Paper Title:

Assembling "Japantown"? A critical toponymy of urban dispossession in Vancouver, Canada.

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Assembling "Japantown"? A critical toponymy of urban dispossession in Vancouver, Canada.

Geographic scholarship in critical toponymy has highlighted the importance of place naming as a form of discursive power within processes of urbanization. This paper builds on such literature and advances a novel theory of *toponymic assemblage* to interpret findings from a participatory research project in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. We foreground neighborhood history in the form of a Japanese Canadian enclave and its wartime uprooting and dispossession, and trace the historical antecedents of a resurrected toponymy of “Japantown” that has appropriated and renarrated Japanese Canadian history to facilitate further rounds of dispossession. Using a genealogical method, we highlight three “moments” of Japanese Canadian uprooting, return, presence, and activism, demonstrating how toponymies are assembled in place in heterogeneous and historically contiguous ways. This approach expands on current research in critical toponymy, offering a novel methodology for exploring the enrolment of toponymy, discourse, and materiality in the formation of place.

Keywords: Critical Toponymy, Assemblage, Japanese Canadians, Downtown Eastside, Dispossession.

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Let's transform the Downtown Eastside, which has evolved from the original Vancouver 1886-1920s (with many centuries of aboriginal settlements before that), to Skid Road (1930s-1960s), to the Downtown Eastside (1970s-present) into the Old Vancouver, the heart and soul of our city--that we can all be proud of, whether we live in the Downtown Eastside or not. - Former Vancouver Mayor Mike Harcourt in *The Vancouver Sun* (Harcourt, 2011, p. A11)

Introduction

The conspicuous absence in former Vancouver Mayor Mike Harcourt's account of four decades of Japanese Canadian inhabitation in the Downtown Eastside (or DTES)ⁱ is as remarkable as it is telling of the notoriety of this neighborhood as a symbol of unsettled capitalist urbanization under colonialism. Beginning in 1877 and until 1907 (at which time immigration was restricted), the City of Vancouver received a steady flow of Japanese labor as a racialized workforce for Western Canada's burgeoning resource sector. By the beginning of the 20th century, a small community of Japanese immigrants, primarily laborers, had concentrated near the Hastings Mill on Vancouver Harbor, centered on nearby Powell and Alexander Streets. Over the next four decades the neighborhood encompassed boarding houses, food stores, bathhouses, and other services that catered primarily to the local population but also serviced the needs of a wider community that had begun to expand throughout and beyond Vancouver (Kobayashi, 1992). But in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, Japanese Canadians were in January 1942 declared enemies of the Canadian State: properties were seized, families were uprooted, and nearly all were dispersed to the BC interior and eastward where they were imprisoned in camps and indentured as farm laborers (see Adachi, 1991; Sunahara, 2000). Powell Street was made derelict in one fell swoop, but it would not remain that way for long.

In this article, we propose that Harcourt's account was not an accidental omission, but a naïve and likely racist toponymic intervention that has abetted the transformation of the DTES through gentrification and ethnoracial erasure that has ensued since his remarks were published.

In Canada such changes have often been inflected by processes of colonialism, racism, and class violence (Harris, 2002; Razack, 2002; Sommers, 2001), generating as in the case of the Downtown Eastside waves of dispossession (Blomley, 2004). At the same time, inhabitants of such places have long resisted immense social and economic pressures placed upon them to disperse and disappear (Hasson & Ley, 1994). Harcourt's quote is even more poignant for geographers because it manifestly highlights how the *naming* and *unnaming* of a place can exert political agency in defining what was, what is, and what ought to be.

While geographers have recognized the power of naming in the production of place, we wish to expand upon recent interventions using a new approach that more closely examines the fluid, relational, and genealogical aspects of toponymy (see Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Tucker & Rose-Redwood, 2015). This approach looks at the *multiple ways in which naming proceeds* while explicitly demonstrating how naming operates *simultaneously with discursive and material processes*. In this article, we examine particular moments of toponymic assemblage, elaborating upon recent literature on critical toponymy (Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009) and assemblage theory (Delanda, 2006; McFarlane, 2011a), in interpreting the results of a three-year participatory research project that has focused in part on the enrolment of Japanese Canadian history within toponymic representations of the DTES. In doing so we advance theoretical and methodological arguments for *toponymic assemblage* as a novel direction for the field of urban geography. Our case study traces the historical emergence and evolution of a toponymy of “Japantown,”ⁱⁱ a place name that has become peculiarly affixed to the DTES for over a century, despite numerous State led interventions that have reconstituted the neighborhood through material and discursive erasure. We trace three significant “moments” of toponymic intervention that have variously enrolled, defended, appropriated, preserved, and

distorted Japanese Canadian presence, history, and culture within neighborhood transformations that have had severe consequences for both Japanese Canadians and other marginalized inhabitants of the DTES. The moments we focus on include a community debate around the role of Japanese Canadians in pre-World War II Vancouver, a 1982 community plan that promoted a “Japanese Village” within the Downtown Eastside, and the arrival of new solidarities forged between Japanese Canadian and DTES activists around a homeless encampment in 2014. In examining toponymic assemblage across three genealogical moments, our findings demonstrate an ongoing embeddedness of toponymic power and persistence of toponymic usage through an integrative, political, and heterogeneous research framework. We contend that our theoretical positioning of toponymy and assemblage expands and enriches previous critical toponymic scholarship, and offers a methodological approach that signifies the dynamic enrolment of diverse toponymic discourses and materialities in place transformation across time.

Critical toponymy, assemblage, and place

While studies of toponymy have a long history within linguistics, geography, philosophy, law, and anthropology dating as far back as the 1830s, *critical toponymy* has become a salient focus for geographers who wish to seriously examine the contested processes and implications of *place naming* (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu, 2010; Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009). In this diverse body of work, naming is seen as an enactment of political power that is implicated in the production and management of place. Within this literature, we identify four key strands of research that substantiate the importance of place names in complementary ways: colonial/imperial toponymies, toponymies of governmentality, political economy, and activism/resistance.

A first group of studies have examined how place naming has been deployed within imperialist or colonial narratives of State and empire (Carter, 1987; Tucker & Rose-Redwood, 2015). For example, Azaryahu (2006, 2009) has described toponymic interventions of the Israeli State that familiarize incoming settlers while emplacing regimes of political power. Swart (2008) has shown how Germany and South Africa have modified the toponymic landscape after regime changes to “reflect new power structures and officially sanction a particular version of history” (p. 120). A second strand draws on governmentality studies to examine how naming processes (among other interventions such as territorial inscription, street naming, and house numbering) work as technologies of classification, management, and control, allowing States to consolidate and exercise power through the identification of populations and the implementation of infrastructure, taxation systems, and policing strategies (Rose-Redwood, 2006, 2009; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; see also Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016)

A third strand uses political economy to examine neoliberal urban governance trends which enrol place naming into ideologies of competition, urban entrepreneurialism, and “creative class” economics, processes which can lead to gentrification (see Berg, 2011; Light & Young, 2015; Medway & Warnaby, 2014; Vuolteenaho & Ainiala, 2009). For example, the city of Manchester (among others) has used street naming to associate ordinary toponyms like “Northern Quarter” with cultural signifiers like “hipster-ism, creativity, fashion and music” in order to attract capital (Light & Young, 2015, p. 10). Similarly, the toponymic transformation of an older suburb in Helsinki, Finland was facilitated by the rejection of traditional names by developers and the city in favor of ones that evoked exotic locales (“Beach Sand,” “Sun Gold”), thereby changing local perceptions while responding to global investment and marketization pressures (Vuolteenaho & Ainiala, 2009).

