Toponymic assemblages, resistance, and the politics of planning in Vancouver, Canada

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Funding Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

Conflict of Interest Statement

We acknowledge that we do not have any financial interest or benefit arising from the direct applications of this research.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge that this research took place on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. Thank you to our community partners whose contributions were integral to this research – these are, in no particular order, Gallery Gachet, the Powell Street Festival Society, the Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre, the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens Association, the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall, Potluck Café Society, and PACE (Providing Alternatives Counselling and Education Society). Thank you to Joyce Rock, whose insights continue to inform our research and writing. Thank you to those who took the time to listen and comment on this paper at the 2015 Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers and the Canadian Association of Geographers. This paper also benefitted strongly from a timely theoretical intervention by Kyle Loewen, as well as conversations with Dr. Tyler McCreary, Dr. Cristina Temenos, and Melora Koepke.

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Short title: Toponymic assemblages, resistance, and the politics of planning

Abstract

The marginalized and impoverished Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood of Vancouver, Canada has long been subjected to planning programs that have aimed to solve area problems through strategic government intervention. The 2011-2014 Local Area Planning Process (LAPP), led by the City of Vancouver in consultation with local actors, represents the most recent of such programs. Despite the LAPP's stated goal of inclusive participation, the resultant DTES plan transformed the political landscape of the neighbourhood and met with derision from stakeholders for its potential to generate dramatic capital-led transformations. In this paper, we critique participatory planning through a case study of the LAPP. We utilize a lens of critical toponymy (the investigation of the historical and political implications of place naming) as a methodological tool to examine planning technologies of power and their mobilization through governmental processes. We deploy a novel approach to toponymy, drawing on assemblage theory, that presents toponymy as a radically open and dynamic process mobilized relationally through a multiplicity of discourses and materialities. Our case study demonstrates that processes of

toponymic assemblage within the DTES LAPP worked to 1) generate new territorial conflicts, 2) depoliticize community activism, and 3) co-opt racialized and class-based histories of displacement and dispossession to stimulate “revitalization” (“Japantown”). On the other hand, we found that in unanticipated ways, these processes worked to stimulate anti-gentrification activism, alliances, and resistance. Our analysis of planning highlights how toponymic agency can service oppressive and marginalizing place-framings, but it can also have liberating effects – by inspiring unlikely alliances and counter-framings.

Keywords

planning, toponymy, assemblage, resistance, Vancouver Downtown Eastside

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1 Introduction

On 14 March 2014, after two days of hearings and almost four years of community consultations and preparation, the City Council of Vancouver, Canada approved a Local Area Plan that aimed to address the myriad problems within the impoverished Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood (City of Vancouver, 2014a; Mackie, 2014). While politicians hailed the plan as an achievement that would generate positive effects for low-income residents (Cole, 2014), some residents and activists called it a “dispersal plan” that would allow for increased market rate development in the city’s most vulnerable area (Wallstam et al., 2014). The DTES has long been framed using discourses around crime, homelessness, poverty, and drug use (see Hugill, 2010; Liu and Blomley, 2013; Woolford, 2001). Oft repeated phrases such as “our nation’s slum” (The Globe and Mail, 2009) and “poorest postal code in Canada” (Franks et al., 2015: 45) reinforce this negative image and generate a sense of urgency around the neighbourhood. The area has also subjected to a litany of governmental interventions, spanning over a century, that have each according to the prevailing rationale of its time, attempted to stamp out the locale’s problems (Blomley, 2004; Gutstein, 1975; Sommers, 2001). The participatory Local Area Planning Process

(LAPP) of 2011-2014 represented a contemporary intervention, and came 32 years after the preceding comprehensive plan from 1982. Reflecting the changed circumstances in the neighbourhood resulting from a myriad of political and economic transformations that have engulfed the city since the 1980s (Mitchell, 2004), the plan aimed at solving persistent socioeconomic problems through an incremental and “balanced” approach to housing and business development (Cole, 2014; Mackie, 2014). Yet despite its efforts, the final plan stood accused of consolidating hegemonic forces that would see the area’s revitalization dictated by the ongoing capital led transformation of the city.

In this paper, we take the LAPP and its antecedent state interventions as the focus of a critical inquiry into participatory revitalization planning. Our lens is through critical toponymy (the investigation of place names and processes of place naming) as a methodological inroad into understanding technologies of power, their channelization within governmental processes, and their contestation within the discursive and material transformation of place. Building on recent critical toponymy studies (see Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009), this paper examines the enrolment of historical toponymies in/of the DTES within participatory planning strategies as well as in oppositional claims to place. Following recent work on assemblage theory (in particular Delanda, 2006; McFarlane, 2011b), we present toponymy as a radically open and dynamic

process of assemblage, mobilized through a multiplicity of discourses, materialities, and aesthetics operating in relation to each other.

To advance this thesis, we first provide a literature review of recent developments in critical toponymy and assemblage theory and briefly outline our analytical framework, which we call *toponymic assemblage*. Second, we offer a short overview of our methods and research setting in Vancouver. Third, we present a case study that shows how planning led processes of toponymic assemblage 1) destabilized the community and generated territorial conflicts, 2) depoliticized a low-income claim to community while suppressing marginalized residents, 3) coopted histories of racialized dispossession and displacement to inspire commercial “revitalization,” and 4) stimulated activism, resistance, and alliance building in the face of encroaching gentrification. Finally, in our discussion, we show how our analysis of planning and toponymy augments related theorizations of toponymic mobilization by highlighting the agency of toponymic politics in place. Ultimately, we demonstrate that such agency, while often in service of oppressive framings of place, can be simultaneously liberating, inspiring unlikely alliances and counter-framings.

