To Motivate and Dismantle: The History of the Japanese Fishing Village on Don and Lion Islands and the Effect of Racism

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Abstract:

Don and Lion Islands are two small islands on the south arm of the Fraser River that were settled by Japanese fishermen and their families from 1901 after a racist attack on their previous home provoked them to move to a more isolated location. It was populated until at least the mid 1920s, but a few people may have remained until 1942 when they were forcibly removed to be interned during World War II. While Japanese-Canadians resided there, they fished, brewed sake, exported salmon roe to Japan, salted dog salmon and shipped it to Japanese-Canadian fishing camps and cookhouses. This paper discusses the history of racism towards Japanese-Canadians and touches on the early years of emigration out of Japan after their seclusion policy was lifted. It also describes the history of Don and Lion Islands and how racism from working class whites continued to affect its residents despite its isolated location, due to the increasing pressures of strict fishing licensing and regulations. The aim of this narrative is to connect the racism that initially caused the community to move to Don and Lion Islands with the racism and reduced fishing licences that eventually caused the islands to depopulate. In doing so, it can be argued that racism motivated and dismantled these island communities.

Introduction:

Don and Lion Islands are two small islands (22 acres and 16 acres respectively) located on the South Arm of the Fraser River between Richmond and Delta, British Columbia. From 1901 to the 1920s, these islands contained a thriving community of Japanese fishermen and their families, but looking at their vegetated and natural state today, it is difficult to believe that this was the case. Through an examination of the history of racism towards Japanese-Canadians, as well as a history of the islands, I intend to portray Don and Lion Islands as being a product of anti-Asian racism as well as a community that was eventually eradicated because of racist fisheries regulations.

1 D.E. Ross, An Archaeology of Asian Transnationalism, Florida, 2013, 74
Japanese Immigration - The Early Years:

In the year 1637, Japan came under the rule of an authoritarian warrior family of Tokugawa who imposed a strict seclusion policy on the country, preventing any Japanese citizens from leaving and anyone else from entering. At the time, this was done in order to prevent all foreign influence under the fear that Japan would lose its traditional customs and way of life and be assimilated into Western culture and catholicism.\(^2\) As a result, Japan remained completely isolated until 1854 when two ports were opened to American ships for trade.\(^3\) Upon the return of the rule of the Emperor in 1867, a new period of exploration began. This was especially marked by the Emperor’s Charter Oath of 1868 when it was stated that, “knowledge shall be sought for throughout the world so that the welfare of the Empire may be promoted”.\(^4\)

During the two hundred years that Japan secluded itself from the rest of the world, European nations had been “brawling their way to commercial and imperial expansion in almost every corner of the world”.\(^5\) This, unsurprisingly, lead to tensions in places like British Columbia that wished to maintain their white status as numbers of Japanese increased. The need for labour often outweighed the desire to limit immigration from non-white countries.\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Ibid, 5

\(^4\) Ibid, 1

\(^5\) Ibid, 4-5

\(^6\) Ibid, 37
Racism in Capital Versus Labour:

In British Columbia, anti-Asian ideals were promoted for three distinct reasons: cultural differences and their physical appearance as ‘other’, the assumption that they were unassimilable into white society and customs, and most importantly, the economic impact they had on working class whites in primary industries such as fishing. The majority of the Japanese that came to Canada were escaping a life of poverty and had the goal of working to send enough money back to their family in Japan, and were considered a drain on the Canadian economy as a result. Meanwhile, because of their inferior status, Japanese-Canadians were increasingly pushed into working class positions. Fishing, for this reason became the dominant employment for many Japanese-Canadians, but they were paid less than a white man doing the same job. Because they were paid less, Japanese-Canadians were discriminated against even more, under the argument that by working for less, the Japanese were undermining white living standards. Solving this with equal pay however, was also unthinkable because of the concept that Japanese were inferior workers. This presents Japanese-Canadians as being in a never-ending cycle of racist attitudes and unequal pay. The pressure to be competitive by working hard, living on less wages, and working longer hours in order to survive only further persuaded white-Canadians to victimize Japanese-Canadians. Instead of examining the underlying structure of capitalism in this context, white-Canadians chose to place the blame on Japanese-Canadians and complain about “their apparent willingness to be exploited by the ‘ugly capitalist’ and their unassimibility” into general Canadian society.

