

Defining Nikkei: How a California Museum Built a Global Storytelling Community

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An older Japanese American gentleman stands in front of a museum display case. Behind him is an enlarged photograph of a group of Japanese picture brides (a sort of predecessor to the mail order bride) newly arrived in the United States, looking a little lost and apprehensive. Mr. Hayashi, a volunteer at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), is explaining how he uses the photograph as a didactic tool during school tours, but he is also talking about its personal significance —his own grandmother was a picture bride.

The brides share a display case with several other objects. One of these, a document in the lower corner of the frame, reads: *Keep California White*.

Mr. Hayashi is commenting that despite his grandmother's ambiguous fate as the bride in an arranged marriage, the partnership was considered successful and resulted in 36 grandchildren and great grandchildren. Mr. Hayashi is, in fact, a testament to his family's success in the face of a myriad of trials that women like the ones in the picture must have faced so many years ago. He is *Nikkei*, a descendent of Japanese migrants, and there are 2.6 to 3 million others with stories like his across the globe.

A global storytelling community

Allowing people to discover stories like the one Mr. Hayashi tells in the video described above is what the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles hopes to achieve through its *Discover Nikkei* website, an interactive multimedia webpage launched in 2005. *Discover Nikkei* was conceived as a community-building tool on a grand scale that allows users to keep up with activities at the museum, and also permits access to a part of JANM's collections, through the *Nikkei Albums* feature.

Through the website, *Nikkei* all over the world are able to communicate, connect and share, with a particular emphasis on the U.S., Canada, Central and South America, where a large number of Japanese emigrants have settled. Altogether, *Discover Nikkei* presents three main areas that allow *Nikkei* and people interested in the Japanese diaspora to build a global network together: Stories, Community and Resources. This wealth of primary-source material available through the *Discover Nikkei* website in the form of archival home videos, blogs and video profiles

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combine to mount a concerted effort to privilege the community's voice over a classic museum discourse.

In the “Stories” section of *Discover Nikkei*, the Nikkei Album feature allows users to create collections of images and/or film, much like the Flickr website does. To get an idea of the diversity of voices accessible through the albums, some recently published albums include a Japanese farming and arts community in Brazil, Baptist churches in Japan, and an origami crane making lesson in Peru. Of the three, the last album is written in Spanish, one of the four languages in which *Discover Nikkei* is available; the others being English, Japanese and Portuguese.

The Museum as Participant

Although a significant part of the Nikkei Album section of the website features user-generated content, JANM contributes heavily by uploading a variety of content through a museum account. An example is the picture bride video, featuring Mr. Hayashi. This video forms part of a series entitled *The 21st Century Museum: Significant artifacts selected by Japanese American National Museum volunteers*. The objects chosen for the videos by volunteer guides are from an ongoing exhibition, *Common Ground: The Heart of Community*, about Japanese American history. In addition to exhibitions-related content the museum also uploads material related to events and celebrations in the Los Angeles community, and articles published in a museum member's print magazine.

The museum as participant is a major premise for the *Discover Nikkei* website, and manifests itself both in the “low profile” it presents on the website, as well as in the importance it places on community members' involvement and collaboration. Aside from website users, the website gets a large part of its content through international correspondents who range from cultural institutions to individuals who write blogs in the “Stories” section and post events on the main page. A subtle museum presence displaces the focus from the “experts” to the community and allows the website to take on a real, marketplace-type feeling, where stories are related, not dictated.

Nikkei History in the First Person

The JANM account in the “Nikkei Album” section also gives self-service access to a portion of the museum's permanent collection, made up of over 80,000 artifacts, objects, photographs and artworks. The available documents are from the Watase Media Arts Center and include an important collection of home movie footage—more than 330 film clips totaling over six hours—filmed between the 1920s and 1960s, and digitally transferred for online access. Each film clip is

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described and annotated on the janm.org website in the collections, home movies section.

The home movies touch on a wide variety of subjects and themes in the lives of American *Nikkei*, including work, play, home and family life. Some extraordinary footage is also consultable, dating from the period of internment of Japanese Americans at several camps across the country from 1942 until the end of World War II. The clips depict daily life at the camps from the point of view of the interns themselves, and are a grim reminder of the extent to which certain communities have had to grapple with a *Keep California White* mentality.

