Commemorating with (In)Visibility: The Case of the Japanese Canadian War Memorial

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Abstract

Interrogation of the histories and symbolisms embedded in the Japanese Canadian War Memorial, located in Stanley Park, Vancouver, revealed a narrative of not only the disempowerment of Japanese Canadians, but also empowerment through proactive financial and institutional support against the climate of discriminatory politics in British Columbia. The “national memory” of Canadian war remembrance has embraced the dissemination of Anglo-centered narratives by mainstream memorials like the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France and the Ottawa National War Memorial. As such spaces displaced “other” narratives like visible minority war efforts in WWI, the “national memory” embedded in current commemorating practices of Canadian war remembrance is not representative to the actual realities of Canadian history. Japanese Canadian disenfranchisement and (dis)empowerment were essential factors driving Japanese Canadian volunteers to enlist and serve on the Western Front. The paper argues for a major extension of public attention and knowledge regarding the symbols and narratives “bled” within the Japanese Canadian War Memorial for a more legitimized practice of Canadian war remembrance.

Spaces of (In)Visibility

Canadians ought to look to the Japanese Canadian War Memorial, located in Stanley Park, Vancouver, to inspire a more inclusive “national memory” of commemorating veterans from past conflicts (Figure 1). WWI served as a premise for Canada to consolidate its identity after Confederation in 1867 by embedding the “bleeding” of its soldiers—who fought in the name for Canadian “freedom” and “democracy” in WWI—into its national identity.¹ Post-war place-making projects like the 1936 Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France and the Ottawa National War Memorial in 1939 were established for Canadians to embrace their patriotic gaze for “national sorrow” in these spaces.² Interrogation of historical narratives “bled” within the


Japanese Canadian War Memorial, located in Stanley Park, Vancouver, will illuminate that the cenotaph is not only a story of commemorating fallen soldiers—but also of (dis)empowerment and the lack of Canadian “democracy “for Japanese Canadians.

![Japanese Canadian War Memorial in 1920.](image)


Such “spaces of visibility” are also—rather cynically—“spaces of invisibility,” as the Anglo-Saxon centered masculine spectacle displaced “other” narratives of visible minority (like Japanese Canadian) war veterans from being disseminated into Canadian public consciousness (Figure 2; Figure 3). It is, of course, not to say White soldiers did not suffer or sacrificed in WWI for Canadians. The problem, however, lies in Canada’s imbalanced post-war commemoration practices, as national consciousness was deliberately shifted towards Anglo-

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centered mainstream cenotaphs by performances such as Queen Elizabeth and King Edward VII’s visit at their unveilings—at the expense of “other” narratives embedded in memorials like the Japanese Canadian War Memorial (Figure 3; Figure 4).

Figure 2: Bronze figures (with only representations of White male veterans) on the National War Memorial in 1938. Group of bronze figures on the National War Memorial, Ottawa, Ont [c. 1938]. Photograph. MIKAN no. 3359001. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

Figure 3: King Edward VII unveiling the (White male) figure of Canada at Canadian National Vimy Memorial in 1936. National Film Board of Canada. H.M. King Edward VIII unveiling the figure of Canada on the Vimy Ridge Memorial [c. 1936]. Photograph. MIKAN no.3224327. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Canada.
Figure 4: A Canadian war veteran shakes the hand of Queen Elizabeth after the unveiling of the National War Memorial in 1939.

Japanese Canadians in the late 19th and early 20th century

Early Japanese immigrants engaged mostly in labor-intensive employments in the lumber, fishing, and mining industry. Contrary to their dreams for “prosperity” before migrating to Canada, as most felt they were “Japanese in a white man’s country,” Japanese often agreed to accept lower wages than their White counterparts out of necessity by being the “other” in British Columbia.\(^4\) Despite their labour contribution to the economic growth of the province in the early 1900s, from an Occidental lens they were still inferior to and, in the words of a shoe dealer

residing in Victoria named William Shyte, were “dangerous competitors if they remained in the country” to the White majority.5

The growing influx of Asian immigration and fear of increased economic competition reached a climax in 1907, culminating into the anti-Asian Labour Day riots in Chinatown by angry Euro-Canadians within the same year.6 Although there were no restrictions on Japanese immigration in the late 19th century, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 did not grant enfranchisement for Japanese migrants.7 In 1895, much to the delight of the White majority, the British Columbia provincial legislature officially barred Japanese Canadians judicially from having the right to vote.8

The Canadian Japanese Association (CJA) was a social organization which aimed to serve the Japanese Canadian community socially, politically, economically, and educationally in the early 20th century. This included helping immigrants to find work in an anti-Asian discriminatory climate, learn English by setting up educational facilities, and—most importantly—strived to obtain “franchise for naturalized as well as for the Second Generation” Japanese Canadians through tenacious negotiations with both governmental and civilian authorities. There are competing accounts about the official formation year of the CJA. Despite Amor and Gonnami’s (2000) account of the organization in being formed in 1908, an essay written by the CJA themselves in 1940 indicated that the organization was actually formed in 1897 and only became an authorized social organization in 1910. In the words of the CJA, the


