

“Am I Japanese? Am I Nikkei?”
An Exploration of the Identities of Yonsei and Gosei Japanese Canadians

by

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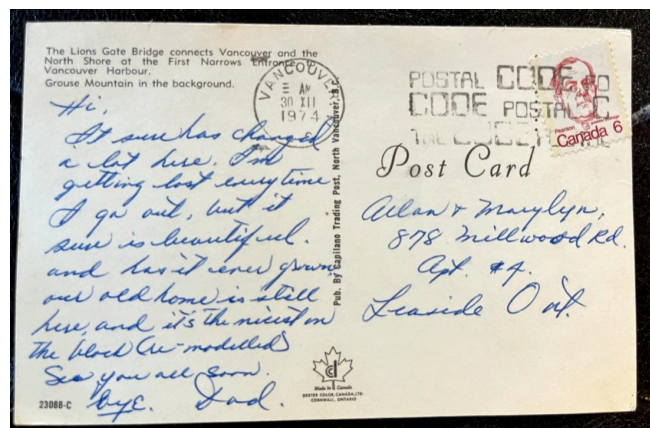
Prelude

In February 2024, I received a conspicuous text message from my grandmother asking me to call her as soon as possible. “You will not believe what I found,” she exclaimed as I picked up the phone. It was a postcard from my great-grandfather, John Nobuo Nagasaki, sent to my grandparents in 1974, almost 50 years prior. My great-grandfather was born in Vancouver on the 22nd of April, 1922. He was Canadian-born. However, he was also of Japanese descent and, despite never setting foot in Japan, was still considered ‘alien’ on so-called ‘Canadian’ soil. In 1942, when John Nobuo was 20 years old, he and his family were forcibly uprooted from the West Coast along with thousands of other Japanese Canadians and incarcerated in internment camps. Their family home in Vancouver was dispossessed and lost to them forever.

In 1974, John Nobuo visited Vancouver for the first time since his uprooting, a trip during which he wrote this postcard. As my grandma read it out loud over the phone, I felt my heart beat erratically in my chest. This postcard is the only piece of writing I have ever found from my great-grandfather, a figure in my ancestry who is somewhat of a mystery while simultaneously holding so much influence over my life and identity. The postcard read:

“Hi,

It sure has changed a lot here. I am getting lost every time I go out, But it sure is beautiful, and has it ever grown. Our old home is still here, and it's the nicest on the block (remodelled). See you all soon, Dad.”



I felt chills. “It’s practically a family artifact,” my grandmother went on, “look at how he calls it a home and not a house...really shows how they lost so much more than just a house, so much more than just things.” I felt tears well up in my eyes. This postcard offered a rare connection to the past, a short missive which briefly outlined the emotion behind what my great-grandfather went through in the 1940s. Today, my family is mixed, assimilated, and disconnected, a broad tapestry of trauma trickling down through the generations. In reading this short postcard, I formed a relationship with my heritage and the intergenerational trauma within my family, coming closer to understanding what it means for me to be Japanese Canadian, what it means to be a descendant of internment.

Introduction

During the Second World War, thousands of Japanese Canadians were forcibly uprooted from their homes and communities along the west coast of British Columbia, dispossessed of their property and belongings, and unjustly incarcerated in internment camps within the Interior or forced to work on sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba (Stanger-Ross, 2020). During this period, Japanese Canadians, also referred to as Nikkei (i.e., Japanese diaspora), were made to feel like “enemy aliens” in their own country as they were robbed of autonomy and voice and incarcerated for no other reason than their ethnic and cultural background (Aoki, 2019). Today, the shadow of the internment period continues to linger over Japanese Canadian families and communities across the country. After the war, against the backdrop of intense systemic racism, many Nikkei distanced themselves from community and culture and became silent on the events of internment (Ikebuchi & Ketchell, 2020). For many, assimilating into “Canadian” society became an act of survival (Tsing, 2015). Through these lingering repercussions of the internment era, numerous aspects of culture were lost within many Japanese Canadian families, including

language, religion, cultural traditions, and family heirlooms. Today, this burden of loss, assimilation, and enduring silence is carried by many of the younger generations within the Japanese Canadian community, as the descendants of those impacted by internment, straining their connection to the past and to one another.