Finally, a fourth strand of research focuses on toponymic resistance, describing how social groups mobilize against colonial and entrepreneurial designations imposed from above through subaltern naming practices (Berg & Kearns, 1996; Kearns & Berg, 2003). To date, much of this work has shown how place naming enables social movements to challenge systemic marginalization through alternative namescapes (communicated by monuments, place markers, and street signs) or by ensuring that new toponyms fail to take hold, performing a type of “symbolic resistance” to power (Alderman, 2002; Berg & Kearns, 1996; Herman, 1999; Kearns & Berg, 2003; Masuda & Bookman, 2016; Myers, 1996; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010, p. 463).

In reading across these four strands of research we see that critical toponymic studies to date have been instrumental in demonstrating how diverse forms of power are implicated in naming. However, we, much like Post & Alderman (2014), want to decompartmentalize this literature to account for *simultaneous*, contradictory, and historically continuous processes of production and transformation of place. Scholars have often divided critical toponymy scholarship into various strands (see Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Light & Young, 2015; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010), and we argue that such divisions can potentially make research foci *seem* mutually exclusive, and that they can implicitly (and perhaps unwittingly) frame place naming as either a manifestation of hegemonic power *or* of on the ground resistance. While the comparison of official naming practices with more informal processes does not necessarily imply a binary mode of analysis, particularly as some scholars have shown that the toponymic motivations of the State are far from monolithic (see Rose-Redwood, 2008; Swart, 2008), we seek to blur the distinction between the hegemonic and subaltern while demonstrating how different toponymic processes can intersect within a single case study.

Notably, two recent papers in critical toponymy have made significant steps toward realizing such an approach. Light & Young's (2014) study of Bucharest, Romania hints at the multidimensionality of toponymy, using insights from cognitive psychology to show the importance of habit and everyday practices in explaining the persistence of socialist era toponymies in urban neoliberalism in that country. Likewise, Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch (2016) have framed place naming as a Foucauldian *dispositif* of laws, discourses, regulations, policies, and institutions, among many other elements, that work together in both overt and banal ways to govern and orient the actions of heterogeneous actors.

We propose to extend, but also challenge, this work by offering an alternative approach to critical toponymy. In studying genealogical moments, we expand upon existing literature that shows how toponymic power is implicated not only within discursive politics, but also very much in between the *discursive* and the *material* in the production and transformation of place. We argue that the indistinguishable entanglement of historical and contemporary toponymic transformations, as well as the discursive and material, is evidenced within competing toponymic tactics that reach across multiple genealogical moments. This approach gives us our view of place as a *toponymic assemblage*, a theoretical approach we see as more integrative than other approaches as it facilitates a fluid, dynamic, and emergent investigation that unsettles toponymic power and draws together the various research strands to date.

Drawing on the work of Delanda (2006) and McFarlane (2011a, 2011c), we define toponymic assemblage as a complex process of social and material alignment among active and diverse entities that are made up of a constellation of elements. Read in this way, the assemblage has some distinct similarities to the Foucauldian *dispositif* (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Müller, 2015), but rather than identifying any singular source of toponymic mobilization,

assemblage remains radically open. Assemblage theory enrolls both the material and the discursive, and it offers several key insights that enhance understandings of toponymic formation. For example, assemblages are “unequal, contested and potentially transformative” (McFarlane, 2011b, p. 1), continually being defined through physical and expressive processes of *stabilization* (solidification) and/or *destabilization* (fragmentation) that (re)produce place over time (Delanda, 2006). Further, such processes of assemblage reflect the labor, learning, experimentation, practice, and participatory engagement through which history, knowledges, and materialities are aligned (see also Anderson & McFarlane, 2011), and describe how social relations emerge as “key actors, ideas and technologies are actively brought into productive co-presence” (McCann, 2011, p. 143). Finally, assemblages are highly fluid and are composed of diverse elements: they can “apply to a wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts [...] whose properties emerge from the[ir] interactions” (Delanda, 2006; p. 3, 5). Importantly, assemblages remain open to contestation even as they assert a territoriality and relationality that may emerge or be repressed at particular historical moments (see Davies, 2012). For us, an assemblage based genealogical investigation of such moments is important, as it frames toponymies as historically contiguous while challenging the analytic separation between the hegemonic and subaltern, the material and discursive. An assemblage approach to critical toponymy also has the potential to resist easy compartmentalization, because it is open-ended and highly malleable, making it not only amenable to place based inquiry, but giving it the ability to accommodate both existing and as-yet undefined strands of toponymic research.

While increasingly popular, assemblage approaches have also been controversial, and we acknowledge that in theorizing toponymic assemblages it is easy to lose sight of political power networks, or even promote a narrow ontological engagement with naming processes that fails to

expose issues such as inequality and racialization (see Brenner, Madden, & Wachsmuth, 2011; Jacobs, 2012; Wachsmuth, Madden, & Brenner, 2011). The numerous similarities between assemblage and actor-network theory (ANT), e.g., in their mutual focus on the ongoing and emergent qualities of social and material orderings, as well as an emphasis on human/nonhuman relationality (see Fariás & Bender, 2010; Müller, 2015), mean that important questions of power and inequality can potentially get lost in the relentless horizontality and “situated flatness” of assemblage approaches (see Jones III, Woodward, & Marston, 2007). To address this critique, we adhere to McFarlane’s (2011b) understanding of assemblages as blurred and “translocal” (i.e., as place focused but not fixed in place, p. 2), while still paying attention to what and who has the power to assemble the city. An assemblage framework can indeed be political, as it can challenge seemingly naturalized place formations and render them “open to political challenge by exposing their contingency” (Müller, 2015, p. 32).

In following this approach, Vancouver’s DTES (as a longtime site of toponymic contestation) provides an ideal setting to elaborate an emergent and radical epistemology of toponymy and place. By following the toponymy of “Japantown” across three genealogical moments, our study makes two specific contributions to urban geographical scholarship. First, we use assemblage theory to decompartmentalize research strands within critical toponymy, and second, expand significantly upon recent literature by demonstrating how ongoing processes of toponymic formation occur amid, yet are indistinguishable from discursive and material processes of place production. An assemblage approach allows us to move beyond a historical description of toponymic *usage* within places to pay attention to the highly political “consequential geographies” (Soja, 1996, p. 1) of toponymic *assemblage* that emerge within, and that transform, place.

