

# REFRAMING *NIKKEI* HISTORIES:

## *Complicating Existing Narratives*

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**D**URING RECENT DECADES, scholars on both sides of the Canada-US border and in Japan have contributed to the development of a rich and growing body of literature that addresses the historical experience of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in North America. In early 2015, the contributors to this special issue responded to a call for papers that asked scholars to take stock of what this has meant for *nikkei* history in British Columbia and how approaches developed in other regional or disciplinary contexts might be applied to complicate or reframe our understanding of the *nikkei* experience in British Columbia, whether by resituating it within larger global or national frameworks, locating it in relation to that of other racialized groups, or drawing upon previously untapped sources.<sup>1</sup> The authors include both established and emerging scholars in the fields of *nikkei* history, Japanese history, and archaeology as well as the novelist Joy Kogawa, whose profound contribution to Japanese Canadian literature has not just enriched the field but sensitized a nation to the wrongs visited on Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Taken together, their articles complicate existing narratives of *nikkei* history and our understanding of the historical experience of pre-war Japanese immigrants and their children in important ways. They tell a complex story of courage, adjustment, and adaptation to a series of unfamiliar environments, offering opportunity but riven by racial discrimination, both before and after Japanese Canadians were forcibly removed from

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<sup>1</sup> Although I recognize that the convention in Canada and the United States is to use “Nikkei” to refer to people of Japanese ancestry living abroad, I prefer the Japanese term *nikkeijin* [日系人] to refer to people of Japanese ancestry. As used in Japanese, this term makes a more general reference to ancestry than does Nikkei, which, particularly when used as a noun, works to create people of Japanese ancestry as a separate category of people seemingly distinct from others. The same is true of the terms Issei and Nisei which are rendered here as the more generic *issei* [一世] and *nisei* [二世] to refer to the first generation – immigrants – and the second generation, their children. All authors of articles in this issue are in agreement with this usage.

the coast, confined to detention camps in the BC interior, and, as the Second World War drew to a close, dispersed across Canada, forbidden to return to the coast until April 1949.<sup>2</sup>

The volume begins with a deeply moving excerpt from Joy Kogawa's most recent book, *Gently to Nagasaki*, which serves, in important ways, to frame this issue as a whole.<sup>3</sup> A member of a family that relocated to Alberta after being forcibly detained in a hastily constructed camp in Slocan, British Columbia, and that witnessed the impact of the postwar dispersal of Japanese Canadians across Canada on members of their community, Kogawa, through the eyes of the child that she was then, gives us a glimpse of the profound loneliness and sense of imposed isolation that this entailed. Although her family and others were forcibly displaced to Alberta or other provinces further east as the war came to an end, their stories remained a part of BC history. Like so many other *nikkei* families, the members of the Nakayama family did not choose to move east or settle outside British Columbia on their own initiative. They remained a family whose experience was entangled in that of all British Columbians even as they were geographically displaced and key moments of their lives unfolded elsewhere.

Greg Robinson, in turn, examines reaction to Vancouver's 1907 Anti-Asian Riot in both French- and English-language newspapers in Quebec, one of the provinces to which Canadian citizens of Japanese ancestry were relocated at the end of the Second World War and where they built a thriving community during the decades that followed. Robinson situates the Quebec debate over the Vancouver riot within the context of broader conversations about race, nation, citizenship, and belonging in Canada, noting comparisons drawn between Japanese immigration to Canada's west coast and Caribbean immigration to Canada's eastern provinces (where it was claimed they remained unassimilable despite their three-hundred-year history in Canada) as well as allusions to migrations from other parts of the British Empire, including India.

<sup>2</sup> There is considerable debate regarding the appropriate term to use to refer to the camps in which people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly detained during the Second World War on both sides of the Canada-US border. See, for example, Roger Daniels, "Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans," in *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Louis Fiset and Gail Nomura, 183-207 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006). I have chosen here to refer to these camps as detention camps, following the practice of the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby, British Columbia, but defer to the choices made by each of the authors in their respective articles.

<sup>3</sup> Joy Kogawa, *Gently to Nagasaki* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2016), 86-90.