As Japanese Canadians across the country work to reform community spaces and initiate intergenerational healing, many ask, ‘Where are the young people?’ As Sansei and Nisei (i.e., second and third-generation Japanese Canadians) stand ready to pass on the torch of maintaining community and cultural connections, they find that the younger generations are notably absent, raising concerns over the future of the spaces many fought so hard to build. However, I see that despite this absence, many young Nikkei are hungry for these community spaces and eager to create connections with other Japanese Canadians. Their noticeable absence in the community is then deeply layered and speaks to a multitude of little barriers which stand in their way. This research seeks to pull apart this deeply complex and layered phenomenon within the community by highlighting the perspectives and experiences of fourth and fifth-generation Japanese Canadians/Nikkei, also referred to as Yonsei and Gosei. Overall, by amplifying the voices of young Japanese Canadians, this research seeks to create a deeper understanding of the identities and experiences of Yonsei and Gosei as the descendants of the internment period.

So, what does it mean to be Nikkei and Japanese Canadian for Yonsei and Gosei? How does cooking as a form of inquiry shape our sense of community and Japanese Canadian identity? How does film, as a medium for generating results and an approach to ethnographic research, provide a valuable tool in telling the stories of Japanese Canadians? These three questions guide this research, which does not seek a solitary definition of Nikkei and Japanese Canadian identity but, instead, aims to explore multiple truths and perspectives, navigating the

many complexities of multicultural and multiracial identity within the Japanese Canadian community, using film as a medium to represent these narratives and center the voices of the participants. This paper seeks to provide the analytical background and literary context for the short film *In Our Grandparents' Kitchens*, which I created as the final product of my research on Yonsei and Gosei identity.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was conducted over the month of February 2024 in Victoria, B.C, with the primary data collection methods being organized food gatherings, participant observation, guided group discussion, semi-structured interviews, and the recording of audio and video content. The participants included 7 Yonsei and Gosei participants—6 of whom identified as Nikkei/Japanese Canadian and one who identified as Uchinanchu (Okinawan Canadian)—and my Sansei (third-generation) grandfather. All participants self-identified as being ‘mixed.’ Two Japanese Canadian food gatherings were held for the Yonsei and Gosei participants of this research, the first of which was held at the beginning of the research period and the second at the end. At the first food gathering, I conducted participant observation and guided a group discussion with the attending participants. The second food gathering was optional for participants to attend, as this gathering was used to gather video content for the short film created as part of this project. The Yonsei and Gosei participants who did not attend the second food gathering were not included in the short film due to the limitations of this project in terms of time and resources.

For my main methodological and analytical approaches, I applied auto-ethnography, Cooking as Inquiry, and multimodality. In applying auto-ethnography, arising research themes and collected data were analyzed, described, and understood through the lens of my own

personal experiences and reflections as the researcher and as a Gosei Nikkei myself (Ellis et al., 2011). Through using ‘Cooking as Inquiry—a method of research introduced by Brady (2011)—I acknowledge food and food preparation both as sites of knowledge and as a means to connect with my participants and form a sense of community. This approach is rooted in auto-ethnography and collective biography, focusing on how personal and shared experiences of food and cooking can reveal insights into Nikkei identity and perspectives. As a research approach, Cooking as Inquiry was applied in this project through the holding of two Japanese Canadian food gatherings with the Yonsei and Gosei participants. As an analytical framework, this approach allowed me to center food as an avenue for exploring Nikkei identity, collective experience, and the lasting implications of the internment period. Finally, in applying a multimodal approach, a short film was produced to disseminate the research results. In engaging the senses through film, this project seeks to represent and explore the varied lived experiences of Yonsei and Gosei Japanese Canadians, provoking understanding through embodied and immersive techniques (Pink, 2006).

“Who are we?” The experiences and identities of Yonsei and Gosei

“What does it mean to be Nikkei and Japanese Canadian?” This was one of the most predominant questions guiding this research project. It is also a question I have grappled with my entire life. No amount of ancestry DNA tests, family reunions, Internment documents, or sushi Christmas dinners have ever made me assured of what it meant for me to be of Japanese Canadian descent. If you had asked me a year ago if I identified as Japanese Canadian, I would have said no. If you looked at me, you would say the same. I am white, the perfect product of three generations of assimilation post-internment. Claiming Japanese Canadian identity felt like an encroachment on ‘authentic’ Japaneseness, something I felt my family was far removed from.