Methods

The research that informs this article was undertaken by the authors in their respective roles as a graduate student and principal investigator on a three-year participatory action research project undertaken with several community based partners focusing on Japanese Canadian culture and human rights, housing advocacy, and mental health peer support in the Downtown Eastside. The goal of the project was to coalesce disparate human rights legacies of the Downtown Eastside, in part by focusing on the tenuous place of Japanese Canadian history and culture within the historical politics of the neighborhood. Between August 2013 and February 2015, we undertook research that drew on archival papers ($n=54$), newspaper articles ($n=182$), city planning documents ($n=194$), and key informant interviews with local area planning participants ($n=14$). In reading across these materials, we sought to uncover historical toponymic activity that precedes, while also possibly becoming increasingly enrolled in, the present moment of instrumental neighborhood revitalization planning and concomitant gentrification. We applied a date range of 1907-2014 for our searches, using toponymic keywords such as “Downtown Eastside” or “Japantown” (among many others), interpreting these materials through a recursive and ongoing process of descriptive note taking, distillation, and analysis. Planning documentation and interview transcripts were scoured for relevant ideas and read carefully for toponymic references, then sorted and coded by theme using QSR International’s NVivo 10 software before being analyzed and integrated into the framework that informs this paper. We utilize a genealogical analysis, an approach that aims to examine and problematize often taken-for-granted formations (such as toponymies), excavate their historical emergence, and explore their conditions of possibility, with the ultimate goal of unsettling taken-for-granted narratives

and recovering the ways in which toponymies have been formed and enacted through time (see Blomley, 2017; Fischler, 1998). Key to such genealogies is the identification of “moments,” which represent dynamic, emergent, and transformative historical points of transition between forms of knowledge (see Koopman, 2013). The idea of the “moment” also helps us connect genealogy to assemblages, which form *in moments* - when “elements are drawn together at a particular conjuncture only to disperse or realign” (Li, 2007, p. 265). Taking this genealogical approach to our material, we sought to gain insights into place making narratives centering on Japanese Canadian history and culture within the evolving toponymic assemblage of the neighborhood. Through a synthesis of the varied data sources, we followed patterns of naming through time, tracing key “moments” of historical and discursive ruptures in the DTES and examining the circumstances that enabled such ruptures to occur. In doing so, we have purposively placed the history of Japanese Canadians centrally, offering an admittedly partial geographic account of the place based conflicts so characteristic of this neighborhood for over a century. Our genealogical method enables us to identify moments of assemblage and co-situate historical and contemporary materializations of Japanese Canadian place naming (a “history of the present”, see Fischler, 1998, p. 391) within a dynamic investigation of the DTES.

Results

Our focus on three genealogical moments of toponymic assemblage traces discursive and material toponymies of “Japantown” in place and across time, revealing a punctuated yet continuous toponymic usage which lends new insight into broader historical patterns and events that are already well known. Of course, we have been necessarily specific in our approach and there are more than just three moments of assemblage that could have been considered. Different

assemblages are formed in different genealogical moments, and the ones outlined below illustrate particularly well the interface between State and resistant toponymies in a highly contested place. We present our results chronologically, highlighting toponymic events that have occurred in key historical moments of disruption and change in the DTES: (1) early 1940s wartime, (2) early 1980s urban entrepreneurialism, and (3) contemporary neighborhood gentrification.

Moment One: From affirmation to erasure

“Students Debate Japanese Town” proclaims the December 24, 1940 headline of Japanese Canadian newspaper *The New Canadian*, alerting the public to an upcoming debate between students from the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the University of Washington at the Japanese Hall on Alexander Street (The New Canadian, 1940). This deeply political, yet seemingly prosaic event of internal interest to the Japanese Canadian community is important in the formation of the neighborhood for two reasons. First, it destabilized a prevailing toponymic assemblage in the area and sparked a controversy that had been simmering for years within the broader Japanese Canadian community, foregrounded against the sudden elimination of efforts to name their place in the neighborhood with their literal elimination from the west coast less than two years later. But a second reason why this debate is important is because it provides a rare glimpse of an assemblage as it came into being, the effects of which cascaded into conflicts surrounding the racialized toponymic identity politics of “Japanese Town” that began much later in the 1970s. Indeed, this debate, in light of the ensuing events of the war and its aftermath would be instrumental to toponymic conflicts that would emerge as both the city

and a new generation of Japanese Canadian activists contended with the aftermath of the uprooting and liquidation of the neighborhood.

The political conditions that surrounded the 1940 debate were the zenith of nearly four decades of racist political struggle that concentrated on the neighborhood after Vancouver's elite largely departed the area. Colonial urbanization processes influenced an emergent colloquial toponymy of the "East End" in the late 19th century, after the more affluent West End had developed with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway near Coal Harbour (see Marlatt & Itter, 2011). In the absence of a vernacular toponymy, the old town center was left in a discursive void that would quickly be replaced by a gathering of racialized toponymies of Vancouver's White settler community as Asian immigrants began to take their place in the homes and businesses left behind. In particular, "Chinatown" was forming as a concentrated area radiating south of Carrall and Hastings streets (The World, 1907). To the north, a segregated community of Japanese Canadians formed by the waterfront near Hastings Mill, bounded by Cordova, Jackson, Railway, and Main (formerly Westminster) Streets with a commercial center on the 300 and 400 blocks of Powell Street (Birmingham and Wood, 2008; Kobayashi, 1992; Morita, 1988) (Figure 1).

Latent toponymies during this period demonstrate how diverse forms of labor and power operating simultaneously from outside and inside the community helped give shape to a diffuse and racialized assemblage. White settlers stabilized this assemblage using monikers like "Japanese area," "Japanese quarter," "Japanese section," or more blatantly racist nomenclatures such as "J—town" to define the area as an ethnoracial enclave separate from the rest of Vancouver (see The Vancouver Daily Province, 1907a, 1907b; The Vancouver Sun, 1938; The World, 1907). Ripple effects from the infamous Anti-Asiatic Riots in 1907 from the *Vancouver*

Daily Province (1907a, 1907b, 1907c) presented an organized and economically productive Japanese quarter, conveying a reluctant admiration for the community who defended their physical property against a mob of White supremacists. But by the 1930s, other powerful dimensions of racializing toponymies informed the assemblage in relation to Japanese imperial aggression, leading Japanese Canadians living in British Columbia to be viewed as enemies of the State and regarded with fear and suspicion (see Adachi, 1991; Roy, 2003). Vancouver elites were also becoming alarmed because the Japanese Canadian population was growing, increasing their economic influence, gaining social status, and moving into neighborhoods that had once been exclusively White (see Wilson & DeGraves, 1938). By 1938, growing racial anxieties culminated in an attempt by City Aldermen to use municipal law to segregate and fix Japanese Canadian commercial activity in the Japanese area of Vancouver (The Vancouver Sun, 1938; Wilson and DeGraves, 1938). While the measure failed, the idea stuck that Japanese people, identity, and potential would be fixed and contained within the small area, to the exclusion of other places in Vancouver where Japanese Canadians had been settling.

