in the 1890s (Matas 2011/2017). No. 1 Japanese Town, on the outskirts of the Village of Cumberland, and down the road from Chinatown, was a settlement for miners and their families. There were 31 Japanese Canadian families living there in 1942. After their forced removal, all but one of the houses were demolished, leaving few physical traces of the community behind, apart from the cement footings of the schoolhouse and an old cherry tree. However, in around 2001 efforts began to be made by an informal group known as the Concerned Citizens of Cumberland to establish a public heritage park devoted to Chinese and Japanese Canadians on a property near Coal Creek.¹²

The over 40-acre sized property was owned by Weldwood of Canada Limited, a logging company, and had been leased for 50 years by the local rod and gun club, which used the site for target practice, even though members of the Chinese Canadian community were not in favour of the property being used for shooting (Hume 2002). In 2001, Weldwood gifted the land to the Village of Cumberland. They did this because they were concerned about liability related to coal fires, and the subsidence and environmental effects of overburden on the land due to past coal mining.¹³ Weldwood also provided CAN\$5,000 to the Heritage Commission of the Village to facilitate “an effective local stakeholder input process” to manage the property. Initially, the Village Council was not keen to make the property a park and intended to keep it with the rod and gun club. However, Weldwood was convinced by advocates for the park to put a covenant on the property stipulating that it was to be used only “as heritage Chinese and Japanese community areas” and “as ecological preservation areas.” In line with this mandate, the Chinatown/No. 1 Japanese Town Ad-Hoc Group presented a Park Projection Study to Council in 2006, to promote the idea that the property be dedicated as a heritage park, and that only trails, lookouts, signage, storyboards and gardens be allowed (Richardson 2006).

In 2008, Cumberland Village formalized the committee and renamed it again to be the Perseverance Creek Historic Park Advisory Committee,¹⁴ which had a clear mandate to develop the park. Initially, the focus was on the former Chinatown also on the property. Key Japanese Canadians on the committee were Ray Iwaasa and Tats Aoki. There were also Chinese Canadians on the committee, including Vancouver Island University professor, Imogene Lim.¹⁵ The idea emerged to plant 31 cherry trees on the former site of No. 1 Japanese Town, one for each family that lived there before World War II. The Japanese Canadians in Toronto paid for the cherry trees and planted them during an event organized by the Advisory Committee on October 24, 2009.¹⁶

In July 2011, Bronco Moncrief, Mayor of Cumberland, and a childhood friend of Japanese Canadians living in Cumberland, received Japan’s second-highest award, the Order of the Rising Sun, to

¹² Imogene Lim, *pers. comm.*, August 20, 2019.

¹³ Steve Morgan, *pers. comm.*, information provided by Leslie Baird (not related to me), mayor of Cumberland, January 13, 2020.

¹⁴ The name later reverted to what it was known prior to 1947, Coal Creek.

¹⁵ Imogene Lim, *pers. comm.*, August 21, 2019.

¹⁶ Imogene Lim, *pers. comm.*, August 21, 2019.

honour his long-time efforts to “ensure that Cumberland does not forget the families that were rounded up and sent away.” As mayor, Moncrief also worked with Japanese Canadians from all over Canada and locals to restore Cumberland’s Japanese cemetery, which had been vandalized and left untended for years. In November 2011, a Japanese gravestone that had been used to support a post at Union Bay was repatriated to the refurbished Japanese cemetery. In addition, Moncrief lobbied the provincial government to change the name of nearby “Jap Mountain” to “Nikkei Mountain.” He also played a pivotal role in ensuring that artifacts from Japanese settlers were collected and displayed at Cumberland’s museum (Matas 2011/2017).

In 2018, Cumberland was awarded CAN\$29,620 by the BC Rural Dividends Program, a provincial government initiative, to build a loop trail through the site of No. 1 Japanese Town, and add 12 interpretive signs sharing the history of the site (Neal 2018). Finally, on June 8, 2019, the plaques were unveiled during a special ceremony held at the site of No. 1 Japanese Town in Coal Creek Historic Park (Haluschak 2019). Two hundred people attended the event, with the large group embodying anti-racist practice.¹⁷ In January 2020, one of the Coal Creek Advisory Committee members, Steve Morgan, said that the work was partially related to supporting reconciliation with Japanese Canadians.¹⁸

Activism and Resistance

Japanese Canadian activism and resistance against racism has a long history. For example, before 1907, Japanese and other immigrants from Asia resisted attempts to limit their arrival and their rights in Canada. In response to this resistance, the 1907 race riots occurred, but the Japanese Canadian community in Vancouver resisted attempts by white rioters to drive them out of Vancouver and burn their community down (Price 2007/08). Later, Tomekichi Homma and other Japanese Canadians advocated for the right to vote, although they were unsuccessful at that time (Homma and Isaksson 2008). During World War II, many Japanese Canadians resisted in various ways, from organizing secret Japanese schools at internment camps despite them not being permitted (Baird 2019) to writing letters to the Canadian government to protest unfair treatment (Stanger-Ross et al. 2017).

Later, Japanese Canadian authors such as Ken Adachi (1976) and Ann Gomer Sunahara (1981) wrote important books aimed at raising awareness amongst Canadians in general about the injustices that Japanese Canadians faced between 1942 and 1949. Then, in the 1980s, efforts to pressure the federal government of Canada to acknowledge the injustices of the past, as well as gain some financial compensation, gained momentum, leading to Redress with the government of Canada in 1988 (Miki and Kobayashi 1991; Miki 2004). In addition, in the years following Redress, Japanese Canadian activists who had been involved in the movement of the 1980s, started advocating for others to understand the legacy that internment during and after World War II had on Japanese Canadians (Oikawa 2012).

