ABSTRACT: All geography is historical geography. There is no better way to weaken our scholarly power than to engage in presentism, either by ignoring or by discounting the past. It is equally problematic to engage in historicism, however, as though the past can be excavated for its own sake. The present is but the past becoming. Answering the charge from the AAG’s Historical Geography Specialty Group organizers to reflect on the significance of archival work for historical geographers, I have divided this discussion into three sections, which roughly coincide with my own trajectory from graduate school, through an early, and now a late, academic career. Although that trajectory is roughly chronological, it is also a journey of a changing relationship with archives, and with the people whose lives are archivally represented. This article begins with my research in a Japanese village during the early 1980s, proceeds to discuss the formation of a career based on studying the development of Japanese-Canadian communities, and concludes with a brief description of current collaborative work in the Downtown East Side of Vancouver.

The Making of a Historical Geographer

I arrived in Japan in the fall of 1980, having been assigned to the Department of Geography at Kyoto University, and almost immediately began field research on the Koto Plain in the middle of Shiga Prefecture. The area lies along the main route between Tokyo and the ancient capital of Kyoto, the Tokaido. Between the Tokaido (now the route of the famous bullet train), and Lake Biwa, Japan’s largest lake, lie some of the oldest cultivated fields, dating to feudal times. These were the lands of some of the most powerful daimyo (feudal lords). Not far from this spot is Sekigahara, where occurred the decisive battle that established the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Before leaving for Japan, however, I had met with Dr. Masajiro Miyazaki, a physician and community leader living in Lillooet, British Columbia. He kindly demanded that I make his home village, Kaideima, in the midst of the Koto Plain, the subject of my dissertation. He sent me an introduction to his childhood friend, a Nisei (second generation Japanese-Canadian), Masao Matsumiya, who had lived in Kaideima since being exiled from his home in Canada in 1946.

Two names from the past. It is important to mention them at the outset for two main reasons. Between them they were laden with first-hand knowledge of both their village in Japan...
and the development of a Japanese-Canadian community on Powell Street in Vancouver. Mr. Matsumiya shared with me the information he had gathered over several years of writing the history of Kaideima, and provided me with a copy of his then-unpublished manuscript. Both men were committed to making connections with succeeding generations, with ensuring that their fascinating story should remain alive. Neither was bitter, but both carried a profound sense of what the loss of human rights had meant for Japanese Canadians. Their stories were a

Figure 1. Emigration from Shiga prefecture, showing concentration on the Koto Plain. (Map by Sonja Aagesen.)
In September 1906, the Inugami River, an aggraded stream running across the flat Koto remarkable gift to a young Canadian graduate student embarking upon a career in which it was not yet clear just how deeply linked it would become to ongoing struggles for human rights. Plain into Lake Biwa (Figure 1), overflowed its banks during a typhoon, destroying the annual rice harvest. Facing severe economic hardship, many of the men from the inundated villages migrated to Canada, where they found work in the burgeoning sawmill industry. The villages on this plain became the source of the largest concentration of Japanese immigrants to Canada historically, about 10,000 people in all (Figure 2).

The Meiji Period (1868–1912) was a time of collision between capitalism and a traditional political economy, when concepts of nation and citizen, rural and urban, as well as social identity, were simultaneously re-inscribed and rewritten. Rural-to-urban migration was not unusual in Japan at the time. In fact, the entire Meiji Period saw a massive shift in population from rural to urban areas, along with industrialization, bureaucratization, and unprecedented economic growth. This process was not random; a very large literature outlines both the political economy of the Meiji Period and the processes that occurred at the level of the household, including the role of patriarchy, patronage, religious values, and an agrarian ideal inherited from feudal times in which farmers, who had been given the right to own land only after the Meiji Restoration, were given vaunted social status. Many scholars refer to this process as “samuraization,” because social benefits that had previously been the domain of the nobility were not extended legally to commoners (the rights to property and education, for example). Notwithstanding, commoners...
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paid a high economic price for their new civil rights, which were easy to name but difficult to attain.\(^5\)

The difference for these particular villages was that instead of migrating for poor wages to industrializing areas of Japan, they went to industrializing Canada, where they could earn more and send remittances back to Japan in hopes of retaining that vaunted agrarian ideal. Particularly striking in this place is the large concentration of emigrants from a small region, both because of the disastrous flooding that created an immediate need for outside means of living, and because opportunities became available due to the efforts of earlier migrants to Vancouver, who had established themselves in the sawmill industry. In practice, this process was little different from the practice of *dekasegi* (going out to work) all over Japan, but the higher wages in Canada created the chance to enhance village life through a subsequent trans-nationalization of the community.

