

Vol. 1

A ZINE DEDICATED TO THE DISSEMINATION OF STORIES BY NIKKEI FOR PEOPLE OF THE WORLD

NIKKEI MONOGATARI

日系物語

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Like other mixed-race individuals, I've grown tired of the questions that people ask me only because I don't look white

--Dr. Aurora Tsai

ARTWORK BY

DONA NABATA
ANNA OMORI
MIYA TURNBULL

**ESSAYS & CRITICAL
REFLECTIONS BY**

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© Photo by Miya Turnbull

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My self-portraits are representational and distorted variations, created as a way to explore different facets of my identity...

--Miya Turnbull

“

I asked my mom what wish came true, and she said that her wish was for me, that I would be able to see again. She said, “Honto ni yokatta ne. I’m so glad.”

--Linda Cooper

BEHIND THE SCENES

By Mimi Okabe and Catherine Sachi Kikuchi

In August 2020, Mimi Okabe and Sachi Kikuchi co-founded Japanese for Nikkei, an online teaching and learning platform that provides support for Nikkei around the globe who want to learn the Japanese language.

At Japanese for Nikkei, we define Nikkei as “an all-inclusive and non-static term to refer to persons who are of Japanese descent, who have multicultural families and complex identities.” We use a broad definition to capture the nuances and diversity that people may associate with the word, and we acknowledge that this definition is just one of many. This volume was inspired by the special lecture on the findings from the Nippon Foundation Global Nikkei Young Adult Research Project that took place online in February 2021. The central question of this project was “What does it mean to be Nikkei in 2021?” Using this question as a springboard, we wanted to show that Nikkei identity should not only be understood in a way that upholds “Japan” and “Japaneseness” as the standard from which to assess the discursive formation of global Nikkei identities. We felt compelled to connect with Nikkei from around the world and to create a channel through which Nikkei can share their diverse perspectives on what Nikkei identity means to them.

This volume features the works of seven talented Nikkei academics, artists, and writers from all walks of life who will take the reader on different paths of discovering and contemplating their own politics of identity. The contributors for this volume all navigate questions of identity and belonging that are expressed through different media and genres, providing various looks into and expressions of “Nikkei” identity.

The volume features art by Nikkei, including Dona Nabata's painting, "Out of History." Raised in the suburbs of New York, but currently living in Japan, Anna Omori weaves together concepts of identity, language, and translation through origami in her work "How Do I Say? (Diptych)." Miya Turnbull also uses origami as an art form, offering a series of visually compelling pieces including "Origami - Self Portrait," in which she brings her feelings of "living in-between" to life through expressive self-portraits.

The volume also features reflections by Maria Claridge, who recounts her life as a mixed-race woman growing up in the small town of Lymington, England, in a short story that highlights her encounters with racism and school and opening up about the long-lasting trauma resulting from bullying. Linda Cooper provides readers with a glimpse into her life as a person of bicultural, Hapa heritage. Her blog entry, "Yokoso Y'all," reproduced with permission, celebrates the convergence of Southern American and Japanese culture through language. As an American, Japanese, and Taiwanese person, Aurora Tsai reflects on a crisis in identity in "Negotiating my Japanese identity as a Zainichi Taiwanese Hafu," which addresses the sustained impact of Japanese colonialism in her own life and that of her family. Finally, Ken Yoshida's reflection "Japanese, Canadian, neither or both?" highlights the trials and tribulations of living in between cultures, but ultimately finding a sense of "home" in Canada.

We are incredibly grateful to all the contributors for their patience as we put this volume together and for their support in making our vision into a reality.

We hope that readers find strength and courage in the stories shared by Nikkei from around the world. Nikkei.

LYMINGTON – THE TOWN IN ITS OWN BUBBLE

By Maria Claridge

Privilege and race

First of all, I cannot tell my story without talking about race. They are intrinsically linked. How I position myself and how other people perceive me is shaped, and continues to be shaped, by the events that have occurred throughout my life. The history of the world matters, and the privilege and discrimination I have experienced are woven into my story.

I am white, mixed race. My mum, Midori, is Japanese, and my dad, John, is English. Growing up in my hometown on the South Coast of England felt challenging at times with its lack of diversity. I encountered bullying, children tugging their eyes back in jest, and was often mistaken as being Chinese instead of Japanese. For a long time, a man at the Saturday market thought my mum ran the Chinese takeaway shop. This is how small-minded some of the town people were, and although tough, it made me realise how important it is to be inclusive and racially aware. As I grew older and more confident, I embraced my Japanese blood. Living in London, I met so many people from all walks of life.

I have had the privilege of being educated, going to university, travelling, access to health care and having a comfortable life. Not everyone has had these opportunities, and it saddens me to think that there are people in our world being judged by their race. There are also many people of colour who don't have the opportunity or access to the resources needed to address their mental health needs. Many do not have the space to talk through their issues and are being targeted or bullied, worsening their mental health. This is not okay.

I am very lucky to have had the opportunities that I did when it came to getting medical help for my mental health. I want to make clear that there are people out there with mental health issues who might not have the chance to share their experiences with the world because of their colour or background. I want to help change this.

Now, more than ever, it is important to have that chat with your friends about race and the importance of talking about one's mental health.



Wait, what? Your mum doesn't run the Chinese takeaway?

LYMINGTON – THE TOWN IN ITS OWN BUBBLE

I grew up in a town called Lymington on the South Coast of England. It's one of those lovely, quaint seaside towns which is also close to the forest. My flatmate, Ingrid, once said, 'Lymington is the destination where birds have a vacation for the summer.' In the cold winter months, my friends and I take long forest walks or

go around the Sea Wall, stopping for a coffee or hot chocolate at one of the local coffee shops. In the evenings, we go to the pubs, sit near a welcoming roaring fire in the corner, and drink ales or wine. In the summer, we spend much time out on the water in sailing boats or ribs, travelling to beaches around the Needles on the Isle of Wight. Walking the streets in the evening, you can look up and see the beautiful starlit night sky. I feel safe. So many amazing and fun magical moments happen in this small town.