2 Critical toponymy and toponymic assemblages

Insights from an emergent research agenda known as *critical toponymy*, which recognizes toponymy as a socially constructed process of discursive power, are important to this study (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009). Within this growing body of literature are four major themes. One theme has been to show how toponyms can be used as techniques of colonization and conquest, even as they veil themselves as neutral, objective, and apolitical (Berg, 2011; Carter, 1987; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). A second theme has looked at the usefulness of toponymic techniques such as house numbering and street naming in projects of governmentality (Rose-Redwood, 2006; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010), and even framed governmentality as the most important conceptual framework for toponymic investigation (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016). A third theme in toponymic research has exposed the strategic role of toponymy in supporting entrepreneurialism, competition, and “creative class” revitalization through the branding and commodification of place narratives (Berg, 2011; Light and Young, 2015; Masuda and Bookman, 2016; Medway and Warnaby, 2014; Rose-Redwood, 2011). A final theme has been to look at the role of toponymic resistance, where Indigenous and other groups have semiotically (re)claimed place identities (Alderman, 2002; Berg and Kearns, 1996; Herman, 1999; Myers, 1996; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009), or even toponymic *persistence*, as individuals and groups exercise habitual forms of agency to

maintain the use of toponymies that have been otherwise suppressed (Light and Young, 2014). These insights are vital, yet our research has revealed that none of these four themes *in isolation* can adequately explain the fluid and heterogeneous way in which toponymies are formed in, and influence the formation of, place. While recent efforts have been made to unite these oft-disparate themes in toponymic research from a Foucauldian perspective (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016), and by using insights from cognitive psychology (Light and Young, 2014), we take an assemblage approach to explore the heterogeneity of toponymic formation.

Assemblage theory has recently become increasingly important within geography as a tool for describing and analyzing complex and ongoing processes of urbanization. Urban analysis here proceeds by “mapping encounters and practices through which the heterogeneous elements constituting the city are assembled” (McGuirk et al., 2016: 30), while also framing such practices as “performed, emergent and diversely constituted [...] enacted in the socio-material ‘frictions’ and negotiations of the everyday” (p.129). Such analyses also create space to disrupt universalizing accounts of the urban “by drawing discourses of resistance into dialogue with hegemony, and demonstrating their mutual constitution” (O’Callaghan, 2012: 1933). Yet such frameworks have also been subjected to critique within the discipline for being outside the realm of a generalizable “critical urban

theory,” as they ostensibly fail to address broader injustices (Brenner et al., 2011: 228). But as Roy (2015) has recently argued, urban theory must be attentive to historical difference and the multiple ways in which places are constituted, a call to which we believe assemblage theory can yield fresh insights. Furthermore, critiques such as Brenner’s have sometimes conflated assemblage approaches, which according to Müller (2015) have “distinct utility for analysing the interrelation between power, politics and space” (p.29), with more ontologically flat and horizontal actor-network theory approaches (see Fariás and Bender, 2010; Marston et al., 2005), which stand accused of failing to adequately address power differentials among actants within network formations (Müller, 2015). For us, assemblage theory has been useful in thinking through the multiple ways that toponymies are formed, enacted, and mutated, including through the powerful (yet often mundane) political processes that can facilitate human displacement and social and material dispossession. According to Delanda (2006), place assemblages are multi-scalar and active entities that are constantly undergoing transformation and exist at various points of stability. Assemblage thus constructs places as emergent, historically grounded, materially productive processes of arrangement that claim territory and express identity (McCann and Ward, 2013; McFarlane, 2011b). Places, as assemblages, present an interactive unity of a number of heterogeneous elements – they are “constituted out of the world of flows, as

conjunctures of multiple trajectories” (Lagendijk et al., 2014: 361). They include the processes through which elements are brought together (or perhaps held apart) (McCann, 2011; McFarlane, 2011d), and they are constantly being (re)produced through framing discourses and materialities (Pierce and Martin, 2015). McFarlane (2011c), drawing on Gidwani (2008), highlights how sites and institutions are assembled through the machinery of planning, law, and governance, along with the attendant techniques of mapping, budgeting, and policymaking, among others. Li (2007) draws attention to practices of assemblage in relation to planning and management – i.e. the attempts to draw heterogeneous elements together, and the labour involved in rendering such elements coherent. Likewise, toponymies help shape place-assemblages in relation to competing discourses and materialities, everyday activities, and calculative practices of urban governance (Grove and Pugh, 2015; see Lagendijk et al., 2014).

While assemblages are spatially situated, they also have an element of temporality to them, and we reference such temporalities through the idea of the ‘moment,’ that is, when elements conjoin and are drawn together, only to dissipate or reunite in particular ways (Delanda, 2006; McFarlane, 2011b). Such moments can be fleeting and ephemeral, or they may occur across longer periods, as a cumulative process of repeated interactions, with their duration being determined by the power, knowledge, and resources being deployed to

hold them together (see Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). The idea of the moment, as we use it, is not dissimilar to the Deleuzian concept of the “event” in relation to *agencement*, which “consists of different force relations intersecting with each other” (Grove and Pugh, 2015: 2). Yet in relation to toponymy, we believe that the idea of the “moment” provides a more adequate terminology for understanding the ways in which assemblages align, and it allows us to think assemblage theory through genealogical work that examines emergent points of rupture between different forms of knowledge and conditions of possibility (see Blomley, 2017; Koopman, 2013). Toponymies relate to assemblages insofar as they accrete in spatiotemporal conjunctures (“moments”), yet their dimensions are ever-shifting.