The results are clearly written upon the landscape. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into that fascinating story here,\(^6\) but to summarize, the traditional Japanese village has one large house, usually in the centre, that of the major village landowner, surrounded by smaller houses (which would have had thatched roofs a century ago) occupied by tenant farmers. At the turn of the twentieth century, 90% of the village population was tenant farmers, but by mid-century nearly all owned agricultural land, albeit some very small plots, and had built substantial houses and traditional gardens that had the appearance of the traditional aristocracy. In other words, they came to look like entire villages of landowners, something quite impossible in the traditional landscape with its limited agricultural land base.\(^7\)

Mr. Matsumiya’s home, on the same location where his ancestors had lived for many generations, was just down the street from the ancestral home of the Miyazakis. It was a beautiful, traditional house built during the Taisho Period, fronted by a formal Buddhist-style garden. Inside was a very expensive Buddhist altar (*butsudan*), another symbol of the wealth borne by return migrants. Notwithstanding that he was born in Canada, as a first son, Mr. Matsumiya had been expected to “return” to Japan to head the household. Dr. Miyazaki, on the other hand, was a third son, sent to Canada at age 13 (as was typical) to begin working and going to school. For him there was no expectation of return. The Miyazaki house in Kaideima, now occupied by the current inheritor son and his family, is of a similar period, with a similar elaborate garden and an altar taking pride of place inside the house. These houses present a message to the world of the accomplishments of the emigrant families; moreover, they facilitate the traditional agrarian lifestyle that validates religious ties, social standing, and kinship and family obligations, performed daily in this traditional architectural setting.

With this highly unusual landscape before me, I set about to map the houses, calling at each one to ask if they would be willing to tell me their stories of emigration and return. As a student at the University of California (UCLA), highly influenced by the tradition of Carl Sauer, I had been taught to “read the landscape,” and was well schooled in ethnographic methods. Not everyone in the village talked to me, but most did, some at length and over several sessions. Most of the conversations were of ancestors who had emigrated and returned, or of Canadian cousins with whom people had maintained contact. I also learned to read the subtle cues of architecture, could tell when and how a house had been built, and could identify the symbolic placement of items in the garden and household that signified adherence to Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian ideals (Figure 3). In short, for this is a very long and complex story, I developed a theory that I called the “paradox of the sojourner,” which explained the ways in which migrants had engaged in the earnings from industrial labor, which was still anathema to them, to purchase a particular landscape that conferred social status. That landscape needs to be understood has having several elements, the domestic, the religious, the agricultural, all part of traditional way of life that
Within the established paradigm of historical geography in North America at the time, these achievements would have been good enough. But historical geographers in Japan did not abide what they considered to be such impressionistic landscape research as practiced by North American cultural geographers. They wanted hard data. My advisors decreed that if I was truly to understand the impact of emigration on the village, then I must go much further. They proceeded to provide me with an extremely rigorous training in using Japanese archival sources.

First, I accessed the population registry, the *koseki*. Scholars of Japan will recognize immediately that research using the *koseki* is not allowed in Japan for reasons of privacy—and it is certainly not open to a student from North America. But such was the power of my primary advisor—the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters at Kyoto University—that these archives were opened to me. I spent nearly two years recording every birth, death, marriage, and change of residence for 115 households in Kaideima between 1883 and 1941. Next, I went to the directory of land transactions, the *Tochidaichō*, and recorded over 15,000 separate land transactions for the same time period. At that time, of course, there was no access to desktop computers, so each event had to be manually recorded and translated into English, then added to a chart for each of the 115 households. It was thereby possible to connect demographic events, migration, and landholding to assess the impact of dekasegi on the village.