Recent attempts to do anti-racist work and reconstitute Japanese Canadian spaces on Vancouver Island have received less attention than efforts on the mainland of BC, and at the national level, but have occurred nonetheless, although they have faced opposition from some. For example, despite the Japanese Canadian community’s disagreement with honourific naming associated with A.W. Neill, some people in Port Alberni have and continue to defend Neill’s memory, thus making their worldviews abundantly and disturbingly clear. The argumentation is worth considering. Lloyd A. Hills, for example, wrote a letter that was published in the October 23, 2019 issue of *Alberni Valley News*, stating that, “His [A.W. Neill’s] opinions are not in line with the general thought today. That is no reason to vilify his name.” Hills then went on to write, “What has Mr. Neill done to provoke such antipathy that some people want to take away the honour bestowed on him by having a school and a street named in his honour?” This

¹⁷ Imogene Lim, *pers. comm.*, August 21, 2019.

¹⁸ Steve Morgan, *pers. comm.*, September 2, 2020.

question is troubling, especially considering that nowhere in Hills' letter are the abuses that Neill promoted against Japanese Canadians acknowledged. Instead, he simply ends his letter with, "Let us work toward something that will benefit those living today and forget the wounds of yesteryear" (Hills 2019). Another opponent of the name change, Port Alberni resident John Zoet, voiced his opposition in a *CBC Radio* interview. He argued that changing the name of the school would constitute a waste of tax dollars. Zoet was also quoted as saying, "History is history, no matter what it is. Good or bad, it's there for a reason...If the bad history isn't shown too then people will think all was rosy and it wasn't" (Hamilton 2019). Over a year earlier, Port Alberni resident Cameron Stefiuk also voiced his opposition to changing the name of Neill Street, essentially arguing that nothing should be done to promote reconciliation, as bad history is still history (Hamilton 2018). However, all three of these detractors seem not to recognize two important points that are integral to thinking about history and honorific naming. First, the history of A.W. Neill should be remembered, as he played an important role in the Alberni-Comox area. Museums and history books play this role. However, it is something very different to maintain a honourific name for someone whose opinions, as Lloyd A. Hills (2019) noted, "are not in line with the general thought today." As Rosemarie Buchanan was quoted as saying, "I think we've learned some hard but good lessons...about who should and shouldn't be honoured with namings and why" (Hamilton 2019).

While resistance to changing the name of A.W. Neill Elementary School and Neill Street has been significant, there has been less of a negative response to Valerie Harrison's efforts to remove the A.W. Neill racist covenant from her property. Even Lloyd A. Hills, who wrote a letter to the *Alberni Valley News* to support A.W. Neill, expressed approval for removing the covenant from Harrison's house. He wrote, "As for covenants, why should persons who are dead be allowed to control the lives of the living? That is really the essence of covenants. Therefore, I am in complete sympathy with Mrs. Valerie Harrison. She should have her money refunded and all covenants abolished" (Hills 2019). Still, an elderly female neighbor left scolding notes in Harrison's mailbox. However, Harrison remained committed, despite the harassment.

As for the Tofino apology, it took considerable efforts and activism by Japanese Canadians, both locally and across Canada, to pressure the City Council to publicly apologize. It certainly was not an idea that was immediately accepted, but in the end, the results appear to have been positive for all sides.

Finally, in relation to Chinatown and No. 1 Japanese Town at Coal Creek Historic Park, there were different opinions about how the property should be used. However, anti-racist work was done to change the land use of the property to heritage purposes, and no such investments were made.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described four different ways that anti-racism activism associated with Japanese Canadians has been mobilized in Central Vancouver Island. I have contributed to the critical geography literature on Japanese Canadians by emphasizing the importance of scalar politics and anti-racist work at local levels, something that is important for critical geographers to be attentive to. Indeed, it is surprising that critical geographers have not been more critical of national-level redress in 1988 for not really addressing injustices committed at more localized levels. Indeed, the main contribution of this article is to make it clear that anti-racist work needs to be attentive to the various spatial scales that redress often needs to occur on, rather than assuming that national-level efforts are sufficient to address all scales of injustices.

All four cases relate to particular local spaces and have achieved a local level of reconciliation with Japanese Canadians by instilling new meanings to particular spaces. The unresolved nature of these issues and spaces has resulted in significant anti-racist work, including efforts to bestow new meanings

to spaces, showing that reconciliation frequently needs to occur at various spatial levels, not just the national level.

The role of anti-racist work has been to enact new social relations and modes of spatial practice. While the future of some efforts remains uncertain, and there are potential pitfalls associated with some kinds of self-serving anti-racist work, there is no doubt that efforts to reckon with the injustices imposed on Japanese Canadians during World War II and afterwards are variously occurring in central Vancouver Island, and for good reason. Even though these efforts have sometimes faced resistance, they have nevertheless moved ahead, thus creating new landscapes specifically designed to counter the legacy of past anti-Asian racism, but more importantly, to send the message that locally-scaled redress, including work related to particular places, is critically important, and that critical geographers have the potential to contribute to the type of multi-scaled anti-racist work that is needed.

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