My family home is near some beautiful gardens which have tennis courts, flower beds, a football and rugby pitch which are welcome for use by anyone. The space is vast, and the air fresh. I can sometime forget how lucky I was, to grow up in a loving home with endless outdoor adventures on my front doorstep.

Lymington is extremely quiet in comparison to the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, and I knew my mum struggled with making friends and fitting in when she first moved there. She occasionally encountered small-minded people, assuming she was Chinese and unable to speak any English. Speaking slowly and loudly to her, occasionally using gestures, it could be perceived comical. Despite English not being her first language and having a completely different upbringing in the heart of Japan, over her time in Lymington, she adapted. My mum created a new, beautiful life full of friendships and laughter.

My parents met through dinghy sailing. Both are keen sailors. My dad has a good reputation working as the local boat builder and is well-liked in Lymington. Both my parents work hard; dad works long hours at the boatyard, while mum manages all the finances.

My mum is beautiful and has a laugh so loud it is heard from any room in the house. Like me, her sense of humour is childlike (simple), and making her laugh makes me feel golden. Whilst I was growing up, she had long ink-black hair which framed her round face. Her petite Japanese build contradicts her fiery personality. If she was annoyed or mad you would soon know, but fortunately, once her wrath was out in the open, she would cool down quickly. My brother once slammed his bedroom door post-fight with mum, and mum responded with, 'I can slam my door, too!' before she slammed her own bedroom door. Dad wasn't impressed with the crack it caused in the downstairs ceiling.

My mum is the strongest person I know, and we have a very close relationship. This became abundantly clear to me for the first time, whilst we were travelling together in Sri Lanka. A woman exclaimed that she could never travel with her mum and get on as well as we did, making the observation my mum and I had a unique relationship. An observation I had never myself made until that moment.

My mum is open-minded about a lot of things, and as I grew older, we started talking more like friends do. Well, most of the time. She's still a mum.

My dad, with his thick builder hands, is tall and handsome. He now has silver hair, but still a defined jaw, with eyes radiating warmth and kindness. He is always thoughtful and never one to react with anger. I can only recall a handful of times he has ever raised his voice. He listens intently and pauses before speaking. Whenever I have been upset, he has come quietly into my room and sat on my bed, waiting until I was ready to speak.

If ever I'm in any trouble, I can always turn to mum or dad. I know all the good traits I have can be attributed to the two of them.

My parents make a beautiful pairing, and to this day, dad still comes home with flowers (reduced-priced, but still) and has mum laughing her sunny laugh. I love looking at photos of them together. Photos like the one of dad with his bushy moustache and flared trousers, pushing my brother in a buggy, our then-dog Shelly trotting alongside him, mum in her dungaree denim dress, belly swollen with me, holding dad's hand.

PRIVILEGED

Growing up, my parents provided my brother and I with a variety of opportunities. We were fortunate to be able to travel. We always took a family summer holiday. One summer, when I was 9, we went to Greece, where I fell in love with Greek yoghurt and honey, playing in the sunshine every day. From when we were babies, at Christmas time, we would travel to Japan. I can still picture Rob, my brother, at age 6, sprawled on two airplane chairs, me sprawled on the floor by the feet. This became harder to do as we grew older and bigger.

I struggled with maths at school, so I had math tutoring every Wednesday with Mr Lewis, whilst my brother attended private school - I didn't get the grades to go to private school. We both had piano lessons, and my parents endured me playing My Heart Will Go On from Titanic for three years.

During our school years, we attended gymnastic club after school and tennis club in the summer. I played volleyball and was part of the athletics club. We were both keen sailors and competed around the UK and internationally. The opportunities we had felt endless. To this day, I feel like an all-round athlete because we tried so many sports when we were younger.

Warm memories and gratitude spread through me when I think back over my childhood.

If I have children, I wish for them to have these same opportunities. I strongly believe trying a variety of things, experiencing different cultures, and all these sports and travel helped me build the character and healthy lifestyle I have today.

SCHOOL

My brother and I were the only two half-Asian children at our primary school. It was a small school, and on my very first day, I was excited to make new friends. My brother, on the other hand, was in floods of tears clinging onto mum. I feel this reflects how free and confident I was from a young age. I felt fearless, and this feeling I still recall and hold close. Although I did struggle in my early years, being the youngest in my year and falling asleep in class, I was a happy child and an average grade student. My brother excelled in all his subjects, to the point where sometimes he would even correct the teacher. Yet, despite the difference in academia and sailing ability, my parents never made me feel I needed to compete or prove my worth.

I enjoyed primary school and liked my friends, but this abruptly changed one day in the bathroom when my friends pointed out how small my eyes were in comparison to theirs. This triggered the beginning of my complex with my eyes. Some other children started chanting, 'Chinese, Chinese,' during break time. After a stern word from the teacher, the children apologised the next day, and things seemed okay again.

Upon reflection, I definitely noticed microaggressions and racism growing up. It was in the kinds of things that children would say out of curiosity with no ill intentions, but it still made me feel different.

According to Google, microaggression is 'a term used for verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group, particularly culturally marginalised groups.'

Racism is a 'prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.'

What I experienced growing up wasn't right or healthy for a child to experience. If I ate my lunch with chopsticks, ate rice balls, onigiri, or did anything slightly Japanese, they'd say, 'Oh my god, you're weird,' or, 'Oh, it's because you're Asian.' These kinds of comments can be damaging, especially whilst growing up, strengthening the feeling of exclusion. When you're young, you want to fit in and feel 'normal'. Being told you are different by your peers builds barriers and insecurities.

I felt upset for being singled out, but forgiveness came easy to me as a child. I received the kindness award in my final year of Primary School, which my parents found heart-warming, and with my peers clapping, I felt I had finally been accepted.

