

JAPANESE AMERICAN MALENESS AND FEMALENESS THEME AT THIRD ASILOMAR

CONFERENCE by Philip Tajitsu Nash (August 10, 1979)

A cloudy California afternoon. They pass through the gate, and a guard directs them over to the low, wooden administration building. They pick up their tags and are given directions- where to leave their bags and where to eat. While moving to their quarters, they fondly talk about the homes they've left behind- and their hopes and fears about this new experience.

While the beginning of Asilomar III might have sounded like the beginning of a sadder major event in Nikkei (Japanese American) history, the rest of the conference had little in common with it. Asilomar III was a three day (July 20-22) series of workshops and activities whose main theme was "Japanese American Maleness and Femaleness". (The themes of the previous two conferences, held in 1975 and 1977, were "The Camps" and "The Japanese American Character".) All three conferences were held in a small cluster of buildings at the beautiful Asilomar Conference Center, two hours south of San Francisco, on the shores of the Monterey Peninsula. And participation was purely voluntary.

The femaleness/maleness theme drew over eighty people from around the country for a variety of reasons. For some, it was a chance to compare Nikkei male/female roles to male/female roles in society at large. For others, it was a chance to see how Nikkei in different areas or age ranges were coping with rapidly changing stereotypes as to what is "maleness" and what is "femaleness". For still others, it was a chance to discuss personal growth or inhibitions with sympathetic Nikkei brothers and sisters.

The backgrounds of the conference participants were diverse enough to allow discussion of the theme on many different levels. A Nisei housewife (domestic engineer) talked about the female bonds holding the Nikkei family together. A sansei clinical psychologist and self-proclaimed "house-husband" discussed the joys of participating in the rearing of children. Several nisei men brought up the extreme pressures they were under to conform to two differing male stereotypes- the aggressive United States male and the quiet, respectable Japanese male. A female sansei elementary school teacher described her preference for non-sansei men as due to sansei male

"indirectness" and feelings of "incestuousness" if she should get involved with a fellow Nikkei. A male haffu (one Nikkei parent) performed a touching monologue, using a half-white/half-yellow mask, to describe his mixed feelings and ultimate positiveness about being a child of two cultures. Unfortunately, there were no Issei participants, so their experiences could only be felt indirectly- through their influence on the Nisei.

The maleness/femaleness theme provided a strong link which held the conference together. From this central theme, discussion ran off into other areas of equal concern to Nikkei. A male Nisei graphics designer told about the post-WW II racism that barred his entry into the legal profession. A professional importer described the plight of "war brides" and other non-white immigrants today, and then related it to the humiliation she suffered in the 1950's when she was forced to certify that she was "not a prostitute" before she was able to leave Japan and enter the U.S. with her G.I. husband. A female Nisei social worker discussed the plight of the unmentionables- those who broke down in the concentration camps and who now survive in mental institutions- and contrasted it to the "model minority" stereotype for Nikkei.

To balance out the often-heavy discussions, the twenty member planning committee from the San Francisco Center for Japanese American Studies (SFCJAS) skillfully arranged for creative exercises and entertainment. Fortunately, there were plenty of creative Nikkei ready to help out. Phil Gotanda, with Peter Horikoshi, played a long stream of catchy/funny/meaningful tunes. Haruko Nagaishi and Jim Hirabayashi performed admirably in "A Window for Aya", a new play by talented Nisei writer/actor Hiroshi Kashiwagi. Entertaining and educational films were provided by the Los Angeles-based groups "Visual Communications" and "the Manzanar Committee", each of which had members at the conference. Nisei writer Nikki Bridges coordinated the readings of a broad spectrum of works, some by conference participants and some from other sources, which were used as springboards for discussion. And a creative workshop led by Missy Tanaka produced some beautiful haiku and paintings.

It might seem that structured activities accounted for every moment at Asilomar III. Nothing could be further from the truth. Informal activities included walks to the beautiful beach, indulging in delicious meals, impromptu sing-alongs, wild and crazy dancing, and spending quiet moments in conversations with newfound brothers and sisters.

The importance of these informal activities was specially celebrated as the conference finally drew to a close. Missy Tanaka, in discussing the work done in the creative workshop, noted that each artist had intuitively approached her/his work in a very Asian way: finding pleasure in both the process of creating and the finished product. And as each participant left the Asilomar grounds, each seemed to embrace that same Asian approach to our weekend together. We had enjoyed the interacting as Japanese American males and females just as much as we treasured what we took home with us- new friendships, new attitudes, and new confidence in ourselves.

For more information about Asilomar III or other events sponsored by the San Francisco Center for Japanese American Studies, contact: SFCJAS, PO Box 99345, San Francisco, Ca. 94109. Membership, including a monthly newsletter, is \$10.