

# Creative Belongings Beyond Japan: Rethinking Belonging Using Novels by Nikkei Authors

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## Introduction

This paper asks what themes and strategies do Nikkei diaspora authors use to explore belonging in their works? I have two aims in asking this question. First, I wish to clarify the meaning of belonging in contemporary Japan and its diaspora which is often confused at the levels of the individual and the state<sup>1)</sup> or is conflated with other terms such as identity. I agree with the rising number of scholars who argue that previously held concepts of belonging, particularly in relation to a supposedly homogeneous Japan and its corresponding unique Japaneseness, are increasingly obsolete and need to be replaced.<sup>2)</sup> Second, I wish to test cutting-edge concepts of belonging with my research on Nikkei diaspora literature. Theories on belonging are contingent (at their very minimum) on spatial and temporal empirical characteristics. After grappling with innumerable theories spanning the social sciences and the humanities in the early stages of my academic career, I have come to find that literature, whilst certainly not explaining everything, can provide a nuanced understanding of contemporary (Nikkei) belonging which can be supplemented with theory. In their portrayal of characters negotiating multiple cultural identities and experiences of displacement, Nikkei diaspora authors reveal the complexities and fluidity of belonging in a globalised world, challenging the notion of a fixed and homogenous Japanese identity either inside or outside of Japan.

The concept of belonging is a common central theme in recent global literature. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the belonging of Indian im-

migrants in America. Andrea Levy's *Small Island* explores the belonging and displacement of West Indian immigrants in post-World War II Britain. Belonging reflects the human desire to connect with others and find a sense of place and community. This is particularly relevant in the context of diasporas, who are displaced from their homeland and must navigate new environments and identities in an era of super-diversity (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore). In this paper, I explore the expression of belonging in the works of Nikkei diaspora authors and consider the implications of their experiences for our understanding of diaspora literature.

The Nikkei diaspora is a diverse and complex group, with a history that spans several centuries and a range of geographical locations. From the early 19th century, Japanese immigrants and their descendants have settled in various parts of the world, including the Americas, Europe, Australia, and various countries in Asia. These experiences of migration and settlement have shaped the identities of the Nikkei diaspora. Nikkei diaspora literature offers a correspondingly rich and varied exploration of the experiences of belonging. Through their works, Nikkei diaspora authors express a range of emotions and perspectives, from nostalgia for their homeland to the challenges of adapting to new environments.

I begin with an overview of Nikkei diaspora authors and their works, highlighting the ways in which their historical experiences of migration and settlement have shaped their writing. I analyse specific examples of belonging in Nikkei diaspora literature, examining the ways in which these authors explore themes of connection and disconnection in their works. Finally, I consider the implications of these findings for our understanding of diaspora literature and the experiences of diaspora persons and communities.

## Background and context

### *Nikkei, diaspora, belonging*

First, it is important to define what is meant by the terms ‘Nikkei’, ‘diaspora’, and ‘belonging’. Nikkei are people of Japanese birth or heritage, or people who have entered a family union with Nikkei, plus their descendants. Nationality and citizenship are disregarded in my definition, although they are important when discussing Nikkei belonging. According to The Association of Nikkei and Japanese Abroad (“Who Are ‘Nikkei & Japanese Abroad?’”), there are approximately 3.8 million people of Japanese descent settled in countries around the world including Brazil (1.9 million), the United States (1.3 million), Canada (121,485), Peru (100,000), and Australia (36,000).

