

Reimagining Japanese Prostitutes: The Photographs in *Devil Caves in Canada* (1910)
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Hi, I'm Asato Ikeda, Associate Professor of Art History at Fordham University in NYC, which is located on Lenapehoking, the homelands of the Lenape people. In this video, I will discuss photographs of Japanese prostitutes published in *Kanada no Makutsu* (*Devil Caves in Canada*).

A Japanese woman wearing a white blouse and a pompadour hairstyle looks straight into the camera in a half-length oval photograph. Dressed in formal attire for the occasion, she looks respectful and dignified, but her facial expression is ambivalent and rather enigmatic. Is she nervous in front of the camera? Is she sad? Happy? Or is it more complex than that? This is one of the photographs of eight women who allegedly engaged in the “ugly profession” (*shūgyō*) of prostitution in the interior of British Columbia, according to the book *Devil Caves in Canada* (*Kanada no makutsu*). The book was published in Vancouver in 1910 to publicly shame these “fallen women” and “devils and monsters” into leaving Canada.

Devil Caves in Canada deserves serious scholarly attention for a few reasons. The existence of female sex workers in the early phase of Japanese immigration has been considered taboo and written out of the conventional narrative of Japanese Canadian history, which tends to espouse Japanese immigrants as a model minority. *Devil Caves in Canada*, however, reveals that Japanese residents were diverse in their socio-economic backgrounds and professions, and their community was not free from internal conflict. Furthermore, I would argue that the photographs give us unique visual access to the prostitutes that allow us to circumvent, challenge, and refute the book's characterization of them as “fallen women” or “devils and monsters” and instead to contemplate more sympathetically on the lives and perspectives of these women who still remain voiceless.

The lack of information about the photographs inevitably makes our reading speculative, but at the same time it also gives us room to develop multiple scenarios. In this presentation, due to time constraints, I will introduce two different readings of them : one that focuses on the prostitutes' aspiration and belonging and the other that considers the potential subjugation of the women.

The sex industry in Japan grew significantly in the early nineteenth century, and that trend continued into the Meiji period. In the early Taisho period, about 1 in 31 young Japanese women worked in the sex industry. In 1910, approximately 19,000 Japanese women were working as prostitutes outside the country. In the same year, more than one thousand female entertainers, ranging from prostitutes to performers to barmaids—whose professional boundaries were often blurred—were estimated to have lived in North American West including Seattle, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Victoria, among other cities. They worked with women of other races and served a disproportionately male population on the frontiers of settler colonialism. These women were called “ameyuki,” as opposed to “karayuki,” who were women sent to the Asian ports of European (more specifically British) colonies or colonial territories in China and Southeast Asia, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and British Malaya.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, were an era of social reforms and anti-prostitution movements in Canada and elsewhere. Prostitution was understood as a social vice and was the target of social reform movements, but it also became a racial issue, with the ideas of sexual excess, moral degeneration, and racial inferiority closely linked. Female Asian prostitutes who were not detained or deported by the immigration office were often “rescued” by white Christians. In Japan too, the public’s understanding of prostitution had changed dramatically by the turn of the twentieth century. Japanese government officials and prostitution abolitionists came to be concerned that Japanese prostitutes overseas, especially in North America, were damaging the country’s reputation.

It was in this context that Japanese immigrant leaders decided to expel Japanese prostitutes from Canada by publishing the book *Devil Caves in Canada* (Kanada no Makutsu) in 1910. It was published by *Tairiku Nippō*, the largest Japanese-language newspaper in Canada, which had strong ties with the Japanese consul in Vancouver. The book was an edited version of a series of reportage articles titled “The Exploration of Devil Caves” (Makutsu tankeiki), written by Osada Shōhei (1879-1930) based on two months of research in the small mining towns of Nelson and Cranbrook in B.C. It was intended as a truly explosive exposé but also as an entertaining read. Osada reveals that some well-known Japanese businessmen had in fact been managing and owning brothels and describes drama and scandals among prostitutes and pimps—from their habits of drinking and gambling to love triangles, jealousy, murder, pregnancy, and the use of fraudulent marriages and passports.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the book that makes it different from the original article series is that it reproduces photographs of eight women, identifying their names and hometowns in Japan, and describing their career trajectories. The photograph I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation is of Shichi, whose English name is Maple. According to the text she became a prostitute in Shiga, then married a Japanese man, and moved to Seattle where she specialized in non-Japanese clients. Once her husband went back to Japan, she became involved with another man and engaged in the “ugly profession,” the caption reads. Another photograph is of two women. Dressed in Western clothes and large hats decorated with flowers, they stand side by side against a plain background, posing for a full-length portrait. The woman on the left, identified as Sachi, wears a white dress with a sailor neck. Her companion, identified by her English name Cecil, is in a white blouse and long, dark skirt. Both hold umbrellas and look straight into the camera with subtle smiles.

