

Nihonjin Face

An Introduction to the Play



Nihonjin Face is a play in [Tacoma Arts Live's](#) Civil Rights Legacy program, a series of original, all-ages theatrical works, which explore the on-going story of American civil rights and liberties through the experiences of the nation's diverse peoples. Designed to bring to life both history and civics, each play is accompanied by study materials for varying ages. Included are both original resources and links to high quality curricula developed by Tacoma Arts Live's partners, including [Densho: The Japanese Legacy Project](#) and [KCTS 9/PBS LearningMedia.org](#).

Synopsis

Ten-year old Tomiko Hashimoto and her family must leave their home in Tacoma, WA for an undetermined amount of time to an unknown destination – because of their Japanese ancestry. It's 1942, the country is engaged in World War II, and the US Government incarcerates 110,000 Japanese Americans for reasons of national security. During her three years of incarceration, Tomiko learns the impact of racial discrimination and develops empathy for others facing civil rights challenges – eventually joining Dr. Martin Luther King's efforts. Later in life, she shares her experiences with her grandson, who is also navigating the complexities of racial identity in the America of today.

Accessing Civics Concepts through Social-Emotional Learning

Too often, history is presented as a dry exercise in memorizing dates, names and places. This is not that.

The project challenges learners to step into the lives of those who came before us. To empathize. To walk their same paths and reflect on what themes and issues continue to resonate in our own times.

Older learners can draw connections to civics by examining the delicate balance between individual rights and government power, the impact of racism during crises (especially timely in the era of COVID-19), and what happens when we intentionally violate our own Bill of Rights with regard to key concepts like due process. Younger learners will examine **critical concepts:**

friendship, family, fairness, injustice, equity, identity, discrimination, loss, longing, hope and action. In this way, the historical content comes to life as students relate firsthand to the characters, standing in their shoes and experiencing these concepts alongside them.

For younger learners, the concepts of the Constitution and Bill of Rights are quite abstract. But, these young learners will have a lot to say about what it means to be part of a family, to have a friend, to be singled out, to be forced around, to stand up for something or someone, and to try one's hardest.



Girl with luggage, 1942; Dorothea Lange, Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Meet the Characters

- **Tomiko Hashimoto** (at ages 10, 14, 34 and 84): an American girl from Tacoma, Washington, born to immigrant Japanese parents (*nisei* generation)
- **Mrs. Hashimoto, “Mama”**: a Japanese immigrant (*issei* generation) in her 40s, mother of Tomiko and Kiyo, married to “Papa” who runs a store in Tacoma’s Japan Town
- **Kiyo Hashimoto**: American born 18 year old boy, older brother of Tomiko, who takes on new responsibilities when the FBI takes away Mr. Hashimoto without specific charges
- **Reginald**: thirtysomething African American organizer from the South who has come to Chicago in the mid-60s to aid Dr. Martin Luther King in the fair housing effort
- **Tommy**: contemporary 14 year old student at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington who is into basketball and video games; Tomiko’s grandson (fourth generation, *yonsei*)
- **RJ**: contemporary 14 year old student at Lincoln High School; Tommy’s friend and Reginald’s grandson
- **Alice Clark**: Tomiko’s childhood friend
- **Camp Guard**: Soldier patrolling the border of the Tule Lake concentration camp

From the Playwrights, Janet Hayakawa and Teresita Martinez:

*This is a coming of age story of two parallel characters - Tomiko and Tommy. **Tomiko**, the daughter of immigrants, is born in Tacoma, WA and sees herself as an American. She is a smart, self-confident, carefree, energetic, and spirited child who, along with her family is incarcerated during WWII because of her Japanese ancestry. She becomes aware of how she is identified as “the enemy” due to her ethnicity. Experiencing this discrimination enrages her and becomes a catalyst for her participation in advocating for civil rights/liberties throughout her adult life. She ultimately shares her life experience with her grandson, Tommy.*

***Tommy** is a typical teenage boy trying to fit in with his peers, but unsure about who he really is. He hides a bit behind some bravado. He favors video games and basketball to school work. He has grown up hearing about his grandmother’s wartime experience, but somehow takes it for granted. He’s found a new friend in RJ, whose Grandma Alice was childhood friends with his own grandmother. When Tommy and RJ are asked to work together in a history project, questions about race and discrimination come to the surface. As part of the project, Tommy decides to interview his grandmother and probe her experience which allows him to become aware of how her story links to his life and identity.*

***RJ** is Tommy’s good friend who has recently moved from Atlanta to Tacoma. Like Tommy, he loves video games and basketball however; he’s a more conscientious student. Their grandmothers’ relationship has deepened their friendship. RJ is more aware of his ethnic identity than Tommy is, although he doesn’t know how to deal with the structural racism that he confronts on a regular basis.*

