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Migration Narratives and Material Traces of a Japanese Canadian Heritage Community

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"Migration Narratives and Material Traces of a Japanese Canadian Heritage Community"
Douglas E. Ross, AAA, San Francisco, 2012

Introduction

The process of long distance migration is both a mechanism for forming diasporic communities through displacement and of maintaining them over time, as memories of the migration episode and of things left behind form a basis for collective identification. Diasporic communities and the archaeologists who study them both draw on specific migrations and their physical traces in constructing narratives of the past, but often do so in distinct ways. For my PhD, I focused on a set of migration narratives and the role of a specific set of archaeologically recovered material things in documenting the emergence of collective diasporic identities among first generation Asian migrants at the turn of the twentieth century. Modern Japanese Canadian descendants of those migrants emphasize a different set of migration narratives and material things (plus some of these very same material things interpreted differently) in maintaining a sense of collective identity through subsequent generations. This paper is an examination how diasporic communities are initially formed, how they are maintained over the long term, and how insights from both archaeology and contemporary community-driven activities contribute to understanding this process.

Doctoral Research

My doctoral research examined the everyday lives of Chinese labourers and Japanese fishermen at a turn of the twentieth century salmon cannery along the Fraser River in Richmond, BC, although here I will focus on the Japanese. The Ewen Cannery, which operated between 1885 and 1930, was located on Lion Island and comprised an industrial complex plus segregated housing for a multiethnic labour force, including a Chinese bunkhouse. In 1901, a group of Japanese immigrant fishermen, led by entrepreneur Jinzaburo Oikawa, established a small
community on neighbouring Don Island where they fished for the cannery. As part of his entrepreneurial activity, in 1906 Oikawa smuggled 82 migrants from his home prefecture in Japan to Canada aboard the ship Suian Maru to avoid strict emigration laws. They were arrested upon arrival, but were eventually allowed to stay, with some settling on Don Island. This controversial episode is an important touchstone for members of the local Japanese Canadian community, many of whom are descended from Suian Maru passengers. In 1917, Oikawa and his wife returned to Japan permanently, leaving the island community in the hands of others. It was largely abandoned after the cannery closed in 1930, with the last settlers forced to leave in 1942 following Pearl Harbor.

My research, based on excavations on the island camps in 2005 and 2006, is rooted in the related concepts of transnationalism and diaspora. In particular, I draw on anthropologist Martin Sökefeld's concept of diasporas as imagined transnational communities, dispersed collectivities that distinguish themselves by clear self-imaginations as community using written, verbal, and (I would add) material discourses of shared identity. One of my goals was to explore how migrant communities use everyday material practices to construct and maintain a sense of collective diasporic identity in the face of displacement and associated culture change.

Analysis of excavated assemblages suggests diasporic identities were as much a product of the migration process as of homeland traditions, with everyday consumer goods playing a significant role. We can see this in things like ceramic tablewares and alcoholic beverages, which include the most common elements but lack the diversity found in the homeland. In this sense, very generalized drinking and dining customs were reproduced in overseas contexts as individuals from different families, villages, and regions came together to form communities in response to racist exclusion in the host society. What were retained were objects and behaviours
they shared in common and those with strong traditional roles in social and ritual life back home, especially among groups of adult men (e.g., food, alcohol, smoking, games). Their social roles in the homeland were transferred abroad to become the basis for collective diasporic identities; this explains why such items are found so frequently archaeologically, whereas other imports and regional variants are less common.

In Sökefeld's sense, diasporic identities are social constructions drawing on shared, real world experiences of the homeland and dispersal from it. In this way, distinct collective identities rooted in the homeland can persist with reference to a limited number of iconic symbols drawn from shared cultural tradition, despite considerable cultural transformation in other areas of life. This is what we see at the Japanese camp, where limited categories of imports are accompanied by a range of locally available consumer goods.

A question not addressed by my doctoral research is how (or even whether) subsequent generations maintained a sense of collective identity following the physical dispersal of the original island community between 1930 and 1942.

**Japanese Canadian Descendants and the Suian Maru Centennial**

In 2003, a group of local Japanese Canadians, including descendants of the island community, visited Don Island as part of an effort to reconnect with their past. The group brought shovels with them, and during their visit they conducted amateur excavations in the location of the former Japanese fishing settlement and collected a sizeable quantity of ceramics and glass bottles. These items were deposited at the Japanese Canadian museum in two blue recycling bins with a note attached, and remained unwashed, un-catalogued, and increasingly dusty until I encountered them in 2005 and eventually united (and even cross-mended!) them with my excavated material.
In October 2006, the Suian Maru Centennial Committee of the Japanese Canadian (now Nikkei) National Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby, BC (including many of these very same people) hosted a series of events celebrating the 100th anniversary of the arrival of 82 Japanese migrants aboard the Suian Maru. Centennial events included a panel discussion on the history and archaeology of the island settlement, a museum exhibit on the Suian Maru and its passengers, dedication of a historical plaque adjacent to, and boat tours around, Don and Lion islands, and a formal dinner. Among the participants at these events (that included me) were former island residents and their descendants from across Canada, the US and Japan, including two of Oikawa's great-granddaughters.