Within the community, discursive and material strategies reveal a power struggle that was “defined as much by racism as by internal, spontaneous energy” (Kobayashi, 1992, p. 10). Indeed, assemblage work was also reflected in a generational divide between first generation immigrants (known as *issei*) and their *nisei* children who were citizens of Canada, many of whom had been fighting for greater recognition from the State through the newly established, franchise seeking Japanese Canadian Citizens’ League (see Sunahara, 2000). For years, the *issei* shaped the assemblage through their labor, which was targeted at building a cohesive commercial and residential community in an area then simply known as “Powell Street” or *Pauerugai*. Kobayashi notes that outsider toponyms like “Little Tokyo” or Japantown were never

used by early residents, and that the “entire neighbourhood is ‘Powell Street,’ the symbolic centre of [Japanese Canadian] collective history” (1992, p. 12). Likewise, *issei* resident Katsuyoshi Morita (1988) remembered in an oral history that “People [outside the community] call[ed] the Powell Street area of Vancouver ‘Little Tokyo’ or Japanese Town, but the *immigrant Japanese* of the pre-war era never called it that,” because they believed they should “assimilate and melt into this country called Canada” (p. 1, emphasis added). These assimilatory discursive attitudes were also reflected in the materiality of working class *Pauerugai* as the *issei* embraced western architectural styles (e.g. art deco) and advertisements, consciously adhering to styles of the era while rejecting stereotypically “Japanese” aesthetics (Birmingham and Wood, 2008; Masuda & Franks, 2014). Furthermore, for many older Japanese Canadians, Powell Street was a fluid toponymy that did not reference a bounded area, it signified parts of the city beyond the so called Japanese area and reflected how residents understood the community (see Birmingham and Wood, 2008; Marlatt & Itter, 2011).

While *Pauerugai* appears to have been a remarkably consistent toponymy among the *issei*, the *nisei* had other priorities. A review of the *nisei* published *New Canadian* reveals that younger Japanese Canadians worked to destabilize and (re)shape the assemblage through a variety of noninstrumental, unsettled, and complex toponymic strategies. On one hand, *nisei* channeled names like “Japanese Town” that reflected those of White Canadian society, and on the other hand they used the English “Powell Street” and “Nihonmachi” (“Japan Town”) as a concession to older residents (The New Canadian, 1940, 1941). But other younger residents scorned their parents’ traditional values, articulating a desire to literally and figuratively move away from Powell Street (see Sumida, 1935; Sunahara, 2000). Among these *nisei*, naming was often used to expose the weaknesses and divisions within the community and advocate for the

full rights and benefits afforded by the Canadian State (see *The New Canadian* 1940; Roy 2003; 2007). A Japanese Canadian student studying at UBC during the 1930s described Powell Street residents as wanting to become less segregated in the city (Sumida, 1935). At least for Sumida, the neighborhood was an unhealthy place “where the moral tone is undoubtedly lower than average,” reflecting in his own racial prejudice a lament that Powell Street’s buildings housed “about forty percent of the single white men in the city. [...] The majority of [which] are frankly failures in life, and many, more or less, degenerate” (p. 442).

The divisions and discursive conflicts within the pre-war neighborhood culminated at the 1940 student debate, which questioned whether or not the “Japanese family should move from the center of concentration usually known as Japanese town” to seek “domicile in the suburbs” (*The New Canadian*, 1940, p. 1). The debate offended some residents of the community (feelings which emerged in subsequent newspaper issues) when a presenter described the Japanese area as a “slum,” and in response, some asked why a more respectable term like “Nihonmachi” wasn’t used instead of such negative framings (*The New Canadian*, 1941, p. 4). This conflict clearly highlighted an intergenerational divide between the *issei*, whose assemblage work attempted to protect a traditional way of life and solidify a socially cohesive community *in place* in spite of ongoing segregation and marginalization, and the *nisei*, who shaped the assemblage by denigrating the area and wanting to move out, insisting that widespread condemnations of this *place* were preventing them from socially integrating with Canadian society. While *The New Canadian* does not report which group emerged victorious on the day, the debate presages an important and heterogeneous toponymic assemblage that would be suddenly and actively erased in the events following the Pearl Harbor attack. The attacks left “Japan Town” (Malone, 1941, p. 2) reeling with disbelief, and on January 14, 1942, Japanese Canadians were declared enemy

aliens. Over the next several months, with the implementation of the War Measures Act, the federal government moved Japanese Canadians living within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast into internment camps and indentured labor east of the Rockies (Sunahara, 2000). As for the East End, the historical record suggests a gaping toponymic void. Though the name of the area was, up until this point, a referent to its inhabitants (i.e., “J—town,” “Little Tokyo”) or created by its inhabitants (*Pauerugai*), in the 1940s, such racially motivated toponymies had all but disappeared, at least for the moment.

Moment Two: From return to appropriation

Moment Two occurred in April 1982 as a new assemblage emerged in tandem with the publication of a new city plan, which in turn was shaped by the interlinking of politically contentious working class and faux-Japanese toponymies. The plan coalesced alongside a new low-income activism led by a community who sought much needed improvements to housing and social services for a community they began to refer to as the “Downtown Eastside.” But the plan also reflected a response to a nascent group of young, primarily *sansei* (third generation) Japanese Canadians who had been motivated in preceding years by the anti-racist politics of the Asian Civil Rights Movement, and who had begun to reassert themselves into the area almost thirty years after restrictions on uprooted families to return to the west were lifted entirely after 1949 (Roy, 2007). These *sansei* activists stabilized the historical Japanese Canadian legacy in the area through discursive outlets such as the *Community Voices* zine/journal and the *Tonari Gumi News*, and through material events such as the Powell Street Festival, a volunteer run celebration of arts and culture which evinced and capitalized on stereotypical ideas of identity (Izumi, 2005; McCulloch, 2014). However, their work, combined with that of Japanese Canadian business

leaders and community organizations, also unwittingly drew attention away from the assemblage work of low-income activists and facilitated a distorted vision for the proposed transformation of the neighborhood into a “Japanese Village” through the city plan. As with Moment One, the publication of the city plan in Moment Two reflects a complex and contradictory assemblage that paradoxically perpetuated processes of erasure of the Japanese Canadian lives and places that once thrived in the neighborhood. Further, the plan’s effects influenced contemporary toponymic interventions in Moment Three that continued to use a cultural politics of recognition to harness various forms of activism and circumscribe a Japantown premised on racialized placemaking interventions.

