

By Turns Poetic: Redress as Transformation

For Canadians of Japanese ancestry, the 22 September 1988 redress settlement with the federal government stood as the culmination of a difficult effort to resolve a complex of injustices endured in the 1940s—from mass uprooting to dispossession, internment, and, for many, the ignominy of deportation. That was the historic day when they received the long-awaited acknowledgement of the injustices, along with individual and community compensation, pardons for those wrongfully convicted, citizenship for those who had been deported as well as their children, and a public foundation to fight racism, eventually established as the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

My account of this event in *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* situated the redress movement in the multi-faceted interplay between the national politics of citizenship with its democratic values and the subjective spaces of memory and desire that constituted the history of Japanese Canadians (hereafter JCs), myself included, across several generations.¹ The heart-wrenching consequences of dispersal from our West Coast homes saturated the nooks and crannies of my childhood, feeding my imagination with stories of tearful separations and losses, not only of properties and belongings, but more deeply of dignity and well-being. Once we were branded “Enemy Alien” and reduced to nothing more than “of the Japanese race,” a phrase devised by the government, we were transfigured as scapegoats who would bear the mark of the enemy.^{2,3}

As far back as memory takes me, this mark was attached to the body, acting very much like a hovering shadow, *there* even when it was not apparent in consciousness. The shadow spread over the broader imagination of the events that dismantled the social, cultural, and economic fabric of ties *back* to the family homes in Haney, British Columbia, the small town in the lush, fruit-laden region of the Fraser Valley. In my young imagination, my family’s expulsion from the West Coast meant that my own birth during their confinement in the site of relocation, Ste. Agathe, a small French-Canadian town not far from Winnipeg, must constitute a form of exile. Such a condition spawned an often-aching sense of absences—of a much richer and grounded home site *back there*, of closely knit community ties *back there*, and of a

nurturing geography *back there*. Always *back there*. These absences were made tangible in memories of lost family photo albums, stored in a trunk with other memorabilia to be saved by neighbours, only to be sold off for a pittance at one of many government-sponsored public auctions. The few photos that were kept for the trip across country, as mementoes of what was left behind, became haunting icons of pre-internment life. It was the aura of estrangement from the past that shaped my childhood memory of the inner streets of Winnipeg where I grew up in the postwar years. Nowhere was this more palpable, at least to my young ears, than in one story, a bona fide ghost story, my father, Kazuo, told me many times.

Kazuo was born in BC in 1906 and grew up in *Nihon machi* (or “Japantown”), the area around Powell and Alexander Streets in Vancouver, where the majority of JCs in the city lived prior to the mass uprooting. One dark and stormy summer evening—yes, it had to be dark and stormy—a friend from the Fraser Valley, who couldn’t return home, decided to stay at a Powell Street hotel. All the rooms were booked except for the one that was normally left empty. Rumours circulated in the community that it was haunted by a young woman murdered by her lover. Not superstitious at all, in fact, scoffing at the belief in ghosts, my father’s friend rented the room. Well, not unexpectedly, since this was a ghost story, he was awakened in the middle of the night by moaning sounds. There in the smoked glass of the door appeared the figure of a woman with long black hair crying out to him for help. When the figure disappeared, he fled the hotel. The kicker, my father said, and this has always stuck with me, the ghost disappeared with the community when *Nihon machi* was dismantled in the mass uprooting in 1942. The story stuck with me so closely that my own version of it came to me in a poem, first written in the early 1970s. It invoked the figure of an old woman who used to wander the streets and back lanes of our central Winnipeg neighbourhood. She constantly talked to herself in Japanese, and in her rambling speech she was always hunting for signposts of her lost Vancouver community. Like the ghost in my father’s story, she became a manifestation of the internal effects of internment. I had recently moved to Vancouver, and as I wandered the Powell Street area, as I often did at the time, she appeared in my imagination, for me a premonition of the redress movement on the horizon—a movement that, in many ways, was driven by the desire to mediate a past haunted by the unacknowledged traumas of internment.

It is not surprising that, at first, many JCs shied away from public meetings on redress. There was the anxiety of being visible, of being perceived as other, and even of a racist backlash. Redress awakened memories of a past that had not been put to rest. When their surfaces were rubbed, even in casual



Photo: National Archives of Canada C47398

conversations, individuals relived the scenes of uprooting, confinement, and suffering; once again unable to mediate the violations they had endured. They had learned that to be JC was to inhabit a consciousness that was divided by an internal contradiction: while “Canadian” signified the security of citizenship rights, national belonging, and democratic forms of governance, “Japanese” conjured the ghost of Enemy Alien, an identity that had condemned them to the dark underside of the nation—where they had been deprived of voice and the power to defend themselves.

