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The Queer Heritage of Japanese Americans

KIYOSHI KUROMIYA: A QUEER ACTIVIST FOR CIVIL RIGHTS (2007)

Not long ago, when actor/activist George Takei publicly affirmed that he is gay, it was a major step forward for Japanese Americans. It might seem odd that in this day and age, the coming out of even such a celebrated representative of the community could cause much of a stir. After all, gays and lesbians have become increasingly accepted in Japan, even as LGBT Asian Americans generally have become visible in diverse fields. Redondo Beach mayor Mike Gin, a Republican, and former Oakland City Council member Danny Wan, a Democrat, have each achieved a measure of renown in the political arena. Lawyer Urvashi Vaid opened doors for other Asian Americans as chair of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. In media and the popular arts, actors Alec Mapa and B. D. Wong, journalist Helen Zia, filmmakers Gregg Araki and Arthur Dong, and ambisexual comedian Margaret Cho are examples of well-known Asians who have spoken publicly about their queer sexual orientation. [Author's note: since this was published, actor Sab Shimono

and model Jenny Shimizu have also come out publicly.] Pauline Park has pioneered the movement for transsexual rights.

Yet Japanese Americans have generally been less open about homosexuality, in part because the community has not always been welcoming. Even in San Francisco, the gay capital of North America, many Nikkei probably still think that gay and lesbian Japanese Americans do not exist or are not really part of the community, that antigay discrimination is not their concern.

Nevertheless, a few noteworthy Japanese (North) Americans have joined struggles on behalf of both groups. The late Tak Yamamoto, who was confined in Poston as a boy, was named first president of Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays, even as he worked for redress and led pilgrimages for the Manzanar Committee. Stan Yogi, a longtime activist with the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, has been active in gay/lesbian community work. In Hawai'i, Al and Jane Nakatani helped organize the 1998 campaign against a proposed anti-marriage amendment to the state constitution, saying that it was an assault on American freedom. (In 1996 the Honolulu chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League [JACL] introduced an official resolution at the national conference supporting same-sex marriage as a matter of equality. With its adoption, the JACL became only the second nationally based civil rights organization—the ACLU was first—to go on record as supporting equal marriage rights.)

North of the border, a lone Japanese Canadian defied the odds and won the fight. In 2002 Joy Masuhara, a Sansei physician from Vancouver, brought suit in a British Columbia court to gain the right to marry her partner, Jane Eaton Hamilton. In her brief to the court, she explicitly connected the silencing and shaming she felt as a lesbian with her experience growing up in a Japanese Canadian family that had been incarcerated during World War II. In May 2003, the court found for Masuhara and Hamilton. The decision led to North America's first same-sex marriage laws.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of LGBT activism among Japanese Americans is that of Kiyoshi Kuromiya. Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya was born in Heart Mountain on May 10, 1943. His uncle was Nisei draft resister Yosh Kuromiya. He grew up in Monrovia, California. In 1961 Kiyoshi (then known as Steve) enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied architecture with the famed designer/philosopher W. Buckminster Fuller (he would later collaborate with Fuller on the 1981 book *Critical Path* and the 1983



FIGURE 9.1. Joy Masuhara, left, and Jane Eaton Hamilton.

work *Cosmography: A Posthumous Scenario for the Future of Humanity*). In his Penn years, Kiyoshi was celebrated as a gourmet and helped support himself through school by compiling a Philadelphia restaurant guide. At the same time, he was energized by the nonviolent civil rights movement. He joined the campus NAACP chapter and participated in a sit-in at a bus terminal in Aberdeen, Maryland. The following year, he attended the famous March on Washington. In early 1965, Kiyoshi went south as an activist for voting rights for black Americans. On March 16, following the violent repression of demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, he joined a nonviolent march on the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery. The marchers were chased and set upon by local sheriffs. Kiyoshi was clubbed so badly that he was hospitalized with scalp lacerations.

Although Kiyoshi had known of his homosexuality for some time, his work on behalf of black Americans (and, later, his protest against the Vietnam War) made him aware of the need to protest injustice against gays and lesbians. He is said to have been one of some forty gays and lesbians who formed a picket line in front of Independence Hall on July 4, 1965, an event widely considered the first-ever gay rights demonstration. In the following years, he continued to seek more “rational” laws on sexuality.

In June 1969, police raided the New York bar the Stonewall Inn. Instead of dispersing quietly and shamefully, as usual, the bar's patrons reacted to police repression with anger and self-defense efforts. The three-day Stonewall Riot opened the door to a nationwide Gay Pride movement, in which thousands of young people (and some not so young) came out of the closet. Within weeks, a new political group, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), had been organized, modeling itself after the black power and other minority pride movements. Kiyoshi threw himself into the movement, and helped found the GLF's Philadelphia branch. The same year, he attended a convention of the Black Panther Party as an openly gay delegate and helped persuade Panther chief Huey Newton to make a statement on behalf of gays and lesbians. Throughout the 1970s, he worked on behalf of LGBT causes. He remained interested in justice for Japanese Americans as well.

In the early 1980s, Kiyoshi discovered that he was HIV-positive. He soon became absorbed with treatment issues and improving the quality of life for people with AIDS. He helped found a Philadelphia chapter of the AIDS activist group ACT UP in 1987. Two years later, he created the Critical Path Project. Critical Path served as both newsletter and website for information on AIDS treatment options and as a space for people with AIDS to express themselves. Kiyoshi himself read widely on AIDS research and became an encyclopedic authority on medical care. He simultaneously remained active on behalf of free speech and peace issues. In 1996 Kiyoshi volunteered as the plaintiff in an ACLU lawsuit challenging the Communications Decency Act, a federal Internet censorship law. In 1998 the case went to the US Supreme Court, which struck down the law as an infringement on freedom of speech. The next year, he brought another lawsuit, *Kuromiya v. US*, in which he tried, without success, to obtain marijuana for medical purposes for people suffering from serious diseases. Kiyoshi died on May 10, 2000. The Kiyoshi Kuromiya Memorial Community, a community gathering space, was founded in his honor.

