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## “Politics of memory” Interview with Kirsten Emiko McAllister

COLLECTED BY FRANÇOISE SULES AND CHRISTOPHE PREMAT

**Abstract:** For communities who have been the target of political violence, the damaging after-effects can haunt what remains of their families, their communities, and the societies in which they live. This interview with Kirsten Emiko McAllister conducted at the *Författarhuset* in Stockholm in November 2009 deals with the case of Japanese Canadians in the province of British Columbia. The goal of the interview is to present the work of Kirsten Emiko McAllister: facing painful memories can help to rebuild social and intergenerational links.

**Keywords:** Memory – Japanese Canadians – recognition – memorial

**Résumé:** Pour des communautés qui ont été la cible de violences politiques, les effets traumatiques peuvent se ressentir au fil des générations. Cet entretien avec Kirsten Emiko McAllister s'est déroulé à la maison des écrivains de Stockholm en novembre 2009. Il porte sur le cas des Canadiens-Japonais de la province de la Colombie Britannique. L'objectif est de présenter les travaux scientifiques de Kirsten Emiko McAllister et sa thèse principale : l'affrontement de la mémoire douloureuse contribue à restaurer des liens sociaux et intergénérationnels.

**Mots-clés:** Mémoire – Canadiens-Japonais – reconnaissance – mémorial

# “Politics of memory”

## Interview with Kirsten Emiko McAllister<sup>1</sup>

Collected by Françoise Sule and Christophe Premat<sup>2</sup>

**Christophe Premat:** I would like to start by asking you to explain how your background relates to your research on Japanese Canadians.

**Kirsten McAllister:** My mother’s family is Japanese Canadian. Even though Japanese migrants began arriving in the province of British Columbia long ago in the late 1800s, like other Asian migrants they were never welcome in the province. British Columbia originally was regarded as a “British” colony so while Asian migrants were an important part of the labour force along with Indigenous people; they were seen as threats to this young colonial society.

As a child growing up in this province, it was as if this history still had an uneasy presence in the social landscape. At the same time, both sides of my family, the Nakashimas and the McAllisters/McQuarries, have been in the province of British Columbia for around four generations, so generations of family stories locate me there. But still, it was as though there was something unspoken, something that as a child I could not articulate.

When I was growing up, while I had family stories, there was very little written on the history of Japanese Canadians. Japanese Canadian activists only started writing about the history in the late 1970s and early 1980s. What they discovered about the past, became the basis for a movement to seek redress from the Canadian government for violating the rights of over 22,000 Japanese Canadians. Let me give a summary of this history. The activists conducted research that

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documented how in 1942 the Canadian government gave into pressure from anti-Asian leagues and politicians in British Columbia and stripped the rights of all people of “Japanese racial descent”, most of whom were Canadian citizens. The government liquidated their properties, sold their belongings, and began a plan to permanently remove them from the province. The first phase of the removal included internment camps, where women and children were sent. Initially men were sent to road camps but they began to protest, worried about the fate of their families. After a year, the government reunited families fearing that the protest by this small group would spread to other Japanese Canadians who had more or less cooperated with the government. Most Japanese Canadians believed officials when they assured them that their removal was “temporary” and the government was looking out for their safety and well-being. The government also sent many families to work as labourers on sugar beet farms in the prairies where most had to endure severe weather, poor living conditions and hard labour. In 1945 when the war ended, Prime Minister MacKenzie King’s cabinet did not permit Japanese Canadians to return to their homes in British Columbia. Instead, the plan was to ship them to Japan, even though it was a foreign country to most Japanese Canadians since most had been born in Canada. By that time, civil rights groups, including unions and churches, challenged the government and the government finally conceded and allowed Japanese Canadians to stay if they agreed to be dispersed across Canada. The other option was to be shipped to Japan, which was the fate of 4,000 Japanese Canadians. It was not until 1949 when all the restrictions on Japanese Canadians were lifted.

Since very few Japanese Canadians talked about this painful and humiliating series of events, many third generation Japanese Canadians didn’t know that their parents had been interned by the government. And it was not until the 1980s during the height of the redress movement that the Canadian public began to learn about this history. In 1988 the National Association of Japanese Canadians negotiated a redress settlement with the Canadian government, which Roy Miki writes about in his 2004 book, *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Redress*, which is published by Raincoast Books.