BIG SCHOOL

Entering secondary school, my sense of acceptance, friendship, security and confidence within myself changed. Once again, I felt like an outsider. Again, lacking diversity, there was one other Asian boy in the year above me, and people instantly assumed we were related.

Age 12, I'm sitting on the bench with my friend, drinking our Capri Sun juices. She turns to me asking,

'Hey, your brother Freddie is in the year above us...'

'He's not my brother,' I cut in, squeezing my juice box, my body language cold. 'He's Chinese.'

'Yeh, yeh, same as you, though? Chinese and Japanese...they are pretty much the same, right?' she says knowingly, eyes narrowed, looking at me like I was behaving dim.

Anger pulses through my body. I want to scream at her that this is not the same. We aren't the same.

'Sure,' I flash a smile. 'Let's get to class.' What my friend didn't see was that my knuckles had turned white, and the juice box had buckled under the pressure of my clenched fist. Anything to avoid conflict. Standing up for myself was something I lacked at school, and that assertiveness I still sometimes lack now.

Differentiating between Asians can be difficult, but I feel one should never assume. Children should be educated that there are all kinds of cultures and ethnicities. If one thinks it's just children who make these assumptions, adults often think my Japanese, half-Filipino partner Dice and I are related. At parties, at the tennis club, etc., we often get asked if we are siblings. This is something which would never be assumed in London, only in this small town.

At secondary school, there were many times I wished I was white and had Western eyes. I would go to sleep at night thinking if I had Western eyes I wouldn't be picked on. I wouldn't be stereotyped. I thought boys would notice me more if I looked like my blonde and pretty friends. I became the poster diversity girl in the school catalogue and on the school reception wall, which resulted in me feeling like I was singled out as different from my peers. Growing up, there were definitely times I wished I wasn't Japanese.

I remember when my then best friend and some other kids started saying this rhyme which went 'Chinese, Japanese, Siamese,' and then they'd tug their eyes back. It made me feel ashamed of my eyes all over again. When choosing a Disney princess in games, I was always asked to be Mulan, even though I wanted to be the Little Mermaid, Ariel, as I loved the sea. But that didn't matter as Mulan has narrow eyes like me. I got called 'Jackie Chan' and nicknamed 'Chinky', and these words cut a wound so deep I cried myself to sleep at night. It was hurtful. I am not Chinese, and I despised being singled out for the shape of my eyes.

I remember on one occasion, I had tied my hair back into a new style and felt very pleased with the result, not being very good with hair or makeup. But when a group of boys walked past me and yelled, 'Nice hair, Jackie Chan,' I rushed to the closest bathroom, looked under the doors to check no one else was there, avoiding the mirrors, and shut myself in a cubicle. I put the toilet seat down and pulled my legs up, hugged them close and began sobbing. Pulling my hair down, and feeling the humiliation burn through me, fat tears rolled down my face. I would cry in the school bathrooms on a regular basis but always arrived home with a smile on my face, not wanting my parents to worry. But the damage had been done, their hurtful words had pierced my heart, and I no longer wished to be Japanese. It's sad to think my past self would denounce being Japanese for the sake of fitting in, but what child doesn't compare themselves to their classmates?

From then on, I would never tell my friends about going to Japan over Christmas, and I would go out of my way to hide anything I did or ate related to Japanese culture. I was ashamed of my Japanese heritage. It made me feel different, and like I didn't belong or fit in with my peers. They made me feel like it wasn't okay to be Japanese. So, sometimes, I behaved as a false extrovert to compensate for my lack of confidence.

UNIVERSITY - LONDON

When I moved to London for university, my whole world was turned upside down. Walking around London, I was surrounded by a fusion of different people, ages, life experiences and cultures. My peers were no longer a sea of white faces. There were other people who had grown up with two cultures or had been exposed to other cultures, and I began to flourish. I no longer needed to hide my Japanese heritage. I no longer felt singled out. In Lymington, without realising it, I had been holding my breath for all those years, and London gave me the space to finally breathe.

I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if I wasn't the only Asian girl in my year, or if we weren't the only Asian family in town. I wonder what it would have been like to have a city upbringing. But looking back, I definitely see value in the way I was raised in the open space and fresh air. I'm really grateful to have grown up between two cultures. I think my mum and dad raised me the best way they could, and upon reflection, I feel I have the best of both worlds.

Experiencing bullying during my school years allowed me to develop empathy and kindness for others. I never turned into someone who retaliated or became a bully.

Writing this, I realised more than ever how important it is for children to feel love and connection in order to grow and thrive. Children need to feel accepted when they are young, it's what morphs them into healthy adults. Love, security and acceptance were at the heart of my family life. But what happened at school was outside of their control.

My parents made it clear their love didn't depend on my accomplishments. None of my mistakes were treated like life failures. Children can feel fear and anxiety from experiences they don't understand, but my parents made my brother and I feel okay to be afraid or anxious. It's okay to be afraid of something at any point in your life.

Confidence grows in a home that is full of unconditional love and affection. We learn from our family how to form relationships and function in society and in our work. My parents are a team who support me, believe in me and care about me. If I didn't have their love and support whilst enduring the bullying, I would have felt isolated. Instead, I have many happy memories from my childhood and I showed no signs of depression or manic behaviour. I want to state very clearly that my parents could have never prevented what was going to happen to me in my early twenties when signs of mental health struggles started to materialise for me.

I call this time in my life, pre-bipolar diagnosis (PBD).

"I had a dream, I got everything I wanted...they called me weak, like I'm not just somebody's daughter..." - Billie Eilish

My dream for my past self and future children: You walk into school and greet friends who have backgrounds from across the globe. You talk about different cultures, present interesting items that are sentimental to you. You learn each other's languages. There's no fear in being different. You each embrace your uniqueness. Every morning, you look in the mirror with pride. Everyone's eyes are different, everyone's skin colour is different. There's no pain in your eyes. Just love and acceptance. There are textbooks, picture books, media and films you see yourself in. You could be the lead, not just the karate master or a fun action sidekick.