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7 M.F. Forhan, A Survey of Racial Attitudes toward the Japanese of B.C. from 1907 to the Present as Evidenced Primarily Through the Newsprint Media and Government Policies, MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, n.d, Richmond Archives Japanese Ethnic Groups Collection, 8-9

8 P.E. Roy, White Man’s Province - British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants 1858-1914, 1989, 86


10 P.E. Roy, 23
the primary sector, in which they were resultantly concentrated. This then lead to the accusation that Japanese were unfairly monopolizing these jobs.\(^\text{11}\)

The connection between capital and labour becomes apparent when examining this history of the Japanese in British Columbia. Roy notes, “racial antagonisms appeared only after members of that race became an economic threat to white men”.\(^\text{12}\) In addition, as Roy remarks, “few whites had much contact with [Japanese-Canadians] outside the competitive market place”.\(^\text{13}\) In the context of the fishing industry, cannery owners (i.e. capital) believed that cheap labour was vital to the development of the industry and the province, whereas white fishermen (i.e. labourers) fought against cheap labour arguing that it prevented them from making a living wage. Because most Japanese were not official Canadian citizens, they could not obtain their own fishing licenses and had to work for a cannery in order to fish. This not only meant that Japanese-Canadian fishermen were at the mercy of the cannery, the cannery could more easily control wages across the entire industry. Previously, fishermen would fish during openings and sell their fish to the canneries and therefore had more control over the price per fish. With an increased access to labour (i.e. Japanese fishermen) canneries no longer had as much of a need for private fishermen and could lower the price per fish. Because Japanese fishermen depended on the cannery for their contract, when wage strikes arose among white and native fishermen, the Japanese were usually first to break the strike for fear that they could lose their job or upset the cannery bosses.\(^\text{14}\)

While there was a strong consensus among working class whites to fight for legislation limiting Japanese immigration and Japanese fishing licenses, Canada’s status as a dominion of Britain limited restrictions on Japanese-Canadians. In 1894, Japan and Britain entered into

\(^{11}\) M.F. Forhan, 11-12

\(^{12}\) P.E Roy, 81

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 13-14

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 85
the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation, allowing subjects of both countries to have more rights and freedoms in the other.\textsuperscript{15} When Japan voluntarily restricted its people from emigrating in 1903, it effectively reduced the controversy.\textsuperscript{16} British Columbia could however, restrict Japanese-Canadians from voting, thereby disenfranchising them in 1895.\textsuperscript{17} As Fiset and Nomura note, "[b]ecause it applied not just to Japanese immigrants, but to anyone born

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.jpg}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{15} Adachi, 41
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 43
in B.C. who was of Japanese descent, the issue became one not just of national origin but of race”.18

**Japan as a Rising World Power:**

Japan’s restriction on emigration was not to appease British Columbia as much as it was to maintain its manpower for an impending battle with Russia.19 From the time that Japan removed its seclusion policy, it began to increase its status as a world power. Once Japan had defeated Russia in 1905, it was seen as a particular threat to European power and therefore a threat to British Columbia. Many believed that Japan would soon embark on an empire-building spree and take over the Pacific coast.20 After this war, British Columbia saw its second surge of Japanese immigrants from 1905 to 1908.21 In 1907, British Columbia experienced its largest spike in immigration, causing the anti-Asiatic riot to break out in Vancouver.22

**Restrictions on Fishing Licences:**

By 1919 fifty percent of fishing licenses were held by Japanese Canadians. In this same year, the Fishermen’s Union stopped giving further licenses to Japanese-Canadians, restricted where they could fish, and established a Fisheries Commission to look into fishing conditions on the Pacific Coast.23 Figure 1 shows the area which Japanese-Canadian

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18 L. Fiset and G.M. Nomura, 21
19 Adachi, 44
20 Ibid, 44
21 D.E. Ross, 66
fishermen were contained (shaded) and is a mere sliver of the area open to every other non-Asian fishermen. In 1923 once the commission had returned its findings, forty percent of Japanese fishing licences were repealed and an additional ten percent reduction each year was set until Japanese fishermen were completely removed from the industry. Fortunately, in 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against these restrictions, but this decision was too late for many that had already lost their licenses and either returned to Japan or other industries.24 By 1931, only sixteen percent of fishing licences were held by Japanese-Canadians.25