SEXUALITY FROM ISSEI TO NISEI (2008)

My first queer Japanese American heritage column focused on a small number of visible, self-affirming gay and lesbian figures, notably George Takei, Tak Yamamoto, Joy Masuhara, and Kiyoshi Kuromiya. (One might now add writer/poet Dwight Okita of Chicago, whose 2011 book, *The Prospect of My*



FIGURE 9.2. Hideyo Noguchi's statue in Ueno Park, Tokyo.

Arrival, was among the top three finalists for the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award.)

The reason for this selection was that most often, when gays and lesbians have received a measure of tolerance it has been on the largely unspoken condition that their difference remain hidden, so as not to make others uncomfortable. As Yale law professor Kenji Yoshino, himself an openly gay Nikkei man, most provocatively put it in his book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (2006), it is not so much being queer or Asian American that remains stigmatized as it is acting out, such as by publicly proclaiming one's identity or protesting discrimination. Thus, Japanese Americans who

use their Japanese first names or same-sex partners who hold hands in public (let alone marry) arouse particular hostility. My first column was intended as a reminder that sexual minorities—particularly outspoken ones—did and still do compose a vital element of the Nikkei community.

That said, much of the queer side of the Japanese American past is secret, guarded, and uncertain: desire between persons of the same sex must be inferred, guessed at, or interpreted from the sources. The very definitions of love and sexuality must be qualified when we look at ethnic Japanese society—notably the immigrant generation—for the good reason that Issei couples were often united for family reasons rather than romance. Conversely, a large percentage of Issei laborers, both in Hawai'i and on the mainland, were “old bachelors” who immigrated alone and then would not or could not find wives locally or in Japan. Instead, their living spaces, and their most intimate relationships, were shared with other men—a pattern that Nayan Shah has called “queer domesticity,” in speaking of Chinese immigrants. (In this line, chronicler Richard Akagi told the compelling story of Mr. K—, an Issei who ran a boardinghouse for other bachelors. Mr. K loved to play female roles in full drag whenever the community performed a *shibai* (Japanese play) and sometimes acted as a woman offstage.)

We do not and cannot know to what degree these men, who shared rooms and often a bed together, had actual sexual relations with each other; yet the romantic friendships that evolved must frequently have had an edge. Witness this wonderfully sexually charged scene between the scientist Hideyo Noguchi and his roommate Miyabara, recounted on page 157 of Gustav Eckstein's 1931 biography of Noguchi:

To Miyabara [Noguchi] lets out also his vexations, talks often of one colleague who comes with silk gloves and a cane, pronounces the silk in a particular way, as if the whole colleague might be made of that commodity. Which is certainly no reason for being vexed at the man, and perhaps no one is vexed. The man wears perfume . . . Presently [Noguchi] is himself wearing silk gloves and carrying a black cane.

“Look at my body. It is little. But every organ in it is powerful.” He is naked when he says that and about to get into the tub. He struts back and forth. Miyabara loves him. Miyabara may gall him and he may gall Miyabara but they gall each other as two people who love each other.”

There is even clearer evidence of poet Yone Noguchi's bisexuality. As scholars Amy Sueyoshi and Edward Marx have noted, Noguchi's correspondence reveals that he had intimate attachments with both travel writer Charles Warren Stoddard and with a fellow Japanese immigrant, Kosen Takahashi, even as he pursued affairs with woman (including Léonie Gilmour, with whom he fathered sculptor Isamu Noguchi).

Whatever the impact of these individual histories, which were known to some Nisei, little if any real awareness of same-sex desire filtered down to the next generations. Even today it is almost impossible to acquire information from Nisei on the lives of gays and lesbians in the community during the first half of the twentieth century. As one older Nisei later described the climate, "The closet was deep and dark."

There were, it is true, scattered hints of various queer behaviors in Japanese America, subsumed under other labels. In 1931 twenty-six Nikkei in Los Angeles were among those fined for vagrancy and indecent exposure after police raided a screening of "obscene pictures." Four years later, a biracial Nisei woman was arrested for vagrancy after she hitchhiked from San Diego to San Francisco with a female companion. In 1948, after the bodies of a ten-year-old Nisei boy and his friend were recovered from the Chicago River, police investigating a sex slaying broadcast the name of a local Japanese American man who they had targeted for questioning because he was "friendly with the boys." A Japanese American newspaper proceeded to print his name.

The Nisei press also gave a few glimpses of queer life outside. In 1931 the *Nichi Bei Shimbun* carried a photo of pioneer sexologist and gay propagandist Magnus Hirschfeld. Ten years later, the *Rafu Shimpo* carried a photo of a "female lothario" who had passed as a man and seduced other women. Journalist Joe Oyama, who had ridden the rails as a hobo and mixed in artistic circles, regaled Nisei readers with various tales of drag queens shopping for jewelry in Little Tokyo and of a French man who was betrayed by his wife with a woman in male dress.

Whatever these glimmers, most Nikkei, like most other Americans, long remained hostile to any notion of homosexuality. A select few found community outside. John Nagatoshi Nojima, a former inmate at Manzanar camp, joined the pioneering homophile organization Mattachine Society after it was created in 1950 and later was active in the allied group ONE Incorporated.

For thirty years, Nojima was the lover of gay activist W. Dorr Legg. Still, most remained isolated. Progressive minister Rev. Lloyd K. Wake of Glide Memorial Church, who in 1971 began celebrating commitment ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples, wrote an open letter deploring the treatment of queer Japanese Americans by their own community:

I have counseled with a number of Japanese homosexuals. It is heartbreaking and agonizing to hear the problems that have come down on them because of the cruel and inhuman attitude of family and friends. The Japanese community, like any other community, is slow to accept the fact of homosexuality in its midst. It is just as slow to affirm it as a valid orientation and life style. Consequently, many of us counsel with people who have been dehumanized by an insensitive and "uptight" community. This certainly includes the church community.