I have hope.

YOKOSO Y'ALL

By Linda Cooper

Thirty years ago, much to my delight, two events occurred which served to encapsulate my bicultural, hapa heritage. I am the daughter of a Japanese mother and Southern gentleman father, a career U.S. Army veteran who met and married my mother in Japan in the aftermath of World War II.

While I traveled the world with my parents when my dad was in the military, I did most of my growing up in a small suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, after my dad retired.

In 1986, the Memphis in May International Festival, in addition to showcasing great barbeque and music, also paid tribute to the country of Japan. In the summer of that same year, the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., celebrated the heritage and culture of the state of Tennessee and the country of Japan.

At the time, I was serving as a press aide to Tennessee's U.S. Sen. Jim Sasser in his Washington office. I wanted to go to Memphis in May so badly that year, but wasn't able to do so. However, a colleague who did travel to Memphis in May with our boss, brought back for me a few souvenirs he had picked up, including a button which reads "Yokoso Y'all." I didn't know what *yokoso* meant. I was more familiar with *irasshaimase*. I had to ask my colleague and confirm with my mom that like *irasshaimase*, *Yokoso* means welcome. For me, the button uniquely reflects the hospitality of Japanese and Southern culture; both are warm, friendly, and inviting.

In the South, we say "y'all" a lot, and sometimes even its double plural "all y'all." More than slang, for me, it's a term of inclusiveness that is ubiquitous here.

My best friend Brenda and I often describe ourselves as half-Japanese and half-Southern. Brenda is a registered nurse and travels widely for her job with a medical research facility. Her facial features are more Japanese than mine, but her Southern accent fits in just fine here at home, never raising an eyebrow. However, when she travels, she almost always captures people's attention with her Southern twang.



In San Francisco, she recalled a very nice waiter handing her a basket of rolls as she and a large group of colleagues were having dinner. She said, "Do you want me to pass these on down the line?" The waiter's eyes grew large and he said, "That is not the accent I thought you would have."

In Chicago, ordering food at a McDonald's, the cashier simply stared at her for what seemed like several minutes, then commented, "I just can't believe your accent, I think it's great." Also in Chicago, she and a colleague were walking back to their hotel and passed a homeless man holding out a cup for change. Her colleague gave the man some change, but Brenda, said, "I'm sorry, but I don't have any change on me." His response was, "Oh my God, let me guess, Mississippi? Arkansas? Alabama?" She said, "Close, Tennessee." He said, "That's not the accent I thought you'd have." And, she replied, "I bet you thought I'd say, sorry, no speak English," and they both laughed.

And, in Washington, D.C., Brenda went looking for a bakery and ended up in Chinatown. Surrounded by Asian customers and bakery staff, she asked, "Do you still have those blueberry tarts?" She said everyone in the bakery just froze, staring at her. Then one of the bakery staff said, "You don't see that much in Chinatown...with your accent."

Sometimes, people also are confused about my and Brenda's cultural background. In Denver, Brenda was surprised when a Native American man asked her, "What tribe are you from?" And, for many years, living in the Washington, D.C., area I was often approached by Latinos asking for help, or simply saying hello and passing the time of day with me in Spanish. Luckily, I took some Spanish classes in high school and college. So, I tried my best to help when I could, and also explain that I was half-Japanese and not Hispanic.

When I was a child, my mom didn't teach me to speak Japanese fluently. A product of her time, generation, and immigrant circumstances, she felt it was more important for me to grow up speaking only English. She didn't want me to become confused. However, Japanese words and phrases were always spoken in our household, by all three of us. From *tadaima*, "I'm home," to *okaeri*, "welcome back," and *itadakimasu*, "let's eat," to *gochisousama*, "Thank you for the delicious meal." *Gohan* also meant breakfast, lunch, or dinner, or the steamed rice my mom had with every meal.

As for my *hapa* friends, our dads, and myself, we all without exception are very familiar with the not-so-polite word *baka* spoken by our moms a lot, and we know it means stupid.

At the same time, my mom loved to laugh, telling the story of one of her trips to Japan where she was singled-out amongst her Japanese friends on a train platform by an American family asking for directions. She couldn't understand how the family knew she could speak English and even more, after helping them, was shocked "*bikkurishita*" when they wanted to know where she was from, and commented that she spoke English with a Southern accent.

Back in 1986, I spent days at the Festival of American Folklife, and was treated to Appalachian and Japanese craft demonstrations, country music, and taiko drummers, as well as traditional Japanese and Southern food. There were kiosks selling Japanese items, and I remember purchasing rice candy and caramel childhood treats for myself, and a *daruma*, which I sent home to my mom.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel to Japan twice with my mom, for three months as a teenager in the summer of 1974, and as an adult, for three weeks in the fall of 1996. Both trips were huge learning experiences. I met and learned about my family, my mom's friends, and about Japanese history, traditions, and culture. It was on my first trip that I learned about *daruma*. A *daruma* is a round paper mache doll that can bring good luck in the fulfillment of a wish or goal. Its shape makes the doll hard to tip over, signifying perseverance or *gaman*. The eyes start out as blank. The left eye of the doll is colored in when a wish or goal is established, and the right eye of the doll is colored in when the wish or goal is fulfilled. I had sent the *daruma* to my mom so she could make a wish for herself.

