Developing Second-Generation Voices:
Women in the Pre-War Nisei Writers Group

By Valerie J. Matsumoto

In the prewar Japanese American community, Nisei women were active and influential participants in all spheres of creative expression, especially in literary circles. In Los Angeles, the *Rafu Shimpo* and the *Kashu Mainichi* reflect Nisei women's multi-faceted contributions to the ethnic press: they wrote passionate poetry and humorous ditties, penned romantic and socialist realist fiction, reviewed new books and music, composed analytical essays on literature, and aired their opinions in a plethora of newspaper columns. They debated the "Nisei problem" and the roles of women, waxed lyrical over the beauty of nature, and lamented the trials of love. Women also channeled their energy into developing a network of second-generation literati. Leaders such as poet Toyo Suyemoto and writer Mary Oyama Mittwer encouraged each other's literary efforts while also challenging the Nisei literati to present more of their own experiences as Japanese Americans. Today, I will discuss women's participation in prewar Nisei literary endeavors, focusing on the 1936 journal *Gyo-Sho*.

In 1934, Toyo Suyemoto assessed the promise of Nisei literary efforts. She was then a 19-year-old student at the Sacramento Junior College in central California. An acclaimed poet from an early age, Suyemoto subsequently received a BA degree in English and Latin at the University of California, Berkeley. She stated: "The second generation Japanese, as a group, realize that in our complex environment, the youthful literati of our race have much to accomplish. As yet, there has been only the foreshadowed evidence of greater things to come, for we are still in the embryonic stage of literary development. Our lot is by no means simple, for differentiation of thoughts

and ideals lie between the first generation and our own, between our occidental acquaintances and ourselves, necessitating an interpretation, written expression." Suyemoto believed that, in the process of gaining the maturity and experience necessary for literary achievement, "The second generation literati are gradually building a world entirely our own; constructing a structure belonging wholly to ourselves, simply by mastery of prose-writing and poetry."

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a flood of poetry, essays, fiction, and letters by second-generation women and men contributed to this construction of a lively Nisei world. They repeatedly exhorted each other to develop a "new and different" voice that would reflect their experiences and perspective. Denied access to mainstream publishing by racial barriers as well as by inexperience, they turned to outlets within the ethnic community.

The ethnic press, which stretched along the West Coast from Los Angeles to Seattle, offered a crucial forum for the development of Nisei writers, publishing their fledgling efforts in literary sections that became regular features. The *Kashu Mainichi* in Los Angeles became particularly notable as a literary showcase for the second generation, including writers such as Mary Korenaga, Chiye Mori, Mary Oyama, Toyo Suyemoto, and Hisaye Yamamoto. Within a peer community facilitated by the English-language sections, the Nisei struggled to define themselves in relation to both their parents' generation and the larger US society. In the process, they established an energetic literary conversation that crossed the United States and spanned the Pacific Ocean.

Women took active and sometimes leading roles in literary networks. In 1940, *Current Life, the Magazine for the American Born Japanese* ran an article on "Who's

Who in the Nisei Literary World," profiling fifteen men and nine women, including Mary Oyama, Lucile Morimoto, and Hisaye Yamamoto. They and many others published prolifically in the Japanese American newspapers, experimenting with form and content in the process of developing their own voices. Some adopted a flippant, bold jazz style; Hisaye Yamamoto poked fun at lyric convention as well as social convention in humorous poems with Latin titles. Toyo Suyemoto limned her subjects in formal rhymed verse, stating: "…all that I can give to you/ Is simple speech of everyday…/ Words stripped and stark like life and death/ Wherein you stand midway." Writing in a variety of styles on eclectic themes, women enthusiastically engaged in the effort to create a Nisei voice, expressive of their ethnic, generational, and gendered experiences.

Driven by the conviction that they had a distinctive perspective to contribute to the Japanese American community and to the larger society, the Nisei literati launched a number of creative-writing journals in the 1930s. These included *Reimei*, edited by Yasuo Sasaki in Utah, and *Shukaku*, a quarterly magazine published by the Southern California poets, and Issei and Nisei organization. A Buddhist youth journal, *Bhratri*, also included creative writing. Similarly, the Los Angeles Nisei writers' group began a publication called *Leaves* as a vehicle for second-generation literature and art. Rather than just showcasing local talent, they aimed to include Nisei from far and wide. As Carl Kondo explained in 1935, "The literary club of Lil Tokio wants it understood that the pages of its magazine, 'Leaves' is open to all writers regardless of distance." The members, he said, "do not wish it to be merely a club organ but to have a real purpose, such as bringing the Japanese psychology forth for the American people to understand."