Few popular or scholarly accounts have described the Powell Street area in the years immediately following 1942. However, 23 years later, the City of Vancouver (1965) began to reshape the assemblage by acknowledging that “the departure of the Japanese population after the Second World War” (p. 21) changed the demographics and hastened the material decline of the area north of Hastings between Cambie and Heatley, and around Alexander and Powell Streets. The uprooting generated “an area of low-cost rental units, often poorly maintained by absentee landlords” (Kobayashi, 1992, p. 9), and through the 1940s and 50s the area came to be referred to as “Skid Road,” home to a low-income population marked by social issues such as alcoholism, prostitution, and drug use (Ryan, 1952; The Vancouver Daily Province, 1947; The Vancouver Sun, 1947). For many, Skid Road was a problem without a solution, and it was not until 1971 that the city’s Social Planning Department, which advised council on social, cultural, and community issues, decided to try a different approach to solve the area’s social problems (City of Vancouver, 1971; City of Vancouver Archives, 2006). By this time, the modernist “urban renewal” programs that the city promoted as solutions in the 1950s and 60s had been

hastily abandoned as widespread transformations in planning thought, combined with citizen resistance, rendered such solutions obsolete (see Gutstein, 1975). Embracing a post-modern approach to planning, the city initiated a new community based planning process that resulted in the formation of a resident led neighborhood advocacy organization known as the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) (Cameron, 1996; Mitchell, 1975). DERA's labor assembled a different kind of toponymy, the *Downtown Eastside*, as an unofficial act of resistance to challenge long held negative assumptions about Skid Road residents, and attempted to solidify the community as an emancipatory site of potential (see Bantleman, 1973). Yet by stripping the area's designation of all aspects of place save geographical location, the new toponymy valorized a particularly White working class representation of history and activism and enrolled ethnic identifiers (such as those of Chinese and Japanese Canadians) into its broad definition (see Sommers, 2001; Mitchell, 1975). The multiplicity of the assemblage was again evident as the DTES toponymy was enrolled in a city planning program, and it became apparent that the DTES performed an important political function for both the State and activists.

By 1976, DERA had become substantially powerful, and the group was petitioning to have the DTES officially recognized within a city plan for an area referred to as the "Oppenheimer District" (Figure 2). The Oppenheimer Area Planning Committee (OAPC) was subsequently formed to communicate community opinions to the city, and the group consisted of DERA members, city/social planners, engineers, and representatives from Japanese and Chinese Canadian cultural groups (City of Vancouver, 1976b; Izumi, 2005). Though the committee was ostensibly guided by the city, the process was informed by political motivations that molded the assemblage in diverse ways. DERA exercised political authority over the group in early planning stages, and they were concerned with housing improvements for low-income residents in the area

(City of Vancouver, 1976b, 1976c), yet in an overlapping culture of political affiliation and membership that is typical of the DTES, the committee also contained representatives from the Japanese Canadian community, some of whom had returned to the coast as early as 1949 (see Roy, 2007). Materially, Powell Street had become a minor cultural hub by the late 1970s, hosting a number of Japanese Canadian residences, organizations, and businesses (see Blain, 1980), and the committee recommended “that encouragement should be given to the Japanese community to preserve and expand their culture and facilities in the area” (Oppenheimer Area Planning Committee, 1976, p. 3). Considering that the area had been framed as a low-income Skid Road for almost 35 years, this discursive acknowledgement of a Japanese Canadian presence within a city plan is important, and it was partially inspired by the work of Japanese Canadian OAPC member/advocates who were also organizing the Japanese Canadian Centennial Celebration (marking the arrival of the first Japanese Canadian immigrant to the City of Vancouver) and the Powell Street Festival (British Columbia Japanese Centennial Year Planning Committee, 1976).

Sansei activism in the late 1970s marked a (re)emergent assemblage that worked to combat the wartime erasure by reasserting a Japanese Canadian presence in the area. Where the *nisei* had wanted to leave the neighborhood, the *sansei* wanted back in, and the community began to celebrate their historical relationship with the former neighborhood, which was touted by activists as “the focal-spiritual centre of the Japanese-Canadian community [in Vancouver]—a community that was living, dynamic—human” (Hotta, 1972, p. 2; as cited in Aoki, 2011, p. 43). This growing interest in culture and history emerged in tandem with the Asian Rights Movement in Canada, which in Vancouver was centred around Japanese Canadian student activism at the University of British Columbia, and Tonari Gumi, a social service organization and drop in centre on Powell Street where *nisei* and *sansei* worked to support aging *issei* seniors

(Izumi, 2005). This combination of cultural affirmation and rights activism would in time inspire members of this group to lead a national effort calling for the federal government to redress the injustices of the uprooting, internment, and dispossession (Aoki, 2011; Miki, 2005). Publications such as the activist anthology *Inalienable Rice* and events like the Powell Street Festival celebrated the material and discursive *return* of Japanese Canadians to the heart of the low-income DTES by communicating, showcasing, and celebrating history and culture while emphasizing the community's connectedness to the Powell Street area (Aoki, 2011; Izumi, 2005; Miki, 2005). Yet diverse motivations within the broader Japanese Canadian community became quickly apparent as the goals of activists also aligned well with new multicultural strategies within government (see Izumi, 2005). Here, ongoing advocacy and cultural performance informed the assemblage and became channeled into the city plan, which asserted a Japanese Canadian presence for the benefit of the low-income neighborhood (particularly in light of the former uprooting), while such revitalization critically intersected with the Canadian government's newfound focus on multicultural community planning, a liberal response to the urban renewal schemes of the 1960s (City of Vancouver, 1976a; Izumi, 2005). While these policies provided a ready source of funding for community based initiatives, they also represented a distraction from the civil rights agenda of activists, and community engagement provided impetus for a commercialized, post-modern planning vision of a "Japanese Village" intended to beautify the DTES after some 35 years of neglect and disinvestment after the uprooting.

The success of events such as the Powell Street Festival prompted a renewed Japanese Canadian commitment to the neighborhood which spread throughout the Lower Mainland and even further afield (see Izumi, 2005). Such interest led representatives and activists from

Japanese Canadian businesses and cultural groups in the Powell Street area to begin exercising a stronger influence within the OAPC in ways that transcended their original concerns with celebrating history and rights. For example, cultural and economic interests began to augment each other as businesses from within the Japanese Canadian community endorsed material interventions in the form of Japanese style beautification in the DTES, and even offered to help fund the scheme (City of Vancouver 1979a; 1979b; City of Vancouver Archives 1982; Izumi 2005). Conversely, Japanese Canadian activists were soliciting public support through the media by discursively highlighting the historic area of “Little Tokyo” on Powell Street and emphasizing the area’s human rights legacy, first by relaying the tragedy of the uprooting to the public, then by chronicling the community’s struggle for justice through redress activism (Wakayama, 1980). Yet Japanese Canadian businesses (as part of the Powell Street Property Owners and Merchants Association) were also concerned that the city plan would reserve the Oppenheimer District for poorer residents, stating: “a decision has to be made whether Powell Street will be Japanese or hard-to-house” (City of Vancouver, 1979c, p. 2). A *Vancouver Sun* article observed that many people were excited to “creat[e] a major Japanese tourist area” but Japanese Canadian business owners had significant reservations over the area’s social problems, and some even expressed disgust toward low-income residents, stating “there is no way that the Japanese community would want to identify with that kind of group” (Blain, 1980, p. B1).