The meaning of the term diaspora has changed since its initial meaning based on the historical experiences of Jews exiled from their homeland. In everyday use today, its dictionary definition is “a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries, or the act of spreading in this way” (“Diaspora”). In academia, however, it has become a broad, contested field of study in the humanities straddling multiple disciplines. For my research, I am interested less in concepts of diaspora originating from ethnographic and empirical research, and more in diaspora in relation to literature and philosophy, particularly the characteristics of diasporas as created and elaborated upon by scholars such as Robin Cohen (3) who lists nine strands of diasporic rope: 1. Dispersal. 2. Expansion. 3. Retention. 4. Idealisation.<sup>3)</sup> 5. Return. 6. Distinctiveness. 7. Apprehension. 8 Creativity. 9. Solidarity.<sup>4)</sup>

Nikkei diaspora literature is therefore literature written by or about the Nikkei diaspora around the world. My research focuses on Nikkei diaspora literature in English-speaking countries. University students studying English literature in courses throughout North America are familiar with well-known Nikkei authors including John Okada and Ruth Ozeki in the United States, as well as Joy Kogawa and Roy Miki in Canada. In the United Kingdom, 2017 Nobel Prize

for Literature winner Kazuo Ishiguro is arguably the most famous Nikkei diasporic author of all. My recent research focuses on the underrepresented topic of Nikkei authors from Australia, of which there is a distinct lack of studies. There is a scarcity of significant Nikkei literature in other regions too such as New Zealand, as well as in English-speaking countries in the Asia-Pacific region such as Malaysia and Singapore, despite the presence of large Nikkei communities in these countries. It is worth noting that the lack of literature in the Asia-Pacific region may be due to the historical perception of the Japanese as aggressors. This differs from the perception of the Japanese in other English-speaking countries where their voices and stories of suffering are acknowledged.

I intimated earlier that the word belonging in English is often confused or conflated. The problem is that at face value it seems a common, simple, everyday word. Belonging means to feel a sense of welcome and acceptance to someone or something. But the subject of belonging can refer to a person, a minority, an ethnicity, even a country or a global diaspora. Where do these subjects belong? Is belonging temporary or permanent? Are there various degrees of belonging? How much agency does the subject have in determining their belonging? Who are the gatekeepers to belonging (or, in this context, the term 'social inclusion' might be a better description) and how do socio-political power dynamics work in relation to this? The seemingly straightforward concept of belonging, upon closer examination, reveals an intricate network of connections pertaining to the comprehension of minority identities, which necessitates an examination of the processes of racialisation.

Belonging is suggested to be a basic human need (Allen et al. 1134). It is a feeling of connectedness and attachment to a particular place, community, or culture. If one fails to find a sense of belonging, isolation, depression, or even suicide can ensue (Fisher et al.).<sup>5)</sup> Many Nikkei think about their identity and belonging at some stage in their life, usually, it is in adolescence or early adulthood, but sometimes it is brought into focus by an experience such as living in a different country or meeting people from a different culture.<sup>6)</sup> People become

aware of how their opinions and beliefs differentiate them. During this time, some people may discover where they belong, whereas many others do not. Like identity, belonging is not something fixed and absolute; rather, it is an ongoing journey throughout our lives as we encounter new experiences that will alter our thoughts, emotions, and perspective on ourselves.

### *Keiichiro Hirano*

Identity and belonging are important themes in the novels and essays of Japanese writer and thinker Keiichiro Hirano. His recent works, such as *A Man* (Hirano), depict the process of people from diverse cultural backgrounds redefining their sense of identity and belonging in Japan. As such, Hirano's work shares common ground with my work on Nikkei diaspora literature. In *A Man*, belonging refers to the way characters perceive themselves and their place in Japan. This can include their cultural background, personal values and beliefs, and relationships with others. The protagonists Kido and Rié struggle with their sense of belonging, either because they feel out of place in their current environment or because they are trying to find themselves and their place in the world.