Conditions have changed a good deal since Wake's letter. Today, queer Japanese Americans need not feel the shame and isolation their forebears did. Nikkei civil rights organizations have defended the rights of gays and lesbians. Nevertheless, Japanese American communities still have a ways to go to build a climate of acceptance and inclusion toward their children who are "different."

THE RISE OF HOMOPHOBIA IN JAPANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES (2009)

Since I started writing *The Great Unknown* in 2007, I have marked LGBT Pride Week each year with a column on the queer heritage of Japanese Americans. The struggle for equality by gays and lesbians is of special importance to Japanese communities, not just because Japanese Americans have themselves been targets of bigotry and injustice, but because the increasingly visible presence of gays and lesbians within Nikkei circles ensures that antigay discrimination touches the community directly and powerfully.

My first column focused on the contributions of proud, self-affirming Nikkei activists such as Joy Masuhara, George Takei, Tak Yamamoto, Stan Yogi, and especially Kiyoshi Kuromiya, who participated in redress and other struggles on behalf of Japanese Americans and defended gay and lesbian rights. The goal of the column was to remind readers that gays and lesbians have always comprised an essential element of Japanese communities. I was

highly honored and gratified when Harry Honda, the legendary Nisei journalist and longtime editor of the *Pacific Citizen*, later praised and endorsed this piece in his own *Pacific Citizen* column.

My second column focused on the hidden history of queer sexuality among Japanese Americans. My main argument, which took off in part from the groundbreaking scholarship of Amy Sueyoshi and Nayan Shah, was that conventional categories of homosexual and heterosexual are not terribly helpful for understanding the lives of Japanese Americans, particularly the Issei. Through an article by Ken Kaji, I have since learned of the life of one immigrant, Jiro Onuma. Onuma came to the United States in 1923, never married, collected erotic male photo magazines, and developed close relationships in camp with younger Japanese American men.

Interestingly, no arrests of Japanese bachelors for sodomy have as yet come to light, in contrast to several cases in which Chinese were prosecuted. For example, in 1895 Ah Fook, a cook in Los Angeles, was arrested for a “crime against nature” with a Scandinavian sailor. In 1901 Quong Ho and Charles Wong were imprisoned in North Adams, Massachusetts, for rape and “unnatural crime,” while in 1904 Charlie Lum, a laundryman in Worcester, Massachusetts, was formally charged with sodomy following the complaint of a local white boy who was revealed to be suffering from “an infectious disease.”

My question today is how the varied (and sometimes freewheeling) sexuality of the Issei gave way to silence and suspicion of alternative sexuality among many Nisei and Sansei. While causality is always complex, we can say in historical terms that Issei tended toward Japanese views. In traditional Japanese culture, unlike in the West, male homosexuality was not a sin but something essentially private, separate from marriage. There was even some history of glorification of same-sex love among samurai, as demonstrated by Ihara Saikaku’s renowned 1687 collection *The Great Mirror of Male Love*. In imperial Japanese society, where the sexes often remained separated, same-sex social relations flourished. Issei artist Chuzo Tamotsu, an antimilitarist, later recalled that when he did his military service, circa 1900, a superior officer propositioned him for sex while they were in the bath. When Tamotsu resisted, his superior reported him for disobedience. Fortunately, Tamotsu persuaded the high commander that the emperor did not expect him to do such things as part of his oath of allegiance.

Once settled in America, Japanese immigrants and their children seem to have absorbed dominant views of homosexuality as contemptible and unmentionable. Under the influence of Protestant missionaries, Issei were pressured—and pressured each other—to conform to heterosexual norms. (The preaching was apparently less successful at curbing endemic gambling and prostitution within Japanese communities.) As John Howard reveals in his provocative book *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (2008), internal community policing was augmented during World War II by official policies of enforced heterosexual interaction between Nisei soldiers and women from camp via USO dances. Nisei men, frequently relegated to gardening or domestic labor and sensitive over dominant stereotypes of Asians as unmasculine, may also have wished to distance themselves from homosexuality as effeminate. The result was that gays and lesbians were largely invisible and unwelcome in Japanese communities. I have heard various Nisei women recount the story of an unnamed boy—or maybe several different ones—a gentle and scholarly Nisei whom everyone knew to be “different,” who no doubt faced constant harassment and suffered so badly that he committed suicide at a young age.¹

Worse, even as the larger society began changing in the 1970s and 1980s, homophobia and denial remained rampant, even among Nikkei progressives. S. I. Hayakawa, a conservative who nonetheless championed black equality, called himself “deeply, deeply, deeply offended by homosexuality.” In 1977 he endorsed the failed Briggs Initiative, a ballot measure in California that would have barred gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools. Two years later, Hayakawa publicly asserted a link between marijuana and homosexuality, which led him to oppose decriminalization. James Omura, who denounced Executive Order 9066 as totalitarian and bravely supported the Heart Mountain draft resisters, was not equally supportive of rights for homosexuals. Because a fellow Japanese American worker once made a pass at him during his early years when he worked in fish canneries in Alaska, he claimed, he developed a strong prejudice and opposed equality for gays and lesbians (Omura added that homosexuals were generally disdained and ostracized by Issei as well).

Perhaps the most striking example of a homophobic civil rights activist was William Marutani, the long-serving Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) attorney and judge, who was confined as a teenager at Tule Lake.