Although government authorities, including the RCMP and the military, knew from evidence that the mass uprooting was not a necessary security measure, and that it reflected a capitulation to racist pressures in BC, decades had passed and nothing official had been done to acknowledge the injustices. Without such public recognition, JCs continued to bear the stigma of being identified as Enemy Alien. Having undergone the pressure to assimilate—to become the model minority—they still carried deep inside them the emotional and psychic haunting of internment. But how to move from here to there—from the condition of haunting to the House of Commons, the inner sanctum of the nation’s power?

By using the *War Measures Act* to intern JCs, the government could argue as administrators and politicians did that it acted legally. Consequently, when the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) initiated redress as a political movement, they based their call for justice on the abuse of the *War Measures Act*. In other words, the government’s policies may have been legal, but the effects of these policies—mass uprooting, dispossession, forced dispersal, and deportation—far exceeded the norms of fairness and due process under the law. The violation of citizenship rights on the basis of ascribed racial origin—being categorized as “of the Japanese race”—could not be defended as a necessary security measure.

Designing the call for redress would involve urgent questions of narrative, voice, and position, all the elements that required a careful attention to the language of redress. Shaping these elements took over two years, as the NAJC worked to bring together a fragmented group of JCs, who lacked knowledge of political movements and who had to struggle against the temptation to remain silent. But more, the role of “victim,” often raised in the context of redress, especially by the national media, was rejected by many JCs. While they held the government accountable for their losses, they remained proud of the ways in which they managed to rebuild their lives and to maintain their loyalty to the Canadian nation. Their belief in democratic principles explains why the language of citizenship struck such a resonant chord for them, confirming

as it did their efforts over many decades to be responsible Canadians. The abrogation of their rights, especially for the *Nisei* (second generation) in Canada, signified the ultimate insult to their faith in democracy. This attitude became a critical component of the case for redress presented in the NAJC's 1984 brief to the federal government. Instead of adopting the voice of victims who sought compensation for losses and damages (the language of law), the brief focused primarily on the democratic system itself. When the government wrongfully interned JCs, it argued, the principles of democratic governance were "betrayed" in its actions. *Democracy Betrayed: The Case for Redress*, the key document that propelled the NAJC's redress movement into the area of national politics, was released in Ottawa on 21 November 1984.⁴

The redress settlement may have been a political end to a long struggle for justice, but it was also the very medium through which a painful past could be transformed. Redress dominated my daily life for nearly a decade, drawing me into a relentless schedule of meetings, talks, lobbying sessions, and trips all over Canada. At times, the endless attention it required was all so overwhelming that the threat of pessimism and failure—of a collapse into cynicism—was never far away. But deeply immersed in the struggle, perhaps because of this, there were the more poetic moments—those astonishing moments when a turn would occur to reveal one of the signposts on what eventually became an unfolding path towards the settlement. My old friend, the poet bpNichol, who died suddenly and unexpectedly just days following the redress settlement, often talked about the need to "trust in the process" to get us through a creative negotiation with form. Maintaining a belief in redress called for this same trust in process and a respect for what it would conjure at the most unexpected occasions. I'll draw from three poetic moments of many; these are ones of extraordinary significance because they occurred during the summer of 1984, a period when the national redress movement took on a shape of its own.

One

The summer of 1984 was a volatile time for redress. An all-party government report on the effects of racism in Canada called *Equality Now!* had been issued with a recommendation in favour of a redress settlement, but the Liberal government of Pierre Eliot Trudeau, and especially Trudeau himself, aggressively ruled out both an official acknowledgement of injustices and direct compensation.⁵ The most his government would offer was a statement of "regret" for what happened to JCs and a few million dollars to set up a vaguely described institute to commemorate their internment. At this same time, the talk of redress was creating waves within JC communities, and debates suddenly became strained in the face of Trudeau's rejection.



Photo: Probably Tak Toyota, National Archives of Canada C46355



Photo: Leonard Frank, Japanese Canadian National Museum, Vancouver

Those of us trying to mount a redress movement in Vancouver decided to hold a public event on the evening before the large Powell Street Festival in Vancouver, the annual JC celebration held in Oppenheimer Park, set in the heart of what was once *Nihon machi*. Because of the reluctance of many senior JCs to be visible in public events, we knew that it was important to feature prominent speakers. Luckily, three speakers with large public profiles quickly said yes: David Suzuki, CBC broadcaster and scientist, Joy Kogawa, author of *Obasan*,⁶ and Ann Sunahara, author of *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War*.⁷ The only voice missing, at least from our perspective, was that of Tom Shoyama, one of the most well-regarded Nisei in the community. Shoyama had been the editor of *The New Canadian*, the only community newspaper allowed to publish during the internment.⁸ In the postwar years, Shoyama garnered a national reputation as an influential organizer with Tommy Douglas's CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federal) party in Saskatchewan, and when he moved into federal politics he rose to become the deputy minister of finance under Liberal MP John Turner. Rumours were that Shoyama wanted to distance himself from the redress issue and, even more critically, did not support individual compensation. He had not responded to our invitation to speak at the event.