Where Robinson draws on French- and English-language sources to locate *nikkei* history within the broader framework of Canadian and British imperial history, Janice Matsumura, a scholar of Japanese history, draws on Japanese-language sources to situate it within the larger framework of the Japanese empire. She examines ways in which participants in debates regarding racial and ethnic hierarchies in both British Columbia and Japan invoked the results of the intelligence testing of Vancouver-based Japanese Canadian schoolchildren in 1925 to position Japanese immigrants not only in relation to the Euro-Canadian children who were their classmates but also in relation to children of Japanese who did not leave Japan, as well as Japanese who migrated to colonized areas of the Japanese empire such as Manchuria. Like Matsumura, Daniel Lachapelle Lemire also draws on Japanese-language sources to locate *nikkei* history within a broader imperial context, analyzing essays written in Japanese by *nikkei* schoolchildren at the Japanese School of Languages on Alexander Street and published in the school's newsletter. These essays reflect their complex balancing of the competing cultural pressures that framed their lives during the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War and provide new insight into the role of such schools in shaping understanding of events such as Japan's invasion of China. In so doing, these essays challenge, in significant ways, received narratives of the postwar period.

Patricia Roy's article, in turn, reminds us that there is still a great deal of critical work to be done with English-language sources.<sup>4</sup> Roy examines the contradictory attitudes of Anglican Church members who worked with Japanese immigrants and their children, at times expressing racial hostility towards the very people to whom they ministered. Even as it set up missions in which services were also conducted in Japanese, Anglican Church leaders endorsed the forced removal of Japanese Canadians from the coast as well as their postwar dispersal across Canada, although they did object to the expatriation of Canadians of Japanese ancestry to Japan at war's end.

This volume concludes with a photo essay by Bob Muckle, which reminds us of the critical contribution archaeological evidence can make to a broader understanding of *nikkei* history and that of other marginalized groups. Muckle introduces us to a *nikkei* community of which there is little trace in the archival record – a community that would be

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the historiography of Japanese and Chinese Canadian history and her own journey as a historian, see Patricia Roy, "From Exclusion to Inclusion: An Informal Historiographical Memoir about East Asians in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 188 (2015-16): 91-106.

rendered all but invisible if we relied on archival sources alone. Based on his excavation of an early twentieth-century logging camp located in the forests of a mountain valley in North Vancouver, Muckle complicates our understanding of the ways in which such logging camps might be organized and, through photographs both of the site and of the artefacts uncovered there, makes it possible for us to imagine, in ways that words alone could not, what life comprised for those living there during the decades prior to the Second World War.

The cover image selected for this special issue also speaks to the importance of material culture. An advertisement for the dry goods store run by Manzo Nagano in Victoria, British Columbia, first opened in the 1890s, it reflects the complex social and cultural world that he and other Japanese immigrants negotiated. Nagano, who arrived in British Columbia in 1877 and is often identified as the first known Japanese immigrant to formally settle in Canada, selected an image of a Japanese woman similar to those one might have seen in Japanese woodblock prints of the time, framing her both with the cherry blossoms evocative of Japanese cultural tradition and with roses, almost certainly a nod to British culture in the very Victorian city that he had made his home.<sup>5</sup>

The previously published poems that we were generously permitted to republish here in *BC Studies*'s THIS SPACE HERE section likewise speak to lives lived at the intersection of both Canadian and Japanese culture. These poems address aspects of Japanese Canadian history that are generally more familiar to British Columbians than those addressed in the articles, but they do so in unfamiliar ways through *haiku* and *tanka* originally written in Japanese and only later translated into English.<sup>6</sup> Chie Kamegaya, a teacher who lived in New Westminster prior to the war and was relocated to a detention camp in Kaslo, BC, during the war, reflects on her life as an immigrant in British Columbia after retiring to New Denver, where she helped to establish the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre in 1994. Kamegaya's *haiku* are written in her own hand in Japanese in a style that is an art form in itself.<sup>7</sup> Accompanying these poems is a painting by Kiyoko Kay Takahara in a style known as *haiga*, which

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to the Royal British Columbia Museum for its permission to use this image.