In 1936, the Nisei writers' group moved to upgrade *Leaves* by merging it with *Gyo-Sho*, another quarterly publication. *Gyo-Sho*, edited by Eddie Shimano and sponsored by the English Club at Cornell College, made its debut in June 1936. When *Gyo-Sho* was published, a party was held in Los Angeles in honor of Eddie Shimano; the interethnic mix of guests included Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and European Americans.

The cover and title of *Gyo-Sho* signaled the transnational vision of the editor, a Nisei from Seattle, Washington. On the cover, designed by Shimano, was a linoleum cut of a Japanese temple bell, with the title at the top, emblazoned in kanji that were echoed near the bottom by the corresponding romaji. Shimano explained that, like a temple bell struck to herald the start of a new day, Gyo-Sho—meaning "dawn bell"—was intended to "announce to the world a new day, symbolizing the awakening of the Nisei." He declared, "And like the reverberations of the temple bell, it will be heard universally, high birth or low, European ancestry or Asiatic."

Striking the familiar note of the cultural bridge, Shimano expressed hope that the Nisei, whom he called an "interstitial cultural group," would someday "bridge the chasm between the cultures of the East and the West." Mindful of the challenges Japanese Americans faced, he wrote: "Struggling against economic, social, and racial problems, seeking self-expression in a language alien to their parents but a generation removed, called foreigners by their Caucasian fellow-men, the Nisei are earnestly striving for a means of expressing their unique Japanese-American individualities." Shimano did not elaborate on the nature of these unique individualities, but he seems to have believed they were rooted in Japanese cultural traditions inherited from the Issei, including an aesthetic

sense and an "awareness of cosmic forces," perhaps a reference to Shinto beliefs. In Shimano's words, the mission of *Gyo-Sho* was to help the Nisei "to attain full articulateness in self-expression and thereby to contribute to American culture the artistic simplicity and the symbolism of the Orient."

Although Shimano did not draw any connection or comparison, his goals somewhat paralleled those of the guiding lights of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, later also called the New Negro Movement. As Patricia Liggins Hill states, in 1920 W.E.B. DuBois issued perhaps the first call for "a renaissance of American Negro literature," writing, "the material about us in the strange heart rendering race tangles us in riches beyond dreams, and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart." Although Eddie Shimano did not clearly define what might be unique about Nisei experiences, he felt that the second generation had something significant to contribute to American culture. The "new day" and Nisei awakening that he anticipated call to mind the emergence of the "New Negro" and a dynamic spirit of self-expression heralded by Alain Locke, an influential critic in the African American arts movement. In 1925, Locke asserted that the African American was shifting to a new status as "a collaborator and participant in American civilization," and he believed that these artistic contributions would lead to recognition and acceptance. Likewise, Shimano hoped that the gifts of Nisei creativity would reach a wide, appreciative audience beyond the ethnic community.

The vehicle of Shimano's ambitions was a 24-page journal presenting the poems, fiction, and short prose of ten Nisei, with the addition of a translated Japanese story. Six of the ten writers were women: Mary Oyama, Toyo Suyemoto, Amy Tomita, Teru Izumida, Mary Korenaga, and Ellen Thun, a Korean American writer. Of the four short

stories included, three were written by women who explored a range of themes: the civic duty of the second generation, the struggle of a misunderstood artist, and dynamics among women in a Japanese family. In these three stories, young women protagonists grappled with differences between how they were perceived by others and how they identified themselves. Of course this was an issue of keen concern to the Nisei. Today I will discuss two of these stories which are also notable for addressing issues of women's duty, as citizens and as family members.

Mary Oyama produced the one piece in *Gyo-Sho* that explicitly addressed racial dynamics from the point of view of a Japanese American character. A young Nisei woman's first trip to the voting booth marked her "Coming of Age" in Oyama's short story of the same title. This work could be read as a how-to guideline, coaxing nervous Nisei to participate in the electoral process; it also suggested how interracial relations framed the political actions of second-generation youth. From the outset, the protagonist Sumiko thinks about how the white people at the polls may perceive her; she expects that they will misidentify her as younger than her age and as Chinese, because "They always did." The author contrasts how Sumiko identifies herself: "How were they to know that Sumiko wasn't even Japanese?" Although Sumiko is an American, she worries about not being recognized as such: "Wonder what they'll think—a 'Jap' girl coming to help elect the governor of the state?" Sumiko has heard that in some localities, "young voters of Japanese extraction were subjected to a lot of unnecessary cross examination."