8 Ibid, 102.
organization ultimately acted as a “medium for furtherance of amicable relationship between the Japanese and the Canadians” by pushing for Japanese Canadian empowerment and enfranchisement.\(^9\)

In 1900, a test case was submitted by the CJA on behalf of Tommie Homma, a naturalized British subject, to challenge the 1895 decision judicially.\(^10\) Despite such efforts, the banning was nonetheless upheld in 1902 by the Privy Council in London, which declared that British Columbia had the right to decide on its own franchise.\(^11\) The fact that Japanese Canadians were disenfranchised ultimately enforced the anti-Asian climate as “legitimate” in the early-1900s, as Japanese Canadians were officially casted as the “other” on judicial terms within British Columbia.

**1914-1936: The Road for Enfranchisement**

The First World War gave a looming path for the CJA to exploit and gain enfranchisement for Japanese Canadians through institutional and monetary support of military service.\(^12\) Yashushi Yamazaki, an editor for the Japanese newspaper *Tairiku Nippo* and president of the CJA, began recruiting aspiring volunteer soldiers through an advertisement posted on August 15\(^{th}\), 1914.\(^13\) After receiving an unconvincing reply from Prime Minister Robert Borden after the CJA offered the services of volunteers for combat, Yamazaki and the

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\(^11\) Ibid.


\(^13\) Ibid.
CJA formed the Canadian Japanese Volunteer Corps to train 171 volunteer soldiers between January and May 1916.\(^\text{14}\) Funding for the training of the volunteers came from the Japanese Canadian community themselves, despite being marginalized socio-economically in British Columbia.\(^\text{15}\) Interestingly, many Japanese Canadians had also contributed to the financing of pan-Canadian war efforts by (over)subscribing to the Victory Loan.\(^\text{16}\) As Mayor Gale stated, “at the beginning of the campaign the Japanese were assigned $50,000 as their amount but it was soon perceived this quota was too small, and another $50,000 was added.”\(^\text{17}\) For the volunteer soldiers financed by the Japanese Canadian community, after being rejected by the federal Cabinet of a proposed Japanese Battalion, the less racial province of Alberta became the “door” for them to enlist in the province’s battalions.\(^\text{18}\) In 1917, 222 Japanese Canadians were enlisted to serve on the Western Front with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).\(^\text{19}\)

The Battle of Vimy Ridge and other battles on the Western Front in 1917 and 1918 required the mobilization of all available—including Japanese Canadian—CEF soldiers for combat. Japanese Canadian war veterans who served on the Western Front were recognized for their bushido-like courageous discipline and heroic achievements on the battlefield, which quickly displaced the initial racial casting of them as being “unfit” within the battalions by their

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\(^{17}\) Ibid.


\(^{19}\) Ibid, 445.
White counterparts and superiors.\textsuperscript{20} As Sergeant Kubota from the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion notes, “our discipline was quite correct and we earned the praise of the head of the unit and all the other officers.”\textsuperscript{21} Japanese Canadian war veterans also won military medals for their miraculous war achievements. For example, after leading 35 Japanese Canadians in the Battle of Hill 70, Sergeant Mitsui of the 10\textsuperscript{th} Battalion was awarded the Military Medal for his tremendous leadership and exceptional bravery.\textsuperscript{22} With this mindset, Japanese Canadian veterans endured many causalities that piled up on the war front, with Sergeant Kubota reported at one point that “the Corps was reduced by half with many Japanese Canadian causalities” for the 52\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion on the Western Front.\textsuperscript{23} The heroic and courageous enlistment of the 222 soldiers, however, did not gain enfranchisement for Japanese Canadians.

54 Japanese Canadian voluntary soldiers ultimately died during the war. To honour the sacrifice of their fallen heroes, much like the financial support of military training and Canadian war bonds, the Japanese Canadian community raised $15,000 dollars for the building of the Japanese Canadian War Memorial in a rather short time span.\textsuperscript{24} Designed by James A. Benzle, the monument was officially unveiled on April 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1920, three years after the Battle of Vimy