25 M.F. Forhan, 11-12
Jinsaburo Oikawa and the Settlement of Don and Lion Islands:

Jinsaburo Oikawa, pictured in figure 2, immigrated to British Columbia from Japan in 1896 with the hope to capitalize on the fishing industry by fishing for salmon and exporting salmon roe back to Japan where they were a delicacy. Upon arrival, he found that the Japanese in Canada were very insular. They stuck with those who came from the same prefecture in Japan and therefore spoke the same dialect. A year after his arrival, Jinsaburo partnered with a fellow Japanese man from his own prefecture of Miyagi, named Souemon Sato. Together, they set up an agreement with a landowner in Sunbury (present day Delta) named Charles Clark to clear his land in exchange for the wood they cleared, a plot for them to build log houses, and a contract to work for a local cannery. In 1898, they finished the first log house and started fishing with eight other Japanese men. At this time, Japanese fishermen were completely dependent on fishing companies and canneries for boats, fishing gear, and licences in exchange for a contract with the company. Most Japanese were not considered citizens and therefore could not obtain licences of their own. Jinsaburo and Souemon wished to be the first to create a private Japanese fishing operation on the Fraser River and therefore purchased a few of their own boats in order to avoid the ‘lease trap’ of using cannery owned boats. When the fishing season neared, they were given a contract with Ewen Cannery (pictured in a 1908 postcard in figure 3) on the west shore of Lion Island. Ironically, Jinsaburo and Souemon were from a mountainous village in Japan and therefore had very little fishing knowledge compared with many other Japanese-Canadian

26 D.E. Ross, 81
28 D.E. Ross, 81-82
29 Ibid, 82
30 N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 54, 57
31 Ibid, 58
With time they gained enough experience to be competent at their trade.\textsuperscript{32} Also in 1898, Jinsaburo returned to his hometown in Japan to recruit people to come back with him. His goal was to bring at least 30 people, but he only managed to return with his family of three, their housekeeper, and five others. Most could not afford to pay the sixty yen fare to get to Canada.\textsuperscript{33}

As the leader of his community, Jinsaburo strove to maintain good relations with the few white fishermen around him, however, in 1901, when a group of seven white fishermen asked him to stop fishing and join the wage strike against the canneries, he was forced to say no.\textsuperscript{34} Firstly, they did not belong to the same fishermen’s union, and secondly they could not afford to risk their contract with the cannery. The white men later lit Jinsaburo and Souemon’s

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{Ewen Salmon Cannery, Near New Westminster, On Line of CPR. Postcard. Harold Steves Collection, Nikkei National Museum. 13 x 18cm. 1908. 2013-3-1.}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 54
\bibitem{D.E.} D.E. Ross, 82; N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 60
\bibitem{N.} N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 54, 67
\end{thebibliography}
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log house on fire, sabotaged boats, and cut nets in an act of revenge.\(^{35}\) This same racism was widely felt downriver in the much larger community of Steveston, as the Japanese there also did not follow the conditions of the strike. Many injuries and a death were even reported. Justice was served when some of the violent offenders were arrested, but the anti-Japanese perspective still remained.\(^{36}\) Shortly after this incident, in the interest of reducing tensions between Jinsaburo’s Japanese village and the surrounding white fishermen, Charles Clark approached them with the offer of moving their settlement to adjacent Don and Lion Islands

\(^{35}\) Ibid, 67

\(^{36}\) K. Adachi, 59-60
without having to pay a lease for 20 years. Jinsaburo and Souemon agreed, based on its more isolated location away from the temptations of gambling, drinking and prostitution that the more populated areas of Sunbury and Steveston contained, but mainly to avoid further racist acts.\textsuperscript{37} They created their settlement on Don Island, after clearing the land, building log houses, a common eating house, and buildings for the production of sake and miso.\textsuperscript{38} A photograph of Don Island is pictured in figure 4 and figure 5.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{don_island.jpg}
\caption{Oikawa Island BC. Photographer Unknown. 26 x 12.5cm. n.d. Nikkei National Museum, 2009-2-49.}
\end{figure}

By 1902, the population of Don Island was thirty, many of whom are pictured in figure 6. Jinsaburo was always looking to expand his Japanese fishing village and made multiple voyages back to Japan to convince others to join him. In the summer of 1903, a carpenter, a blacksmith, and a mechanic came to Don Island, along with five other men from Japan,