It wasn't until I started attending events run by the local Japanese Canadian organization, the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society (VNCS), that I began my own journey of identity. It is in these community spaces that I came to understand that there is no one way of being Japanese Canadian, that it is a multifaceted experience in essence, unique to the personal experiences of each individual, the Japanese Canadian community itself a collage of diverse expressions of identity.

In order to understand the identities and experiences of Yonsei and Gosei Nikkei, it is important for us to outline two of the most significant repercussions of the internment period within Japanese Canadian families: silence and assimilation. As stated by Ikebuchi and Ketchell (2020), silence was one of the most prominent responses to internment. As Sugiman so perfectly articulates, "in response to this act of violence, for years the Nisei (second-generation), attempted to filter the painful memories of their internment - by not literacizing their stories, by not putting reminiscence to paper, nor verbally articulating their experiences as part of a public discourse" (Sugiman, 2004, p. 361). Much of this silence was an attempt for Japanese Canadian parents to shield their children and subsequent descendants from the violence and racism they endured, this act of protection stretching to parents then encouraging their children into cultural assimilation and the shedding of their Japaneseness (Sugiman, 2004, p.361).

This assimilation went beyond simply accelerated acculturation post World War Two, as in the 1960s–1970s, the number of Japanese Canadians entering interracial or 'mixed' marriages accelerated to the point where it became the new norm within the community. This 'norm' has persisted into the 20th century, as today, the Japanese Canadian community continues to hold the highest rate of interracial marriage out of any minority group in Canada (*Mixed Unions in Canada*, n.d.). As a result, Yonsei and Gosei Nikkei are primarily 'mixed' and significantly

acculturated into 'white' Canadian society, thus further complicating their connection to the Japanese Canadian community and identity. This "racial erasure" of Japanese Canadians, as termed by some writers, which started in the years following internment, was fueled by the fear of being once again discriminated against for being a distinct cultural and economic group within Canada, resulting in a deep sense of shame which echoes across the generations (Sugiman, 2004, p. 361).

Shame stands at the root of this silence and assimilation within the Japanese Canadian community. Jennifer Matsunaga (2023) examines experiences of shame within the Japanese Canadian and Indigenous communities in light of historical trauma, colonial state violence, and assimilation. As Matsunaga (2023, Episode 2) highlights, a key feature of historical trauma is that it is generally intergenerational, subsequently causing shame as a result of this trauma to trickle down through the generations. However, this shame is carried differently between generations, where one is often trying to cope with trauma and shame through disconnection, the other yearns and searches for reconnection (Matsunaga, 2023, Episode 2). In other words, for the generations of Japanese Canadians who were directly impacted by internment, their silence and assimilation are born out of acts of survival and desire to shield their descendants, while the descendants of internment experience shame through not knowing their families' experiences or having cultural knowledge. Shame interrupts Japanese Canadian cultural reconnection in the face of assimilation, impacting feelings of disconnection and authenticity of identity for Yonsei and Gosei.

Authenticity of identity was something which arose for all of the participants of this study. For the younger generation within the Japanese Canadian community, the loss of culture and knowledge experienced within our families due to intergenerational silence, assimilation,

and an underlying sense of shame has resulted in a disconnection from a sense of identity. Many of us carry an internalized shame often attached to the feeling that we are not ‘authentic’ enough to engage with Japanese Canadian identity or community. As stated by one participant, Robyn Nakano, “That’s part of why I feel I can’t say I’m Japanese, because I don’t have that cultural knowledge and I don’t know my own Japanese family’s history, so who am I to claim that identity?” Other participants discussed times when non-Japanese people who claimed to “love everything Japanese” would correct the pronunciation of their own name or claim to be “more Japanese” than them because they had more knowledge of Japanese culture and language. Some participants expressed that these experiences often made them feel that they were not “Japanese enough.” Overall, many of my participants expressed that there seemed to be an overarching idea of authentic Japaneseness that they simply did not feel aligned with, disrupting their sense of belonging and efforts to reconnect with their heritage.