In bringing assemblage into conversation with toponymy, this paper advances a theory of *toponymic assemblage* that sees places as relational, multi-scalar, temporally situated, and politically powerful networks of meaning. Such meanings can be revealed through a study of contested and mutable toponymies as historical constellations of elements that act to form places. Places are dense and highly unstable arrangements that emerge in the “unfolding of distinct sociomaterial rationalities and processes through emerging and unequal milieu” (Delanda, 2006; McFarlane, 2011b: 31). Implicated here are the ways in which place naming works to transform boundaries. Boundaries can act as a powerful mediating force and have serious effects upon place-identities (see Martin, 2003;

Nedelsky, 1990), and they are often presented through the technology of the map (see Blomley and Sommers, 1999). Maps are highly-contested technologies of government (operating at multiple scales, and deployed by multiple actors), and they help to reinforce the boundary-making assemblage work of toponymy, even as boundaries themselves remain fluid and open to revision (see Rose-Redwood, 2006; Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015). As Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch (2016) assert, “maps and plans on which toponyms are recorded function as surfaces of emergence,” and this function has been aptly demonstrated by Tucker and Rose-Redwood (2015) in their recent paper on the rescaling of the Salish Sea, where several different water bodies were toponymically consolidated over a period of over 20 years. Here, the technology of the map was imbricated in the state-led upscaling of space, reinforcing new boundaries and naming strategies while also limiting the influence of Indigenous actors to assert self-determination over toponymic practices. Likewise, at the local level, the map has acted as a material agent that can (re)define neighbourhoods. Masuda and Bookman (2016) note that *neighbourhoods*, as broadly conceived by state actors, are often represented through an array of technical spatialities, often in stark contrast with their lived reality. In relation to the DTES, Blomley and Sommers (1999) have shown how the neighbourhood map can act as a site of struggle

through which boundaries are contested and non-state, neighbourhood-scale actors can reconfigure and redeploy toponymic power (see also Rose-Redwood, 2006)

To the point, the neighbourhood currently known as the DTES has over time been represented through variously derogatory (or ostensibly neutral) toponymies. Each of these toponymic inscriptions has, in turn, generated community effects, including political solidarity, place attachment, and social cohesion, and conversely stigma, dispossession, and conflict. We build on existing literature in assemblage and critical toponymy to argue that such toponymies have been (and are) realized within dynamic, agentic, and multifaceted processes of gathering that stabilize within momentary, place based alignments. As such, we aim to contribute new insights which will enhance understandings of the spatio-temporalities of urban assemblages, while also demonstrating that critical toponymy can be a powerful analytic tool for uncovering the contested production of place and for critiquing contemporary forms of participatory governance.

3 Toponymic assemblage in the context of planning

This article emerged out of three years of participatory action research in Vancouver's DTES. The goal of the project was to highlight the human rights legacies of the neighbourhood that would contribute to alliance building among diverse activist groups

within the present context of rapid gentrification. The premise of our broader research has been to create discursive linkages between historic and contemporary moments of uprooting, displacement, and resistance tied to historical injustices that have occurred in the DTES, including the original dispossession of Indigenous peoples at the hands of colonialism, the uprooting of Japanese Canadians during World War II, the displacement of Afro-Canadians in the face of 1960s “urban renewal,” and the ongoing gentrification and expulsion of the current, largely racialized, low-income community (Blomley, 2004; Franks et al., 2015). The DTES LAPP provided an ideal entry point for expanding understanding of the relevance of such histories in the present, and examining the assemblage work that toponymies have played within the attempted revitalization of the DTES. Concomitant to participatory research with low-income, Japanese Canadian, mental health, and housing organizations, we more specifically traced toponymic patterns among city planners and members of the LAPP planning committee via interviews ($n=14$) and an extensive collation of planning documents ($n=194$) spanning four years. Our analysis critically examined the discourses, aesthetics, and materialities implicated in the LAPP, recognizing the two years of planning as a generative, fluid, and relational process that reworked the toponymic assemblage of the DTES. Yet we have also attempted to illuminate how the LAPP acted as a participatory yet exclusionary assemblage-making arena where political relations were

transformed and subaltern toponymic mobilization was reinforced, recognizing such resistance as a political response to toponymies mobilized through planning, policymaking, the media, and our own research presence.