During the 1960s, Marutani spent summers in Louisiana as a volunteer lawyer defending African Americans, and in 1967 he represented the JACL in the Supreme Court's famous case *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down all laws against interracial marriage. Marutani's was the first-ever argument by a Nisei lawyer in any civil rights case before the high court. In 1980 he was selected as a member of the US Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, whose report led to the granting of redress. In 1982 Marutani remarked in his *Pacific Citizen* column that he felt an instinctive aversion and moral abhorrence for what Issei pejoratively called *hentaisei* (which he translated as "abnormal" or "sexual perversion") and the Nisei called "queers"; he did not know any homosexual Japanese Americans himself and did not wish to. While Marutani conceded that those practicing homosexuality (he refused to use the term *gay*) should not be arbitrarily persecuted, he felt that the "practice should not be encouraged or advanced." Thus, he opposed civil rights for gays and lesbians, such as the right to teach in public schools. When challenged by a reader, Marutani countered that his view reflected the views of the vast majority of Nisei, if not of all Nikkei.

It is unclear, and doubtless unknowable, how right Marutani was in 1982. Nonetheless, since then, many Nikkei have clearly changed their minds, as a new generation—gay and straight—has come of age free of the culture of silence and shame. We must give credit to various mentors who pointed the way. There is Dana Takagi, author of pioneering essays on politics and sexuality. There is Kenneth K. Kumashiro, editor of *Restoried Selves* (2004), the collection of autobiographies by LGBT Asian American activists. There is Seattle's Yoshiko Matsui, who came out in 1992 at seventeen (moving in with her partner's family because she found living at home impossible) and organized groups for local lesbians. But perhaps we should stop here and save more for next year's column.

THE RISE OF HOMOPHOBIA: PART 2 (2010)

Writing a LGBT Pride Week column on the queer heritage of Japanese Americans, a tradition I began with *Nichi Bei Times*, is one that I am happy to carry over to *Nichi Bei Weekly*. Such discussion seems particularly relevant at the present time, when conservative and Christian movements have appealed to Asian Americans to support legal discrimination against gays and

lesbians in the guise of family values. (Hak-Shing William Tam, an evangelical Christian, has expressed such virulent antigay bigotry during testimony in court challenges to Proposition 8 that he has thereby been transformed into a poster boy of sorts for the LGBT movement.) People of all backgrounds have a strong interest in learning about the vital, if often hidden, history of the queer members of the Japanese American family. Today's column serves to update and expand on these columns with new information that I have found since their appearance.

In the first year's column, I told stories of some of the few visible gay and lesbian Japanese Americans and traced their struggles to win equal rights for different groups. One figure I mentioned was Stan Yogi. Yogi—adding historian to his repertoire of skills and service—has coauthored (with Elaine Elinson) *Wherever There's A Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California* (2009), the first multigroup, comprehensive study of civil rights in California. This excellent volume has just won a Gold Medal at the California Book Awards.

The second year's column discussed the state of research on same-sex relations within early Japanese communities. It brought together original research by several scholars who have done duty as historical sleuths. Since that time, I have been pleased to discover the amazing work of lesbian artist/archivist Tina Takemoto. Last year, as part of a show at San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society, *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive*, she did a project on Jiro Onuma, an Issei bachelor who lived in San Francisco before being sent to camp at Topaz. Drawing on Onuma's surviving papers, Takemoto dramatized his isolation and hardships in camp by creating the "Gentleman's Gaman: A Gay Bachelor's Japanese American Internment Camp Survival Kit."

In the third year's column, I discussed the turn of the Issei away from Japanese culture, with its long homoerotic tradition, and the growth of endemic community homophobia in the early twentieth century. I was very proud that the piece drew the most favorable comments from readers of any of my columns to date. Still, not everyone agreed with my suggestion that the rise of antigay hostility was a product of the influence of Christianity—especially white Protestant missionaries—on the Nikkei. Instead, readers suggested that lack of tolerance for homosexuality reflected larger community taboos about sex—one Nisei woman said that until she married she had

no idea where babies came from—plus the desire of Japanese Americans to prove their good citizenship by conforming to the moral codes of the dominant society. This meant distancing themselves from anything stigmatized and shaming transgressors, though without any violent hatred.

There is, to be sure, a good deal of truth in this. As mentioned, gay Nikkei legal scholar Kenji Yoshino has argued in powerful terms in his book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (2006) that a major part of prejudice against racial or sexual minorities results not from their existence itself but their visibility. (This is demonstrated in extreme form by the US military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy: the Army admits that sexual orientation has no impact on the ability of gays and lesbians to serve since they are not barred altogether, but they are allowed only on the strict condition that they not reveal themselves and make others aware of them.) Certainly, many mid-century Nisei and Sansei viewed homosexuality as unspeakable, denied that there were any gays or lesbians in the community, and greeted all mention of the topic with embarrassed silence. Male homosexuality, because of its association with effeminacy, represented a special threat to Nikkei men anxious over their manhood. As journalist Edward Iwata noted some thirty years ago, tongue only partly in cheek, the main element in the "inexcusable ignorance" of Japanese Americans about sexual minorities was fear: "There is only one thing that most Asian Americans fear more than speaking in public or finding bad skiing conditions, and that is homosexuality. It is the last taboo, it is tainted ground. If one is religious, homosexuality is a filthy sin. If one is a Nisei, it is *verboden* to discuss. If one is a Sansei, it is a netherworld full of lispng, limpwrsted men."

Furthermore, the discomfort often became internalized. One small window on such attitudes can be found in Joanne Oppenheim's recent book, *Stanley Hayami, Nisei Son: His Diary, Letters, and Story from an American Concentration Camp to Battlefield, 1942–1945* (2008). This charming volume reprints the diary entries and letters of Stanley Hayami, a teenaged Nisei who was confined at the Heart Mountain camp and later served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, where he met his untimely death. (Hayami's papers, donated by his family to the Japanese American National Museum, also form the basis for Ann Kaneko and Sharon Yamato's documentary, *A Flicker in Eternity*.) In his writings, Hayami makes no mention of his attraction to any females or males, and his profile drawing of a muscular male

nude represents the sole conceivable marker of any erotic interest. Yet, in his diary entry for June 27, 1943, he speaks of his moodiness and frequent wish to be alone amid nature and then quickly adds, “I don’t tell this to anyone because they’ll figure that I’m a queer (Maybe I am).” This awkward confession not only provides our only clue as to Hayami’s sexual identity but suggests how thoroughly all deviance from community social norms was tarred with the brush of homosexuality.