I have been blind in my left eye since birth due to an irreparable illness called retinopathy of prematurity, where too much oxygen in the incubators of premature infants in the early 1950s and '60s led many babies to become blind. In the fall of 1986, I was diagnosed with a cataract on my right eye, the one with which I am able to see. As a consequence, I went through a period of three years of progressive blindness, until 1989, when my surgeon finally decided it was time to risk removal of the cataract to restore my eyesight. The intraocular lens implant is a very common surgery today, but in 1989, at the age of 28, I was one of the youngest patients to undergo the procedure at the Wilmer Eye Institute at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

The surgery was a success, much to my and my parents joy and relief. It wasn't until a trip home later that year that I noticed the *daruma* on a shelf and saw that both eyes had been colored in. I asked my mom what wish came true, and she said that her wish was for me, that I would be able to see again. She said, "*Honto ni yokatta ne.* I'm so glad."

One of my favorite Japanese words is *hisashiburi*. It basically means, "Long time, no see." I learned the phrase on my second trip to Japan with my mom. She repeated it often, with such elation and exuberance greeting friends and family again after several years. To me, *hisashiburi* means happiness, in more ways than one.

In a way, Memphis in May and the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife all those years ago were lovely gifts of celebration just for me. They helped me to appreciate my bicultural heritage and my uniquely American life. And, whether it's *hisashiburi* or "hey, y'all," simple words of greeting serve to strengthen the bonds of family, friendship, and community, with the universal language of hospitality that can easily bridge time and cultural divides. My "Yokoso Y'all" button is a reminder that my bicultural heritage serves as a bridge, too.



OUTSIDE OF HISTORY

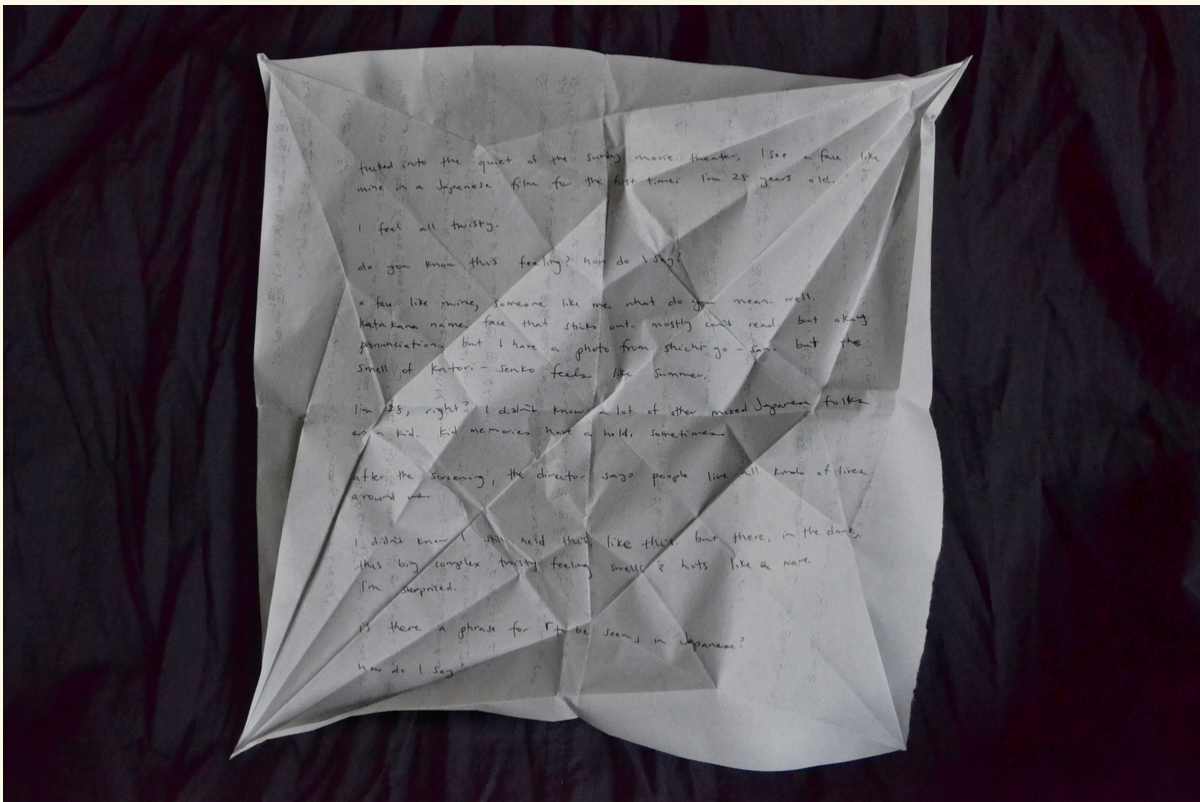
By Dona Nabata



"Outside of History" (11" x 17"). Oil paint on Inkjet Print.

HOW DO I SAY? (DIPTYCH)

By Anna Omori



NEGOTIATING MY JAPANESE IDENTITY AS A ZAINICHI TAIWANESE HAFU

By Aurora Tsai

Aurora Tsai, (Diary entry, September 12, 2016)

"It's too difficult to change society, so why don't you just change yourself? Be more confident and proud?"

A former classmate asked me this the other day. She was someone who has never struggled with being multiracial or multicultural, and she couldn't seem to understand why I'm not more confident in my Japanese identity.

Honestly, the only reason I am confident enough now to call myself American, Japanese, and Taiwanese is because my white, straight, cisgender male therapist told me I could. It's like he somehow "gave me permission" or "empowered" me to do so. I was grateful and still am for his guidance. But why did I need his "permission"? Why has it been so difficult for me to claim an identity? I struggle to find the words to adequately describe what it feels like to have constant paranoia about the way others perceive me due to past and present experiences of being racialized, exoticized, and othered.

Like other mixed-race individuals, I've grown tired of the questions that people ask me only because I don't look white:

What are you?

What is your ethnic makeup?

Are you mixed?

Do you have Native American in you?

You're so exotic.

This is going to sound bad, but I remember you because you're not white.

Even if I answer these questions, I often confuse them more. Now that I have lived in Japan for a few years, speak Japanese on a daily basis with colleagues, and even teach it on occasion at university, people are confused when they learn that my blood is actually Taiwanese. Then a new set of questions come:

How come you don't speak Chinese?