The Downtown Eastside LAPP emerged in 2011 at a point where groups with oft-competing agendas, including housing activists, community development groups, and business associations, were aligning in a call for local area planning (see Building Community Society of Greater Vancouver, 2008; Carnegie Community Action Project, 2009; Kumagai and McGuire, 2006). Our interviewees described several factors that led to a unified demand for planning. First, in 2009, a brand new “socially mixed” housing development (Woodward’s, see Ley and Dobson, 2008) opened in the lead up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games, bringing with it a “gentrification bomb” of speculative property investment and redevelopment that cast significant negative effects upon low-income housing stock in the area (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2010; Swanson and Drury, 2012). Second, the expiration of a coordinated funding and management strategy for the neighbourhood in 2010 (The Vancouver Agreement, see City of Vancouver et al., 2000) meant the potential loss of social services and support for grassroots community initiatives. Third, and perhaps most importantly, planners had just implemented a new zoning strategy for the area through a plan (the Historic Area Heights Review, or HAHR) that raised

allowable building heights in some parts of the DTES (particularly Chinatown) from 70 to 120 feet (City of Vancouver, 2012a). Such pressures led to activist calls for social justice in the form of housing investments for low-income residents, and voices from all sides pled with the City of Vancouver to mediate, dispel the animosity, and help envision a clear future for the community. This request was granted in 2011 in the form of the participatory LAPP. While Local Area Planning processes were occurring in multiple Vancouver neighbourhoods by this time, in the context of the DTES the LAPP represented a novel tool for improving the conditions of the city's poorest community after many others had ostensibly failed.

Numerous scholars have made important interventions into the study of participatory planning under neoliberalism, in particular showing how consultation processes *appear* to address local concerns, while simultaneously generating market oriented plans reinforced through participatory processes designed to secure community acquiescence (see Gunder, 2010; Huisman, 2014; Purcell, 2009). Such critiques are valuable, but perhaps limited in their capacity to explain the complex ways in which the activities/discourses of planners and participating citizens may act in concert *and* in opposition to shape and transform place. Departing from the conventional critique of participatory planning that focuses on procedures and recognitional politics, our case study

looks to the role of toponymy as it is enrolled within planning to discern possible effects beyond instrumental/political outcomes. We ask how toponymies of the DTES were assembled and mobilized through planning to transform place in ways that work to depoliticize activist claims to community, and to entice market led development. In the following sections we outline how toponymic assemblage involved 1) the materialization of a comprehensive planning map/definition for the Downtown Eastside; 2) the confinement of marginalized residents of the community to an area slated for city led strategic management and economic development; 3) the outlining of a heritage led Japanese Canadian commercial district (“Japantown”) that ran contrary to the wishes of activists and other planning participants; and 4) the generation of solidarity and resistance among planning actors, as well as positive place transformations even in the face of disappointing outcomes.

4 Transforming the map, redefining the dimensions of the Downtown Eastside

The first moment of toponymic assemblage occurred in the lead up to the LAPP in 2011, when the City of Vancouver released a map of the planning area within the planning Terms of Reference (City of Vancouver, 2011b). This map is an otherwise unremarkable material intervention, but its toponymic approach would work to destabilize the traditionally known boundaries of the low-income neighbourhood while producing cascading effects within the

process itself (see Figure 1). Notably, the boundary configuration displayed on the map eschewed the use of the singular term “Downtown Eastside” and presented a pluralized assemblage known as “Downtown Eastside Communities” (DEC) that enrolled numerous toponymies (“Chinatown,” “Strathcona”) and actors (business interests, activists, property owners) into a heterogeneous milieu. As planners informed us, the LAPP marked the first time that this new and highly abstract DEC had been mobilized within a *comprehensive* planning process for the neighbourhood, and it offered a significantly different definition of the DTES than the previous comprehensive plan in 1982 (City of Vancouver, 1982a). Moreover, it presented a way of framing the neighbourhood that was vastly different from, and mainly opposed to, that which was typically used by residents and activists (see Hugill, 2010).

Blomley and Sommers (1999) observed the initial emergence of the DEC definition in the late 1990s, when activists attacked the new toponymy as an “effective balkanisation of the Downtown Eastside ... fragmented into a cluster of smaller, autonomous neighbourhoods” (page 277, see also City of Vancouver, 1998, 2005). While the re-embodiment of the DEC went relatively unmentioned by activists in 2011, its rematerialization effectively destabilized and erased their work toward maintaining an internally coherent DTES community by enlarging the planning boundaries and including

places like Strathcona, Chinatown, and Gastown in the new DEC definition. While such areas had long been planned separately (City of Vancouver, 1982a), they were now mapped into a DEC framework that conflated place based understandings and transformed the toponymic boundaries of the community (see Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015; Ward, 2012). Strategically, the DEC projected onto the map worked to silence the labour of low-income activists who claimed to stand for the DTES by downplaying the social and economic distinctiveness between theirs and adjacent communities, while also enfolded an immense array of new people, places, and vested interests into a single bounded space. An interview with a LAPP committee member from a Business Improvement Area (BIA) revealed to us that the DEC was strategically mobilized by city planners who stabilized the delineation in meetings by framing the planning area as a “‘community of communities’ because we had Strathcona, Chinatown, Japantown, [...] even Oppenheimer. [...] a lot of talk [...] about the DTES being very diverse.” The DEC framing articulated through the work of planning staff destabilized a highly political and relatively unified community and recast it as a distinctly heterogeneous assemblage divided into sub-areas, each of which carried with it different and often contradictory political meanings (City of Vancouver, 2014b).