But what had he really found? It was no longer clear to him. For the trauma of the earthquake had thrown him back into uncertainty and reawakened the question that he had thought long resolved. *Who am I?* Except it was not a simple repeat of the words that had perplexed him in his youth. Although the meaning of the question had hardly changed, its form had evolved in keeping with his age. Now he asked, *Did I make the right choice?* (Hirano 100)

In contrast, minor characters in the novel have a surer sense of their belonging, and feel at home in their surroundings, even the Japanese prisoner Omiura who taunts Kido over his Korean ancestry. Although some Japanese, such as Kido's father-law, maintain that "Zainichi or not, after three generations you're a full-blown Japanese" (Hirano 39), Omiura scowls and is contemptuous when dealing with Kido, suggesting that Kido's racialised body will never allow him to escape his ancestry: "Your face says it all. Especially the shape of your

nose and eyes. I can see through you in a second” (Hirano 129). The juxtaposition of these different levels of belonging adds depth and complexity to the characters and their experiences. They can also provide insight into the broader themes and ideas about society that Hirano is exploring.

There are many reasons why someone might find it difficult to belong when moving to a new country, regardless of their cultural background. Some common reasons include language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of a supportive social network. These reasons do not affect Kido. For Japanese people who move to other countries, these challenges may be compounded by the fact that Japan supposedly has a unique culture and way of life that can be very different from other countries. Additionally, Japanese people may face discrimination or prejudice in their new country, which can make it difficult for them to feel like they belong. Hirano turns this around by showing that the very same processes of racialisation that people of the Japanese diaspora have been fighting against in other countries around the world are also being used by Japanese against Zainichi in Japan such as Kido. Ultimately, the difficulty of belonging when moving to a new country is a complex and personal issue that can vary greatly from person to person but often shows similar processes of racialisation and othering.

Hirano’s ideas can be applied to Nikkei diaspora literature. First, Hirano’s (平野, chap.1) concept of *dividualism* challenges the idea of a unified true self identity,<sup>7)</sup> proposing that it is made up of various aspects of our personality that change depending on our interactions. The *dividual* is constantly in flux and undergoing continual change through their interactions. This can be seen in the experiences of diaspora characters who are struggling to find their place in a new culture and define their own identities. These characters often feel torn between their Japanese heritage and the culture of their host country, leading to a sense of dislocation and uncertainty.

Second, Hirano’s emphasis on the self as being shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which it exists can be seen in the way that diaspora characters

negotiate their identities in the face of societal expectations and norms. For example, a Japanese immigrant in America may feel pressure to assimilate and conform to American culture, leading to conflicts and dilemmas as they try to balance their own identity with the expectations of others. Hirano's compelling portrayal of Kido adds an additional layer of depth to the story and is interesting because of Kido's struggles with his identity as a naturalised Japanese of Korean descent. The novel offers an examination of the Japanese family registration system, which makes it possible for deception to occur.

Finally, Hirano's ideas on the self as being shaped by the past and present can be seen in the way that diaspora literature often explores themes of memory and nostalgia. People of diasporas struggle to reconcile their present lives with their past experiences and the memories of their homeland, leading to a sense of loss and longing for a sense of belonging and connection.

## Belonging across the English-speaking countries of the Nikkei diaspora

### *United States*

The Nikkei diaspora in the United States has a long and complex history, dating back to the early 19th century (Daniels). The first wave of Japanese immigrants to the United States came in the late 1800s, when a small number of Japanese workers were brought to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations (Okamura, chap.2). This was followed by a larger wave of immigrants in the early 1900s, when Japanese workers were recruited to work on railroads and other industries on the mainland (Takaki 180). The early experiences of Japanese immigrants in the United States were often marked by discrimination and exclusion (Takaki 181-82). In the early 20th century, Japanese immigrants were subject to a range of racist policies, including the segregation of schools and the exclusion from certain professions (Takaki 197-212). The attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 led to further discrimination, as Japanese Americans were forced to relocate to incarceration camps during World War II. Despite these challeng-

es, the Nikkei diaspora in the United States has managed to build vibrant and resilient communities (Asakawa, chap.7). In recent decades, Japanese Americans and other Nikkei have made significant contributions to a range of fields, including art, literature, and business (Takezawa and Kina). The Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles is a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Nikkei diaspora in the United States.