Nikkei Today

Although the *Nikkei* experience translates well through images, text is also an important component of the *Discover Nikkei* website. Through the “Stories” “Journal” rubric, we meet Norm Masaji Ibuki, a Canadian *Nikkei* struggling to come to terms with his government's non-action in the face of recent devastating events in Tohoku, Japan, where he once lived. Since the earthquake hit on March 11th of this year, Norm has been keeping tabs via email and telephone on an old friend, Tomo, and his family, stranded not far from the earthquake epicenter. “The Great Tohoku Disaster” blog allows readers to listen in on a conversation that is both fascinating and terrible, as we progress from not knowing the family's whereabouts, to learning that they are in Tokyo trying to find a way back to Canada, leaving house, belongings and friends behind.

A focus on oral history is emphasized through videos in the form of interviews produced by JANM. A young *Enka* singer born in the United States of African-American and Japanese heritage but living in Japan, a Canadian woman incarcerated during WWII, a Taiko musician, an Argentinean woman trying to reconcile a Western identity with Japanese roots. These are only a few of the engaging personalities *Discover Nikkei* introduces users to through the “Stories”, “Interview” section. The 70 available videos feature a diverse array of *Nikkei* living in Japan and abroad, sharing their life experiences and what they have learned from them. Each video is meticulously transcribed, then translated into all four languages available on the website. The library of stories we are privy to through the Interview section provide audiences with first-person accounts of the *Nikkei* experience, much like the images in the home movies from the collection also available through the site.

Tools for empowerment

Issei, Nisei, Sansai... These terms and many others are peppered throughout the *Discover Nikkei* website. They are words used to denote how far removed a person is from their Japanese heritage by generation, and they provide a kind of reference for those who are initiated to the lingo. The current “Nima of the month”, or *Discover Nikkei* colleague, is a *Sansei*, a third

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generation Japanese, born in the U.S. His wife is *Yonsei*, fourth generation Japanese. The user clearly expresses himself well in English, but does he speak Japanese? Does he even feel it is necessary to speak the language in order to feel a connection to his Japanese heritage? These are the types of identity issues explored in a number of the user-written articles accessible in the “Nima-kai” rubric of the “Community” section. Here users can also post photographs and events, in a way that is similar to Facebook. A “Taiko drums” rubric will be added to the section in future phases of website development.

A critical step in the preservation of cultural heritage is the acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills. The “Resources” section of *Discover Nikkei* attempts to provide users with just enough guidance to encourage participation. This how-to section has detailed instructions for beginning a genealogical research project, including tips on conducting interviews, conservation basics and even a bit of information on starting a personal collection of artifacts. These could potentially be the tools to inspire a user to create a Nikkei Album with a few of their own home movies, start a blog about *Nikkei* communities in countries other than the ones already featured, or maybe even dust off those old family kimonos in the attic. *Discover Nikkei* users participate in a variety of ways, defining and affirming the term *Nikkei* in an active way with the help of the website interface.

Apart from inspiring users to affirm their cultural identity, *Discover Nikkei* is also a remarkable example for museums that may be looking to relate to their audiences in a different, more egalitarian way. JANM's idea was one that started small and gained momentum as the project advanced stage by stage, allowing for more complexity only after a solid framework had been put into place. JANM staff observed that one of the most important elements of website development was ease of content management. For JANM this meant that in order for content to remain relevant as the website progressed, room had to be made for constant revisions by regular staff members, as opposed to specialized IT staff. Avoiding proprietary software to cut down on costs and compatibility issues has also been a key development issue.

Through the *Discover Nikkei* website, JANM provides access to a rich collection of documents and artifacts that encourage *Nikkei* to take pride in their cultural patrimony, and to place a high value in sharing and communicating with others at a local and global level. By focusing on primary source materials and community-generated content, the museum places an emphasis on providing a forum for discussion and discovery rather than contributing expertise via a classic museum discourse. This approach, visible through the *Discover Nikkei* website, allows for a transfer of authority to take place, positioning in the foreground a community that has much to offer in the way of cultural tradition and values.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A Los Angeles native, Cynthia G. Valdez is currently on the way to Switzerland to complete a Master's in Museum Studies at the University of Neuchâtel. Prior to this, she spent two years in Mexico working with the Collections and Exhibitions of the Museo Amparo. In Mexico and while completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Paris, Cynthia wrote for various art publications in France and abroad, including ArtSlant, The Paris Times, The Mag L.A. and Whitehot Magazine for Contemporary Art. When not accumulating stamps in her passport, she enjoys knitting, gardening, experimental music and answering emails at [yomemioi\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:yomemioi@gmail.com).