I was in Ottawa, more specifically at the Ottawa airport, on my way back home after a redress meeting, and worrying because we had not heard from Shoyama. If only I could talk with him face to face, so I thought, I could convince him to attend. As a highly respected Nisei, there was no doubt in my mind that his appearance would encourage many of his generation to attend. I had my head down, jotting down some notes for the conference, but then I glanced up and across the large waiting area of the airport. There, seated in the distance was a slender built man with a gentle face who looked like a JC. Tom Shoyama, I thought, could it be him? Could it actually be the one person I wanted to speak to at this very moment? I walked over to him and asked, "Tom Shoyama?" He smiled and nodded yes. After introducing myself as a coordinator for the conference, he politely said no thanks to the invitation. As a last resort I proposed that we sit together for the short flight from Ottawa to Toronto, his destination, and that if he felt the same way when we landed, I would respect his decision. He agreed, and luckily the flight was not full so we were able to sit beside each other. By the time we landed, he agreed to be our keynote speaker—and then off he went for another meeting of the Macdonald Commission on the economy, of which he was a member. At the public event, which filled to capacity (and more) inside the old Japanese Language Hall on Alexander Street, Shoyama publicly came out in favour of redress.

Two

That same summer the national political world was rife with anticipation, as John Turner replaced Trudeau, and all of the federal parties began campaigning for the September election. The NAJC was preparing a redress brief to submit to the political party that formed the next government. I was part of the brief writing committee, and given my background in academic research, I was asked to visit the national archives in Ottawa to make sure that our references to historic documents were accurate.

On the plane to Ottawa, I was busily working my way through one of the numerous drafts, noting which documents had to be located in which of the enormous number of files on internment that were housed at the national archives. While doing so, I was drawn from time to time into a conversation with a passenger next to me. As he picked up bits and pieces of what I was planning to do in Ottawa, he became more and more curious about the notion of redress and the brief we intended to submit to the federal government. He queried me about the mass uprooting, the destruction of the West Coast communities, and the confiscation of properties and belongings. He had grown up in the Maritimes, he said, and had little knowledge of the internment, but he expressed enthusiasm for the current decision to redress that past. I was in the process of pondering, yet again, the power of one BC politician in the cabinet of the Liberal government of Mackenzie King. Ian Mackenzie, a Vancouver MP, was perhaps the most vocal anti-JC voice in politics at the time, and his animosity evoked fear and anxiety among all JCs. Mackenzie campaigned stridently to expel them from BC, and they knew that in Ottawa his influence, as chair of the cabinet committee deciding on what to do about their presence on the west coast, had led directly to their mass uprooting and dispossession. It was Mackenzie whose campaign slogan was “Not a single Japanese from the Rockies to the sea!”⁹ We cited his slogan in our redress brief, one of the most memorable of racist statements that were etched in the memories of JCs. Landing time came, and as we said our goodbyes my fellow passenger said that he would be watching for news about the progress of the movement. When we shook hands, he said his name was Ian Mackenzie—and then, as quickly as a moment passing, he blended into the crowd of departing passengers.

Three

On the last day of the parliamentary session, just before the campaign period began, Opposition leader Brian Mulroney challenged Trudeau’s dismissal of redress. His voice rising in signs of anger, Trudeau once again declared that his government was not accountable for the past injustices endured by JCs.



Photo: Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, Toronto

It was then that Mulroney declared that a Conservative government would “compensate” JCs, a statement that would be used in the four years ahead during which the NAJC would lobby his government. No one then expected the powerful Liberal machinery under Trudeau’s leadership to crumble, but crumble it did by the time that John Turner took over as leader. In his brief public statements on redress, Turner revealed some distancing from the inflexible stance of Trudeau, though he did not make any commitments towards redress.

Turner’s popularity was so unstable that his Liberal team decided that he should not take the chance of losing in Ontario and, instead, should run in the safest Liberal riding in Vancouver, the Point Grey riding of Quadra. The NAJC had not been able get close to Turner, but I thought that if we could simply talk to him we could get him to say his Liberal government would reconsider the question of redress. This is as much as we could expect, given Trudeau’s response on behalf of the Liberal government.