**Françoise Sule:** So what was it that compelled you to research this history?

**K.M.:** As a child I knew about the camps because my mother’s family talked about where they were interned in east Lillooet. But they always referred to Lillooet as a story-book place somewhere in the mountains. My uncles and aunts and mother had many stories and they gave me a strong impression of the landscape: dry hot terrain in the summer and freezing cold in the winter with the mountains and pine trees. I remember many stories about the Fraser River, a massive river that churns through this region. It is one of the most important salmon rivers in the

province. And the rich agricultural land south of Vancouver, a massive area that we call the lower mainland, is basically built on the Fraser River delta. There is one story about my grandfather fishing in the river. Internees were not permitted to fish. But one night he threw in a rope with some meat on a large hook and the next day he discovered he had caught a sturgeon. These fish are very large, up to six metres in length. They had a difficult time hauling the fish out of the river but it meant that the camp had a welcome supply of fish.

Unlike many Japanese Canadian families, my mother's family went to a "self-support" camp. Like all the camps, Lillooet was located outside of the 100-mile "protected zone" along the Pacific coast in an isolated mountain valley, but as a self-support camp, internees used their own finances to set up the camp. It is important to note, though, that all internees ended up paying for the costs of their internment. The government used the funds from their liquidated property to pay for the costs of internment and charged them rent for the shacks in the government-run camps. The difference was, that in the self-support camps, internees had a few less restrictions since they had to arrange for food supplies and so on, but like all Japanese Canadians, their rights were stripped, they were categorised as "enemy aliens" and the government attempted to forcibly remove them from the province in 1945.

Of course I did not know all these details as a child. I knew that my mother's family lost their home in Vancouver and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police regularly inspected their home and monitored their activities – but mostly, I remember the stories. My mother's family also had photographs from the camp, even though cameras were banned. The photo albums were in my grandmother's house. As a child I was fascinated by the photographs because in the photograph albums there were pictures of the camps and they were like little windows into a place that existed only in stories. The photographs were integrated into the family album so they seemed to be part of a continuous history of my mother's family from when my great grandparents first came to Canada, when they lived on Powell Street in Vancouver, which is the location of one of the pre-war nihonmachi (Japanese Canadian neighbourhoods) to when they went to this other place.

**F.S.:** That other place, could it be described as a summer camp?

**K.M.:** No, not quite.

**F.S.:** How did your family talk about the camp? Only as in stories?

**K.M.:** It was as if they talked about the camp in terms that were safe for a child. Mind you, my uncles and aunts and my mother were only children when they were interned. There were eight children in the family. Each had a very different view of the camp – and this is how I learned

that people's experience of the same events can be different based on factors like sibling order and age. I also learned how stories construct – give meaning to -- events in different ways, sometimes to protect their listeners as well as the speakers from the humiliation and pain. For instance, in my 20s, when I worked for the Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association's oral history project and began interviewing people, in contrast to my mother, my aunt talked about how terrible the internment was. My mother, who was around 10 when she was sent to the camp, approached their situation in a determined matter-of-fact way and took on many responsibilities to help support the family. But she was only a child at the time and I don't know all she had to endure in the camp or when she left at age 18. She won a scholarship to go back to Vancouver to the University of British Columbia. She went alone to the coast, without her family, against her father's will, to the city, which I have heard from others, was still full of terrible racist tensions. That said, she was interested in reading about the camps. I remember that my mother bought some of the earliest books written by Japanese Canadian authors about the camps, including Ken Adachi's 1976 *The Enemy That Never Was* and Shizuke Takashima's 1971 picture book, *A Child in a Prison Camp*.

**C.P.:** Did other families talk about their experiences in the internment camps?

**K.M.:** Most Japanese Canadians didn't discuss the internment camps; it was too humiliating and painful. And it was not until later when I was at University that I learned from books written by activists that Japanese Canadian's rights had been stripped – and about the government's plan to remove everyone from Canadian territory.

**F.S.:** In particular, your research looks at the memory of Japanese Canadians. Why are you interested in memory?

**K.M.:** For my MA thesis, I wrote about the video-documentary following a group of Japanese Canadians who had been interned in the Lemon Creek camp. The video, "With Our Own Eyes" (1991) was directed by Ruby Truly. She is a Japanese-Hawaiian video artist and theatre worker who was living in the one of the valleys where there had been many internment camps. Her husband escaped the draft in the US in the 1970s and they, along with other young anti-war Americans went back to the land in this region. I think it was Naomi Shikaze who asked her to do a documentary for the Japanese Canadians going back to visit the site where they were incarcerated. On the one hand, it was like a pilgrimage and, on the other hand, it was a reunion of people who had been interned in the Lemon Creek camp. Because of my experience working in the Japanese Canadian community with oral histories, Truly asked me to be the sound person.