"My dad didn't teach me. But I learned Japanese to speak with his family and my grandparents."

Huh?

"Taiwan was occupied by Japan from 1895 to the end of WWII, so my grandparents grew up speaking Japanese."

So you spoke Japanese growing up?

"No. I started learning in college"

Why do you act so Japanese?

"I lived there for 3 years and my relatives have lived there for over 50 years. I guess I took on some of their mannerisms, but I've also always been a bit reserved in large groups."

So you're American?

"Yes."

Why do you have an accent?

"I have an accent?"

If people seem willing or interested (which is rare), I'll explain. My dad grew up in Taiwan, but his family moved to Japan over 50 years ago, long before I was born. He came to the U.S. for college, married my mother, and raised me and my siblings first in Ohio and then Maryland. My dad loves American values of liberty, individualism, and working hard for success. He didn't want to "adulterate" his children's English, so he only spoke to us in English--never Taiwanese or Mandarin. In college, the white groups I hung out with always called me "the Asian chick."

I never felt like I belonged with the Asian groups because I couldn't speak Chinese or Japanese. So I made it a point to learn in college. Even moreso, I wanted to be able to speak with my Taiwanese-Japanese relatives in Japan and to communicate and become closer to this part of my family.

Somehow speaking Japanese has helped me gain confidence in claiming myself as Japanese. But even being able to speak Japanese, society tends to tell me that I'm wrong--I'm a second language speaker and I don't actually have Japanese blood, so it's strange--or even wrong--for me to claim this as part of my identity.

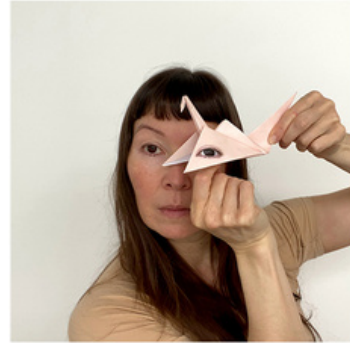
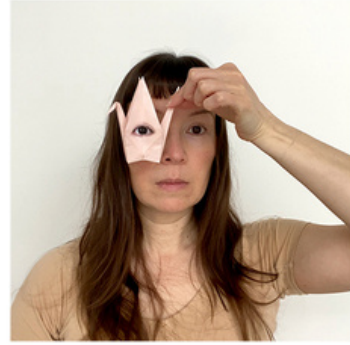
When I lived in Japan, I had the opposite reaction. People asked me why I didn't like hamburgers or why I was so soft-spoken for an American.

The only place I've lived where people didn't interrogate me is Hawaii. It was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders and I could finally breathe. It was like I finally found people who readily wanted to accept me into their Ohana.

No matter how "confident" I am in claiming myself as American, Japanese, and Taiwanese, I find that the society I live in right now tends to knock me down again and again. There is nothing I can do but get back up, stay strong, and decide which situations I should try to defend myself and which ones to run.

ORIGAMI - SELF PORTRAIT

By Miya Turnbull





I am drawing from the traditional uses of masks worn for disguise, transformation and protection, and as symbols for persona, self-image and identity. My self-portraits are representational and distorted variations, created as a way to explore different facets of my identity- specifically duality stemming from being half-Japanese/half-Caucasian and concurrently, the predominant feeling of being 'in-between.'

I am always looking for innovative ways to 'mask' myself and recently I began making Origami, mapping my image into the different designs. I was taught Origami by my mom when I was very young and was inspired by a video that my brother recently made showing how to fold an Origami butterfly to promote Children's Day in Japan, using the symbol of the International Children's Festival for the Arts in St. Albert. This sparked a whole new series. I'm so proud and happy that I can incorporate something from my youth and heritage as Nikkei, into my body of work of masks and self-portraits.





JAPANESE, CANADIAN, NEITHER OR BOTH?

By Ken Yoshida

For many within the Nikkei community, we have an affinity for Japan whether it be for familial, cultural, or linguistic reasons. In one way or another, we have sought different ways to build closer relationships with this connection to Japan. Perhaps the strongest expression of this desire is by going to Japan for holiday or even for residency. I have often gone to Japan to see family and travel, but the last time I went to Japan was between March 2017 to February 2018 for an academic exchange at Okayama University. This had a profound effect on my identity, and I wanted to share my identity's evolution because I thought it might be helpful to fellow Nikkei who wish to live in Japan or are currently experiencing an identity crisis. My identity's evolution has three phases: (1) pre-exchange, (2) during the exchange, and (3) post-exchange.

As an elementary school student, I distinctly remember being under great pressure from different cultures and languages in my private and public life trying to form my personal identity. At home, my Thai mother and Japanese father were both trying their best to instill their cultures and languages. At school in Ottawa in the French immersion program, my anglophone teachers and francophone teachers were also busy trying to instill their cultures and languages. These four cultures and languages increased the difficulty in figuring out my identity as a child, but each has proven to be very formative and influential later in my life.

I remember my mother trying to teach me Thai, eat Thai food, practice Thai Buddhism, and be loyal to the Thai royal family when I was a child. However, due to her permanent absence half-way through elementary, her efforts to instill a Thai identity in me have not had a lasting influence. Since my mother's departure from my daily life at a young age, I do not consider myself Thai in any way, as evidenced by this piece's title. My Thai background is only hinted at when I state that my mother is Thai or that I was born in Thailand (but I would always add that I came to Canada before my first birthday). With the Thai influence gone, it became much easier for my father to instill Japanese-ness in me at home.

My father instilled Japanese-ness in me more successfully than my mother because he made it participatory. Such as sending me to Japanese language school on Saturdays so that I was in an environment where Japanese was being used with people besides my father. With my increased exposure and usage of Japanese, I could consume more Japanese media entertainment to reinforce a Japanese identity. Another example is where I not only ate Japanese food at home, but I was involved in the kitchen helping my father make Japanese food. All these helped shape my sense of Japanese-ness but it also created a sense of difference from my white classmates.