However, through listening to one another’s perspectives on identity and belonging, my participants and I began to realize that we all felt some degree of disconnection or inauthenticity. Through our discussions, we found that while our individual lived experiences and identities are unique and diverse from one another, there are many perspectives and experiences that we share; this has instilled in us the understanding that the impacts of internment, which often incite feelings of inauthenticity, in fact, validate our presence within the Japanese Canadian community and connects us to other Yonsei and Gosei. Ironically, a sense of disconnection from identity and community unites us. Overall, this research demonstrates that there is no solitary answer to the question, “What does it mean to be Japanese Canadian and Nikkei?”

Food Gatherings: Creating Space

A critical part of this research project was the holding of two Japanese Canadian food gatherings for the Yonsei and Gosei participants. During these food gatherings, all of us worked together to make Japanese Canadian dishes from a cookbook titled *Just Add Shoyu*. This cookbook is a collection of Japanese Canadian recipes intermixed with personal stories, gathered by community members out of a desire to record and compile many favourite comfort foods which connect to our families' experiences and histories within Canada ("Just Add Shoyu Celebrates its 10th Anniversary," 2020).

But why did I choose to center these gatherings around food? As mentioned previously, in light of the dispossession, displacement, and internment of Japanese Canadians, many families disconnected themselves from their Japaneseness, causing many aspects of culture to become lost to the younger generations. However, despite this, food continues to be passed on within our families (Ikebuchi & Ketchell, 2020). Japanese Canadian food and identity were reformed and reimagined through internment and displacement, powered by feelings of loss, survival, and a desire to retain a connection to our pasts ("Tastes of Internment," n.d.). Nikkei dishes tell a story not only of struggle and loss but of resilience and survival. In engaging with food, this project seeks to utilize a powerful avenue for Yonsei and Gosei to come together and connect with their heritage.

In the food gatherings, participants were not asked to perform identity (Clammer, 2015) as proof of "Japaneseness," but rather were asked to engage with the practices and spaces both lost and formed through Internment and dispossession, forging and nurturing connection to our pasts and to one another through the food of our families (Ikebuchi & Ketchell, 2020). There was no judgement from anyone in not knowing how to make these dishes, as we worked with one another to learn these recipes and generate cultural knowledge together. The food gatherings

allowed participants to connect over shared experiences while simultaneously allowing for multiple experiences to exist in one place. In doing so, feelings of belonging and validation arose within this space.

The main goal in holding these food gatherings was to create a sense of community among the participants and forge space, which is specifically for Yonsei and Gosei. Within my engagement in local Nikkei community organizations, I began to realize the importance of having spaces that are specifically for young people within the community, especially as Japanese Canadians work to facilitate collective healing in light of the lingering impacts of internment. One of my participants, Natsuki Abe—who grew up being significantly engaged in the Japanese Canadian community in Victoria, B.C.—highlighted the importance of this within our interview. As she stated:

“You can learn a lot about yourself from talking to other people and like learning about their experiences. Whether or not they're the same or different, I think it's healing in a way, to just connect with other people and especially connect over shared things. And even though you may have shared things, they manifest differently.”

At the end of the day, my main objective in conducting this research was to create space for young Japanese Canadians within Victoria, B.C. If nothing else came out of this research, I would be happy if I succeeded in creating a sense of community and belonging for my Yonsei and Gosei participants. In this way, I apply a framework of reciprocity to my research, as I place the needs of the community above the goals of the research project (Campbell & Lassiter, 2014). I also work to adopt perspectives of community leadership as introduced by the participants of Jennifer Matsunaga's podcast (Matsunaga, 2023, Episode 3), where leadership is not determined

by wealth and power but rather by one's ability to create space for others. As reflected in the quote from Natsuki written above, creating these community spaces is important to being able to approach topics of Japanese Canadian identity within ethnographic research, as it is through connecting with other Yonsei and Gosei that we are able to form a deeper understanding of our own identities and what it means for us to be Japanese Canadian. Overall, the food gatherings created enriching spaces of community, affirmation of identity, and celebration of heritage, highlighting food as a powerful conduit for creating a sense of togetherness among young Japanese Canadians, allowing participants to learn together and (re)claim cultural knowledge.