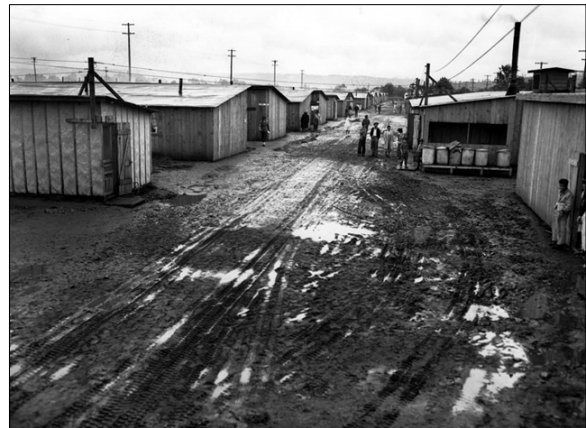
We hope that audience members connect with Tomiko and Tommy - and see their life journeys as inspiration for them to explore their own.

Historical Overview

On February 19, 1942 Executive Order 9066 put in motion the forced removal and incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese Americans (as well as smaller numbers of other targeted groups) in American concentration camps. Two thirds were U.S. citizens. Eventually, this displacement of U.S. families of both natural born citizens as well as immigrants was found to be a wrongdoing based on "... race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership" in a report from the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States went to war with Japan, thus entering World War II. On the presumption of wartime security, thousands of Japanese American community leaders were taken by the FBI within weeks. By early 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt signed 9066, which allowed regional generals to forcibly remove certain American citizens and resident aliens from their homes and gather them in military-controlled camps in remote regions of the country. General John L. DeWitt of the Western Defense Command called for the removal of Japanese American families from the West Coast (ironically, the 150,000 Japanese Americans in Hawaii were left alone). In a very short time, families were forced to sell or safeguard their belongings and businesses. Taking only what they could carry they reported to makeshift assembly centers at fairgrounds and camps, where they lived in animal stalls under military guard until they could be imprisoned in more permanent camps in unused deserts and swamplands.

Once in the incarceration camps, families lived in simple barracks with tar paper walls – through freezing winters and hot summers. Each family was assigned to a room with one lightbulb, a stove, cots and about 28 non-private toilets to 300 people. Within the camps, Japanese Americans organized civic groups, classes for children and social activities. Almost immediately, some young men were able to leave to serve in the military or attend college. Ironically, parents of soldiers fallen in battle would receive the customary American flag behind a curtain of barbed wire and armed guards. Children would recite the Pledge of Allegiance in makeshift classroom under the shadows of guard towers.



"Camp Harmony" Assembly Center at the Puyallup Fairgrounds;
Courtesy of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of
History & Industry

The last camp was closed in 1945; each person was given a bus or train ticket and \$25 to re-start life. Those who still had property often returned to find it stolen or vandalized. Many could never re-build the lives they were forced to abandon. In some cities like Tacoma, once-thriving Japan Towns never resurfaced.

Eventually Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which as signed by President Ronald Reagan, finally issued a government apology and provided limited reparations to survivors still living.

This summary is compiled with resources from Densho.org and its 2008 Sites of Shame online exhibition, as well as the National Park Service.

Terminology & Vocabulary

Through the years, many different terms have been used to describe the experiences of Japanese Americans during World War II. Words can be powerful in shaping our understanding of events and this was evident from the very first official government communications. This study guide uses the term **forced relocation** rather than “evacuation” or “relocation.” With regard to the camps, the terms “internment” or “relocation camp” do not reflect the fact that individuals were forced from their homes and property and concentrated behind barbed wire and armed guards with very controlled interaction with the outside world. Thus, the terms **concentration camp** and **incarceration** are used. For a full explanation of the rationale behind the terms, please see Densho’s Note on Terminology, [online](#) or in the Appendix of this guide.

Vocabulary: Key Concepts

GAMAN: A Japanese word representing perseverance and the resolve to try hard and not give up

SHIKATA GA NAI: A Japanese phrase meaning “It cannot be helped,” or “Nothing can be done about it”

CIVIL RIGHTS: The right to be treated equally

CIVIL LIBERTIES: Our freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights

INCARCERATION: To be imprisoned

CONCENTRATION CAMP: A place where people who have something in common are forced to live together

ANCESTRY: Our family heritage, which includes not only people, but cultures, places and languages

Vocabulary: Japanese terms used in the play

NIHONJIN: Japanese, as in a Japanese person

HAI: “Yes”

NANI: “What?”