The information brings every male triangle and every female circle (Figure 4) to life, showing who they were, where they lived, whom they married, how many children they had, when and where they died. One hundred of the 115 households had migrants to Canada, and by

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*Figure 3.* The author's hand-drawn chart showing a typical family history of emigration and other demographic characteristics.
comparing the patterns I was able to discern the workings of class, inheritance, and patriarchy. I combined this information with the oral histories to tell the complex stories of individual households. In general, it was the wealthier households that initially sent male household heads and first sons, in order to consolidate the household property in the village. Less wealthy households were able to sponsor fewer migrants, and of course bought proportionately less property. The poorest households usually ended up leaving the village entirely. Notably, there were a significant number of new “branch” households established by younger, non-inheritor sons, who in the normal Japanese course of events would not have been able to remain in the village at that time, because there was not enough agricultural land to support them.

Figure 4 shows my original, hand-drawn chart of a typical household. It shows that emigration began during the late 1900s with the head of the household, at that time a middle-ranking tenant farmer. There were four sons in the next generation, three of whom migrated to Canada, and all whom returned. The youngest of the three migrants returned to Kaideima to establish a branch household, which remains there today. The middle sons both migrated elsewhere in Japan. The eldest son emigrated with his wife and their eldest son, and two additional sons were born Vancouver. Among their children (the fourth generation on the chart), three Canadian-born daughters married out, and a Canadian-born son returned to Japan, where he remains as head of the household. The second son returned to establish a branch household, but the third son remained in Canada, establishing a new Canadian branch.
The koseki research presents some interesting research ethics questions. Seldom are Japanese researchers given access to these records, and I do not know of another non-Japanese scholar who has been given access to records as recent as those of the twentieth century. So this was a rare opportunity—so rare in fact that my Japanese supervisor decreed that every graduate student in the Geography Department should spend some time in the archives helping me, just for the experience of working with data that they would likely never see again. Their assistance helped me to gather all my data within the two-year scholarship period! But what strikes me as I look back—other than to marvel at how fortunate I was to have had both this training and the archival access—is the immense power and responsibility, but at the same time the intimacy, of holding all these pieces of information that fit together to depict actual lives. Seldom is it possible to know so many details about people.

At that time, universities did not have mandatory ethics review boards, but my Japanese advisors trained me carefully on how to behave, including how to use the correct level of polite language to approach people, how to act in people’s homes, and what topics are beyond the reach of proper conversation. Proper behavior even includes how to sit, with the legs folded under behind the knees, rather than sprawled out “like a foreigner.” This posture, called seiza, is especially appropriate for women; and in 1980–81 in rural Japan few would have recognized a feminist demand to extend one’s legs.

Japanese society is a complicated dialectic of highly regulated conventions. The fact that I had been introduced to the village by a venerated elder (especially one who had made good in Canada by being educated and becoming a physician) initially gave me access to a circle of about five families who were the acknowledged core of the emigrant village. The fact that my official advisor was a man of such stature in the academic world enhanced my credentials. Beyond these initial advantages, however, I had to follow careful protocols to ensure not only that people would assist me in my research, but that I was seen to be doing things in a respectful manner. Respect is defined by the conventions of place and I faced a demand to learn those conventions if I hope to be successful as a researcher.

The ethics of fieldwork became very clear to me one day as I approached an elderly woman who immediately became quite upset and agitated. I do not know if she spoke English, or where she had been born, although she was of an age to indicate a probability that she was born in Canada. She clearly associated me with Canada, however, and therefore with the human rights violations that she had experienced during the 1940s. She yelled at me, in Japanese, that she had been treated “like an animal.” No amount of correct language and posture could overcome her anger, and no archival information, no matter how detailed, could capture the raw emotions of the moment. I left feeling very badly that I had upset her. Hers was the only overt hostility that I encountered in two years in the village, but the experience raised questions that have never left me concerning the meaning of respect on the part of the researcher, and the obligation to recognize that no relationship with subjects can be reduced to banal neutrality.

The Nikkei Community in Canada

I shift now back to Canada, where I finished my PhD and took up an academic job in 1983. I immediately began to implement my long-term plan to study the development of a Japanese-Canadian community, mainly in Vancouver. Most of the emigrants who had remained in Canada, from all over Japan, were members of households headed by second, and subsequent, non-inheritor sons. As explained earlier, most of the individuals and families whose familial obligations required that they carry on the household returned to Japan, sometimes after a short while, sometimes after years. The records, of course, allowed me to construct a detailed picture
of the migration process, and the population sorting that took place in order for a Japanese-Canadian cultural community to develop.