Identity and belonging are major themes in Japanese American literature, as the experiences of Japanese Americans often involve a complex and fraught relationship with both their Japanese heritage and their American identity. This tension is a result of the unique position of Japanese Americans as a group that is simultaneously seen as foreign and yet also expected to assimilate into mainstream American culture. In *The Buddha in the Attic* (Otsuka), Julie Otsuka examines the lives of Japanese picture brides who were brought to America in the early 20th century and the challenges they faced as they tried to navigate their new lives in a foreign country. The novel shows how these women struggled to reconcile their traditional Japanese culture with the expectations of their new Japanese American husbands and communities, and how their experiences of discrimination and isolation often made it difficult for them to fully belong in either world such that “...we wondered if we had made a mistake, coming to such a violent and unwelcoming land. *Is there any tribe more savage than the Americans?*” (Otsuka 36).

Another notable example of this tension can be seen in the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. The forced relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans was a deeply traumatic experience that stripped many people of their homes, belongings, and sense of belonging. It is compellingly recounted by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s memoir *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston and Houston). In her novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka also explores the experiences of a Japanese American family during this time and the ways in which the incarceration fundamentally changes their sense of self and their relationship to America. In another memoir, *Citizen 13660* (Okubo),

Mine Okubo examines her own experiences of incarceration and reflects on the various ways in which she and other Japanese Americans were able to maintain their cultural traditions and sense of community despite the challenges they faced.

In John Okada's novel *No No Boy* (Okada), one of the first Japanese American novels, belonging is explored through the experiences of the protagonist, Ichiro Yamada. After being imprisoned for refusing to fight for the United States in World War II, Ichiro struggles to find a sense of belonging in a society that ostracises him for his choice. Through Ichiro's relationships with his family and other Japanese Americans, the novel explores the complexities of Japanese American belonging. Ichiro's father, a first-generation Japanese immigrant, is fiercely loyal to the United States and feels shame at Ichiro's decision to refuse the draft. Meanwhile, Ichiro's uncle, a veteran who fought in the war, supports Ichiro's decision but still grapples with the trauma of his own experiences. Ichiro struggles to connect with other Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during the war. Many of them, including his former girlfriend, Emi, have assimilated into mainstream American culture and reject Ichiro's embrace of their Japanese heritage. In turn, Ichiro is rejected by the white community for being Japanese American and is unable to fully assimilate into either culture. Ultimately, Ichiro must come to terms with his own belonging and make the choice to either reject or embrace his Japanese heritage. Through his journey, the novel explores the challenges and complexities of belonging in a society that defines one's identity based on race and ethnicity.

In addition to issues of assimilation and discrimination, Japanese American literature also often explores the ways in which people negotiate their multiple identities and find a sense of belonging within their communities. A common theme in post-war Japanese American literature is the idea of the model minority stereotype, which portrays Japanese Americans as hardworking, successful, and well-assimilated into American society (Iino). This stereotype has often been used to contrast the perceived failures of other minority groups and to promote

the idea that with enough effort, any person can overcome discrimination and achieve the American Dream. However, the reality for many Nikkei is often more complex and fraught than this stereotype suggests (Chou and Feagin; De Souza, “The Ambivalent Model Minority”).

Amongst Nikkei literature, Japanese American literature provides the richest and most complex exploration of the Nikkei experience that is often caught between two cultures and struggling to find a sense of belonging in both. Through their stories, these authors shed light on the challenges and triumphs of people who are trying to navigate their own identities and place in the world.