Due to the location of my elementary school, the student population was about 95% white. As the sole Asian and Japanese student in the French immersion program within my grade (the only other Asian and Japanese student in the program being my younger brother), I felt alienated from my white classmates. This was felt acutely when I was sent to the ESL (English as a Second Language) class whenever it was English class until grade 4 because at home, I was speaking, reading, and writing in Japanese instead of English like my white classmates. While talk of the holidays and birthdays with friends and classmates made me feel lonely because they would talk about their grandparents' and relatives' visits, but that was not possible for me because my grandparents and relatives were all in Japan. I could only see my extended family once a year during family trips to Japan. In French class or courses taught in French, however, I did not feel alienated from my white classmates because we were both learning a "foreign" language. In fact, I was more proficient in French than English during elementary because most of my classes were taught in French. Since my father was a public servant in the federal government, he was proficient in French and could help with my homework that was in French.

As I progressed through middle and high school, my language-based alienation disappeared but, I was still the only Japanese student in the French immersion program. There was a small increase of Asian students (and other ethnic minorities) in the program, but the student demographic in the program was 90% white.

As such, the alienation I felt was either based on culture or history. I was extremely uncomfortable around the subject of WW2 in Canadian history classes because Japan and Canada were enemies during the war. I have two living aunts who remember American bombers dropping firebombs on their city and being taught self-defence techniques at school in the event of an American invasion. Had my grandparents been killed by firebombs during the war, my father would not have been born in 1947 and I would not have been born in 1996. So, when I went to Japan in 2017 for my exchange, I viewed myself as Japanese because of my lived experiences and historical reality.

My motivations for doing an exchange to Japan were for the following reasons: (1) Fulfill a childhood dream of living and attending school in Japan, (2) Learn more about my father by living in his country of origin (he passed away in 2010, so I hoped get some closure about not knowing him more before he passed away), and (3) rediscover or expand my sense of Japanese-ness after living with francophone guardians since 2010. Before my exchange, I was aware that my “incomplete” Japanese-ness (due to the loss of my Japanese father and not being formally educated in Japan), I would come across some personal obstacles regarding my identity because of the homogenous nature of Japanese culture. What I did not realize was how being aware of my “incomplete” Japanese-ness did not even scratch the surface of what would be my identity crisis while living in Okayama for a year, away from my relatives who live near Nagoya.

The Japanese-ness I felt prior my exchange was obliterated within the first month of my exchange. I was unable to befriend Japanese students who were not interested in becoming friends with foreigners because I was not “fully” Japanese (I was familiar with certain Japanese cultural traits and behaviours, but they were not instinctive or second nature to me). While in my mandatory Japanese language courses, I was the most fluent in speech, but my vocabulary knowledge and my reading and writing skills were vastly inferior to Chinese and Korean students. I also found myself in some everyday situations where the procedures and language styles were very foreign to me, such as at a bank or city hall. The harsh smack of reality hit me hard, and I was in great despair when I no longer felt Japanese.

I tried to remedy the loss of my Japanese identity by taking on a Canadian identity from the second month of my exchange because I was the only other Canadian at my host institution. This newfound Canadian identity was also shattered because I was unable to befriend Japanese students who were interested in making foreign friends. They were not interested in befriending me because I was not “fully” foreign (I look Japanese, I have a very common Japanese name, and I do not have a foreign accent when speaking Japanese). When seeking part-time jobs related to foreign languages or cultures, I was not hired or hired reluctantly because I was also not “fully” foreign. The most pain I felt for not being “fully” foreign was when I was ignored by Japanese students at French-related activities. There was a high level of interest in French things at my exchange location, and I thought that it would be a good place to make friends who were not from other English-speaking countries and be a good starting point to build up my new Canadian identity. I tried to build my Canadian identity from French because French is where I felt no alienation at elementary school in the immersion program with my classmates. The triple rejection of my Japanese, English, and French “identifies” caused a significant identity crisis.

Unlike my obliterated Japanese identity, rebuilding my shattered Canadian identity was easier. It was made easier because the Western exchange students considered me as one of them instead of being Japanese. The French exchange students would talk to me in French instead of English, even if they were fluent in English. I got along best with the American, British, and Australian exchange students because we all shared an anglophone mentality, humour, and culture. Whereas the Asian exchange students did not interact much with me or other Western exchange students due to differences in language, culture, and mentality. However, I was able to befriend 帰国子女 (kikokushijou – Japanese-born children who have lived abroad and returned to Japan) at my host university because they were familiar with Western cultural behaviours.

The final aspect that allowed me to completely rebuild and accept my new Canadian identity was a course I took at my host university during the second half of my exchange titled “Sociology of Globalization.” In the textbook of that course, there was a chapter about the immigrant experience in America and looked primarily at Asian immigrants. Its description about the experience of second-generation immigrants where they are caught between their parents’ identity and the identity of their “adoptive” home struck a chord with me. When I discussed privately with the course’s professor about my identity crisis, he told me that my identity is based on where my mind and soul feel most at ease.

Therefore, the first half of my exchange was marked by identity searching and the second half was marked by the acceptance of a new Canadian identity. How has my new Canadian identity fared since my return to Ottawa in 2018 and what is it like now with the ongoing pandemic in 2021?

Upon my return to Ottawa in 2018, I realized that having been educated my entire life in Ottawa embedded a sense of Canadian-ness that I was not aware of before. The homesickness I felt in Japan was evidence of that and one way I would relieve that feeling was by listening to Canadian radio stations online. That does not mean that I feel that I “fit in” all the time though. The first time I felt out of place after my return was when my friends recommended me “Crazy Rich Asians” because it was a Hollywood movie that had an all-Asian cast. To be recommended a movie due to my ethnicity reminded me that the Canadian identity I discovered and accepted in Japan will be challenged. It reminded me of how my father told me as a child that when people outside Japan would look at me, they would not consider me as being Canadian but Japanese. I also remembered how foreigners and Japanese I met in Japan would also view me as Japanese but not Canadian until I stated that fact. Before my exchange, I was not bothered of having a different skin colour from white people in Ottawa because I believed myself to be Japanese.