Unsurprisingly, low-income organizations such as DERA strongly objected to the idea that beautification should occur at the expense of the poor, yet the city reassured Japanese Canadian businesses and organizations that Powell Street would be reserved as a stable, institution (social housing) free character area with its own design guidelines (City of Vancouver, 1979c, 1979d). Planning practitioners privileged a culture led economic

revitalization script that was being enacted both locally and globally in the form of “Chinatowns” and “Curry Miles” (Anderson, 1995; Bell & Jayne, 2004), and indeed, Powell Street was mobilized as a culturally specific aesthetic intervention within the DTES where “Japanese banners and lantern-style pedestrian lighting” would help generate economic development in the area (City of Vancouver, 1979d, p. 1; see Figure 3). Further, planning began to discursively remobilize racialized toponymic framings of the early 20th century for commercial purposes (City of Vancouver, 1980). A draft concept for a “Japanese-Canadian Commercial/Cultural Area” refers to a beautification scheme for Japantown, located on Powell Street (City of Vancouver, 1979a), while the City Manager recommended to Council that Japantown could benefit greatly if it were stabilized as a “special area” with a “particular ethnic nature” to “provide a stimulus to revitalization activity” (City of Vancouver, 1980, p. 3). Meanwhile, DERA felt like the work they had put into the plan was being ignored and they were upset that decisions affecting low-income people were being made by people they felt did not have resident interests in mind, stating that it would be reckless to create a Japanese aesthetic in the area without consideration of current inhabitants (Blain, 1980). Thus the toponymic assemblage was shaped by heterogeneous discursive/material agendas as planners attempted to mediate between cultural advocates, business interests, and activists, while the planning process generated an unfortunate division between participants, which in turn led to years of missed opportunities for alliance building.

The moment the Downtown-Eastside/Oppenheimer Policy Plan was adopted in 1982 marked an intertwined assemblage of Downtown Eastside and Japantown/Japanese Village toponymies which became *officially* inscribed upon the city. Japanese style beautification was encouraged despite its possible exclusionary and dispossessive consequences for low-income

residents (City of Vancouver, 1982). The policies discouraged new social housing in the area, and instead urged Japanese Canadian businesses to return to the DTES at a time when market demand was low and subsidies were required (see City of Vancouver, 1982; Matsune, 1982). Furthermore, when it became clear that the City of Vancouver was willing to use Japanese Canadian culture as a tool for economic development, some Japanese Canadian interest groups exercised their power to support the displacement of individuals from a neighborhood they were physically removed from nearly forty years earlier. But while many actors were willing to reassemble pre-war toponymies to facilitate socioeconomic mixing and mitigate/downplay social issues in the DTES, this rhetorical support did not result in substantial action, and the beautification scheme presented a hypothetical materiality that was never fully realized.

Even though Japanese Canadians had begun to actively perform their culture on an annual basis in the Downtown Eastside via the Powell Street Festival, sustained economic recession and disinvestment, compounded by processes such as deinstitutionalization and the arrival of hard drugs in the neighborhood, influenced a declining presence of Japanese Canadian businesses and organizations in the DTES in the years after the plan was released (see Birmingham and Wood, 2008). The idea of a Japantown remained relatively latent for almost 25 years, except when used to describe its failure (Ward, 1989), its distant history (Boyd, 1989), or solely as a festival site (Hanna, 1992). Yet the assemblage again began to coalesce and stabilize in 2007, when the Heritage Vancouver Society declared “Japantown” to be one of the top ten endangered sites in the city (Heritage Vancouver Society, 2007). In response, the City of Vancouver commissioned a historic/cultural review of “the Powell Street area commonly known as Japantown” (City of Vancouver, 2007, p. 1) to inform future planning processes. The report was co-authored by a diverse group of architects, designers, historians, artists, and community

workers in consultation with an advisory group of Japanese Canadian and Downtown Eastside representatives, and its recommendations reflected the moment of the 1980s plan, stating that Japantown should be declared a culturally distinct heritage area so that it could be protected/restored (Birmingham and Wood, 2008). Drawing on this momentum, the City of Vancouver allocated \$150,000 to Japantown revitalization, citing the historic/cultural review and the material presence of the Powell Street Festival (among other interventions, see Oikawa, 2009; Powell Street Festival Society, 2009) as key engagements that marked the transformative potential of the Japanese Canadian community in the DTES (City of Vancouver, 2010). According to the city, Japantown restoration would connect communities, “help achieve DTES community-building and economic revitalization objectives,” and “inform future planning work in the Downtown Eastside Oppenheimer District” (City of Vancouver, 2010, pp. 2–3). It was at this point that a group of activists and academics stepped in and began to dispute the motives behind Japantown.

Moment Three: From appropriation to repossession

Moment Three occurred on July 24, 2014, one week before the 38th Powell Street Festival was to take place in Oppenheimer Park. For the previous week, a growing encampment of homeless and primarily Indigenousⁱⁱⁱ residents had been setting up in the park to draw attention to Vancouver’s contemporary housing crisis as well as to Indigenous urban rights under ongoing conditions of municipal settler colonialism (see Smith, 2014). With the occupation threatening to obstruct the festival, instead of using their influence with the city to remove the protesters, the festival society actively supported the rights of residents to stay. Yet these new solidarities did not arrive spontaneously, they coalesced through the political interventions of a

research partnership co-led by the festival's advocacy committee alongside numerous DTES and Japanese Canadian activist and arts and culture organizations that had been working behind the scenes during a landmark city led planning process for the DTES. The assemblage of Moment Three questioned a Japanese Canadian identity politics calling for the return of Japantown, and moved toward a diverse place based activism that aimed to consolidate the ongoing efforts among Japanese Canadians and other rights based activism in the DTES.