### *Canada*

The Nikkei diaspora in Canada mirrors in many ways the long and complex history of Nikkei in other countries in the Americas. Canadian Nikkei literature offers another valuable perspective on the experiences of Nikkei and the complexities of belonging. It highlights the struggles and triumphs of trying to maintain a sense of self in a world that often sees them as outsiders. Beginning in the late 19th century, Japanese immigrants began to settle in Canada, primarily in British Columbia (Nakayama). These early immigrants were primarily male and worked in industries such as fishing, logging, and farming (Takata, pt.1). In the early 20th century, however, the Canadian government implemented a series of policies that restricted Japanese immigration and restricted the rights of Canadian Nikkei. For example, the 1908 Gentlemen’s Agreement prohibited Japanese women from immigrating to Canada, and the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act imposed a “head tax” on Japanese immigrants. These policies, along with others, effectively limited the growth of the Canadian Nikkei community (Adachi, chap.6).

During World War II, the situation for Canadian Nikkei became even more difficult. In 1942, the Canadian government declared Canadian Nikkei to be “enemy aliens” and forcibly relocated more than 20,000 individuals to incarceration camps in the interior of British Columbia (Adachi 224). Many of these people lost their homes, businesses, and personal belongings, and were not able to return to their homes until after the war (Adachi 335). After the war, Canadian Nikkei

faced ongoing discrimination and marginalization. In 1949, the Canadian government passed the Canadian Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship to all Canadian Nikkei who had served in the military during the war. However, Canadian Nikkei continued to face discrimination and prejudice in their daily lives, and many chose to leave Canada in search of greater opportunities.

Today, the Canadian Nikkei community continues to thrive, despite the challenges of its history. While many Canadian Nikkei have chosen to assimilate into mainstream Canadian culture, others have worked to preserve their cultural traditions and heritage (Makabe, chap.5). The Canadian Nikkei community is vibrant, diverse, and continues to make important contributions to Canadian society.

Canadian Nikkei literature often explores belonging as it relates to their historical experiences. Many writers explore the struggles of trying to balance their Japanese cultural heritage with their Canadian identity, and the challenges of being a minority group in a predominantly white society. Some writers, such as Joy Kogawa in her novel *Obasan* (Kogawa), explore the experiences of Canadian Nikkei during World War II, when they were forced to leave their homes and live in incarceration camps. Kogawa was born in Canada to Japanese immigrant parents, and her experiences of growing up as a Canadian Nikkei during World War II have shaped much of her writing. *Obasan* tells the story of a Canadian Nikkei child who is forced to flee her home along with her family during the war, and who must confront the trauma of her experiences as an adult. Through this novel, Kogawa explores the ways in which displacement can impact a person's sense of belonging. The novel highlights the difficulties of trying to maintain a sense of belonging in a hostile environment.

Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether you admitted it or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt

in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spiders' legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. Where do we come from Obasan? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt. (Kogawa 271)

The protagonist, Naomi, must confront the trauma of her experiences and the ways in which they have impacted her sense of belonging. Throughout the novel, Naomi struggles to find a sense of connection, commenting upon the contradictions of belonging in Canada: "we're a 'lower order of people' in one breath we are damned for being 'unassailable' and the next there is fear that we'll assimilate" (Kogawa 104). She is haunted by the memories of her experiences during the war and feels disconnected from her heritage and her community. As a result, she often feels lost and alone, unable to fully connect with those around her. However, as the novel progresses, Naomi begins to find a sense of belonging through her connections with other Canadian Nikkei. Through her interactions with her aunt, uncle, and cousin, she begins to understand the importance of her heritage and the ways in which it can provide a sense of connection and community. By the end of the novel, Naomi has found some sense of belonging and connection, even in the midst of her displacement.