In Vancouver, indigenous settlements were pushed out of the way over the second half of the nineteenth century to make way for a Pacific coast railway terminus and an economy based on primary industries, the largest of which was lumber. The industrial landscape of Vancouver began to develop during the 1880s, a time almost exactly concurrent with industrialization and rural out-migration in Japan. The first Japanese labor immigrants arrived during the 1880s, but the largest group came in 1906–7. The largest source of employment was in sawmills, followed closely by fishing. Although there was considerable diversity, the largest number of male emigrants working in sawmills were from Shiga Prefecture. They included the men from Kaideima. The largest number in fishing were from neighboring Wakayama Prefecture. As the sawmills rose up along the Vancouver shoreline, there developed a significant community centered on Powell Street in what is now the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, a community that eventually grew to contain about a third of the total Japanese-Canadian community by 1942.

I cannot begin to tell the story here, except to say that the Powell Street district was a community of laborers and their families, the men working in sawmills and in other menial jobs, many of the women in domestic service. There was also a significant number of business people, who created the infrastructure for a self-contained community. They adapted the original English-style houses (built by white residents in the 1880s) to create multi-family structures and boarding houses, in a style that is very particular to Japanese immigrants (Figure 5). The landscape was the polar opposite of the Japanese agrarian ideal, but suited the circumstances of an immigrant

**Figure 5**: Typical Japanese immigrant housing built in the early 20th Century. Photo: Audrey Kobayashi
Kobayashi population. I have also become adept at reading this landscape, using cues of building materials, styles, and layouts to date the buildings (see Kobayashi 1996).

Let me return to the archives. Having learned so much from my Japanese advisors, I was determined to gather as much information as possible about every immigrant family from throughout Japan, and I set to work in 1984 gathering a mass of material. I do not have space to describe the sources in detail, but I used government documents, community directories, street directories, association records, newspapers, and church and temple records. By 1984, it was possible—just—to enter the data on a desktop computer, but the software was still very basic. I used the very first version of dBase, which allowed one to enter information but had almost no interactive capacity. I had to work with a programmer to write all the individual macros in order to do any analysis. But I shall return to that point shortly.

In September 1907, there were racist riots in Vancouver to oppose Asian labor, causing considerable property damage along Pender Street (the neighborhood of Chinese immigrants) and Powell Street. In response, the Canadian government established quotas and kept very close tabs on the movements of Japanese immigrants; Chinese immigrants were almost entirely excluded by use of the infamous “Head Tax.” Every new and return entry from Japan is therefore recorded, with numerous details about individuals. Further, I returned to Japan where the Department of External Affairs (Gaimusho) held individual records of visas issued to all emigrants, again with considerable demographic detail. These records combined with a great deal of contextual information including everything from biographies to poetry, photographs to government documents, to create profiles of the more than 30,000 individual immigrants. The records contain errors of course, but in many cases it is possible to trace individuals and their family members from their original villages, to Canada, and then either back to Japan or on to another destination in Canada (although my records stop after the uprooting of the 1940s).

Japanese immigrants created settlements throughout British Columbia, the largest being the Powell Street district adjacent to sawmills in Vancouver, and the fishing village of Steveston to the south of Vancouver. There were also farming communities in the Fraser and Okanagan valleys of the interior of the province, and fishing, mining, logging, and sawmill communities north along the coast and throughout the islands of the Gulf of Georgia. These were mostly segregated but relatively successful communities, with a range of institutions and increasing levels of home and business ownership. One of the fascinating aspects of these settlements is that they exhibit strong clusters of people from the same prefectural background in Japan, organized according to occupation as well as prefectural, village, religious, and kinship ties.

Then it ended. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese in December 1941, all Japanese Canadians, the majority of them Canadian citizens (either by naturalization or by birth), were deprived of their human rights, freedom, and property. In a manner similar but not identical to what happened to Japanese Americans, they were removed from Powell Street and all areas within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast, and placed in internment camps or labor camps. Most never returned to their homes. Powell Street was left derelict. One of the greatest abuses of human rights in Canadian history had been perpetrated. A history of systemic, institutional, personal, and labor racism had culminated in revoking of all human rights. In 1946, about 4,000 people, more than half born in Canada, were exiled to Japan. Most of those remaining, by then about 22,000 people, were permanently relocated east of the Rocky Mountains.