WAKAMARISU KA: “Understand?”

GOCHISOSAMA: Said after finishing a meal

SENSEI: Teacher

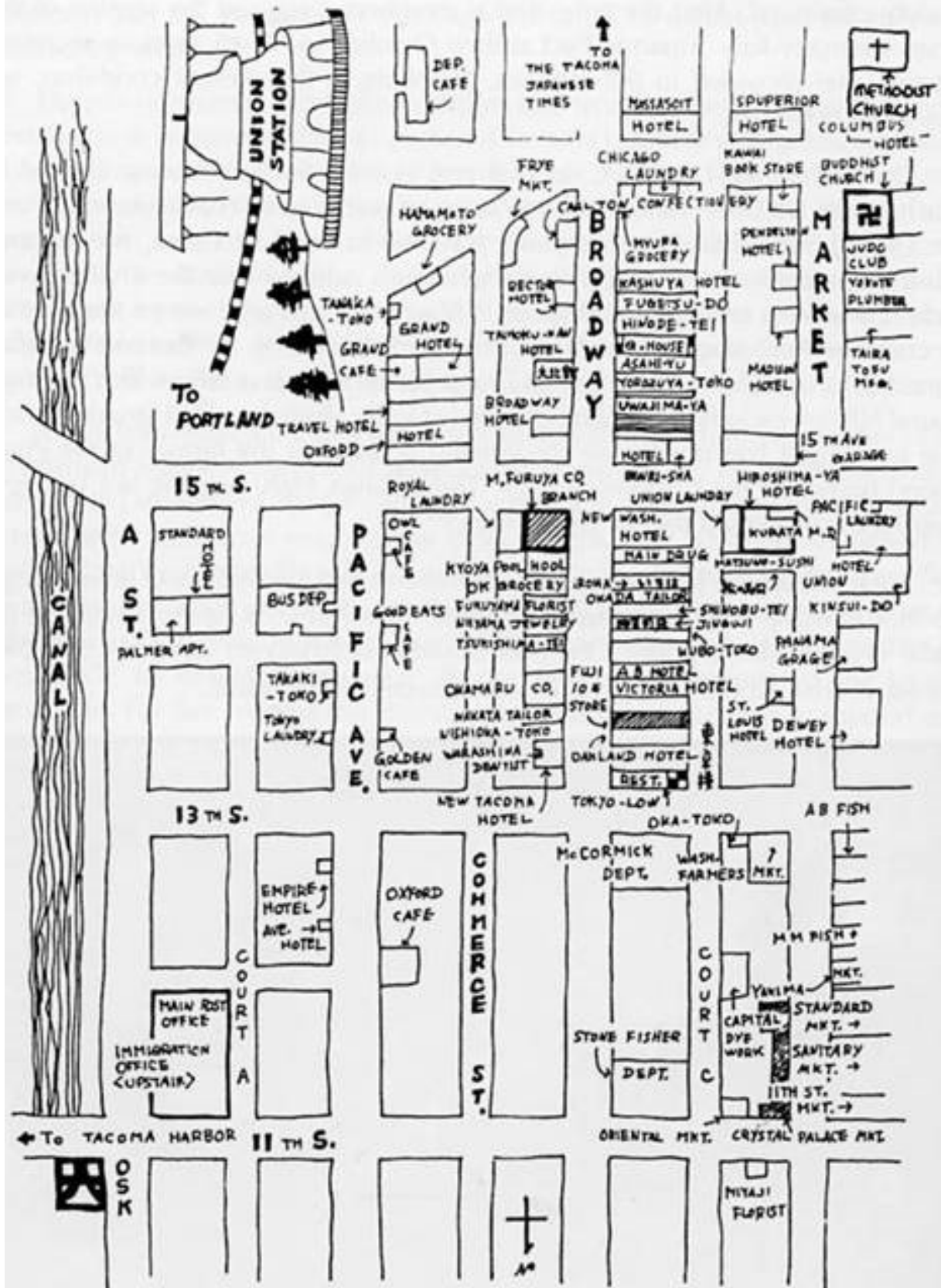
SABA & DAIKON: Mackerel and radish

MISO: Soup

TEGAMI KAITERUKA?: (You) write a letter?

Tacoma's Nihonmachi (Japan Town)

Tacoma, Washington



Hand-drawn map of Tacoma's Nihonmachi (Japan Town) by Kazuo Ito (c. 1920). Before the war, it was one of the nation's largest Japan Towns, per capita. Accessed from <https://tacamahistory.live/2016/06/10/nihonmachi-ca-1920/>