“In Our Grandparents’ Kitchens”: Honouring our predecessors

Growing up, I always loved going to my grandfather's house in Cowichan, B.C. I would spend hours in his kitchen, as he would make me Japanese food and regale me with stories about our fishermen and samurai ancestors. When I was little, people would always ask me about my identity, demanding, “How did someone who looks like you end up with a last name like that?” or sometimes even simply, “How much are you?” I never really knew how to answer these questions, not knowing how to equate my identity to a fractured math equation. So, I would often just respond simply, “My grandpa is Japanese Canadian.” For me, my grandpa was my Japaneseness (Ohama, 2003).

For Yonsei and Gosei, our grandparents can be both a point of connection and disconnection to Japanese Canadian identity, due to the silence and shame which still lingers within our families. However, no matter how silent or acculturated our grandparents and family members may be, they still hold an important connection to our heritage and identities. Many of the participants in this study discussed that losing a Japanese Canadian relative becomes so much more than just losing a loved one, as we also lose a piece of our identity or claim to heritage. In

the face of silence and loss of culture within our families, losing a Japanese Canadian relative often also means losing our family histories and cultural knowledge forever.

However, food often offers a way for us to connect with our relatives, as one of the only aspects of culture which continues to be passed down and engaged within our families today. As described by Ikebuchi about her own experiences as a Sansei Japanese Canadian woman, “it was through food that [she] was able to connect with [her] grandmother,” and today, it is through food that she “remembers and honours a past to which [she] has only tenuous connections” (Ikebuchi & Ketchell, 2020, p. 30). I decided to name the film “In Our Grandparents’ Kitchens” in order to honour this narrative. For many of us, our lives have been burdened by the weight of the conflicting identities we carry. So, my hope for the food gatherings and this film was to recreate the safety of my grandfather's kitchen, where I have always been allowed to exist as a whole.

Film as Methodology: An approach to imparting ethnographic voice

As stated previously, the primary findings and results of this ethnographic research amalgamated into the creation of a short film titled “In Our Grandparents’ Kitchens.” Using a Canon EOS Rebel T7 DSLR Camera with an 18-55mm IS lens, my approach to filming involved initially taking atmospheric video clips of the surroundings of the filming location and offhandedly recording sounds on my smartphone microphone. Then, I took video shots of my participants as they engaged in various activities. The first filming location was at my grandpa’s house, where he made Japanese food; the second location was at the Fairway Market and Fujiya on Shelborne, where one participant shopped for ingredients for our upcoming food gathering; and finally, the third location was at my own house, where I filmed the second food gathering. After this was completed, I took quotes from my interviews with each participant who consented

to participate in the film and collaborated with them to make a short script, which I then recorded with them dictating to the camera. I then wrote a narrative script for myself to provide context for the film and drive the storyline, which I recorded as an audio clip on my smartphone.

Through my editing, I sought to create a rich tapestry of sound and visuals to engage the senses of the audience and create an immersive film (Pink, 2006). Those watching the film are intended to feel like they are sitting at the table, engaging with the food and connecting with the participants. By intermixing interview clips with atmospheric shots, I sought to allow the audience to form an understanding of the underlying significance and meaning behind each scene by highlighting the perspectives and narratives of the participants.

Using film as the primary medium for disseminating research results, I impart my ethnographic voice through subtle narration, storyline, and editing. In using this approach, I apply the method of “speaking nearby” rather than “speaking about,” allowing the voices of my participants to stand on their own with only very subtle influence from myself through editing and directorial instruction (Chen, 1992). Additionally, this film acts as an autoethnography in itself, mapping out my journey of identity as I work to connect with my family history and build a sense of community with other Yonsei and Gosei Japanese Canadians. In this way, I incorporate reflexivity and state my own positionality. Therefore, the film's final product is deeply interpretative and encompasses many perspectives and expressions of Yonsei and Gosei's identity. This allows this project to highlight the perspectives of Japanese Canadians, creating important avenues for understanding and representation, while avoiding broad generalizations about the beliefs and experiences of the entire Nikkei community. Overall, the use of film within this research project highlights the potential of multimodality within ethnography as a powerful medium for anthropological and cultural inquiry, suggesting a move towards more interpretive,

fluid, and dynamic methodologies that reflect the complexities of human cultures, experiences and identities (Chen, 1992).