The LAPP consultation phase began in early 2012, and as our planner interviewees highlighted, the newly expanded DEC was presented to the public as both an abstract/technical object defined by neighbourhood boundaries, i.e. a "planning admin decision to draw a line around a collection of neighbourhoods," and as a natural grouping of communities that had melded together over time and "had its evolution to what it is now" (see also City of Vancouver, 2014a). Many LAPP committee members that we interviewed found the DEC definition acceptable because it appeared to describe the relationships that existed within and between diverse sub-areas. Even some low-income committee members accepted the DEC framing, as they believed that the planning boundaries would allow them to claim and support constituents across all the areas of the map, even those beyond the traditionally defined "Downtown Eastside." As one of our interviewees highlighted, "there's low-income people that live in Strathcona, [...] in Gastown, and Victory Square, so we do share the city's [definition], and our low-income people are everywhere." Some low-income activists asserted that the new DEC definition was not incompatible with an activist claim to community, and even saw the emerging toponymy as a political opportunity, believing that they could challenge market led development in gentrification prone areas outside of the traditional DTES. As one community advocate stated: "the Downtown Eastside I think is in every spot where low-

income people live and gather,” while another noted that the DTES “is not just a postal code, or an address, [...] it’s in the lived experience of the people here. It’s in the hearts and minds of the people who [...] not only have survived but are trying to thrive.”

However, as the LAPP continued through 2012 and 2013, it became evident that the embryonic DEC assemblage was not forming an expanded political terrain for low-income activists. Indeed, its *actual* boundary effects were significantly different, creating a situation where residents from more affluent communities (particularly Strathcona) grappled with their status as a “Downtown Eastside Community.” From the LAPP’s outset, such communities worked to reject their material and discursive association with the stigma of the DTES and its attendant social problems, as well as its political connection to a group of militant activists who they presumed were largely opposed to their aspirations of preserving a staid, middle-class heritage community. A BIA representative described in detail how LAPP participants from Strathcona, Gastown, and Chinatown actively distanced themselves from the materialities of the “Downtown Eastside” during the process, even though they were enrolled in the DEC definition:

“I think largely they try to differentiate themselves and not be included, or lumped in, as being in the DTES. They’ve tried to be something distinct, I think, something that stands out. [...] When you think of Gastown you don’t think of the DTES - you think like, cobblestone streets and high-end fashion, great coffee shops [...] They don’t want you to think IV drug users and Insite [supervised drug injection clinic] or like, people selling blocks of cheese and old jackets on the street.”

Other committee members, including business representatives and low-income activists, echoed such assertions, and some denounced the new boundaries as a “divide and conquer” strategy whereby the city created a common arena to pit disparate communities and class groupings against one another. Once set in motion, LAPP critiques came to see the DEC as an attempt to strategically dilute the community’s long-time association with social justice and activism and redefine the community per the toponymic genealogies associated with adjacent territories. In sum, planning labour, combined with the material and discursive intervention of the map reconstituted the toponymic boundaries of the DTES and set a singular, yet heterogeneous and politically fragmented DEC assemblage in motion.

5 Confining the poor

“The DTES is more a metaphysical term for a geography around Main and Hastings”
(Interview with Social Service Provider)

The second moment in the toponymic conflict occurred in May 2013 as another map was generated for the final LAPP plan. While all LAPP participants had acceded to the diverse “Downtown Eastside Communities” definition for planning purposes, as the process continued, another new framing known as the “Community-Based Development Area” (CBDA) began to materialize on the map, overlaying the politicized toponymies of the

Downtown Eastside and replacing them with a new set of boundaries, discourses, and nomenclatures (see Figure 2). The CBDA appeared during the “Emerging Directions” phase of the process in early 2013, as planners were consolidating community inputs and communicating them back to the public (City of Vancouver, 2013a). LAPP participants that we interviewed candidly asserted that planners had fused three distinct sets of stakeholder input to generate the CBDA. First, low-income stakeholders contributed to the work of assemblage through their participation in a city led Social Impact Assessment (SIA) (City of Vancouver, 2014c). According to planners, low-income participants, and BIA representatives, the SIA was a response to activists who were demanding information on the ongoing consequences of residential/commercial redevelopment in the community. The SIA represented an assessment framework through which planners could identify the potential impacts of planning and identify the social ‘assets’ of the area through low-income participation in consultations and community mapping exercises (see City of Vancouver, 2014c). Second (and concurrently with the SIA), a group of low-income community leaders, lending their expertise to a consultation held by the Carnegie Community Action Project (a housing, income, and land use advocacy group in the DTES), were separately calling for planners to enact a “Social Justice Zone” inclusionary zoning framework within the LAPP (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2013). This zone would

help support and maintain 100% social housing for low-income residents in an area roughly corresponding to the CBDA (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2013). Third, business leaders we interviewed were at the time touting the potential of having a “special economic development zone” where “different types of businesses and different types of development [could] suddenly [be] feasible in the context of the needs of the low-income community.”

The CBDA became enrolled in the toponymic assemblage through the consolidation of these three discrete sets of community input, which was manipulated through planning to reconcile resident and stakeholder views with normative city practices. In the words of a BIA representative, the CBDA was the direct result of planners working to “find the middle ground in this discussion over what type of zone we wanted.” Perhaps most significantly for low-income representatives, city planning transformed discourses of “social justice” into those of “community-based development,” thereby transmuting a deeply political claim to place into a technical concept primed for social entrepreneurial intervention. As one planner informed us:

“What we proposed was to call it a Community Based Development Area because [...] there is a legal opportunity to intervene in applications for development or rezonings, or business purposes, in a way that can serve the interests of the low-income community and the residents in that area [...] some members of the community call it their Social Justice Zone, and so they may indeed, why not? [...] we’re just labeling it for the purposes of administratively building people around common interests as best we can. And some people use different words, you know, to achieve the same end.”