Wherever the force of overall community strictures, it is clear that the most overt opposition to gay and lesbian equality within Japanese communities, as among other ethnic groups, has long come from those speaking in the name of Christianity. A vivid illustration is the actions of Allen Kato. In 1994 the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) National Board, by a 10–3 vote (plus three abstentions), approved resolutions in favor of full equality for gays and lesbians and called the freedom to marry a constitutional right that should not be denied to any American regardless of sexual orientation. The JACL thereby became the first national civil rights organization, apart from the American Civil Liberties Union, to formally support equal rights to marriage for gays and lesbians. Kato, JACL legal counsel, publicly resigned his position over the issue. While he objected on procedural grounds to the board’s action, he admitted that the center of his opposition was religious: “As a Christian, I believe the issue of same-sex marriage is a moral issue and not a civil rights issue. I believe homosexual marriage is morally wrong.” While Kato pronounced himself in favor of laws to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination (what he called “prohibitory laws”), he did not explain how he proposed to afford same-sex couples equal benefits with married couples. Instead, he insisted that recognition of civil marriage for gays and lesbians would violate his religious freedom.

Kato’s views remain widely shared within Japanese communities. In September 2008, when Proposition 8 was on the ballot in California, a national Asian American survey found that a majority of ethnic Japanese voters in California intended to support the measure. Still, the widespread opposition to Proposition 8 by those under forty-five years old across all racial groups strongly suggests that as the younger generation of Japanese Americans—both gay and straight—assumes community leadership, they will produce a more open and less fearful community.

Postscript (2012)

This column, on how Western-style homophobia grew up in West Coast Japanese communities, sparked some debate. As noted, in the course of my discussion I quoted the entry from the camp diary of Stanley Hayami, in which he spoke of his moodiness and his frequent wish to be alone amid nature. He confided to his diary, "I don't tell this to anyone because they'll figure that I'm a queer (Maybe I am)." I used this "confession" as evidence for the proposition that social nonconformity among Japanese Americans became tied up with gender nonconformity—that is, any people who were somehow different, and who stuck out from the general crowd, were stigmatized as "queers." I added in passing that there was no hard evidence in the diary of Hayami's sexual orientation and that the only conceivable hint in any direction was some drawings he did of muscular men.

Some readers proceeded to jump on my comments and complain that I was presenting Hayami as gay. One noted that, despite Stanley's comments, the diary shows him to be a normal teenager who was not antisocial and who liked parties. Various friends also contended that I might have made too much of Stanley's use of the word *queer* in reference to himself, since it was a common word among Nisei (like other Americans of the time) that meant "strange" or other things with no connection to homosexuality—as indeed, Stanley uses the word at other places in the diary where there is clearly no sexual dimension.

My reply to all these comments was this:

As you will note, my main point is not to speculate on Stanley Hayami's sexuality, much less to make a definitive interpretation. Stanley says that he is reluctant just to tell people that he wants to be alone, because that might mark him as a queer. I picked up on that as a sign of just how stigmatized all difference in character was, and how it became tied up in people's minds with sexual difference.

That said, there remains a question about how to treat Stanley's private comment to his diary. The point about the generalized use of the adjective "queer" is well taken. However, in this one particular case Stanley uses it, not in adjectival form as elsewhere [à la "queer ideas"], but as a noun: "a queer." This too was a well-recognized usage: Bill Marutani, to give just one example, has stated that that Nisei of his generation routinely referred to homosexuals

as “queers.” [Marutani was just two years older than Stanley Hayami.] Of course, there were more symbolic uses of the label as a generalized undesirable: for instance, in Milton Muramaya’s novel *All I Asking for Is My Body*, which takes place in Hawai’i in the late 1930s, a plantation Nisei character praises his white school teacher, whereupon another [young Nisei] scoffs that there are no “good” haoles—if a white guy is nice, he is either “a communist or a queer.”

We can agree that the Hayami diaries (at least the published part) do not give any much evidence one way or the other about ANY sexual interest. Whether Stanley attended parties or not, and whether he was social or antisocial, there simply is no statement of erotic interest in girls, [unlike] lots and lots of guys in camp who DID express heterosexual inclinations. Stanley’s silence on the subject could indeed be regular teenager behavior. It could also be something else. Conversely, when I say that the only conceivable sign of any sexual desire at all is his nude male drawing, this is just precisely what I mean—it is the ONLY thing that could by any stretch of the imagination even be so interpreted. It is at least equally conceivable that there was no such [sexual] interest associated.

In sum, I do not mark Stanley as attracted to men, but in the absence of clear evidence I do not assume that he was straight either, and I do not consider it over-reading or stigmatizing to leave the question open, though my main point is elsewhere.

I do not know whether I satisfied my critics, but I did not receive any further comments. More recently I came upon an intriguing corollary to the matter, something that serves as an odd sort of confirmation of my analysis of Stanley Hayami’s comments in his diary. As noted, in 1982 William Marutani mentioned in his column in the *Pacific Citizen* that in the years when he was growing up, he and other Nisei called gay people “queers,” while the Issei referred to them as “hentaisei,” a phrase which Marutani translated as “abnormal” or “sexual perversion.” (Since then, I have found no other corroboration that Issei regularly employed this term—perhaps some Nisei readers could enlighten me as to whether their parents actually used it.) Intrigued, as I always am by Issei Japanese lingo, I mentioned Marutani’s statement to a group of friends from Tokyo. To my surprise, they responded that, in Japanese, hentaisei means “nonconformist” or “deviant,”

with a connotation of “antisocial” in the sense of being opposed to dominant social norms. As such language would imply, it was not so much that, in Japanese eyes, same-sex activities were shameful or unnatural, as Marutani would have it, but that they disrupted the traditional, fixed social structure. Indeed, this sense of *hentai* reminded me of nothing so much as the classic Japanese proverb about the nail that sticks up being hammered down. If this is the intellectual framework that Nikkei communities took from Japan, it is no wonder that Stanley Hayami internalized the association of queer behavior with queer sexuality.