I was sitting in our kitchen in our West 15th residence wondering what kind of strategy might work when I glanced outside to see a large bus coming slowly down the street. No doubt about it, the logo on its side boldly announced that the Liberal campaign was in full throttle in our neighbourhood. I quickly called my wife, Slavia, and my two kids, Waylen and Elisse, and then, just adjacent to our house, there was the man himself, John Turner, stepping down from the bus. I grabbed my camera and we all ran outside.

Looking somewhat haggard and drained of energy, Turner still remained upbeat, acting the role of the consummate politician. I thanked him half-jokingly for taking the time to visit me to talk about redress, and he smiled back in good humour. Surprisingly he seemed familiar with my work on the issue. We would wish him well, I said, if he would promise to keep the issue open after the election. He nodded, acknowledging that the issue was important to him, which for me was a positive-enough reply that the NAJC could use to continue lobbying for him in Ottawa. Turner would be elected in Quadra, but his party would suffer a devastating blow in the elections, losing 107 seats—from 147 to 40—in the House of Commons to a triumphant Conservative party. In the years ahead, when he assumed the role of Opposition leader, to his credit Turner consistently maintained support for a negotiated settlement with the NAJC. We marked the auspicious moment the Prime Minister paid us a visit by having his aide take a family photo with him—and then, as quickly as he arrived, off he went down the street with his liberal entourage.

Departures as Arrivals: Four Photo Collages

Being haunted by a history of absences, if left unmediated, can become an arrested condition of consciousness. The past takes on an overwhelming power and places a barrier between the imagination and the immediacy of the present. In the process, the future loses its potential fecundity and comes to reproduce the effects of absence. Redress was played out in the arena of public opinion and political dynamics, but it was always more than the settlement achieved on 22 September 1988, as large as that event was for JCs and for Canadians who supported them. What I have called the poetic moments offered a transitional turn from a haunted past to a present with the potential to imagine a more generative future. It was as if the signposts of redress were evidence that much larger forces of justice were at work—that redress even confirmed a spiritual energy that enabled new creative forms to emerge. For me, so much of the haunted past that was part of my childhood was invoked in the photos—of the figures departing for an unknown future—that have appeared many times over in various accounts of the internment. These photos acted as touchstones for me during the redress movement. The haunting of dislocation is manifest in their faces, even as they look into the camera's eye and make the most out of what is clearly a catastrophic personal and collective moment. I choose four of these photos for transformation in the accompanying collages. In these visual images, which also incorporate current photos of local sites—once local to prewar JCs—I have sought to imagine the event of departures as arrivals on the shores of a post-redress phase of transformation. These are not shores where the difficulties of encountering our current commodity culture are erased but spaces in which its complex complicities are imagined beyond the reproduction of a framed history *back there*.

Notes

- 1 Miki, Roy (2004). *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice*. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books.
- 2 Wood, S.T. (1942, February 7). A Public Notice by the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Addressed to Male Enemy Aliens. Retrieved 2 November 2010 from: http://www.najc.ca/thenandnow/experiencec_firstorder.php
- 3 St. Laurent, L.S. (1942, February 26). A public notice by the Minister of Justice addressed to all persons of Japanese racial origin. Retrieved 2 November 2010 from: <http://www.najc.ca/thenandnow/>
- 4 National Association of Japanese Canadians (1984). *Democracy Betrayed: The Case for Redress*. A Submission to the Government of Canada on the Violation of Rights and Freedoms of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II. Winnipeg, MB: National Association of Japanese Canadians.
- 4 Special Committee on Visible Minorities in Canadian Society (1984). *Equality Now! Report of the Special Committee on Visible Minorities in Canadian Society*. Ottawa, ON: Queen's Printer. Bob Daudlin served as Committee Chair.
- 5 Kogawa, Joy (1981). *Obasan*. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada.
- 6 Sunahara, A. Gomer (2000). *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War*. (2nd ed.). Ottawa, ON: Ann Gomer Sunahara. Retrieved 26 November 2010 from: <http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.ca/index.html>
- 7 *The New Canadian*, an English-only newspaper that was billed as the voice of the Nisei, began publishing in 1938 in Vancouver. Tom Shoyama took over as English editor from the original editor, Peter Higashi, in 1939.
- 8 Dyer, J. (1944, September 19). 'No Japs for B.C.' Mackenzie's pledge. *The Vancouver Sun*: 19.