So, while the new, diverse DEC toponymy encircled numerous distinct communities, planners identified and stabilized one area, the CBDA, as being in critical need of targeted intervention. The CBDA, which contained the largest low-income population within the DEC, and by extension the entire city (City of Vancouver, 2014a: 5), was framed by the LAPP as a “key focus area” full of “place-making opportunities” (City of Vancouver, 2012b: 22). As the consultations proceeded, LAPP representatives began to see the defined area of the CBDA as a proxy for the wider low-income community, as our non-low-income interviewees highlighted. For example, one BIA representative observed that the low-income area was “really around ... the Main and Hastings area,” while another noted that “I think most people think of [it] as being from Oppenheimer Park to where Pigeon Park is,” a definition that roughly corresponds with the boundaries of the CBDA. While of course low-income residents could be found beyond those boundaries, such definitions served to discursively “empty” areas outside the CBDA and prime them for gentrification.

As the assemblage shifted to accommodate the CBDA, the areas surrounding it received much less attention by planners, because many of these neighbourhoods fell outside of the immediate planning mandate (City of Vancouver, 2012b), a situation that was conveniently left out of the Terms of Reference. Chinatown, for example, already had its own recently established development and land use guidelines (City of Vancouver,

2010, 2012a), while Gastown had a still active heritage management plan from the early 2000s that was backed up by a more recent rezoning policy (City of Vancouver, 2001, 2010). Strathcona had two existing plans – a city plan from the 1990s, and a privately funded plan from the 2000s (Strathcona Revitalization Committee, 2008). One BIA representative observed that a lot of the planning centred on areas within the CBDA, and planners confirmed that observation, stating that the LAPP “collected the existing policy documents and brought them in” and noted that the major policy changes in the plan applied primarily to the area enclosed by the CBDA. Even though planners had promised to give low-income committee members equal standing, the power of such participants to influence policies was thereafter constrained to those areas in which they were already concentrated.

Planning was able to implicitly redefine the CBDA as a distinct place operating on a divergent development trajectory from its more affluent and ostensibly autonomous neighbouring districts, which in turn subverted the city’s vision of interconnectivity which saw the components of the DEC assemblage as “working and serving with each other” (see also City of Vancouver, 2014a). This toponymic segmentation, transmitted via map materials, discouraged fruitful discussion around the shared future of communities and instead channeled conversation into turf wars and border patrolling, creating a situation

where divisiveness pre-empted cooperation. Furthermore, the LAPP could enrol the adjacent toponymies and planning ethics of Gastown, Strathcona, and Chinatown (among others) into the DEC conversation to circumscribe possibilities and legitimate planning policies within the CBDA that would be complementary to pro-development interests.

6 Outlining “Japantown”

A third moment of assemblage occurred in the summer of 2013 when a new toponymy began to be inserted into the boundaries of the CBDA, as a set of maps and design proposals appeared on design panels and in planning documents that would materially present a small area of it as “Japantown.” To uninitiated observers, Japantown’s appearance within the assemblage of Downtown Eastside Communities might seemingly have emerged from nowhere, but to Japanese Canadians living in the Vancouver area, whose pre-World War II community centred on and around Powell Street (enclosed by what is now referred to as the CBDA) such nomenclature was deeply historical, emotional, and political. In February 1942, Japanese Canadians were declared enemy aliens by the Canadian Government and forcibly removed from the Pacific Coast of British Columbia (see Adachi, 1991). As an emergent component of the DEC assemblage, formed within the arena of the LAPP (and drawing on old planning renderings of a commodified Japanese Canadian

neighbourhood, see City of Vancouver, 1982b), “Japantown” was an attempt to draw the value of this history into the planning process, while also preserving disappearing material heritage (buildings in particular) and drawing attention to the ongoing presence of Japanese Canadian organizations in the area (Birmingham and Wood, 2008; City of Vancouver, 2011a, 2012c). The opinions of members of the Powell Street Festival Advocacy Committee, as well as individuals representing the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall, were solicited from the very earliest stages of the LAPP in 2012 (City of Vancouver, 2012c, 2013c). Subsequently, the inputs of such groups became enrolled into the toponymic assemblage in an attempt to align their self-interests with a broader vision for the future of the CBDA and the DEC.

From the beginning of the LAPP, actors representing Japanese Canadian groups worked their influence in committee meetings and through direct engagements with city planners. By the summer of 2013 members of these groups were also meeting independently with their constituents to discuss how their material presence and history could be acknowledged in ways that would demonstrate solidarity with the low-income community. It was within those discussions (of which our research team – comprised in part of Japanese Canadian scholars and human rights advocates, and arts groups - was deeply involved) that the conversation around “Japantown” shifted. While Japanese

Canadian participants up to that point had been using their influence in ways that might promote a cultural revitalization of the area (see Birmingham and Wood, 2008; Powell Street Festival Society, 2009), some became hesitant when they realized that their own history could be coopted into an agenda that would lead to the dispossession of current low-income residents through gentrification. Instead, many of the Japanese Canadian participants in the LAPP began to see their labour as an opportunity to destabilize the Japantown agenda and instead mobilize the social justice aims of their low-income LAPP counterparts (Powell Street Festival Society Advocacy Committee, 2013). Much like the consultations around the CBDA, the planners who attended these small group consultations attempted to arbitrate between city approved revitalization/community development strategies and a sense of responsibility among many Japanese Canadians to champion human rights and social justice as a legacy of their own redress achieved in 1988. For some, this would eventually involve a cooperative strategy that would have low-income residents and Japanese Canadian organizations harmoniously coexisting, where human rights history and demands for modern redress would be leveraged to procure public and private funding to restore historic buildings and implement social housing (Powell Street Festival Society Advocacy Committee, 2013).