Truly was very adamant about the way the documentary was going to be made. It wasn't going to be a regular documentary...a sensational exposé. We had to be respectful of the participants and to be unobtrusive. She wanted to follow their return to the site of internment, through the stories and movements. It was not scripted; whatever we recorded was what happened on the journey, including participants who came to us to share their stories on camera. I was in my 20s at the time and simply felt obliged to help with the project – these elderly people were the same age as my aunts and uncles.

We went back to the sites of the internment camps in the interior of the province, including Lemon Creek. I had been to the site of my mother's camp very briefly as a child. I had obviously past through many areas where there were other camps on family holidays and when I worked as a treeplanter but I had never really visited the sites. Most are now empty fields in the bottom of valleys or economically depressed mining and lumber towns with very small populations in very isolated areas. Going back to these sites with these elderly people changed the landscape of the province for me. The elders introduced me to this other landscape of violence.

**C. P.:** Is this history related to what happened to Indigenous people in Canada?

**K.M.:** Yes, the other history, the founding history of the province as well as the rest of Canada is of course the colonization of the territories of Indigenous people. In BC they did not sign treaties with the BC government – so today, we continue to occupy unceded territory. The presence of Indigenous people in BC and their removal from their territories, the forced assimilation programs with residential schools and foster child programs is an even more violent history that haunts the landscape of the province and continues to have damaging effects today. Finally, there is now a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as an Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

**F.S.:** Can you talk about your interest in memory?

**K.M.:** I became interested in memory especially after working on and writing about Ruby Truly's video-documentary. The realisation that the province had different landscapes of memory, many of which were buried, drew me towards the problem of memory. Excavating these histories for me, as someone who grew up in this province, allowed me to make sense of an unspoken tension – an anxiety about the presence of Japanese Canadians in this province, along with Indigenous people and other migrants – troubled memories in the bodies and landscapes of the province that were disturbing and powerful – memories that were not written about in the history books available when I was a child in school.

**C.P.:** Since you are implicated in the project – does that make it difficult to research?

**K.M.:** It is very intense. But it is much like the research by feminists on women's history these researchers are writing about a legacy of the injustices they have in a sense inherited since their lives continue to be shaped by the consequences of these discriminatory structures and ideologies. The next project I conducted was even more intense because I was working with the Kyowakai Society of New Denver, a group of elderly people who had built a memorial, the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, to mark the site where they had been interned during the war, which the government has just designated as a national historic site. When everyone else was forced to leave the province in 1945, the government put a group of 900 in the New Denver camp. The Department of Labour categorized these people as unable to support themselves because of health ailments, their age and so on. The government reasoned that they would "die off" in ten to twenty years and, as the archival documents state, would "no longer be a problem". But they didn't die off. They integrated into village life and made important contributions, for example in education and local politics. They worked in logging, as seamstresses, set up kindergartens, their children married long-time residents and together with the other residents they transformed this little village into a community where they have lived for the last seventy years. All restrictions were lifted on Japanese Canadians in 1949 – this is also when they were given the right to vote. The Kyowakai Society negotiated with the government to deed the land and shacks to the remaining 300 Japanese Canadians in the 1950s. Over the years, they managed to renovate the 14 foot by 28 foot 3-room shacks, adding rooms, plumbing and lighting. They insulated the walls and covered the floors. They turned the shacks into modest yet very comfortable homes with flower and vegetable gardens. To mark their history, in 1994 they built a memorial, the Nikkei Internment Memorial. The memorial makes it clear that this isn't just a pretty little town in British Columbia, but was actually the site of incarceration. It is both an education centre for human rights violations and also a memorial where people can return with their memories, their sorrows, their guilt and their hopes.

**F.S.:** Were there any challenges you faced in your research?

**K.M.:** The memorial was controversial. There were tensions between the contractors who designed the memorial more as what some Japanese Canadians saw as a tourist site that avoided making statements about the violation of human rights. The Japanese Canadian community in New Denver had envisioned more of a memorial and human rights education. I was amazed by how many people came, not just Japanese Canadians, but non-Japanese Canadians, looking for a way to connect with the past, deal with unresolved feelings of guilt or sadness. There are about

4,000 people that visit the centre each year. Initially I did not want to research the memorial because of all the tensions. It was challenging to do research in this context, but conflicts are common in any project, and especially projects dealing with contentious histories. I found one of the most difficult aspects of the project – the writing. I had to find a way to take the elders' stories and put them into a language that didn't treat them just as data. The language of sociology and other social scientific disciplines doesn't really grant research subjects much of a voice or acknowledge their wisdom and insight. So I had a hard time writing the thesis as well as my book manuscript because in the language of sociology the elders were simply victims of racism. I finally finished the book, which UBC Press published this year under the title, *Terrain of Memory: A Japanese Canadian Memory Project*.