The year 2010 was significant for local area planning in the DTES. Immense residential development pressures were leading to rapid material changes in and around the area (see Dewiert, 2013) which had forced actors with often very disparate agendas (see Carnegie Community Action Project, 2009) to unite in a call for a Local Area Planning Process (LAPP) in the Downtown Eastside, a request that was granted by the city in the same year. Representatives from Japanese Canadian organizations participated from the time the LAPP was instigated (City of Vancouver, 2013b), forming a bridge between the city and the wider community. It was at this point that our research team began to intervene in the assemblage by engaging in a recursive process of participatory research, co-learning and political intervention premised upon a coalescing of toponymic resistance across numerous groups of community organizers and activists. We participated actively in discussions that explicitly aimed to clarify the social role of Japanese Canadians in the contemporary DTES, and talked about the consequences of the Japantown toponymy as a revitalization strategy for the neighborhood. Before these discussions, the idea of creating a Japanese Canadian heritage area had been largely unquestioned, yet with subtle prompting facilitated by the researchers (many of whom were also members of both Japanese Canadian and DTES communities), Japanese Canadian planning stakeholders and team members began to tack more strongly toward a critique of the planning process, which they

realized was appropriating their history to advance an exclusionary “Japantown” revitalization agenda. Indeed, minutes from planning meetings reveal how some Japanese Canadians were cautious about exercising their influence within planning, and they understood that their heritage could be used to mobilize community transformations in contradictory ways. In particular, there was a large gap between conceptualizations of a restored cultural area and the basic needs of low-income residents, with one *sansei* activist stating “often, unintentionally, our work becomes a gentrifying force and many of us want to ensure that what we create builds the existing community rather than displaces it” (Powell Street Festival Society Advocacy Committee 2013, p. 1). One *yonsei* (fourth generation) participant that we interviewed stated, “we just want the people who are facing hardships that in principle, are similar to what our people experienced in 1942, to have homes and to be dignified.” Another *yonsei* explained that heritage revitalization was an affront to memories of the uprooting that were celebrated each year at the Powell Street Festival, and observed that commodified visions of “Japantown” would simply “give appeal to a neighborhood for a different group of people than the group of people that live there now.”

Our interviews show that some Japanese Canadians involved in the LAPP shaped the assemblage by resisting the term “Japantown” and pursuing a more limited, and arguably historically authentic, commemoration of their ancestral toponymy. They consistently referred to the former area as “Powell Street,” and were careful not to efface the contemporary low-income claim to the neighborhood in discussions about their own interests for the area. Most Japanese Canadians who were active in the discussions explicitly told the city that they were uneasy with the idea of Japantown, yet they were surprised to find the toponymy used liberally throughout an early draft of the Local Area Plan (see City of Vancouver 2013a). Though they requested that the name be changed to something less controversial, the final planning concept used the hybridized

term “Powell Street (Japantown)” from the 2008 Historical Review (see Birmingham and Wood, 2008; City of Vancouver 2013b; 2014a). This attempt to placate all participants ultimately satisfied none, and it exposed internal divisions within the Japanese Canadian community, largely along generational lines. The city’s final plan reassembled discursive and material elements of place in its attempt to generate a Japantown that “provides potential to promote [a] mixed-use commercial environment [...] in an authentic heritage context” (City of Vancouver, 2014b, p. 12) that includes “public realm improvements, public art, events and programming and strategic development and heritage rehabilitation opportunities” (City of Vancouver 2014a, p. 38). Such interventions purported to memorialize the Japanese Canadian *presence* in the DTES, yet the plan only once acknowledged the *forced uprooting* (see City of Vancouver, 2014a, p. 11), and it passed on the opportunity to account for the true “authentic heritage” of the area, including struggles over the franchise and of human rights championed by Japanese Canadian groups before and after World War II. Further, the plan should have reflected the desire among Japanese Canadian stakeholders to support the existing community and maintain a socially just presence within the DTES, but instead it exhumed the antiquated Japanese Village beautification scheme from the 1982 plan, drew on faux-Japanese materialities that have been encouraged through events such as the Powell Street Festival, and accepted only in part the recommendations of the 2008 Historical Review, thereby presenting a commodified and aestheticized notion of heritage.

The plan’s limited and mainly erroneous reading of history within its policy prescriptions, combined with the strategic interventions of the research partnership, ultimately affected the trajectory of the LAPP. As actors with competing political projects attempted to intervene in the assemblage and mobilize disparate toponymies, Japanese Canadian stakeholders and low-income advocates began to find common ground beyond the project, and alliances were

formed or reaffirmed, extending soon to Chinese Canadians who were fighting grossly rapid gentrification in adjacent Chinatown. Significantly, unlike in 1982, the interests of Japanese Canadian activists provided a powerful stabilizing force that prevailed over the market driven approach being embraced by the city (perhaps because those interest groups had long since departed). In addition, many members of the Vancouver Japanese Canadian community, particularly those from the Powell Street Festival Advocacy Committee, the Japanese Canadian Citizen's Association, and the Vancouver Japanese Language School (all of whom had been forging connections with low-income groups for many years and were partners on our research project), became more interested and involved in the LAPP, to connect with other groups in the DTES, and to recognize the neighborhood as a supportive site for marginalized Vancouver residents. LAPP stakeholders from social development and neighborhood organizations that we interviewed acknowledged the allegiance of Japanese Canadian and low-income groups, while the low-income activists that we interviewed saw how Japanese Canadians spoke on behalf of the Downtown Eastside rather than carving out an exclusionary notion of Japantown, highlighting the new and positive relationships that had been forged during the LAPP process.

By the time the LAPP concluded in March 2014, Japanese Canadian/low-income allegiances were highly apparent, and just a few months later, when the Oppenheimer Park homeless encampment occupied the site of the Powell Street Festival, the festival, responding to the broader goals of the project, refused to displace the protesters and instead drew on the complex history of Japanese Canadians in the DTES to redefine their relationship to the community. The festival society issued a politically charged statement that acknowledged the ongoing effects of colonial urbanization and likened the situation in the DTES to the injustices inflicted upon Japanese Canadians during World War II. The press release stated that they

“acknowledge and respect the concerns of the homeless and community residents in the Oppenheimer Park area, located on unceded Coast Salish territory [...] and [do] not support [...] the threat of removal of residents in the park in any way” (Powell Street Festival Society, 2014). The release of this statement marked a key moment of assemblage as it galvanized a latent activism within the Japanese Canadian community, now including a new generation who were less interested in restitution or cultural performance than in redefining the community’s relationship to the DTES through counterbranding strategies that draw on a common claim to human rights denied and asserted (Masuda & Bookman, 2016). By moving festival activities adjacent to the park, the festival placed the priorities of DTES residents above those of Japanese Canadians while at the same time demonstrating solidarity with the present community. This strategic decision, generated through an iterative process of learning and labor, provided a powerful rebuke to those who might proclaim the area as a commodified “Japantown” and encouraged in its place a supportive and empathetic relationship with the local community based in practice. Alliances continued to be evident in October 2014 when the Vancouver Japanese Language School hosted and supported a tenant rights convention for low-income residents of DTES hotels. Where a previous generation of Japanese Canadian activists had unwittingly facilitated an exclusionary Japanese Village or Japantown, this generation saw their history as part of an emergent, relational, and heterogeneous toponymic assemblage that includes the low-income residents who claim the Downtown Eastside as highly politicized site of support and strength for Vancouver’s most vulnerable.