Our interviews revealed that the city's argument for "Japantown" failed to take hold among many Japanese Canadian participants during the LAPP yet in November 2013, Japanese Canadian committee members were surprised to find the concept inserted into an early draft of the local area plan, and they immediately alerted planners to their displeasure over the policy recommendations (City of Vancouver, 2013b, 2014a). One interviewee highlighted how the city's "Japantown" appeared to be a cooptation of Japanese Canadian history explicitly meant to attract middle-income residents to the community, and noted that such a policy was in direct contradiction with their goal of supporting low-income residents. The planning response was to retain and stabilize a Japanese Canadian framework within the CBDA and defend its use by highlighting how the concept had been used in previous reports and plans (Birmingham and Wood, 2008; City of Vancouver, 1982a).

While the "Japantown" concept within the LAPP initially appears as a vague and aspirational collection of planning imagery, a closer examination of the policies demonstrates that the designation has potential to generate significant boundary effects within the toponymic assemblage of the DEC. While the area reserved for "Japantown" is small, it has been set aside as a place that could potentially generate a mixed use commercial hub defined by its "authentic" heritage (City of Vancouver, 2014b: 12), while

its development trajectory is meant to follow that of economically successful communities such as Gastown (City of Vancouver, 2014a: 128). Short term planning actions include “raising the stature of Japanese-Canadian heritage,” and “prepar[ing] a Statement of Significance for the Powell Street (Japantown) area and its character buildings” (City of Vancouver, 2014a: 185–186), while over the long term, the site would be enrolled in a city led heritage rehabilitation program that could offer property owners financial incentives to upgrade and restore their buildings. Significantly, the plan purports to honour Japanese Canadians through the enhancement and preservation of their cultural history, but this process implies increased future development and the restoration of “Japantown” as a site of consumption and festival celebration that would anaesthetize the troubling political tensions and social issues that remain visible within the area (City of Vancouver, 2014a, page 38; see Figure 3). Here, the city’s attempts to shape the assemblage clashed with the motivations of Japanese Canadians for several reasons. First, for some Japanese Canadian interviewees, while the plans attempted to memorialize their presence at the heart of the community, they also distracted from a dark period of the city’s history by ignoring the city’s complicity in the 1942 uprooting. Second, other interviewees understood that the “Japantown” plan did not reflect the historical growth of the Japanese Canadian community in the wider Vancouver area, instead constraining them to a small two block streetscape and

effectively suppressing their redress aspirations. Finally, even though city planners had claimed that they wanted to work with Japanese Canadian interests to realize their unique goals, the “Japantown” plans and policies in the LAPP closely resembled the heritage revitalization programs that had recently unleashed gentrification in Chinatown and Gastown. In particular, the new zoning regulations for “Japantown” and the CBDA would allow existing property owners to densify commercial and industrial buildings without having to contribute to social housing in the area.

7 Aftermath: Resisting toponymy, reclaiming the “Downtown Eastside”

Moment four occurred in the wake of the LAPP in the Summer of 2014 as our participatory action research project worked to intervene in political discussions in the neighbourhood with the purpose of unsettling troublesome toponymies of planning. Paradoxically, the top down process of the LAPP that aimed to manipulate and constrain the interests of disparate community groups also allowed some members to forge new alliances. For their part, Japanese Canadian LAPP participants began to see themselves as part of a diverse group of activists that viewed the DTES as a place of support for Vancouver’s most marginalized. They also saw their material presence as an opportunity to connect with and work alongside the community to address some of the wider concerns of low-income activists. At the same

time, many low-income advocates now recognized that Japanese Canadians would speak up for their community rather than attempt to create a superficial and exclusionary “Japantown.” Such alliances produced positive effects for low-income people as social justice activists could engage with a diverse group of people that could be counted on to support the Downtown Eastside. Even beyond the Japanese Canadian community, a representative from a neighbourhood association told us that “I think the city did what was considered impossible by most, and they actually united the [community]. Unfortunately, they united them in opposition to the city.” A BIA participant stated that the LAPP “changed my opinion of what the neighbourhood was capable of [...] in terms of communicating and working together,” while a low-income activist likewise noted that there was now “a little bit more cohesion now that we know each other as people in the neighbourhood.”

Although the LAPP’s toponymic reassembling of the DTES into the DEC made it difficult for low-income activists to make broader claims to the city for their priorities, they continue(d) to assert their rights within the area that they considered to be their “Social Justice Zone,” that is, the newly bounded CBDA. And even though the plan attempted to map a new Japanese-themed commercial area within the CBDA, low-income residents understood that its inclusion was relatively benign, because Japanese Canadian activists

made it clear that they did not intend to allow their interests to disserve the interests of the existing community. Planners seemingly believed that they could selectively incorporate ethnocultural heritage into the assembling of place, as they had in the past (see City of Vancouver, 1982a, 2012a). The singular difference between the LAPP and previous attempts was that planners had not anticipated the impact of the 1988 redress settlement upon Japanese Canadians, in which the Canadian government acknowledged the wartime injustices, apologized, and provided some compensation to the community in the form of individual and community financial contributions (Miki, 2005). This decision created a renewed drive within the community for human rights and social justice, an orientation that spilled over into the LAPP over 25 years later.