Now I jump forward to the 1980s. My big data base had become quite well known among Japanese Canadians. The program was not only interactive, including a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) function, but it could be used by someone with no computer experience (which was almost all of the world in the 1980s). The rudimentary GIS program mapped the sources of
the original emigrants from Japan, their settlements in Canada pre-1940s, and their dispersal as a result of the uprooting. It was and is an immensely powerful tool for social, demographic, and family historical research. In 1986 I was asked to use the data in the movement to achieve redress for the treatment of Japanese Canadians during the 1940s, and I became a member of the negotiating team, originally providing data to be used in presenting the Japanese-Canadian perspective. That fight was won in 1988, when a settlement was reached with the Canadian government, a mark of tremendous validation for the Japanese Canadians for whom the years of the 1940s had inflicted shame and a lingering sense of otherness. The redress settlement lifted a collective burden, and people’s interest in their common past was reignited. The settlement supported many scholarly research projects, including my own, as well as student scholarships, community development projects, and links with other communities. The Nikkei National Museum was created, among other things to host the growing Japanese-Canadian archives, becoming one of the richest ethnocultural collections in the country. That archival collection remains an important basis for my research, and I have had a continuous series of joint projects with the museum ever since its inception.

Using community archives presents additional ethical issues in the contemporary context. What is the line between “independent” research and research on behalf of communities? How do community members express opinions about the research done on their behalf? What is the relationship between an obligation to protect privacy and an obligation to provide open access to information? Of course, all archives have strict protocols regarding access and privacy, but those protocols are complicated by cultural considerations. The Japanese-Canadian families who have donated much of the material in the collection want to see it used; most are happy to be named, offended to remain anonymous. But the archives also reveal things that people may not wish to be revealed, such as divisions and power struggles within the original communities. The researcher needs to walk a careful line between creating offense and recreating a romanticized understanding of that history, one that a community might like to hear. As in Japan, although perhaps along less rigidly structured protocols, people respect family lineage, personal connections, and academic credentials of the researcher. The researcher in turn must respect ethical values set not by a university ethics board but by cultural convention. To be unaware of those conventions is to infringe upon people’s rights but also to risk failure to grasp the significance of information gleaned from archives and interviews; to rely too strongly on convention, however, may result in failing to see the bigger picture or creating misconceptions.

Powell Street Today: The Ongoing Fight for Social Justice

Powell Street today shows interesting visual remnants of the Japanese-Canadian community that lived there before all the property was confiscated and sold off during the 1940s. I have never lost my fascination for the study of landscape, and still spend many hours peering into back alleys for clues about historical land use, and linking those discoveries to what the archives tell about the people who inhabited this place. The most important, and often unrecognized, aspect of the Powell Street historical landscape is the boarding houses, built by Japanese immigrants to house thousands of labourers and their families (Figure 5). Each building tells many stories, and I have the information to populate those buildings with the people who once lived there. They linger on the edges of my researcher’s brain like friendly ghosts.

The thriving neighbourhood that was left derelict in 1942 is known today as the Downtown East Side, Canada’s poorest urban neighbourhood. It has the highest concentration of SRO (single residence occupancy) housing in North America next to San Francisco (Figure 6). Unlike San Francisco, however, Vancouver has minimal municipal legislation in place to address either
the supply of or the conditions in SROs. In the midst of the most expensive housing market in Canada, the surviving SROs are rapidly being gentrified, while speculators do as little as possible to maintain decent living standards. There have been a few progressive projects to create decent and affordable low-cost housing, but most of the SROs are in substandard condition; one building went an entire winter last year without heat or hot water. Fires have broken out and the fleeing residents have discovered that the rusted fire escapes had been removed. Many buildings are infested with rats. Toilets do not work. It is not possible to “study” this landscape without taking account of the smell of overflowing toilets, or cockroach- and rat-infested walls. Rats and cockroaches do not just lurk in the woodwork; they smell. Recently, frustrated by inaction on the part of a landlord, a group of SRO residents marched to Vancouver City Hall carrying a mattress with the mice still burrowed inside.