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} NNM Information Files. Sainosuke Kubota, Reminiscences of WWI [c. 1957]. Essay. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Dick, Lyle. "Sergeant Masumi Mitsui and the Japanese Canadian War Memorial." \textit{Canadian Historical Review}. 91.3 (2010): 447.
\item \textsuperscript{23} NNM Information Files. Sainosuke Kubota, Reminiscences of WWI [c. 1957]. Essay. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.
\item \textsuperscript{24} NNM Information Files. Summary of Tairiku Nippo (Continental Times) newspaper article on April 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1920 - Moment to Japanese Canadian Volunteers Serving in Great European War [c. 1920]. Newspaper Clipping. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.
\end{itemize}
Ridge, to commemorate the fallen soldiers (Figure 5). A marble Japanese lantern looms over the 34-foot monument, with four bronze plates lying at the pedestal of the monument, with one of the plates carrying the names of fallen Japanese Canadians and another carrying the names of surviving war veterans. The Japanese lantern at the top of the monument became brightly lit after Alderman J.J McRae drew the memorial's curtains at the unveiling. To reflect the "Japanese" and "Canadian" nature of the monument, one of the plates had the engraving of the Canadian coat-of-arms, while the other carried the coat-of-arms of Japan.

Figure 5: The official unveiling of the Japanese Canadian War Memorial on April 9th, 1920.

The role of the CJA in coordinating the gathered funds and commissioning of the memorial's establishment may be showcased by the Park Board meeting minutes on September


26 NNM Information Files. The Province - Unveil Shaft to Japanese Soldiers [c. 1920]. Newspaper Clipping. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.


28 Ibid.
8th, 1920, whereby the “undertaking between the Japanese Association and the Park Board” led to the Park Board to provide “a site for this memorial and agreed to prepare the same for the Association at their expense” in Stanley Park.\textsuperscript{29} Interestingly, as reported by the minutes, a cost of $350.40 was still outstanding five months after the memorial’s unveiling.\textsuperscript{30}

The light sparkling out of the memorial’s lantern ran parallel towards a continued progression of hope for empowerment among Japanese Canadians. In 1926, Japanese Canadian veterans founded Branch No.9 of the newly created Canadian Legion to fight for enfranchisement.\textsuperscript{31} Continued struggles proliferated by Branch No.9, with Mitsui serving as the president, eventually culminated and gained enfranchisements for (only) Japanese Canadian war veterans in 1931.\textsuperscript{32} Enfranchised war veterans ultimately became a symbol of hope for the community of a more empowering future.\textsuperscript{33} Surviving and fallen Japanese Canadian war veterans became iconic symbols to further the fight for enfranchisement. This may be symbolized by a delegation of Japanese Canadians in appealing to the House of Commons in 1936 on the issue of gaining enfranchisement.\textsuperscript{34} Members of the committee “enquired as to

\textsuperscript{29} Vancouver Parks Board. Park Board - Board Committee minutes [c. 1912-1961]. Minutes. VPK-S64. City of Vancouver Archives, Vancouver, Canada.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 72-73.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 73.

particulars of Canadian citizens of Japanese origin who served overseas” to justify enfranchisement for the entire Japanese Canadian community.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{1941: The Hong Kong Factor}

In October 1941 during WWII, two Canadian battalions were offered and accepted by Britain to reinforce the existing two Scottish and two Indian Battalions to defend Hong Kong from potential invasion.\textsuperscript{36} On December 7\textsuperscript{th} 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.\textsuperscript{37} Eight hours after the attack, on December 8\textsuperscript{th} 1941, an invasion of Hong Kong was launched by Japan, with invading forces totaling more than 50,000 troops, whereas defending Allied forces only totaled approximately 11,000 to 14,000 troops.\textsuperscript{38} Both the federal and provincial authorities condemned the invasion, with the federal Cabinet declaring the attacks of the British territory of Hong Kong as a serious “threat to the defense and freedom of Canada.”\textsuperscript{39}

One day after the attacks of Hong Kong, Sergeant Mitsui, as the president of Branch No.9, wrote a letter on behalf of Japanese Canadian war veterans to the Minister of Defense pledging “their unflinching loyalty to Canada as they did in the Last Great War.”\textsuperscript{40} Despite Mitsui’s pledge of loyalty, war between Japanese and Canadian forces in Hong Kong ultimately extended the existing discriminatory climate by releasing a whirlwind of suspicion—whereby all Japanese


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 131.

\textsuperscript{38} Ciocirlan, Cristina, and Ed Chung. "Against all odds: a strategic analysis of the fall of Hong Kong, 1941." \textit{Management Decision}. 49.6 (2011): 986.