Later Nikkei writers in Canada, such as Hiromi Goto in her novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Goto), focus on the experiences of Canadian Nikkei in the post-war period as they struggle to rebuild their lives and integrate into mainstream Canadian society. These writers explore the challenges of navigating between two cultures, and the complexities of belonging in a multicultural society. *Chorus of Mushrooms* is an important work because it shows that belonging is fluid and multifaceted, varying according to time, space, gender, and generation (De Souza, "Rooted-Transnationalism and the Representational Function of Food in Hi-

romi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*"). Within the three generations of females of a Canadian Nikkei family living in modern rural Alberta, belonging varies between the 'Japanese' grandmother Naoe, her 'Canadian' daughter Keiko, and her bicultural granddaughter Murasaki. Rather than attempting to describe their belonging as fixed, Goto shows the changes in their belonging over the course of the novel using everyday events such as eating food:

Keiko. My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert. Converted from rice and daikon to weiners and beans. Endless evenings of tedious roast chicken and honey smoked ham and overdone rump roast. My daughter, you were raised on fish cakes and pickled plums. This Western food has changed you and you've grown more opaque even as your heart has brittle. Sliver-edged and thin as paper. I love you still. You are my daughter, after all, and this you cannot change. For all that you call me and treat me as a child. I am not your grandmother. I am your mother. (Goto 24)

Even at the end of the novel, belonging is still something that is ongoing and varies between each Canadian Nikkei character.

### *United Kingdom*

The first wave of Japanese immigration to the UK occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Japanese students and scholars came to study at British universities, along with workers such as government officials and servants (Itoh 3). During World War II, many Japanese returned to Japan, and 114 Japanese men were incarcerated in the Isle of Man (Itoh 185). There was another wave of immigration after World War II, especially in the 1970s and 1980s as the Japanese economy grew internationally, with many Japanese nationals residing in London and the South East of England where their corporate offices were located, although the prevalence of Japanese institutions such as schools and banks, plus the ascendancy of Japan during that period, tended to mean such residents did not seek to belong to the UK (Sakai 27). Since then, the Nikkei diaspora in the UK has continued to grow and evolve such that in 2021 there

were an estimated 63,659 Japanese people living in the UK, with concentrations in London and other major cities (“Japan-United Kingdom Relations (Basic Data)”). The majority of Nikkei diaspora in the UK are of working age and are employed in a range of industries, from finance to technology, with an increasing tendency to wish to belong to the UK more permanently (White). Most recently, there have been an increasing number of young Japanese moving to the UK as cultural migrants to engage in music, dance, fashion, film, art, and other artistic activities (Fujita).

The belonging of the Japanese diaspora in the UK, particularly in super-diverse London, therefore, can take on many forms depending on a person’s unique circumstances and experiences. On one end of the spectrum, there are Japanese immigrants who have fully embraced London as their permanent home and have successfully integrated into the local culture. This may involve learning English, adapting to local customs and traditions, and forming deep connections with the community. On the other hand, there are also Japanese expatriates who are in London for short-term assignments, such as company employees and their families. These people may find it more difficult to fully assimilate into the local culture due to the temporary nature of their stay. They may choose to maintain a more insular lifestyle, limiting their social interactions to other Japanese expatriates and retaining many of their traditional customs and practices. Neither of these experiences is inherently better or worse, as cultural assimilation can be a highly personal and subjective process, as we have seen in the other English-speaking countries in this paper. Some people may thrive in an environment of full assimilation, while others may prefer to maintain a distinct cultural identity while living abroad.

Though it is mostly only his earlier work which explicitly references Japan and the Japanese diaspora, Kazuo Ishiguro is at the cutting-edge of Nikkei writers in expressing and promulgating new ideas about belonging in society. In Ishiguro’s most recent novel *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro), which is set in the near future, the main character Klara is an artificial intelligence (AI) who is a so-

lar-powered human-like robot called an 'AF' (artificial friend). She is purchased by a girl named Josie, and the two develop a close bond. Throughout the novel, Klara grapples with her sense of belonging. As an AF, she is treated as a tool rather than a living being by many of the humans she encounters. She is constantly reminded of her status as a machine, which causes her to question her own worth and humanity.