Many landlords do not care. Efforts by the municipal government to improve and increase housing are inadequate at best. And the numbers of homeless increase. Most of the homeless have few personal resources. Thousands are substance dependent, disabled, or have mental illnesses. Furthermore, the pressing issue of the Fentanyl crisis is resulting in hundreds of deaths annually from overdoses. But they cannot, should not, and will not be “studied.” A common refrain on the streets of the Downtown East Side is “Nothing about us without us!” Furthermore, if researchers have both an ethical concern to honour those with whom we work, and a personal commitment

Figure 6: Single Residence Occupancy (SRO) housing on Powell Street.
to advance human rights, then it is imperative both to recognize our limitations and at the same time to abandon a stance of neutral reserve. Like all research with human beings, it is necessary to understand the basis of personal relations within a particular place, and to act accordingly. Socially and culturally appropriate actions are place-specific.

I think it is pretty clear from my story that I do not regard historical geography as simply uncovering past landscapes, nor even as an effort to animate past lives in order that they might somehow inform the present. I am much more concerned to recognize the ways in which the present is its past, and to understand how the stories we tell as academics, citizens, and activists make a difference. I am also concerned how we as geographers invoke what Neil Brenner calls the power of place to achieve human empowerment, inclusion, democracy, and social justice in the face of gentrification, polarization, and the advance of the so-called “creative economy”\(^\text{14}\); what Derek Gregory calls the “colonial present,” testament to the impact of European aggression upon a landscape from which Indigenous peoples were first displaced, and then incorporated as the poorest urban poor.\(^\text{15}\) In formulating our approach to the Right to Remain, we question where the city came from and who has a right to reside there.\(^\text{16}\)

In the summer of 2015, local residents erected a tent city in Oppenheimer Park, in the heart of the Powell Street district, the place where Japanese-Canadian kids used to play baseball. It is also the site of today’s Powell Street Festival, an annual “return” to Powell Street by the Japanese-Canadian community, an ethnocultural celebration with music, dancing, food, crafts, martial arts displays, and information booths. In recognition of the rights sought by the tent city dwellers, the festival was re-located that summer, moving down the street in order to respect the privacy of those living in the park. The occupiers were eventually evicted by the Vancouver police, but not before sending a public message about the terrible living conditions among both the homeless and the tenuously housed in the Downtown East Side.

I conduct neighborhood walking tours during the festival as part of educational outreach on the part of the Nikkei National Museum, conveying to enthusiastic and curious crowds some of the information that has resulted from years of poking in archives and alleyways. But here too arise significant ethical considerations. It would be easy—and interesting—simply to walk the streets telling stories of the past, animating a community that was, providing for descendants of the uprooted a sense of their ancestors’ lives. But to do so would be to ignore the present, to succumb to a kind of cultural tourism. When such tours are conducted, people gaze with one eye at the remaining buildings, imagining what they looked like in their prime; with the other eye they recoil at used needles, empty bottles, overflowing grocery carts containing all the worldly goods of the person sleeping against an iron-barred doorway. My “tours,” in contrast, are in partnership with Indigenous elders and nearby SRO tenants, whose valuable perspective on their neighborhood conveys a meaning of place far more powerful than its relict past. Powell Street is not a museum.\(^\text{17}\)

Four years ago, my colleague Jeff Masuda, myself, and a large coalition of community activists, artists, and academics came together to create the Right to Remain project in the Downtown East Side. I cannot tell the entire story here, but only speak to its point, which is that this participatory research is very clearly aimed at maintaining the Powell Street neighborhood for the people who live there now—today—and at maintaining and increasing the supply of affordable and accessible housing.\(^\text{18}\) This aim will not be achieved by the so-called “creative class,” hipsters who are on the vanguard of gentrification because they view the area as cool, funky, and—at least for now—more affordable than the rest of the city.

Our project was generated in response to a plan by the City of Vancouver titled “Revitalizing Japantown,” which showed romanticized and highly inaccurate images of streets lined with
cherry blossoms and paper lanterns. Indeed, its residents never used the term “Japantown”; that
label was a racialized and stereotypical creation in the imaginations of white people. The material
legacy of Japanese immigrants is not cherry blossoms, but the hundreds of SROs that are still the
homes of the dispossessed, those homes now coveted by the creative class for gentrification. The
Downtown East Side is a landscape of continuous dispossession, from pre-colonial times to the
present.