HAWAII 1986: THE SHIFT TO EQUAL RIGHTS (2011)

This piece represents a fifth entry in the series of annual columns I have produced on the queer heritage of Japanese Americans. It represents an anniversary column in a rather broader sense as well, in that it marks twenty-five years since the years 1986–1987. That period was a time of notably strenuous conflict over the issue of equality for gay and lesbian Americans, including those of Japanese ancestry, and the founding moment of what would soon be called queer activism. In retrospect, we can identify two principal catalysts for the attention to gay and lesbian concerns and the revival of militancy in the mid-1980s.

The first was the AIDS crisis. By 1986 an estimated 1 million Americans were HIV-positive, and the rate of new infections was increasing. Although the AIDS-related death of actor Rock Hudson in late 1985 had brought the first mainstream visibility to the epidemic, it remained a source of shame and stigma to most Americans, gay and straight. When federal and state governments failed to make treatment and research a funding priority, in March 1987 ACT UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—was formed in response. ACT UP militants campaigned for new legislation, more money to care for the stricken, and greater access to experimental AIDS medications. Their tactics, which included creating posters and videos and staging “die-ins” and other demonstrations, would serve as a model for a generation of activists.

The other cause was the US Supreme Court’s ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, announced at the end of June 1986. Michael Hardwick, a Georgia man whose home was entered by police, was discovered having sex with another male. After being arrested on sodomy charges, he challenged the law. While a lower

court threw out the conviction, by a narrow 5–4 majority, the Supreme Court ruled that state anti-sodomy laws were constitutional as enforced against same-sex couples and that there was no “constitutional right” to engage in homosexual sodomy. (The Court would overrule itself seventeen years later in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas*, in which it overturned all remaining sodomy laws—the majority opinion termed the *Bowers* ruling an “insult” to gay and lesbian Americans.)

Japanese American Citizens League leaders, like their counterparts in other mainstream Asian American organizations, did not concern themselves with antigay discrimination in any visible way during the 1980s. Not only was their attention fixed on urgent matters, such as redress for wartime confinement and prosecuting the murderers of Vincent Chin, but much of their membership likely shared, to some degree, the general discomfort over homosexuality. Meanwhile, it must be admitted, mainstream gay and lesbian organizations made little effort to engage with Asian American groups or issues.

Still, individual Japanese Americans, especially in progressive Hawai‘i, did begin to make their voices heard during this time on the side of equal treatment for all. In the wake of the *Bowers* decision, Roy Takumi, a future state legislator then working for the American Friends Service Committee, in a letter to the editor of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, contended that because heterosexual sodomy was not similarly outlawed, “The ruling implies that the Court believes that identical conduct by heterosexuals is not subject to state action: thus it is not the action but who does it that makes it illegal. It marks the first time since the Dred Scott decision that the Court has carved out a category of people for special treatment, reversing decades of movement to apply rights equally.” Tokumi concluded, “The rights of every minority must be vigilantly protected because the rights of one are the rights of all.”

Meanwhile, in response to the decision, in July 1986, a multiracial set of activists formed the Hawaii Democrats for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The group endorsed a slate of eleven candidates for the fall elections. Its biggest coup came in September, when powerful US senator Daniel K. Inouye agreed to address a group meeting organized at Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand, a well-known gay nightspot in Waikiki. Inouye had been, for some time, a quiet supporter of equality for gays and lesbians and in 1980 signed up as an early cosponsor of a bill to extend to sexual minorities the protections of the

Civil Rights Act of 1964 against employment and housing discrimination (the ancestor of today's still-not-enacted Employment Non-Discrimination Act).

Inouye told his audience at Hula's that, while he recognized the difficulties involved in coming out of the closet, gays and lesbians needed to speak out: "If you want to hide, that's up to you. But if you want to stand up and be counted, I think there is greater hope for you." Inouye concluded that gays and lesbians had "many friends" in Congress and that they would eventually triumph, as other groups had, over "unreasoning prejudice." He received a standing ovation. While various polls indicated that he was comfortably ahead in his race for reelection against his Republican opponent, Frank Hutchinson, his presence at the meeting caused a public stir. Hutchinson charged that by speaking at a gay bar, Inouye was "endorsing homosexuality." The senator's defenders responded blandly that he was simply meeting constituents.

Inouye's careful message of support was seconded soon after by an unlikely source. In early 1987, the Catholic bishop of Honolulu, Joseph Anthony Ferrario, took a public position in favor of a proposed bill to protect the state's gays and lesbians from housing and employment discrimination. While he stated that he followed church teaching against homosexuality, Ferrario added that he distinguished between opposition to sinful acts and the equal right to dignity of all individuals. When a conservative group called Concerned Roman Catholics of America, claiming to speak for the majority of the faithful, decried the bishop's position, D. H. Matsuda publicly praised Ferrario, asserting tartly in a letter to the editor that if the bishop's critics indeed spoke for Catholics, "it is better to be a human being than . . . a Catholic."

In the fall 1986 election, Democrats regained the majority in the Senate that they had lost six years earlier. A group of senators, including Daniel Inouye, supported an increase in funding for AIDS research and treatment. In reaction, conservative senator Jesse Helms proposed the first of his notorious "Helms amendments," forbidding any federal funding for AIDS treatment or any other activities that would "promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities." Although the provision represented exactly the type of "unreasoning prejudice" Inouye had told gays and lesbians that their friends would defeat, the senator recognized that the wall of prejudice was still formidable. In order to secure passage of the legislation,

Inouye voted in favor of the amendment—as did all senators of both parties, apart from Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York and liberal Republican Lowell Weicker of Connecticut. (Partly because of Weicker’s stand, conservative groups formed a coalition during the 1988 election to support his challenger, Democrat Joseph Lieberman, who won the seat and thereby launched his Senate career.)

