

An Exhibition of Japanese American Women Through Social Networks  
By Rosalyn Tonai, Executive Director of the National Japanese American  
Historical Society.

*Tanaka sensei, Yamamoto sensei, Kwansei Gakuin University, minasama- de  
Ohiyo gozaimasu.*

*Tada ima goshokai ni azukarimashita  
TONAI, ROSALYN desu.*

*Konoyouna sekide aisatsu dekiru koto wo  
Taihen kouei ni o moimasu*

This is a great honor to be presenting today.

*Taihen moushiwake arimasen, nihongo ga  
Amari tokui dewanai node,*

*Koko kara wa eigo-nite shi-tsu-re-itashimasu*

It is a great honor for me to be here today. You'll have to excuse me, since I have am unable to speak in Japanese having not lived in Japan for over 40 years, I'll be presenting in English.

My talk today is about Strength and Diversity: Japanese American Women's Story through Exhibition

I consider myself a practitioner in the area of exhibition planning, organization and development.

I'd like to share with you my observations and experience in presenting the Japanese American women's story through exhibition.

*Strength and Diversity: Japanese American Women, 1885 to 1990*, happened over 20 years ago, yet it still has its effect on social networking today.

I was so pleased to see the special Nikkei women's exhibit at the Yokohama Overseas Migration Museum. Many of the women scholars here today, had worked tirelessly on its scholarship, photographs, artifacts, and stories that were so well presented. I understand Empress Michiko will have an opportunity to see the exhibit soon. I'm sure she'll be very impressed with the diversity of ordinary women's stories presented.

An exhibition can be one of the best ways to present relatively unknown stories to the public and to achieve multiple goals. It presents original academic scholarship, facilitates the discovery of rare artifacts and archival materials, and

initiates the collection of oral histories. In the realm of public engagement, an exhibition raises awareness, empowers people, and creates long-term relationships both institutionally and professionally. Ultimately, it fosters a long-term impact and which can sustain social change.

We achieved this, not always by design, but through a process of social networking and organizing. These are the same essential ingredients used, especially when the story of Japanese American women are under represented in mainstream institutions.

I began working at the National Japanese American Historical Society in September 1987. I was a graduate student in nonprofit administration at the University of San Francisco. Prior to that I had graduated from UC Berkeley, majoring in Social Welfare and worked in the Asian American community on Asian immigrants and refugees issues, namely job training and mental health needs assessment. But what I learned from the activists-turned-practitioners was an upholding of value of diversity among all Asians. Every story was important, especially those communities whose voices were underrepresented in the mainstream.

Dr. Clifford Uyeda, who was himself a “change agent” and John Tateishi who also led the successful redress campaign within the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Together with Tom Kawaguchi, a distinguished veteran of World War II (of the 442<sup>nd</sup> and Military Intelligence Service,) who helped bring the story of Japanese American soldiers to the Smithsonian’s *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the US Constitution*, all wanted me to stay, as part of their long-term succession plan. They suggested that I work on a women’s exhibit, with which I had no experience. They assembled a group of well-educated, accomplished Japanese American women in the San Francisco Bay Area, both Nisei and Sansei.

Many of them were from the Women’s Concerns Committee of the JACL, who had organized themselves to bring up gender related issues through the ranks of the JACL. Morale in the community at the time was running high, because of the national media attention of the Smithsonian’s exhibit, and redress was gaining momentum in Congress and in the Courts.

Some critical pieces fell into place to get us on track with the exhibition’s development:

1. We secured a museum venue. The Oakland Museum of California.
2. We secured funding. A matching grant from the California Council of the Humanities, a branch of National Endowment for the Humanities.
3. We secured good leadership, with institutional support.

So how did this all come together? Social Networks.

The Oakland Museum of California had just hired Carey Caldwell as their Senior

Curator of History. She had come from establishing a Suquamish Tribal Museum in the Pacific Northwest working with Native American elders and anthropologists. She had established personal relationships with Japanese Americans on Bainbridge Island. Her dentist and local leader was Frank Kitamoto a former internee and the young boy in the famous iconic photo of the mother and children leaving Bainbridge Island.

I followed up with Carey Caldwell and her boss, Chief Curator Tom Frye, well-known in the museum world. A site visit to our offices was arranged. Later, I learned that the Museum was developing collaborations with other ethnic communities such as the African Americans-African American Historical Association in Oakland, as they were grappling with issues of diversity within the museum world. Our exhibit followed theirs, reflecting the Bay Area's rich and diverse ethnic heritage.

How we got funding? The Humanities Council wanted to fund this project as it illuminated the story of internment experience through a unique perspective, from the little known history of women. We stacked the proposal with experts in the field. Professors Valerie Matsumoto, UCLA, James Hirabayashi, SFState University, Jerold Takahashi, UC Berkeley, Carey Caldwell and Tom Frye from the Oakland Museum. Also professional designers like Jonathan Hirabayashi and Janice Kawamoto joined the team.