The Right to Remain collective has used a variety of methods to get its message across,
documenting circumstances in the Downtown East Side through interviews, community
meetings, housing surveys, as well as street protests, presentations to civic officials, a film by
award-winning filmmaker Greg Masuda that has been aired nationally, and a variety of forms
of public information. The core of the recent project was participatory art, involving some very
accomplished local artists as well as lots of ordinary people marshaling their creativity to express
their passion and commitment to human rights. The culmination of the project was an exhibit
mounted by the Nikkei National Museum in 2015–16.

I wish I could say that such projects result in immediate material changes, but of course
such is not the case. Gentrification is ongoing. What has happened, however, is that public and
official understanding has been raised, residents have been empowered to speak up and to
know their rights, and local activists have increased their resources, especially for furthering the
pending lawsuits. We are only a part of a much bigger movement, but our project continues, the
researchers gaining understanding in conjunction with the local activists who are slowly gaining
ground. Graduate students who became involved to write a thesis become impassioned but
informed advocates.

The Historical Geographer as Activist

As a product of the student movement of the 1960s, I suppose I was always an activist,
but—perhaps typically for many of my generation—it took a long time for the pieces to come
together. I was an activist, to paraphrase the words of Tom Petty, “without a clue” as to the power
of connecting academic research and social justice. I recently undertook some research to examine
the roots of anti-racism in the discipline of geography. I had noticed a disconnect between the
radical geographies that were so compelling during the 1970s when I was a student, and the lack
of research on race and racism until geographers began to do serious work on racism in the 1990s.
I attribute that time lag both to the preoccupation with questions of class (not in itself a bad thing)
while research on racialization was largely sidelined, and to the narrowness of geographical
methods at the time, which created a fixation with mapping residential segregation. But those
gaps represent an ironic basis for current participatory research in the discipline, both in my
own career and in the trajectory of historical geography. The gap between activism and research
during the 1970s was a result of geographical theories, interpreted in a certain way. During the
1990s, geographers began to theorize “race” and racialization in a new way, with the result that
we developed tools for critical anti-racist theory. So, I ask, when I work today with colleagues to
address issues of race intersected with class, what are the gaps? I may believe that participatory
action research is an appropriate approach to the issues of the Downtown East Side, and that such
research represents an ethical way for the geographer to contribute to social justice, but that stand
does not change the need to remain critical, constantly questioning both the ethical goals and the
empirical findings.

Earlier I addressed the question of ethics of archival work, of the need to recognize that
as historical geographers we interpret from a chronological distance the lives of real people,
following a trajectory to the present. We make choices when we engage the archives, both in
how we portray past lives, and how we position ourselves in the present. I am inspired by what Jean-Paul Sartre called the “pact of gratitude”\textsuperscript{21} that is forged between writer/researcher and reader. But if all archival work involves ethical—and therefore political—choices, activist research requires choices of another order. Participatory research, moving from the archives to the field, merges the archival and the immediate. We work in dialectical relationship with the past and the immediate, but also in relationship with others, activists, participants, researchers, all. One relationship is the present of the other.

NOTES

1. Thank you to the Historical Geography Specialty Group, the AAG, and to Kirsten Greer and Arn Keeling who organized this session. I am deeply honoured.

2. I wish to acknowledge both the Monbusho (Department of Education) Scholarship that allowed me to study in Japan for two years, and the Faculty of Arts and Letters at Kyoto University.


12. The Tamura Building, the most elaborate of all the buildings on Powell Street, was restored between 2012 and 2017. When it re-opened in 2017, the rents were established at $375 per month, the amount considered affordable for those on minimum incomes. See Tamura House Plan, http://www.partnershipsbc.ca/files-4/project-sro-schedules/SRO-Renewal-Initiative_Attachment-1-to-Appendix-3L_Tamura-House-Plan.pdf. Accessed 18 August
17. Audrey Kobayashi, Memories of our Past: A Brief History and Walking Tour of Powell Street (Vancouver: NRC Publishing 1996.)
19. The project has recently been funded for a second round by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.