Results: Film Synopsis

What does it mean to be Japanese Canadian? Growing up, I always loved spending time at my grandpa's house. When I was little, I knew that a visit to my grandpa's house meant that we were going to get a sushi feast, and I would spend the whole car ride up the island eagerly daydreaming about Futomaki rolls and sweet Inari pockets. I would spend hours at his kitchen counter, watching him make each dish as I helped him fan the rice and snack on pungent pieces of Takuan, which my grandpa affectionately calls 'stinky pickle.' It was in this space that I first learned about the Japanese internment camps of World War Two and my own family's experience in them. In many ways, it was in my grandfather's kitchen that I first learned who I was and what it meant for me to be Japanese Canadian. Within this film, I take you to my grandfather's home, the place which I acknowledge as containing the roots of my Japaneseness. Watching my grandfather joyfully dance around his kitchen, flitting from roll to roll, as he tells me stories of his own life with the nostalgic sounds of Sukiyaki playing in the background, I transport you to my childhood. The rain is gently tapping on the rooftop, the air smells like nori, and I am once again immersed in the safety of my grandfather's home, where, despite my conflicting and fractured identities, I have always been able to exist as a whole.

This film follows me as I try to connect with other young Japanese Canadians, using food as an avenue for coming together. Growing up, I always felt disconnected from other Japanese Canadians, but as I started meeting other young people within the community, I realized that they also felt this same sense of disconnection. So I decided to start holding food gatherings for Yonsei and Gosei Japanese Canadians, where we could all come together and learn how to make

our favourite Japanese comfort foods, working together to generate cultural knowledge which has been lost or strained due to the lingering impacts of internment in our families. As participants share their own experiences of the food gathering within the film, reflecting on their own memories of Japanese food growing up, we begin to understand the multiplicity of Japanese Canadian identity. In demonstrating the sense of belonging, validation and togetherness felt within this space, this film seeks to display the importance of community spaces on the identities of Yonsei and Gosei Japanese Canadians, and the power of food in transporting us back to our grandparents' kitchens, connecting us to our Japaneseness.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I want to return to my great-grandfather, John Nobuo Nagasaki. Not long after he sent that postcard to my grandparents, writing about his trip to Vancouver, he suddenly passed away. He died before redress was achieved, before what happened to him was even acknowledged by the government as an injustice. The postcard, shared in the prelude of this paper, is so short, yet I feel like it says so much. Growing up, my great-grandfather was always somewhat of a mystery to me. His story felt lost because of the gaps in my knowledge and the silence within our family. But in doing this research and reading this postcard, I feel connected to him. When I look at this film I have created, with my grandfather's contagious laugh and teasing smile, I think about my future children, who will be able to watch this film and know their great-grandfather in ways I will never be able to know mine (Peixoto, 2008).

In doing this research, and engaging with my own journey of healing, I often felt pain and loss that my great-grandfather was not here to heal alongside me. My great-grandfather, who changed his name from Nobuo to John after internment, who didn't even put his Japanese surname on a postcard addressed to his son, who was no older than I am now when he was

betrayed by his country and imprisoned for no other reason than his ethnicity. He was the one who was interned; he was the one who deserved to feel pride in his identity, and I, the product of three generations of post-internment assimilation, feel guilty to have been given the opportunity and privilege to heal and connect with my Japaneseness. However, in doing this research, I began to understand healing as non-linear, as through this work, I try my best to heal for my ancestors.

As I mentioned previously, it was at community events and spaces that I began to form a deeper understanding of my own identity. I particularly remember being at one said event and having a community member come up to me and ask, “So, you are Japanese Canadian, right?” I then responded with my usual jumble of words to explain myself without encroaching on Japanese identity, “Well, I have Japanese ancestry, my family was interned, but I would not really call myself Japanese Canadian.” To my surprise, the community member looked affronted at my explanation and teasingly demanded, “Well, what’s wrong with being Japanese Canadian?” This was a turning point for me, as I began to understand that by rejecting a Japanese Canadian identity, I was almost rejecting that part of my heritage. Japanese Canadian and Nikkei identity itself is a multifaceted experience, allowing for Yonsei and Gosei to claim their heritage and find community. Through this project, I work to reform my connection with my ancestors and my heritage, forging new community spaces and building relationships with those whose families were also impacted by internment. After engaging in this research project and pushing myself to engage in important identity work, I can now say that if you were to ask me again if I identified as Japanese Canadian, I would say yes, with pride.

Resources

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