Most importantly, the leadership evolved out of an existing network of women with former commissioner Anne Saito Howden convening the first meetings, then later Chizu Iiyama and Alice Nakahata taking the helm as co-chairs of the Womens Exhibit Committee. The two worked together on the Womens Concerns Committee of JACL and had a cadre of feminists working through JACL to push for womens issues: health care, elder care, gender rights. Subcommittees got organized. We had Niseis with organizing and administrative experience like Nikki Noriko Sawada Bridges, writer and wife of the legendary union leader Harry Bridges, writer Mei Nakano who wrote the accompanying book: Japanese American Women Three generations, Daisy Satoda who worked on Oral Histories at NJAHS, redress activist Kiku Funabiki, Naoko Ito-quilter, Dr. Reiko True, former director of SF Mental Health Department, Katherine Reyes and Florence Hongo, Japanese American Curriculum Project (AACP). Sanseis: Gayle Nishikawa, Kathleen Hirooka and Pat Abe, and Lynne Horiuchi-curator of Turning Leaves.

## CONTENT.

Whose story was this?

Who was the audience?

We invited the professors to help address the content issues. A lively discussion ensued. It seemed to line up along gender, men vs. women, but that is because many of our women were feminists or activists. Prostitutes and runaway wives-

issue raised concerns among the men-folk including historical evidence of domestic violence. Many of the men did not want to be portrayed that way. There was a long explanation about why we should be discouraged from doing so.

We asked: Who was this audience for? The broader public? For our community? We agreed we needed to validate the experience and lives of ordinary women.

Back in 1987, there was a lack of historical materials on Japanese American women; few books, studies, let alone scholars existed on the subject. It was evident and presented a challenge.

Recognizing this, the committee organized teams through California which quickly expanded nationwide to conduct oral histories. Within nine months, some sixty oral histories were collected from Issei, Nisei, Sansei, urban, rural communities, well-known and ordinary women, some even anonymously. These recordings and transcripts revealed a past rich with stories never told, routines of daily life forgotten and feelings well hidden. Through these oral histories the collective story of Japanese American women was pieced together. Mei Nakano, stepped in to write a book to include many of these interviews she conducted and others collected through oral history. Her publication: *Japanese American Women: Three Generations: 1890 to 1990* would be used in classrooms for Asian American Studies.

Exhibit collections proved to be another challenge with many prized possessions once owned by JA lost or destroyed during WWII. An area-wide call went out and soon, we can a nice collection of pre-WWII, wartime and postwar era artifacts.

This was an unusual exhibit in that it was produced, and curated primarily by committee.

The interpretative program and materials were rich and extensive which included an exhibition video, classroom guide, a book, school program, docent program, public programs, film screenings, literary talks and book signing, presentations on camp, dance performances, art & quilt exhibitions

A record number of 30,000 people attended the exhibition which ran for three months. Facial tissues were requested in the gallery because the visitors were often emotionally overpowered by the poignant stories revealed. Chance encounters, serendipitous some after 50 years occurred.

The show was so successful that the Museum suggested that we tour it. While I was honored by the success. I was somewhat about hesitant about this opportunity. Strength & Diversity was like giving birth. It took quite a lot of strength and endurance. The exhibit's "gestation" was 2 years. One could imagine being under pressure of not two mothers' expectations, but under 40 mothers!

“Little did we know that we would undertake a personal journey into our varied and sometimes unknown pasts and arrive at a better understanding about ourselves as Japanese American women with a deeper appreciation for our mothers.”

We decided to proceed... because we needed to capture more local stories. Strength & Diversity toured to Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Illinois, New York, Nevada, and California through the Smithsonian Institution. It received awards from the American Assoc. for State and Local History 1991 and 1992 from the Smithsonian Institution Award of Excellence for new Scholarship and the discovery of original artifacts.

NJAHS developed many more groundbreaking exhibitions such as LATENT AUGUST, the Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1994, and Diamonds in the Rough: Japanese Americans in Baseball, which toured to the Baseball Halls of Fame in the US and Japan in 1997 & 1999. We are currently working on the development of the MIS Historic Learning Center a preservation and adaptive reuse project, using the same formula for success.

Long-lasting, systemic.

First. The women went on to greater scholarship... to see and meet the growing number of Japanese American scholars from Japan both men and women is just amazing in the last 20 years. Other women from the committee went on to form nonprofit organizations, work on human rights, peace redress issues, advanced their careers. We continue to work on issues related to historic preservation.

What was learned?

Never underestimate the power that you hold and the strength within yourself and friends that you make. The chance encounters, the new relationships and interconnections we have are quite powerful and we can move mountains. This journey has underscored the need to create museums and educational learning centers, such as the one we are working on with the National Park Service at the Presidio of San Francisco so that these historic places of learning, so that the lessons of the Japanese American experiences can be told to the world.

It has certainly heightened my awareness of how a movement can make change and how we can become a part of a greater whole. We dedicate ourselves to preserving history--sharing the stories the very way that we understand them to be from the Issei, Nisei..To deliver a clear message--to ensure a more peaceful and just future...

During this Thanksgiving season, I must acknowledge Dr. Satsuki Ina who introduced me to this group of energetic women scholars who were able to meet the pioneers of this JA women scholars consortium Sensei Professor Ikuyo Tanaka and Professor Masako Iino and many of you who are here to day. You need to commend yourselves, pursuing your careers, for following your passions,

in addition to raising your children, taking care of your family, husbands, partners...

I thank the number of supportive men, like my mentors, Clifford and Tom, and husband who supported us with funding, organizational support, and unquestioning faith in our ideas.