In sum, the support from Japanese Americans that gays and lesbians received in their struggle for equality during the late 1980s was modest, low-key, and largely the product of individuals. Yet even such modest beginnings paved the way for more organized efforts during the 1990s, as queer Japanese Americans gained increased visibility within ethnic communities and the larger society in Hawai‘i.

Postscript (2012)

When I wrote this column about the rise of LGBT politics in Hawai‘i, I did not know about the inspiring story of Blake Oshiro. Oshiro, a Honolulu Democrat, was first elected to the state’s House of Representatives in 2000 and subsequently rose to the position of majority leader. In Spring 2010, as the House was considering a bill to legalize civil unions for same-sex couples, Oshiro publicly announced that he was a gay man, hoping to signal the importance of the legislation to him. While little noticed in the rest of the country, his action made him the nation’s first openly gay legislative chief. (The bill passed but was vetoed by Governor Linda Lingle; a subsequent bill was signed into law in 2011 by her successor, Neil Abercrombie, and it remained in effect until same-sex marriage was legalized in the state in 2013.)

Oshiro’s coming out incited Christian conservatives to back a primary election challenge to the majority leader by another Nikkei, Honolulu city councilman Gary Okino. That spring, Okino testified before the Hawaii Senate Judiciary and Government Operations Committee against the civil unions bill. Calling homosexuality a “perversion,” Okino had warned of “the medical dangers of a homosexual lifestyle.” After Oshiro prevailed in the primary, Okino endorsed Republican candidates against him in the general election. In the face of pressure over his bigoted views and party disloyalty, Okino later resigned from the Democratic Party. Oshiro won reelection in November 2010, then left his seat a year later to become Governor Abercrombie’s deputy chief of staff.

THE JACL'S HISTORIC VOTE FOR EQUAL MARRIAGE RIGHTS (2012)

As most Americans are aware, on May 9, 2012, President Barack Obama made the landmark announcement that he supported the right of same-sex couples to marry. Obama explained that, as a Christian, he had faced a long struggle over what position to take, but that in the end, the Golden Rule won out. His announcement was greeted with jubilation by LGBT Americans and straight supporters of equality but bitterly denounced by religious conservatives and right-wing spokespeople as an attack on both Christianity and marriage.

Whatever the political calculation present in the president's change of position, and the limitations of that support in terms of changing existing law, his statement marks the first time that a sitting president has placed the moral authority of his office behind the principle of full equality for gay and lesbian couples. Obama's action in taking sides before election time was also a courageous move, given the opposition to marriage rights for same-sex couples among voters in various swing states.

The game-changing nature of President Obama's statement, as well as the sharply opposing reactions it sparked, were mirrored nearly twenty years ago, on a smaller scale, in regard to the adoption of a resolution in favor of marriage equality by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). The JACL's action, in mid-1994, made it the first nationally based minority civil rights organization to grant official support to marriage for same-sex couples (the national NAACP, in vivid contrast, only did so in mid-2012, after Obama's announcement). Remarkably, the measure was adopted a full five years before Vermont became the first state to enact civil unions and a decade before Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. The JACL's action was the subject of bitter division within the Japanese community and led to an unusually public airing of disagreements and, ultimately, a referendum to repeal the vote of the organization's ruling board.

The origins of the marriage resolution apparently lie with various JACL chapters—most notably in Hawai'i. In 1993 the question of marriage rights first gained nationwide attention when Hawai'i's state Supreme Court ruled in *Baehr v. Lewin*—a suit that included two Filipino Americans and their same-sex partners who sought to marry—that refusing marriage licenses to gay couples constituted unconstitutional sex discrimination (Hawai'i voters ultimately voided the decision by adopting a constitutional amendment limiting

marriage to heterosexual couples). The Hawai'i JACL, which had sent a letter of support for the couples, decided to bring the matter to the organization's national leadership. Bill Kaneko, national vice president from the Honolulu chapter, initially presented the resolution to the National Board, with support from Ruth Mizobe, governor of the Pacific Southwest District Council. Meanwhile, progressive JACL chapters in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles—urban areas with more visible gay populations—moved to lobby for its adoption. Many of these backers had previously worked for Japanese American redress. Some were themselves gay or lesbian, like Tak Yamamoto, a founding member of Asian/Pacific Lesbians & Gays, or former JACL staffer Lia Shigemura. Others, like longtime activists Trisha Murakawa, Ruth Mizobe, and Chizu Iiyama, supported the proposal on general principles of equal rights.

The fact that such a measure could even be considered was surprising. In contrast to its longtime championing of racial equality and affirmative action, the JACL had never been visibly supportive of the rights of gays and lesbians. On the contrary, in 1982 longtime JACL national counsel William Marutani stated in the *Pacific Citizen* that he opposed civil rights for “queers,” like the right to teach in public schools, in order to ensure that homosexuality “not be encouraged or advanced.” He added that his view surely reflected the feelings of the vast majority of Nisei, if not all Nikkei.

In 1988 the JACL adopted a new constitution. It included “sexual orientation” for the first time on its list of categories in regard to which it opposed discrimination and sought equal justice. This addition was not debated at the time of ratification and was probably little noticed at the time—it may have been simply boilerplate antidiscrimination language. It was not until 1993 that the JACL National Board first formally voted to endorse the rights of gays and lesbians to legal protection from discrimination in housing and employment as well as the right to serve in the military. The board's action followed the passage in Colorado of Amendment 2, an initiative to strip gays and lesbians of all legal protections against discrimination, and in the wake of the debate over opening military service to LGBT Americans that led Congress to establish the “don't ask, don't tell” policy. To take up such a “cutting edge” rights question (in the words of national youth council director Kim Nakahara) as same-sex marriage just a few months later represented something of a revolution for the JACL.