Nisei readers might draw reassurance from the difference between Sumiko's anxieties and her actual reception at the polls: Two Jewish children campaigning nearby cheerfully urge her to support their candidate; a matronly poll worker smiles and matter-

of-factly hands her a ballot. Even though no one can see her in the voting booth, Sumiko still feels self-conscious about how she will be perceived as a citizen. She deliberates before each name, lest the poll workers think that she had "voted without any judgment or wisdom on the matter…" Swayed by an issue of continuing concern to present-day southern Californians, Sumiko also votes for the Jewish children's candidate because "he advocates the saving of our beaches for the public and not for private real estate companies." Finished at last, she marches away, satisfied that she has discharged "the important duty of a good American citizen." The happy ending of this story hinged not on the outcome of the election, but on Sumiko's experience of having her American identity validated by participation in the political process.

Mary Korenaga's story, titled "Chiyono," was set in rural Japan, and focused on the realm of family relations, particularly the ties among women. For Korenaga, this was an imagined setting, since she did not visit Japan until after World War II. However, hers was an informed imagination--a family member has speculated that this story may have grown out of Korenaga's relationship with her grandmother, who shared with Mary her experiences in Japan. The protagonist of "Chiyono" is introduced to the reader as a heartsick young woman working angrily and efficiently in a rice paddy. The story delineates the conflicting family obligations that Chiyono must weigh and also the nonverbal communication between her and the sister-in-law with whom she is at odds. Chiyono has just returned from three weeks spent caring for an ill older sister who had requested her help. The presumably older brother with whom Chiyono lives gave permission, but his wife excoriates Chiyono for neglecting her duty to them, exclaiming that the ailing sister is married and therefore the responsibility of the family into which

she has married. The sister-in-law views Chiyono not as a supportive sister but as a "shameless hussy!" Deeply upset, Chiyono responds silently by going out to weed the rice and working like an automaton, not even stopping for lunch. Later, her sister-in-law also sends a message without direct speech: Chiyono's small nephew arrives with a lunch basket filled with her favorite foods. Chiyono "knew and accepted the mute appeal." The apology is magnified by the news that the sister-in-law is making sushi for dinner and afterward the whole family will attend a shibai. Overjoyed by the prospect of these special treats, Chiyono forgets her grievance. Both the nephew's words and his mother's gestures convey acknowledgment of her labor for their family.

Korenaga's story reflected the *Gyo-Sho* aim of welcoming a diverse audience—the editor and author clearly anticipated the needs of readers unfamiliar with the Japanese language. When Japanese words such as "Obachan," "shibai," and "osushi" appeared, they were followed by parenthetical explanations. Nowhere else in *Gyo-Sho*—except for the title—do Japanese words appear.

Despite the ambitions Eddie Shimano voiced in his foreword, one would be hard-pressed to determine what might be uniquely Japanese American in most of the *Gyo-Sho* writings. The featured poems explored various shades of romantic disillusionment and philosophical musings, none of them addressing experiences specific to the Nisei, except for Teru Izumida's mention of Japanese dance. It would be difficult to ascertain whether this selection mainly reflected Shimano's tastes, or whether it was representative of the submissions he received. Without the contributions by Mary Korenaga and Mary Oyama, *Gyo-Sho* might have resembled a mainstream American college literary publication.

In the assessment of reviewer Carl Kondo, the first issue of *Gyo-Sho* was a worthy start, but "the writings of the representative group of Nisei authors and poets express a stirring which has yet to see the light of the promised dawn." Kondo focused his critique on what he perceived as the general absence of a Nisei voice: With a few exceptions, he felt that "The others speak in occidental voices, no two the same, yet one in viewpoint. They do not see the American scene as other races do; what they see is tinged with the color of what they, themselves, are. The product is unsatisfactory when it is remembered that the efforts of the writers were to voice the surging flow of their generation, the Nisei." As exceptions to this "occidentalized" tone, Kondo cited Teru Izumida's poem about dance and Eiji Tanabe's translation of a Japanese story. He singled out Mary Oyama's piece "Coming of Age," in which he saw the beginning of a "new approach to literature typically Nisei." Such writing, he believed, would portray the struggles and environment of the second generation without bias and "narrate what is ordinary and American, yet Nisei because it will be saturated in the psychology of the Nisei."