The Japanese Canadian legacy of dispossession, uprooting, dispersal, and eventual redress, as communicated through our collaborative research project, has helped bolster low-income resistance in the form of a political demand for a “right to remain” in the area (Masuda and Franks, 2014). Indeed, after such interventions, low-income activists told us that they understood the “Japantown” toponymy to be “a perversion of history for the purposes of marketing.” And while the LAPP succeeded on paper in reassembling the DTES into the technical spaces of the DEC, on the ground it engendered a new political configuration grounded in a sense of place premised on solidarity, belonging, and memory.

Neighbourhood strength and resilience were proclaimed repeatedly and eloquently by community experts during the LAPP public hearings (see for example Ward, 2014), and as one low-income activist later informed us, the Downtown Eastside will always be “in the hearts and minds of the people who claim that proudly.”

8 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has contributed to the existing literature on critical toponymy and assemblage by demonstrating the contested, emergent, and political ways in which the Downtown Eastside was remade through participatory planning. It has used assemblage in three ways. First, it has highlighted the stabilizing processes (which legitimate and reinforce assemblages by creating homogeneity) and destabilizing processes (which increase heterogeneity) (see Delanda, 2006; McCann, 2011; McFarlane, 2011a) that have marked planning led toponymic transformations in the DTES, where particular toponymies are continually being deployed in relation to, and at the expense of, others. Second, it has demonstrated how the toponymic assemblages of the DTES are profoundly fluid and relational (see McFarlane, 2011d), formed through the practice, labour, engagement, and learning of actors engaged both in planning and in activist resistance (see Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b). Finally, it has exposed the heterogeneous, variable, and malleable power dynamics

that have shaped the toponymic assemblages of the DTES within the context of planning (see McFarlane, 2011d).

In particular, our study in the DTES looked at the spatiotemporal dimensions of toponymy, demonstrating how toponymic assemblage is an ongoing and recursive process, marked by moments of rupture, reconfiguration, and continuous contestation. The Local Area Planning Process signposted a turn toward a new mode of representation – a toponymic assemblage that emerged through the labour and interactions among actors such as planners, residents, (scholar-)activists, and business interests (none of which constitutes a mutually exclusive category). At the beginning of the LAPP, the “Downtown Eastside” presented a distinctly political assemblage that had coalesced through activist labour around housing, human rights, social services, and social justice; and simultaneously normative discourses that denigrated the community as a space of drug use, poverty, violence, and homelessness. But by the end of the LAPP, the Downtown Eastside toponymy (still proudly claimed by activists) had been destabilized and, at least in maps and planning documents, replaced by new boundaries and descriptions like “Downtown Eastside Communities,” “Community Based Development Area,” and “Japantown.” In particular, planning maps acted to rescale and reconfigure the boundaries of the neighbourhood, and they gave legitimacy to depoliticized techno-rational depictions of the area. Such material and

discursive interventions represent moments of assemblage through which new modes of place knowledge were communicated by and to planning actors, and giving rise to new forms of contestation, political allegiances, and place based futures.

Participants began the planning process with hopes of generating a vision for a mutually beneficial, socially just community in the heart of Vancouver, and the consultation process was indeed able to engage a diverse cross section of residents in that important conversation. Yet across a series of moments, it became clear to participants that the material and discursive assemblage of the Downtown Eastside was transforming in ways that were contrary to community led visions, and the LAPP demonstrated to participants the planning intentions for the community and the inadequacy of the response considering the minefield of DTES concerns. Nomenclatures such as DEC, CBDA, and “Japantown” destabilized and transformed the political terrain of the DTES for planning purposes and produced active consequences for the neighbourhood, but they also had the unintended effect of generating opposition to the plan, creating alliances among disparate actors in the area, and inspiring a renewed acknowledgement of the social justice legacy of the “Downtown Eastside” as a toponymy of resistance. Furthermore, the use of “Japantown” as a racialized framework for commercial “revitalization” created bonds between Japanese Canadian and low-income activists that likely would not have occurred

were it not for the cynical appropriation of the term by the LAPP, or the strategic interventions of our community partnership. Indeed, processes of toponymic assemblage can bring people together, and while it is easy to critique the neoliberal use of “participation” in planning, resistance is difficult to eliminate, and positive outcomes are possible even from tokenistic or misguided planning processes. In short, planning did not fully erase a long held low-income claim to place.

In conclusion, while there are hundreds of transformative events within the LAPP that we could have focused on, we have highlighted four because they are illustrative of how the planning inputs worked within a participatory process to transform a highly political assemblage of survival into a managerial place framing that would argue for technical solutions to political problems. These events are also important because they demonstrate how such activities can stimulate resistance from those who are actively trying to generate place based social transformation. We believe that by focusing on the toponymic transformations that occurred within the LAPP, we have demonstrated the dynamism of toponymic assemblages as they are transformed through materials, discourses, and labour to reconstitute communities. Yet we also assert that attempts to shape toponymic assemblages in depoliticized, rational, bounded ways can result in their repoliticization by subaltern groups working on varied political projects. Thus, it is important to recognize

how the material and discursive elements of planning and toponymy can work together in relational and fluid ways to transform neighbourhoods, inspire resistance, and assemble new epistemologies of place.

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