In February 1994, Bill Kaneko presented a resolution to the JACL National Board supporting “the concept of marriage as a constitutional right that should not be denied because of a person’s sexual orientation.” Legal prohibitions on same-sex marriage, it stated, violated constitutional guarantees of equal protection and human rights. The board voted to table the resolution temporarily, in order to consult member chapters. At its next meeting in May 1994, following the consultation, the JACL’s National Board approved the Kaneko resolution by a vote of 10–3 (with two abstentions).

The board’s action catalyzed a storm of protest. JACL legal counsel Allen Kato resigned, publicly stating that, as a Christian, he considered homosexual marriages to be “morally wrong” and the board’s action was an affront to his religious freedom. Esteemed journalist Bill Hosokawa accused the board of moving the JACL past the purposes of its founding, which was to focus solely on issues of direct and paramount importance to Japanese Americans (the existence of LGBT Japanese Americans, and the impact on their own rights, went ignored in Hosokawa’s discussion).

Meanwhile, numerous individuals sent letters to the *Pacific Citizen* deploring the vote as an endorsement of homosexuality. A writer from Renton, Washington, complained that the JACL now favored granting same-sex couples the same benefits granted to “normal married couples to protect them and their children.” A Redondo Beach, California, reader proclaimed, “If the JACL constitution says that we should support a person’s civil rights regardless of sexual orientation, change it! Otherwise we must support people engaged in paedophilia [*sic*], incest, and bestiality.” A reader from Dublin, California, called on the JACL to stand for the “traditional family.” While Buddhists remained silent on the religious question, several authors, following Allen Kato, couched their opposition to the measure in explicitly Christian terms. One correspondent from Stockton, California, thundered against “same-sex” as the sin of sodomy, an affront by the perpetrator “against the maker and against his own flesh.” Another from Santa Ana, California, stated that “civil rights” could never take precedence over “moral rights” in a nation founded on Christian principles.

Various local chapters protested the board’s action as unauthorized. The JACL’s Mount Olympus chapter, based in heavily Mormon Salt Lake City, brought a resolution to have the JACL National Council—composed of representatives from all chapters—vote on repeal of the board’s resolution.

Hoping to defuse the debate, Mike Hamachi, of the Diablo Valley chapter (following a proposal by Peggy Sasashima Liggett), introduced a competing resolution to support domestic partner legislation rather than marriage and explicitly respect the right of JACL members to disagree about whether domestic partnerships could be considered a matter of civil rights.

For veteran JACLers, it must have seemed like *déjà vu*—the tone of the debate was eerily reminiscent of a similar controversy over civil rights that the organization had faced a generation previously. In early 1963, the JACL National Board accepted Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s invitation to send representatives to that summer's March on Washington. Several local chapters had then protested that the JACL should not identify itself too closely with the black freedom movement, since it was not their struggle and the JACL's presence would alienate useful white allies. Local chapters also charged that the national JACL was exceeding its authority. The *Pacific Citizen* published a number of letters from Nisei, most advising against marching. In the end, President K. Patrick Okura called an emergency National Board meeting to set policy; he set the meeting in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, far from local West Coast pressures. The delegates there approved the right of JACL members to attend the historic march, though only a few dozen actually did so. [With apologies for the self-promotion, I direct readers wishing a fuller account of this conflict to the final chapter of my book *After Camp: Portraits in Midcentury Japanese American Life and Politics* (2012).]

In summer 1994, there was a showdown over marriage at the JACL's national convention in Salt Lake City. In hopes of blunting the Christian-based opposition, Bill Kaneko presented articles written by religious leaders, such as Rev. Joan Ishibashi of the United Church of Christ in Honolulu and Rev. Mark Nakagawa of Sacramento, California, who endorsed the same-sex resolution. He also introduced letters of support from the Asian Law Caucus, the Asian Bar Association, and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium. Perhaps surprisingly, given both his reputation as a moderate consensus-seeker and his vulnerability as an elected official to negative publicity, then congressman Norman Mineta proved to be one of the most forceful advocates of the National Board's resolution. Mineta asked the delegates rhetorically, "Where would we be today if the NAACP, or the National Council of La Raza, or the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, or the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force had taken the position that redress was

a Japanese American issue—and had nothing to do with African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jews or gay and lesbian Americans?” In more practical terms, he reminded JACLers that Representative Barney Frank, the first sitting congressman to come out voluntarily, had been a leading actor in moving redress through Congress and that Japanese Americans had a debt to repay to their champion.

Following the end of debate, the JACL National Council voted 50–38 to uphold the National Board’s resolution. Four chapters split their vote and eleven more abstained. (By a large majority, the National Council then passed the Hamachi resolution on domestic partnerships, though it had been rendered effectively moot.) Carole Hayashino, the JACL’s associate director, later stated that while she had not expected the National Board resolution to actually be overturned, the closeness of the vote showed how difficult it was for the various chapters to accept it: “It was an emotional discussion.” Two years later, JACL executive director Herb Yamanishi added that the decision, which remained controversial, had cost the group part of its membership.

Now, a generation later, when the president and—according to public opinion polls—a majority of Americans (including a large majority of those under thirty) support extending marriage rights to same-sex couples, the JACL’s action appears forward-looking and responsible. In another generation, young Nikkei may look back with puzzlement that there was ever any controversy in the community over marriage rights for the LGBT community.²

NOTES

1. I have since found this precise story documented in Larry Tajiri’s January 5, 1935, “Vagaries” column in *Nichi Bei*.
2. In June 2015, the US Supreme Court declared all state laws barring marriage by same-sex couples unconstitutional.