\textsuperscript{37} D.E. Ross, 82-83

\textsuperscript{38} D.K.A. Sulz, Japanese “Entrepreneur” on the Fraser River: Oikawa Jinsabura and the Illegal Immigrants of the Suian Maru, PHD Thesis, University of Victoria, 2013, 33
making the population rise to forty.\textsuperscript{39} During this same year, the Sato settlement wished to establish their own community and moved to neighbouring Lion Island with five fishing boats and fifteen people from Don Island.\textsuperscript{40} The layout of the islands is shown in figure 7 with the Sato settlement situated on the northeast tip of Lion Island. The residents of the Sato settlement are also pictured in figure 8 in the year 1914. Interestingly, while it is recorded in historical literature that the population on Don Island continued to increase until 1914,

\textsuperscript{39} N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 80

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 70-80
according to this photograph, the Sato settlement appears to have only increased by six people.

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7**

**Suian Maru - Jinsaburo’s Illegal Immigration Scheme:**

In 1906, Jinsaburo persuaded seventy-nine men and three women to illegally make the voyage to British Columbia and chartered a three-masted sail boat named the Suian
The plan was to mask themselves as fishermen and depart the ship in smaller groups to avoid suspicion. At the time, it was not legal to bring that many Japanese into British Columbia at once, under the voluntary restrictions Japan still had in place. They were caught before reaching the islands and were given the option to stay in Canada only if they worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway for one year. Interestingly, the need for labour

Figure 8

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41 City of Richmond Report to Committee, 2005, retrieved from http://www.richmond.ca/__shared/assets/092715_item311997.pdf

42 M. Keen, Richmond Neighbourhood Series - The Country: Richmond's Eastern Neighbourhoods, Richmond Archives, 2010, 17
seemed to override the immigration laws and white labourers demands once again.\textsuperscript{43} After this year, some of them returned to Don Island.\textsuperscript{44}

**Salt Salmon & Sake - Success to Failure:**

By the time passengers of the Suian Maru returned to the island, it was prospering with one third of the land cleared for agriculture, the sake brewery working at full capacity, and the salt salmon business in higher demand than could be facilitated.\textsuperscript{45} Salt-packed dog salmon—previously considered not fit for human consumption by the white population—was processed and salted on Don Island and shipped to Japanese fishing camps and cookhouses.\textsuperscript{46} At first, Jinsaburo and his villagers traded island-brewed sake for dog salmon, and later paid minimally for it. As it grew in popularity, more competition arose, raising the price of dog salmon and making the business on Don Island unaffordable.\textsuperscript{47} Near this time, the previously successful Sake brewery was also put to an end as the police raided and dismantled it.\textsuperscript{48}

In 1914, World War I began, bringing with it the beginning of a recession. The price of fish fell drastically and fishing licences could only be held by naturalized citizens, or those born in Canada which the residents of the islands were not.\textsuperscript{49} This meant that they were tied

\textsuperscript{43} D.K.A. Sulz, 11

\textsuperscript{44} M. Keen, 17; it appears that Keen made an error when describing Lion Island. It could be that she is referring to both islands when she says Oikawa resided on Lion Island, but it has been changed to Don Island to avoid confusion

\textsuperscript{45} M. Keen, 17; N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 60

\textsuperscript{46} N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 60

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 60

\textsuperscript{48} Richmond Archives Japanese Ethnic Groups Collection, Interview with Buck Suzuki by David Stevenson, 15 Jan 1976, T54 S2, T55 S1 Transcript

\textsuperscript{49} N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 148
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Lovik, 17

to their contract with Ewan Cannery. Without it they could not fish. This made it easier for the white fishermen to encroach on their fishing grounds when times became tough. When this happened and fifteen white fishermen’s boats set up to fish just off of Annacis Island to the South-East, Masutaro Miyazawa, a Don Island resident, sped over in a boat to try to negotiate, arguing that the area had been Japanese fishing grounds for the last twenty years, exaggerating a little.\(^{50}\) Part of the conversation is recorded as follows:

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 148

Figure 9
“Is that so?” a White man answered. “Well then, show us your fishing licences to back up your claim. But you can’t, can you? You don’t have licences because your Japs. This isn’t a Jap river, this is a Canadian river and we have licences that let us fish anywhere we please.” “That may be so but the custom is to divide the fishing areas by mutual agreement and we have had the fishing companies permission to fish here for the last twenty years.” [Masutaro responded]. “Twenty years, eh?” “Oooohh permission from the fishing company.”