Being judged by the colour of my skin and my “foreign” sounding name in the post-exchange period posed a new challenge to my sense of self once again because it conflicted with my new view of being Canadian after discarding my sense of Japanese-ness. This new challenge took about a year to completely break me. My new sense of self crumbled during a graduation trip to China in the summer of 2019 to celebrate my Chinese friend’s wedding. He was getting married to a German girl, and whenever I was with his German in-laws, Chinese people would approach me first instead of them because they assumed I was Chinese. To not be recognized as a Canadian while abroad was the final blow to my new sense of self and I no longer felt like I had a home or identity. When I got back to Canada from China, I began psychological treatment for depression, but this would prove to not be enough. I did a medical withdrawal after the first semester of my graduate studies in December 2019 because not having a home and identity from hating and rejecting myself over the years in parts and finally in whole had taken its toll on me.

With the many lockdowns from the pandemic, I have reflected a lot on my identity's journey since 2017. I believed myself to be Japanese, Canadian, or neither during a four-year period. I never considered myself to be both Japanese and Canadian because I wanted to fit into one identity neatly but that not been my reality. Since the beginning of 2021, I have come to accept that I am Japanese-Canadian because some of my cultural interests and behaviours will seem foreign to one side or the other but are natural to me. Accepting this new identity has brought a sense of peace, and I am happy to feel this like in a long time. This is evidenced by my return to graduate studies and wanting to write my master's thesis that is related to Japan. Having an intense internal battle about my identity over a four-year period has been very tiring and I am glad that it seems to be at an end. Instead of hating and rejecting both sides, I have come to accept and embrace both sides. It feels oddly comforting, but perhaps that is because being at home is comforting. And I hope you are or will find yourself at home in comfort too.

「ただいま。」 Tadaima - I'm back (home).

「お帰り。」 Okaeri - Welcome back (home).

Thank you for reading my personal reflection in the first volume of *Nikkei Monogatari*. My thanks also extend to Mimi and Sachi of Japanese for Nikkei for providing the opportunity to publicize these personal reflections.



Maria Claridge - English half Japanese. I love writing.

Linda Cooper is a communications consultant and freelance writer with more than 30 years of experience as a public relations practitioner, U.S. Senate press secretary and journalist. She holds a BA in journalism and political science from Mississippi University for Women. Linda lives in Tennessee, and in her spare time enjoys reading, traveling and playing the ukulele.

Link to original source. Being reprinted with permission “Discover Nikkei” website. <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2016/8/17/yokoso-yall/>

Dona Nabata is a Sansei, or third-generation Japanese Canadian, and an artist living and working on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waath Peoples. In her undergraduate years, she spent 2 years in Japan studying pottery, the Koto, a type of harp, and the Japanese language. She graduated from the Emily Carr University in Ceramics and the University of British Columbia in Japanese Language and Literature. Working mainly with prints and paint, she maintains a studio on Granville Island.

Anna Omori (she/her). Raised in the NY suburbs, living in Tokyo for the past three or so years. Though this began as an exercise in amateur translation, it was limited by my current Japanese language ability. So, while the Japanese version is a bit more literal (and grammatically incorrect), the two texts loosely express the same idea.

Miya Turnbull is a multi-disciplinary visual artist, working mostly with masks and self-portraits. She is Yonsei (fourth generation) mixed Japanese-Canadian, born in Alberta and currently living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Miya has exhibited her work throughout Canada and internationally and is the recipient of many grant awards (thank you Arts NS). To see more of her work, please visit www.miyaturnbull.com and follow her on Instagram: @miyamask.

Dr. Aurora Tsai grew up in Ohio and Maryland. She received her MA in Second Language Studies at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa and her PhD in Second Language Acquisition at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research currently focuses on the intersections of race, language, and identity, and its applications towards language education and policy. In her most recent project, she looks at how raciolinguistic ideologies equating race and language influence the identity development of mixed race and mixed heritage individuals.

Ken Yoshida was born in Thailand in 1996 but was raised in Ottawa since he was seven months old. His father is Tadashi Yoshida, who immigrated to Canada from Inuyama, Aichi during the early 1970s. He is currently a second-year master's student and graduate teaching assistant at the University of Ottawa. Nagoya food specialties like hitsumabushi, tebasaki, and kishimen are some of his favourite Japanese dishes. He can be contacted at kyosh073@uottawa.ca

ABOUT THE CO-FOUNDERS

Mimi Okabe was born in Miyagi but immigrated to Canada with her family when she was 11-months-old. She currently holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta where she currently teaches. Her research interests in Nikkei identity and culture were inspired by having co-founded Japanese for Nikkei. To learn more about her research initiatives please visit, mimiokabe.com

Sachi Kikuchi grew up in a biracial, bilingual, and bicultural household in Canada. After completing her MA in Theoretical Linguistics and a TESL certificate, she moved to Sendai, Miyagi. Four years later, Sachi returned to Canada, where she founded Kokoro Communications, which provides translation as well as Japanese and English language education, then co-founded Japanese for Nikkei with her childhood friend, Mimi.



つづく

To be continued...

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Instead of hating and rejecting both sides, I have come to accept and embrace both sides. It feels oddly comforting, but perhaps that is because being at home is comforting.

--Ken Yoshia

“

...my friends pointed out how small my eyes were in comparison to theirs. This triggered the beginning of my complex with my eyes. Some other children started chanting, 'Chinese, Chinese,' during break time.

--Maria Claridge

NIKKEI MONOGATARI

日系物語