\textsuperscript{40} NNM Information Files. Branch no.9 letter to Minister of Defense [c. 1941]. Letter. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.
Canadians (including war veterans) became considered as spies for Imperial Japan and categorized as “enemy aliens” by the White majorities and the government.\textsuperscript{41} The discursive casting of Japanese as “enemies” of Canada was partly attributed to the ongoing brutalities against Allied forces in Hong Kong by Japanese forces. A highlight incident of such brutalities was the storming of St. Stephen College, a temporary hospital that nursed injured British, Indian, and Canadian soldiers, hours before Britain’s surrender of Hong Kong on December 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1941.\textsuperscript{42} In the ordeal, along with the raping and murdering of many female nurses working in the hospital, a number of Canadian soldiers, who were still recovering from some forms of injuries, were also bayonetted and murdered by invading Japanese troops.\textsuperscript{43}

In 1942, Prime Minister Mackenzie King enacted the War Measures Act, which granted undisputed powers for the Cabinet to pass any regulations in the name of “national security,” and uprooted all Japanese Canadians east of a 100-mile demarcation line into internment camps.\textsuperscript{44} All Japanese Canadian properties and holdings were then confiscated and sold at public auctions.\textsuperscript{45} Coincidentally, just when racial animosity reached its peak towards Japanese Canadians, the lighting of the memorial’s lantern was dimmed out in 1942.\textsuperscript{46} Although the reasons behind the dim out remains a mystery, in a metaphorical sense, the “dim out” may


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 57.


\textsuperscript{46} Wakayama, Tamio. “Lest We Forget: A Dedication to Commemorate the Re-lighting of the War Memorial to Japanese Canadian Soldiers of World War I.” Nikkei Centre, 2 Aug 1985.
cynically symbolize the “dim out” of hope for enfranchisement after the Battle of Hong Kong for Japanese Canadians.

Sergeant Mitsui, while being escorted by the RCMP in 1942, asked and proclaimed, “What are the good of my medals,” as he was about to be detained at Hastings Park pending his eventual relocation to Greenwood, British Columbia. As reported by Mitsui’s spouse Sugi, the total loss of the sergeant’s assets amounted to $4240.34 after the confiscation of his properties and holdings. In the case of Zennosuke Inouye, his confiscated land property was complicated by the fact that it was transferred into the Veterans Land Act of 1942, an act that aimed to rehabilitate and resettle returning Canadian war veterans on a land property. The unequal exchange and unjustified violation of civil rights may be reflected in Inouye’s letter to the Department of Labor in 1945, proclaiming with his “loyalty to the Dominion of Canada” that “it doesn’t seem fair for the government to take away from one ex-soldier property” and give it to a “soldier returning from the present war.”

Embracing Messiness

The story of the Japanese Canadian War Memorial illuminated the actually-existing “messy” reality of Canada’s past. Discriminatory politics by the state and the White majorities displaced Japanese Canadians from gaining enfranchisement, which pushed them outside the judicial margins of what constitutes a Canadian. Despite the voluntarily enlistment of Japanese Canadian soldiers in WWI, enfranchisement was not extended to the community up until 1949,


48 Ibid, 458.


50 NNM Information Files. Letter by Zennosuke Inouye to the Department of Labour [c. 1945]. Letter. Nikkei Centre Archives, Burnaby, Canada.
the same year in which uprooted Japanese Canadians were able to return to the coast.\textsuperscript{51} In addition, the “bleeding” of Japanese Canadian war veterans in WWI, who fought in the name of Canada, did not prevent them from being classified as “enemy aliens” in WWII. Despite declaring their unshaken loyalty to Canada after the Battle of Hong Kong where they were still considered “other” bodies loyal to Japan and outside the confines of what constitutes as an “orderly” Anglo-centered Canadian identity, Japanese Canadians were still proving their loyalty to Canada by enlisting in WWII in 1945.

It is important to note, however, that the memorial did not only symbolize a story of disempowerment and disenfranchisement, but also of empowerment as well for Japanese Canadians. Despite being socio-economically marginalized, Japanese Canadians tried to increase their social standing by providing military financing for volunteers to enlist in WWI and gain enfranchisement for the community. Since its inception, the CJA had been instrumental in coordinating a sense of Japanese Canadian community both institutionally and financially, especially when it came to extending the fight for enfranchisement. In the end, the displacing of narratives embedded within the Japanese Canadian War Memorial as a result of its “messy” nature to preserve Canada’s “clean” past in its “national memory” is not only unjust, but also diminishes a truthful, complete understanding of Canadian citizenship. A major extension of public attention to the cenotaph must be embraced not only for a more legitimate practice of Canadian war remembrance, but also towards an extended understanding about ourselves deep within as pluralistic Canadian subjects.

Future Research

This project, partnered with the Nikkei Centre, was unfortunately unable to fill a crucial gap in historical knowledge regarding the circumstances behind the Japanese Canadian War Memorial lantern dim out in 1942. Interrogation into archival materials was undertaken around the prospect of the lantern dim out in being a result of mandatory black out regulations to prevent night time attack and the possibility of vandalism caused by the heightened racist climate in 1942. As of now, no new materials have been found to prove either of these two probable reasons as valid. Therefore, future research may continue the examination of archival materials revolving around these two “dim out” possibilities, or extend the scope of analysis to incorporate other potential causes to explain the circumstances behind the dim out.
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