Going back to what I was saying before, of course racism is part of the picture, it's an obvious fact, but what was really important for me was how the elders transformed the internment camp, which was part of a systematic plan to erase their presence from British Columbia. They transformed the internment camp into place where they could live together with the other residents and then into a memorial site for other Japanese Canadians and non-Japanese Canadians to have a place to mourn what has been lost as well as learn about the history of internment camps in Canada.

**C.P.:** The work you presented here in Stockholm was on photographs of the camps, why are you interested in photographs?

**K.M.:** The photographs I examine were all taken by Japanese Canadian internees in the camps. They weren't allowed to have cameras or take photographs so the images were illicitly taken. Before I began researching the photographs, I had thought the photos would show me everything Japanese Canadians found hard to talk about: harsh living conditions in the camps and all the people and events that are never discussed. But as I've written elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> what was interesting is that these photos can easily be mistaken for photographs of small rural towns in Canada with "rustic" housing set amidst wild mountains and lakes. Of course people in the camps were not going to record their family and friends struggling emotionally and materially – that would humiliate these people further. Instead, what the photographs tell us is how internees

<sup>3</sup> McAllister, Kirsten Emiko (2010) "Archival Memories" in James Opp and John Walsh (eds) *Remembering Place*, Vancouver: UBC Press; McAllister, Kirsten (2006); McAllister, Kirsten (2006) "Stories of Escape: Family Photographs from World War Two Internment Camps" in Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister (eds) *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 81-110; McAllister, Kirsten (2006) "Photographs of Japanese Canadian Internment Camps: Mourning Loss and Invoking a Future," *Visual Studies*, 21:2, pp. 133-156; McAllister, Kirsten (2002) "Held Captive: the Postcard and the Icon" in Jerald Zaslove and Martha Langford (eds) *West Coast Line: Writing, Images and Criticism: Special Issue on Photography Autobiographical Memory and Cultural Literacy* 35:1, pp. 20-40.

continued to use photography as a social practice, to record events where people gathered together to try to forget their troubles or in some cases, worked together to meet the needs of the internees. It was a way to try to keep reproducing what remained of community life in the camps. At the same time, you can read into the photographs -- especially when you see the photographs in the context of other camp photographs that have been donated to the Japanese Canadian National Museum -- how the internees used photographs to attempt to visualise the hostile terrain where Japanese Canadians were held captive in their own terms, to try to make them into habitable places infused where there was some sense of stability and a sense of a future in a very uncertain, frightening situation. For example, you can see how they attempted to use group photographs to affirm a sense of community while the government continued with its programs to break apart their social and cultural institutions and cut social bonds between individuals and groups.

**F.S.:** Does your latest research focus on Japanese Canadian internment camps?

**K.M.:** My current research has moved away from Japanese Canadian history for now. I wanted to explore contemporary issues of displacement and political persecution. I needed to move outside the space of the internment camps, it was too much to stay in that space of internment. I was beginning to feel imprisoned in the past, in a particular phase of modernity with its programs of racial erasure and population control. So I am just in the last stages of my field research on asylum seekers seeking refuge in Glasgow. Many people ask, "why Glasgow?" Well, in addition to my ties to the UK (I was based there for a SSHRC-funded postdoctoral research project) on the one hand, I was intrigued by Scotland's progressive stance on asylum – which contrasts the Home Office and the Fortress Europe mentality. The Scottish government is very clear about integrating people seeking asylum into Scottish society as soon as they arrive, rather than only after they've received refugee status. So I am looking at the role of the arts in this process of re-imagining and re-envisioning what is Scotland through participatory theatre, photography and other projects. Eventually, I am sure I will circulate back to questions of Asian Canadian displacement and memory. But I also wanted, in a sense, to be displaced myself and sort out what it meant to be in a new context where I had little direct history, where I had to find a way to write about a city – Glasgow – undergoing multiple cultural, class-based and political negotiations rather than focusing on a group whose history I directly shared through my family. There are new connections that I have had to make in the project that are not based on family ties, a shared history of persecution or cultural heritage. For me, coming from a community-based critical research background this is really a challenge. Since I am new to these communities, I am

aware that I can easily misrepresent and in fact misconstrue them in ways that have damaging effects. I am always wondering about the impact of my own research, whether I am being intrusive, making incorrect assumptions, misrepresenting issues and people. Yet at the same time, research that looks at how to move across cultural and political interfaces where there are power differentials, while challenging, I believe is a necessity in this new era of globalisation.

*Interview transcribed by Annelie Sule*