Discussion and conclusion: (Re)assembling “Japantown”

In this case study, we have sought to understand how toponymy is implicated in processes of urban transformation, focusing on the centrality of Japanese Canadian presence, identity, conflict, and activism in the historical production and transformation of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Our findings demonstrate that toponymic assemblage can provide a useful theoretical and practical approach to studies of critical toponymy. In particular, *existing* insights from assemblage theory that highlight processes of stabilization (solidification) and destabilization (fragmentation) (Delanda, 2006), the labor, learning, practice, and engagement of various actors (McFarlane, 2011b), and the fluid/heterogeneous interactions of elements (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Müller, 2015) have allowed us to make two small but meaningful contributions to the existing literature in critical toponymy, both of which appear to have important political implications – a key consideration for praxis oriented participatory researchers such as ourselves.

First, we have found assemblage theory to be helpful in bridging the various research strands of critical toponymy to date (imperialism/colonialism, governmentality, neoliberal entrepreneurialism, resistance). Where previous studies have at times compartmentalized such processes, an assemblage approach to toponymy shows how such processes intersect within a distinct case study, in ways that are mutually constitutive and informative in the historical production and transformation of place. Such an approach is analytically and politically vital because it exposes the manifold axes of contestation, oppression and dispossession that can be enrolled concurrently within all strands of critical toponymic study, providing grist for actors looking to enact diverse and nuanced forms of toponymic resistance. Significantly, our focus on genealogical “moments” of toponymic assemblage allows each strand to be seen in juxtaposition with others. For example, if the community debate in Moment One were only seen through the

lens of colonial or imperial oppression, we might only see Japanese Canadian toponymies as one part of a global political machination of wartime Japanese imperialism and the racist complicity of settler colonial governments in the Japanese Canadian internment. Missing from this analysis would be the economic motivations of Japanese Canadian merchants and property owners trying to establish themselves in Canada, or perhaps the generational divide between *issei* and *nisei* community members. Likewise, a governmentality approach to Moment One could have led to the conclusion that toponymies were being discursively used to circumscribe the activities of Japanese Canadians through processes of racialization, neglecting to demonstrate how the *nisei* actively resisted State logics that they found marginalizing and oppressive. Moments Two and Three also contain elements of all four research foci. Each could be seen through a governmentality lens if one focused on the motivations of city planners (during both the 1982 and 2014 planning processes) who attempted to manipulate, transform and manage the community, or a political economy approach could have focused on the efforts of businesspeople and politicians in pursuit of a branded and commodified “Japantown.” Resistance was clearly important in each moment as Japanese Canadian and low-income activists called for place based justice considering pre-war human rights violations and contemporary housing struggles, yet a singular focus on resistance may have missed the governmentality evidenced in the ways that planning attempted to enroll the community into a liberal politics of recognition that obfuscated the dispossessionary rationales inherent to the aesthetic “revitalization” of the neighborhood.

Our *second* main contribution has been to enrich recent critical toponymy literature by further demonstrating how discursive and material elements of toponymy act simultaneously, in this case across genealogical moments, to capture a highly complex, contradictory, and contested politics of place. This provides a basis for understanding toponymic assemblage (and

concomitant power) as historically contiguous, with power working relationally within the context and among the actors of each era. Here we build on toponymic literature that shows the importance of discursive association (Light & Young, 2015; Vuolteenaho & Ainiala, 2009) and material components (Rose-Redwood, 2008; Swart, 2008), and contribute to a nascent discussion on the multiple dimensions of toponymic mobilization (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Post & Alderman, 2014). Our three moments have drawn attention to the ways in which the toponymy of “Japantown” is inseparable from diverse and concurrent forms of material and discursive power that have protected and promoted an ethnoracial enclave, a racialized ghetto, a vital community space, a historical distortion, an economic development strategy, and a neoliberal commodification. Japantown has a fluid and contradictory character, which has, and has had, real political effects on activism in the DTES as it is configured through continuous processes of intervention and contestation. As demonstrated in Moment One, the work of the *issei* that materially built *Pauerugai* was discursively countered by university educated *nisei* who argued for a life outside of “Japanese Town,” as well as State practices that aimed to eliminate Japanese Canadian presence altogether. In Moment Two, the city’s commodified 1982 “Japanese Village” plan stabilized through Japanese Canadian civil rights activism and material presence, and it downplayed a nascent low-income housing activism aimed at improving the reputation and built environment of the DTES. Moment Three, on the contrary, highlighted the physical relocation of the Powell Street Festival, an act inspired by the recent work of low-income and Japanese Canadian activists during the LAPP (and encouraged by our own labor as part of a participatory action research partnership) that stabilized a redefined relationship with the *Downtown Eastside* and discursively confronted Japantown. Yet Japantown remains a sensitive point in the contemporary moment. On the part of planners, Japantown is seen to promote an

immanent materiality encouraged through placemaking, yet the term has also had unforeseeable consequences, namely the surfacing of unresolved historical traumas and latent rights activism. Japantown also fragments the political power of, and generates uncertainty among, Japanese Canadian activists seeking restitution from the city.

Such insights foreground a need for attentiveness on the part of political actors intervening in processes of toponymic assemblage. Toponymic agency can generate important discursive and material transformations *in place*, yet it does not simply disappear and reappear, but it persists “under the surface” *through time*. Toponymies appear to remain affixed to a place, even through generations and historical transformations. They reemerge through memories (real and contrived), and they facilitate the manufacturing of place. The reassembling of such toponymies can shape oppressive processes of marginalization and banishment at the same time as they might encourage social justice and a “right to remain” (see Franks, Mori, Lohan, Masuda, and the Right to Remain Community Fair Team, 2015).

Examining these three moments has revealed how fluid processes of toponymic assemblage influence urban politics and associated processes of neighborhood transformation. Our genealogical approach demonstrates that assemblages are malleable and subject to resistance. Japanese Canadian toponymies are inseparable from and central to the place based history of the Downtown Eastside. Naming practices exert agency in moments and places, and hypocritical toponymic strategies of cultural appropriation and cooptation can be rejected and/or repurposed to achieve social justice goals and forge alliances, such as the ones that are emerging between low-income residents, Japanese Canadians, and other groups supporting the Downtown Eastside community.

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ⁱ In this article we use the terms Downtown Eastside and DTES interchangeably.

ⁱⁱ All toponyms used in this paper do not refer to any empirical reality, rather they should be understood as subjective, fluid, and relational.

ⁱⁱⁱ By “Indigenous” we refer to the original First Nations inhabitants of the unceded land on which the City of Vancouver is situated.

Figure 2 The 1982 “Japanese Village” juxtaposed with planning boundaries from the City of Vancouver (Source: By the authors using data from City of Vancouver, 1982).

Figure 3 Planning sketch demonstrating the potential “Japanese Village” beautification of Powell Street (Source: City of Vancouver, 1982).