<sup>6</sup> *Tanka* are similar to *haiku* but add an extra two lines of seven syllables each to the more familiar 5-7-5 format. Although Manzo Nagano and other Japanese immigrants would have provided family name first and given name last in Japan in accordance with the Japanese custom, most Japanese immigrants in Canada adopted the Canadian custom of listing given name or initials first and family name last, as does Manzo Nagano in this example. Authors in this volume therefore adopt the same practice.

<sup>7</sup> Kamegaya Chie, *An Immigrant's Haiku Year: Seasons in New Denver* (New Denver: Twa Corbies, 1994), n.p.n.



Japanese Fancy Goods: J.M. Nagano and Co., Balmoral Block, Victoria, BC. Image PDP03234 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

uses a minimal number of essential strokes to convey an image much as *haiku* do with words.<sup>8</sup> The five *tanka* written by Takeo Ujo Nakano recount his experience during the Second World War, from his forced departure from his home in Woodfibre; to his initial detention in the Livestock Building on the PNE grounds in Vancouver; the moment he boarded a train at Vancouver's CPR station for transfer to the road camps in the BC interior where *nikkei* men were sent; and, finally, his decision two decades after the war to become a Canadian citizen.<sup>9</sup>

I would like to thank all the authors for their deeply thoughtful responses to the call for papers and for their contributions to this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Takeo Ujo Nakano with Leatrice M. Willson Chan, *Within the Barbed Wire Fence: A Japanese Man's Account of His Internment in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2012) (originally published 1980), 10, 13, 49, 71, 105.

Together, their work enriches and complicates our understanding of *nikkei* history in British Columbia, demonstrating its significance not just regionally but on a variety of scales, including national, imperial, and trans-Pacific. In resituating *nikkei* history in British Columbia within this series of broader contexts, these articles remind us that, although Japanese settlement was concentrated in British Columbia and, as such, remains an important element of BC history, it is also an integral part of Canadian history and the history of the Japanese empire writ large. The authors demonstrate the enormous potential inherent in working with Japanese-language materials to better understand the complexity and diversity of pre-war Japanese immigrant communities as well as the broad range of responses to a deeply entrenched form of institutionalized racism that extended across Canada and to growing geopolitical tensions during the decades leading to the outbreak of war, as reflected in the careful negotiation of these competing forces by *nikkei* schoolchildren in the essays analyzed by Lachapelle Lemire. The diverse range of responses reflected in these articles, in and of itself, speaks to the complex nature of *nikkei* society in British Columbia, which included internal divisions that have yet to be fully explored.<sup>10</sup> That very diversity, in itself, reveals not just the injustice of interning Canadians of Japanese ancestry but also the absurdity and utter illogic of doing so: *nikkeijin* were no more uniform in responding to opportunity in British Columbia or to the tensions of the time than were members of any other BC community, immigrant or not.

My thanks to Richard Mackie and Leanne Coughlin, special issue editor and managing editor of *BC Studies*, respectively, for their interest in this special issue, and to Jean Barman for suggesting it after commenting on a session entitled “Speaking to Silences in Japanese Canadian History” at the 2013 BC Studies Conference.<sup>11</sup> Participants in that session asked how our understanding of seemingly familiar histories is complicated, enriched, or transformed when we address issues that have been silenced or avoided in the past. Joy Kogawa exemplifies the courage it takes to engage in inquiries of this kind. I am deeply grateful to her for sharing a part of her soul with us through the excerpt from *Gently to Nagasaki* that she generously allowed us to include in this issue.

<sup>10</sup> I explore some kinds of internal divisions in my own work – see Andrea Geiger, *Subverting Exclusion: Transpacific Encounters with Race, Caste and Borders, 1885–1928* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), arguing for the importance of taking into account traditional status categories rooted in Tokugawa culture and society in analyzing the internal dynamics of Meiji-era Japanese immigrant communities, in addition to the more familiar paradigms of race, class, and gender.

<sup>11</sup> I am also grateful to SFU’s University Publications Fund for its support both of *BC Studies* and this special issue.