The problem of these photographs is that their reading is overdetermined. The women in the photographs were supposed to be read as embodying immorality, criminality, irrationality and laziness through a disciplining and condemning gaze. Any hint of aberration—smiling, wearing colorful dresses with bold patterns, or appearing “too relaxed” in front of the camera—were to be understood as proof of their “low morality.” Can we understand these women and their photographs differently, and if so, how?

The first reading I propose is to understand the studio photographs as each woman’s attempt to visually construct her self-image as a respectable immigrant and member of the local community. It is unlikely that they knew that their photographs were to be used in a book that would condemn them: the images were most likely published without their consent. Given that in

Japan around the 1900s the majority of women of all classes and occupations were photographed in kimono, these photographs were likely taken in Canada, possibly by a Japanese photographer. Picture-taking was indeed an important part of the lively Japanese community in Canada, and by 1910, there were several Japanese-owned photography studios in B.C. What characterizes the photographs of Japanese—and other—immigrants around this time is their uniformity. The subjects typically wear formal attire: men in suits and ties, women in blouses and skirts or dresses, with necklaces, ribbons, feathered hats, and purses as typical accessories. The studios used painted backdrops and props such as plants, wooden banisters, chairs, and blankets. Just like the photographs of other Japanese immigrants, those of the prostitutes follow the conventions of studio portraiture, and there is nothing visual that allows us to identify their profession.

Recent scholarship has shown that photography was a medium through which individuals in diasporic communities visually constructed their images as desirable immigrants, challenging white stereotypes. Tina Campt, in her reading of photographs of African diasporas in Europe, argues that photographs can be understood as “a series of choices” and as “a decision to render a particular event, person, object, or moment significant, remarkable, or representative.” She proposes that we read photographs not as “documents or evidence” but, rather, as an enunciation of an individual or community’s “profound aspiration to forms of national and cultural belonging, inclusion, and social status.” Photographs can be read as a performative act in which immigrants show that they are *part of* their new society. The prostitutes in *Devil Caves in Canada* chose to have these photographs taken, perhaps to appear as respectable Japanese immigrants in white Canada and to show their communal and national belonging.

This reading emphasizes the agency of the photographic subject, but it may well be that the power to make what Campt describes as “a series of choices,” and “a decision to render a particular event”...”significant” was not available to the Japanese prostitutes. In other words, their agency may have been significantly compromised, and they may not have had the power or freedom to make certain choices. The second reading of the photographs I propose thus focuses on their potential condition of subjugation. I have so far used the term “prostitute” to refer to *ameyuki*, but whether these women willingly participated in overseas “employment opportunities” or were forced into their occupation has been hotly debated by scholars. Did they choose to prostitute themselves or were they the victims of sex trafficking and sexual slavery? Did they choose to take these photographs, or did their brothel owners, who had power over them, commission them for commemorative or commercial purposes?

Although it sets out to condemn the prostitutes, *Devil Caves in Canada* in fact has sections that acknowledge the plight of the women and the exploitative nature of the business. Describing how the women went to the interior of B.C., Osada explains that some were simply deceived in the process and were trapped in the foreign country as they could not repay the costs of their travel. Osada even uses the word “human trafficking” (*jinshin baibai*) to describe the practice and concedes that it could be incredibly difficult for women to actually pay off their debt.

Is it possible to read signs of the women’s entrapment in their photographs if we look at them closely enough? Kudō Miyoko, a well-known Japanese author who has written books about *Devil Caves in Canada*, has observed that Shichi or Maple has “sad eyes” (*kanashii metsuki*).

However, some of the women look relaxed and are even smiling, if subtly and ambivalently. Are we to read their expressions as signs of contentment with their circumstances? Might they even be enjoying themselves? Or can we draw on Saidiya Hartman's argument about slavery, that is, that violence and subjugation were all the more brutal when slaves were forced to perform their suffering as tolerable and even pleasurable? Permitted expressions of the enslaved were regulated, Hartman writes, and violence was neutralized and disavowed in the name of endurance and contentment. "Soul killing" effects came from forced singing and dancing, supposed expressions of joy and delight, in the discourse of slavery. In the same vein, and more relevant to our analysis, Hartman observes that enslaved women were imagined as having the will to give consent to slave owners' sexual advances or even to seduce them. Given their lack of a voice, it is not clear whether the "prostitutes" in *Devil Caves in Canada* actually had the will to consent to sexual transactions, or were merely made to look as though they did in the photographs. Their expressions of contentment, therefore, should be interpreted with caution.

To conclude: the photographs included in *Devil Caves in Canada* are extremely rare visual records of Japanese prostitutes in North America. The open-ended qualities of visual images invite us to challenge the book's claim that these were "immoral" women, and allow us to imagine the aspirations and plight of these women who have been marginalized in the narratives of both Japanese and Canadian histories.