

# “Am I Japanese? Am I Nikkei?” An Exploration of Yonsei And Gosei Japanese Canadian Identities

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## BACKGROUND

During the Second World War, thousands of Japanese Canadians, also referred to as *Nikkei* (i.e. Japanese diaspora), were forcibly uprooted from their homes and communities along the west coast of British Columbia, dispossessed of their property and belongings, and unjustly interned [1]. After the war, against the backdrop of intense systemic racism, many Japanese Canadians disengaged from community and culture and became silent on the events of internment. For many, turning to silence and assimilating into “Canadian” society became an act of survival [2].

Through amplifying the voices of young Japanese Canadians, this project creates a deeper understanding of the identities and experiences of *Yonsei* and *Gosei* (fourth and fifth-generation Japanese Canadians) as the descendants of the internment period, unpacking what it means to be *Japanese Canadian* or *Nikkei*.

## METHODOLOGY

This project took an anthropological qualitative approach. It included seven participants who self-identified as mixed and were either *Yonsei* or *Gosei* Japanese Canadians. Two Japanese Canadian food gatherings were held as part of the project, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Research methods and approaches include:

1. **Auto-ethnography** [3]
2. **“Cooking as Inquiry”** [4]
3. **Multimodality** [5]

## OBJECTIVES

This project does not seek a solitary definition of *Nikkei* or Japanese Canadian identity. Instead, it aims to explore multiple truths and perspectives, navigating the many complexities of multicultural and multiracial identity. For this poster, I asked each participant to send in documents or photos representing their Japanese Canadian identity and heritage, and created an identity map around the question, “What does it mean to be Japanese Canadian?”

## KEY THEMES

1. **Silence & Assimilation**
  - Silence was one of the most prominent responses to internment [6]. As a result, cultural knowledge and family history were not passed down to the younger generations, complicating their relationship with Japanese Canadian identity.
2. **Identity**
  - In today’s context, there is a prominent idea of what an “authentic” Japanese person is like. In this project, all participants felt they did not entirely align with this idea of “real Japanese-ness,” further complicating (re)connection with their heritage.
3. **Creating Space**
  - The food gatherings created enriching spaces of community, affirmation of identity, and celebration of heritage, where participants were not asked to perform identity [7] or prove their “Japanese-ness”.
4. **Food and Togetherness**
  - This project found that cultural food is a powerful conduit for creating a sense of togetherness among young Japanese Canadians, allowing participants to learn together and (re)claim cultural knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no solitary answer to the question, “What does it mean to be Japanese Canadian and Nikkei?” Our experiences are unique and diverse from one another, but a sense of disconnection from identity and community unites us. Through conducting food gatherings, this project forges spaces of belonging, using the food of our families to connect us to our pasts and one another [8].

## RESOURCES

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## What does it mean to be Japanese Canadian?

**Taylor**

Family portraits, sugar-beet farm and cultural parade

**Robyn**

Family portraits and family plot of land - dispossessed.

**Skylar**

Family portraits, family boat and Internment ID card

**Megan**

Two portraits of grandparents

**Natsuki**

Family recipes, pictures with family at Internment Camp, and ume blossom washi paper

**Djuna**

Family portraits and a postcard from great-grandfather

**Reyna**

Family portraits, repatriation document and Okinawan textile

**Grace**

Painting of family home - dispossessed and pictures with grandparents.