Our generation still carry the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now. You know that. For people our age it's a hard one to let go. We *have* to let go, Chrissie. There's nothing there. Nothing inside Josie that's beyond the Klara's of this world to continue. (Ishiguro 210)

Additionally, Klara feels a strong desire to be accepted by Josie as a true friend. She is constantly seeking validation and acceptance from Josie, who at times treats her coldly and dismissively. Klara's sense of belonging is also challenged by the fact that she is not human and is constantly reminded of the limitations of her artificial form. Klara ultimately comes to understand that her worth and humanity are not determined by her status as an AF, but by the connections and relationships she forms with others. Indeed, it is not just robots becoming more like humans, but the possibility that humans might ultimately be replaceable:

I think I hate Capaldi because deep down I suspect he may be right. That what he claims is true. That science has now proved beyond doubt there's nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can't excavate, copy, transfer. That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise. A kind of superstition we kept going while we didn't know better. (Ishiguro 224)

## Beyond histories, Beyond Japan(eseness)

From the previous section, a key theme that emerges in Nikkei diaspora literature is the impact of historical events on the experiences of belonging. Many Nikkei diaspora authors explore the experiences of Japanese immigrants and their descendants during World War II, when they were forced to endure incarceration or were repatriated. These experiences of displacement and trauma can have a lasting impact on a person's sense of belonging and identity which explains why it is still being written about even today. Nikkei diaspora literature also explores the ways in which persons and communities can find a sense of belonging in their new homes over subsequent generations. This can take many forms, from connecting with other members of the Nikkei diaspora to finding ways to celebrate and preserve their heritage. Through these works, Nikkei diaspora authors offer insights into the complexities and challenges of belonging in a new country. Belonging is often explored through the experiences of characters who find themselves caught between two or more cultures.

Another way in which Nikkei diaspora authors express belonging is through the depiction of their varying experiences of acculturation and assimilation during different periods in different countries. In their works, these authors often portray the challenges and obstacles they face as they try to adapt to their new environments while also maintaining their cultural heritage and traditions. Authors express belonging through the portrayal of relationships with other members of the diaspora community. These authors often depict the bonds of friendship and solidarity that exist among members of the Nikkei diaspora, as well as the ways in which these bonds help them to maintain their cultural traditions and sense of identity. However, it can be difficult for Nikkei diasporas to connect with each other using a shared concept of Japaneseness or Japanese heritage because, as the Nikkei authors I have showcased in this paper show, the idea of what it means to be Japanese can vary greatly depending on the person's cultural background, personal experiences, generation, gender, and per-

ceptions. Additionally, there may be differences in language, customs, and traditions among Japanese people from different regions or generations. The concept of Japaneseness is often associated with a specific, homogeneous national identity, which can exclude or marginalise those who do not fit this narrow definition, including the Nikkei diaspora. Some diaspora writers are, therefore, trying to create a new space in the literary imaginary for contemporary belonging which necessitates either rewriting or recalibrating the rules of the dominant national canon.

I fell in love with the idea that a story could have places of origin and its own lineage, not entirely unlike a person. A fairy tale could move from one region to another, and it would change clothes. It could adopt the customs and beliefs of its new home, and it would still retain much of its core. The notion that a story could adjust to suit a new home was such a hopeful one for an immigrant kid who grew up knowing that he and his parents didn't come from the same places. (Nguyen)

This quotation suggests that Trung Le Nguyen views stories, particularly fairy tales, as having a sense of belonging and connection to a particular place or region. Le Nguyen compares stories to people, suggesting that they can have a lineage and a place of origin and can change and adapt when they move to a new location. He sees this ability of stories to adapt to new environments as a hopeful and comforting idea, especially for someone who comes from an immigrant background and may feel disconnected from their own cultural heritage. The quotation also suggests that Le Nguyen views stories as retaining a core even when they change and adapt to new environments.