Masutaro then tried to go to the boss’ boat, until he fired two shots, not in warning, but right at Masutaro. This experience alone presents a clear picture of the antipathy and resentment the white fishermen felt towards Japanese fishermen and the risks they were willing to take when aggravated. Japanese-Canadians also had a lot of pride in their culture, as evident by the large Japanese flag on a Sato settlement boat in figure 9. It is my assumption that this would only have increased the aggravation of white fishermen.

In 1917, Jinsaburo chose to return to Japan with his wife and daughter. After his youngest son drowned in the Fraser River in 1912, he never had the same drive for success as before. When his eldest son Taijiro returned to the island, Jinsaburo finally felt that he could move on.

Nearing the 1920s, residents of the islands strongly felt the effect of reduced fishing licences and stricter regulations. With much less involvement in the fishing industry, they had to resort to other methods of sustaining themselves, such as rice polishing, small-scale

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51 N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 148
52 Ibid, 148
53 Ibid, 150; M. Keen, 17-18
54 N. Jiro and D.K.A. Sulz, 151
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agriculture, and minimal exports of salmon roe. Nita Jiro lists 1924 as the year that many of the residents of the island had left for other work and closer proximity to schools. Douglas Ross, however, concluded from an archaeological dig on the islands that the majority of the community remained for a minimum of two more years, with “[t]he most reasonable date range for the core of the community, based on historical and archaeological sources [being] 1901 to circa 1930.” Though, most descendants agree that a few families remained on the island for twelve years after Ewan Cannery closed in 1930, only leaving once they were forcibly removed and sent to internment camps in 1942.

Ibid, 84; D.E. Ross, 84

D.E. Ross, 98

Ibid, 86
Don and Lion Islands After Japanese Settlement:

A BC Packers appraisal map from 1946 (figure 10), shows that Ewen Cannery was still standing, however, the main building was marked for tear down for salvage lumber. This is confirmed by a 1959 photograph of the islands (figure 11). Another 1946 map shows Lion Island as still having buildings from the Sato settlement, however everything on Don island appears to be either ignored or demolished (figure 12). In 1968, a marine towing company
bought the islands for a sorting facility. Don Island was quickly logged and covered with river sand. By 1979, both islands were cleared of all trees and all buildings were demolished, leaving very little trace of the Japanese villages that had once resided there. In 1995, both islands were purchased by Metro Vancouver and listed as a part of the Fraser Islands Reserve. In 2004, Terry McPhail, the president of Shelter Island Marina directly north of the islands, recommended to the city of Richmond that both islands be renamed to be “Sato Island” and “Oikawa Island” to more accurately represent their historical significance. While

Figure 12
Ewen Cannery. “Map of Ewen Cannery.” Scale Unknown. 1946. 1 map: [s.n.], 61 x 82 cm. City of Richmond Archives, British Columbia Packers Limited Fonds, 2001 34 3-338

58 D.E. Ross, 79-80

59 City of Richmond Report to Committee, 19
the islands were not renamed, a plaque was erected in 2006 during the Centennial Celebration of the Suian Maru.\footnote{Fukawa, Masako, Fukawa, Stan. Susan Maru Centennial Celebration, Oct 12-14, 2006 Directory of Participants with Suian Maru and Miyagi Roots. n.d. Volume 2, Ethic Groups - Japanese. City of Richmond Archives, Richmond, British Columbia, 18 February, 2016, 5}

**Conclusion:**

As represented by this historical narrative, Don and Lion islands from 1901 to the 1920s consisted of a prosperous Japanese fishing community. While they were isolated from surrounding white communities, experiences with racism still paralleled the experiences felt by Japanese-Canadians in the more densely populated area of Steveston, including the wage strike riots of 1901. This community was also heavily affected by the removal of fishing licences from the 1920s and other increased restrictions. I argue that this community was pushed away from Sunbury to settle on Don and Lion Islands in avoidance of further racist attacks on their property, yet racism followed them anyways. Discrimination and animosity was so widely felt by working class whites towards Japanese-Canadians, that distancing themselves was not enough to evade the hatred. Additionally, by isolating themselves, they created a microcosm of Japan that had little integration with the white community and therefore made it appear that they were unassimilable. Much future research could be done on specific events of racism that were felt by the residents of Don and Lion Islands, as well as what happened to them when they left the islands. For now, it is valuable to know the extent of racism towards Japanese-Canadians was felt widely. Widely enough to create and destroy the community on Don and Lion Islands.
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