The previous year, Oikawa's great-granddaughters in Japan donated a collection of over 200 objects, photos, and documents to the Japanese Canadian museum in Burnaby. Their desire was to contribute to the Japanese descendant community in Canada where their ancestor had made his most memorable contribution. The collection comprises clothing, household items, small tools, and photos brought to Japan by Oikawa and his wife upon their final return to the homeland in 1917. Items include Oikawa's coat, brush-written autobiography, carpet bag and false teeth, along with his wife's clothing. These items were featured in the museum exhibit associated with the 2006 centennial.

In preparation for this centennial, in 2005 the Suian Maru committee had submitted a formal request to the City of Richmond to rename Don and Lion Islands with the names given to them by their early Japanese migrant residents after the two community leaders, Oikawa-jima (Oikawa Island) and Sato-jima (Sato Island). In fact, efforts to rename the islands go back as far as 1997, when a descendant of the original settlers enlisted the aid of the Japanese Canadian museum director and president of the adjacent marina. In their written correspondence, the
museum director emphasized the importance of landmarks as memory devices for preserving history and the marina president noted that renaming would help recognize local Japanese heritage and explain the islands' history.

In 2006, the City recommended supporting this renaming, but noted that for safety reasons the Province (responsible for place names) discourages name changes along inland waterways that appear on navigational charts. Instead, the City funded a commemorative plaque adjacent to the islands and organized a dedication ceremony in time for the centennial celebrations. At the ceremony were 100 visitors from Japan, including descendants, along with representatives of the museum, the City of Richmond, and Oikawa's home city in Japan. The unveiling was followed by planting of two cherry trees representing the communities in both Canada and Japan.

Discussion

Although my work was done at the request of the Japanese Canadian community, and I participated in centennial events and community members aided me with things like archival research, our interpretive approaches to the past remain quite distinct. My research focused on community-wide patterns, collective identification, consumer habits, and cultural persistence and change. For me, excavation was a means of gathering data for later analysis and interpretation, where the process is less symbolically important than the result. (Or is it? Is fieldwork symbolically important as an academic rite of passage and is there something fetishistic about our approach to material things?) Although I relied on peers and mentors for aspects of my research and was involved with the descendant community in the context of the centennial, my work was largely an individual effort.
The Japanese Canadian community's approach, as reflected by the activities of the centennial committee, focused on individual life histories, family relationships, entrepreneurship, and the roles of key figures like Oikawa, including a particular emphasis on the *Suiian Maru* episode. In contrast to my individual approach, their work was at its heart community driven. Their output includes the museum exhibit and other community events, oral histories, memory maps, heritage newsletters, and published genealogically-oriented books on Japanese Canadian fishermen. Although I consulted some of these things, the only real overlap in our use of material things was the donated photos and contents of the "blue bins".

For the Japanese Canadian community, excavation was (and is) used as a way of connecting with the physical remains of the past in the moment. The process is more important than the results, as suggested by the recycling bins. Collecting material remains are therefore important, but more for their symbolic than their information value as part of a larger focus on the islands as places of collective memory that included boat tours, renaming attempts, a plaque, and symbolic cherry trees. According to one community member, "[t]he forced removal of the Nikkei pioneers and their families from the islands in 1942 broke the physical ties of the SUIAN MARU community, never again to be reunited. However, like so many other Nikkei communities forced apart by the internment, the SUIAN MARU community persisted through a network of friendships and family ties that remain strong to this day."

Among my ongoing research plans are to explore how diasporic identification operates in different contexts and in later generations that did not grow up in the homeland. As sociologist Avtar Brah argues, the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different than subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was left behind and by experiences of disruption and displacement. And so, as sociologist Rogers Brubaker asks, how
and to what extent do subsequent generations maintain collective social relationships and boundaries?

Recent scholarship suggests they persist and form the basis for enduring diasporic identities but, whereas first generation migrants can relate directly to memories of a homeland experienced first-hand, for subsequent generations these memories are more fragmented. While the physical homeland is not forgotten by later generations, it ceases to become the primary starting point for diasporic consciousness. Instead, they combine memories of the homeland passed down and reinterpreted from previous generations, along with their own experiences, to continually reconstruct narratives of belonging. Such narratives can be constructed in the context of events like the 2006 centennial celebration and physical/material traces of the past like the museum collections, the islands, and the artifacts still found there. Perhaps together, then, the descendant community and I both have key pieces to the puzzle of how diasporic communities are initially created and maintained over the long term.

Postscript

Earlier this year, the Japanese Canadian museum organized a 70th anniversary bus tour of WWII internment sites in BC and asked me if I knew a local archaeologist in the interior of the province who could help them with some excavation at these sites during their day trip. I respectfully requested that they avoid any digging, and explained the importance of context and properly organized scientific excavations, to which they thankfully agreed.