Although some of the themes of the Nisei literary movement resonated with the impetus and issues of the Harlem Renaissance, there were vast differences. The Japanese American endeavor was far younger and smaller, lacking patronage, institutional infrastructure, and established senior leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois. The Nisei's efforts to create their own literary publications such as *Gyo-Sho* fizzled out in the unpropitious climate of the Great Depression. World War II certainly cut short the early flowering of their creative work, including the promising San Francisco magazine edited by James Omura, *Current Life, the Magazine for the American Born Japanese*.

Gender dynamics constituted another key difference. The Nisei literary movement appears to have been less male-dominated than the Harlem Renaissance—women such as Mary Oyama Mittwer, Toyo Suyemoto, and Chiye Mori played active roles as artists, leaders, and organizers. Perhaps the best-known Nisei fiction writers today are, in fact, two southern California women, Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi, who have been friends since they met in the Poston camp during World War II.

The Nisei, in their effort to develop a Japanese American approach to literature, drew encouragement from the accomplishments of fellow Japanese Americans. For example, the ethnic press took note when Seattle Nisei Setsuko Kashiwagi sold a novel about Japanese American family life in the future to a Philadelphia press (1934), and Kimi Gengo's poetry collection *To One Who Mourns at the Death of the Emperor* was published in New York City in 1935. Kashiwagi and Gengo were two of the few Japanese Americans who succeeded in publishing books in the prewar period.

The Nisei writers enjoyed a camaraderie forged from a shared passion for creative expression and a strong sense of ethnic and generational identification; their networks spanned geographical distances, meeting within the pages of the English-language sections of the Japanese American newspapers. In 1934, for example, Larry Tajiri noted the scope of the writers featured in the *Kashu Mainichi*'s literary section: Welly Shibata wrote from Osaka, while Aiko Tashiro was in Karuizawa; Tooru Kanazawa had moved to Alaska; Yasuo Sasaki was studying medicine and sending poems from Cincinnati, Ohio; Mary Korenaga wrote from Provo, Utah; James Omura was in San Francisco; and Toyo Suyemoto lived in Sacramento, California.

Women writers eagerly read each other's work and provided warm support. Lily Yanai, in a 1938 *Kashu Mainichi* column "Telephooie," thanked writer Ayako Noguchi for a gift of orchids, sent perhaps in honor of her restarting the column. Yanai also complimented Noguchi on her column "La Hash Exclusive," which she said (taking Noguchi's food metaphor) was her "favorite dish" on the *Rafu Shimpo* menu. Toyo Suyemoto remarked on the encouragement she received from the more senior writers such as Mary Oyama, Ellen Thun, Larry Tajiri, and Yasuo Sasaki. Similarly, Hisaye Yamamoto was influenced and heartened by the Nisei creative writing that appeared in the ethnic press. Reading their references to each other, playful and admiring, conveys their sense of community. Despite occasional squabbles, and no end of brickbats from critics, they were comrades united by the conviction that they had embarked on a worthy and exciting enterprise.

New themes entered their writing as wartime tensions rose in the United States. Somber images shadowed their imaginings. In 1940, in the annual New Year's edition of the *Kashu Mainichi*, in a poem Hisaye Yamamoto asked the "question":

> "how can I write of brother love
> of laughter of children in the street
> of pale shoots in the brown of bare earth
>
> how can I speak of casual things
> of the icy cleanness of fresh fallen snow
> of Christmas come wrapped in red ribbon
> how can I sing glad song and smile
> at the soft dusky warmth of a blue, blue song
> or exult in the coolness of smooth rain
>
> when brothers golden like the sun
> and brothers with pale white skin
> hate blindly across the cruelty of steel
> when children hide in darkened cellar
> or flee uncomprehending in sobbing sorrow

when cold rain beats down unfound ones
rotting in inglorious muddy death
with frightened eyes…"

The tone of Nisei literature shifted as war abroad and political expediency at home made Japanese Americans increasingly vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

The nascent Japanese American press provided a crucial forum for Nisei efforts; few were ever able to reach a wider audience. Within its pages they experimented with a wide array of forms, reflecting the influence of high art and popular culture. In the weekend literary sections, social-realist fiction rubbed elbows with romance, sonnets, haiku, and free verse. Although most of their dreams of public acclaim went unfulfilled, both their assessments of the realities of life and the possibilities they imagined reveal much about the ways in which second-generation Americans sought to define themselves before World War II. The literary sections of the ethnic press also reveal the dynamic roles women played in the effort to develop both a Nisei voice and Nisei literary networks.