This chimes with Goto's retellings of fairy tales in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Grandmother Naoe tells her granddaughter Murasaki Japanese fairy tales, but these transformed stories may or may not be accurate: "Child, this is not the story I learned, but it is the story I tell. It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak" (Goto 42). By taking these Japanese folktales, presumably unchanged for centuries, then updating

them to fit their current spatial and temporal diaspora parameters, Goto is showing the possibilities of belonging for displaced immigrants from Japan to Canada. As Libin writes: “This ‘ancient’ past, in the case of the fairy tale, is only accessible through the reception of the story itself: time is not measurable by historical or geographical periodicity but can only be accessed by fairy tale” (Libin 127).

Le Nguyen’s quotation also highlights the idea that diaspora is not just about being physically displaced from one’s home country, but also about the emotional and psychological experience of longing for a sense of belonging and connection to a community. For people in diaspora, finding a sense of belonging can be challenging, as they may feel disconnected from their country of origin and may also struggle to fully integrate into their host society. However, despite these challenges, diaspora communities can often find ways to create a sense of belonging and connection through shared experiences, cultural traditions, and social networks.

## Conclusion

“Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.” (Rushdie 15)

The quotation above by Indian-born British-American novelist Salman Rushdie suggests that persons who belong to multiple cultures may experience conflict or ambivalence. They may feel that they do not fully belong with either culture. This can be a challenging and difficult experience, as people may feel torn between two different sets of cultural traditions and values and may struggle to find their place in either culture. People who belong to multiple cultures may feel a sense of loss or disconnection. They may feel that they have lost a sense of belonging to one culture and may not yet have fully found a sense of belonging to another culture. Literature, such as that I have introduced here, clearly has an advantage over theory in being able to describe this adequately.

This paper suggests that Nikkei diaspora writers explore belonging in their

works from different perspectives, depending on their generation and experiences. The trauma of the Nikkei diaspora's experiences can be located in their writing, and that trauma is carried in the language itself and impacted upon the collective psyche of the entire community (Goudie). Representations of diasporic belonging are varying and fluid concepts, depending on generation, ascription, and collectively shared assumptions about the utilitarian value of ethnic labelling (Manzenreiter). Such research suggests that Nikkei diaspora writers use different themes and strategies to explore belonging in their works, depending on their generation and experiences.

Thus, the works of Nikkei diaspora authors offer a rich and complex exploration of the theme of belonging, forcing us to rethink its very meaning. Through their writing, these Nikkei authors capture the challenges and struggles of living in a new country, as well as the ways in which people can find a sense of connection and belonging in their new homes. These insights have important implications for our understanding of diaspora literature and can help us to better appreciate the experiences of the Nikkei diaspora. By exploring the ways in which Nikkei diaspora authors express belonging in their works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and nuanced experiences of people who are displaced willingly or unwillingly from their homeland. Furthermore, these findings also suggest a need for further study in this area. There are many other Nikkei diaspora authors and works that could be explored to deepen our understanding of the experiences of belonging in Nikkei diaspora literature. Japan, as a country never colonised, does not necessarily neatly fit into the postcolonial literature rubric applied to many diasporas today such as that of the Indian diaspora, therefore, comparing and contrasting such diaspora literatures could improve our overall understanding of minorities. By continuing to study and analyse these works, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the Nikkei diaspora.

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## Notes

- 1) Belonging in contemporary society is multidimensional and complex (Chin) and exists at varying levels in vertical society not just at a single point.
- 2) See Sugimoto (chap.8) "Ethnicity and Japaneseness: defining the nation" for an overview.
- 3) An idealised, collective memory and/or myth about the ancestral homeland.
- 4) A sense of community and group consciousness with other diaspora in the same country as well as diaspora in other countries.
- 5) There are also those who do not belong but are in fact, liberated by their independence.
- 6) See Kirsten McAllister's description of the "necessary crisis" she and other Nikkei go through when exploring their identity (McAllister, chap.1).
- 7) By extension, it also challenges fixed notions of Japaneseness.