

Professor Miyake

JPNT 177 Japanese and Japanese American Women Writers

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Disclaimer:

The following story is a fictional one. Yet the historical backgrounds of the Second World War and the US government's Incarcerations of Japanese Americans are by no means fabricated. In fact, inspirations were drawn from the English translation of Hiroshi Fukuwa's 「マンザナー日記」 (*Manzanar Diary*). The protagonist of the following story is the executive chef and owner of Sushi Yamaguchi, the first omakase<sup>1</sup> sushi restaurant in the city of Las Aires, a fictional metropolis in the West Coast of the United States. The interview that the narrator conducts is supposed to have taken place in the mid-1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> Omakase, from the Japanese word “to entrust,” denotes a type of Japanese cuisine that customers leave it up to the sushi chef to serve seasonal specialities.

山口幾多郎 Yamaguchi Kitarō<sup>2</sup>

Located in the southern end of the glamorous Caesar Boulevard abounds with classy European continental restaurants, Sushi Yamaguchi maintains a rather low-profile gateway that almost seems out of place. Besides a stone tablet which inscribes “すし やまぐち,” “Sushi Yamaguchi” in *hiragana*,<sup>3</sup> and pebble pavement sided by bamboo, nothing else is to be shown at the entrance. Touristy pedestrians could easily mistake this exquisite sushi restaurant for some middle class Japanese residential house. The protagonist of this story is Yamaguchi Kitarō, the executive chef, founder, and owner of Sushi Yamaguchi.

My reservation with Sushi Yamaguchi is at 11:30. To demonstrate my journalistic professionalism, I decided to arrive half an hour earlier. By the time of my arrival, there were already seven people who seemed to be waiting anxiously, all dressed in formal attire. “There comes the last person in our group,” a stern Japanese businessman in his fifties greets me, as in the form of reprimand. Sensing some awkwardness in the air, I attempted to initiate a friendly conversation: “So...How did you all hear about Sushi Yamaguchi?” Taken aback, a professorially-looking lady responds: “Oh. Everyone knows. Sushi Yamaguchi is the best you can find in town.” “Yamaguchi-san is the pride of Kibei<sup>4</sup> Nissei in LA,” the stern man speaks in a monotone. “Sushi Yamaguchi has been my home away from Japan,” pronounced slowly by an

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<sup>2</sup> Japanese names in this paper will follow the Japanese fashion of placing first name after the last name without insertion of a comma in the middle.

<sup>3</sup> One of the three main Japanese writing systems, with the other two being *katakana* and *kanji*.

<sup>4</sup> Kibei, 帰米, literally “return to America,” is a term that describes mostly second-generation Japanese Americans who returned to the United States after receiving their education in Japan.

elderly Japanese woman dressed in elegant kimono. “I am here to see what makes Sushi

Yamaguchi such a reputable place,” said a middle-aged American of German descent who is himself an owner of a high-end sushi restaurant in Santa Barbara, a city that is a hundred miles away from Las Aires.

At 11:30 sharp, a young waiter deftly opened the traditional Japanese wooden sliding door and speaks in Japanese while bowing: “*Dozo.*”<sup>5</sup> Without a delay, eight of us smoothly took our shoes off, changed into *geta*, a type of traditional Japanese footwear, and found our respective seats at the sushi bar, which were arranged rather tightly next to each other. Then from the kitchen steps out of our protagonist, a short yet intense-looking man in his 70s, followed by two sous-chefs, presumably Yamaguchi’s apprentices. With a rhetorical question of “shall we start?” Yamaguchi Kitarō begins his performance.

Sushi Yamaguchi defies your stereotypical imagination of a Japanese restaurant in Las Aires, or anywhere in the United States: There are no continuous, sometimes thundering calls of “*irashaimase*” upon your entrance. Coke and Sprite filled with ice are not beverage options offered here. No fortune cookies are given after the payment, and most astonishingly, there is no physical menu to order from.

Lasting for about forty minutes, the entire course feels like a classical Mozart concert recital. Yamaguchi, the conductor of the concert, directed the movement of the band in a seamless manner. In addition to presiding over the performers, Yamaguchi kept a keen observation of the audience members, who were indispensable elements of the performance.

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<sup>5</sup> どうぞ. Dozo denotes “Please.”

Yamaguchi paced and sized each serving of nigiri piece according to customer's needs. Even the insertion of intermission-esque sweets and desserts was meticulously calculated. The temperature of the vinegared rice was so impeccably controlled that topped with the carefully picked fresh fish, the entire combo melts in your mouth. Unlike any other restaurants, during the entirety of the forty-minute course, there was no talking. All the communication was done in either eye contact or a low-decibel sound of approval. Clearly, every one of us was satisfied with the whole spectrum of the experience.

After the payment and first-time diners eagerly soliciting photos with Chef Yamaguchi, I was finally able to sit down with the man and conduct my interview. At this point, I have been completely captivated by the personal charm of Yamaguchi. Similar to the location of his sushi restaurant behind the plain, unassuming, and even humble gateway, underneath his somber appearance, I assume that there is something deeply agitating and intriguing about Yamaguchi's personal characteristics. Naturally, my first question is about what drew Yamaguchi to being a sushi chef?

Growing up as the grandson of Yamaguchi Akio, a Japanese professional fisher who immigrated from Kushima<sup>6</sup> to Hawaii to seek economic opportunities, Yamaguchi has been exposed to the art of sushi since childhood. For him, sushi is not merely a profession that gets you money; it is a way of living. "In Japan, we have a special word for a craftsman or a chef who dedicates his entire life to the perfection of a single skill: *shokunin*. By repeating the same action days after days, your body and mind become one entity. Even though the practice of *shokunin*

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<sup>6</sup> Kushima is a city in the southwest of Kyushu, Japan.

might look repetitious, it is by no means a mindless. 100% of one's attention is required to perfect the skill. The same sort of cultivation applies to professional archers, kabuki actors, woodcutters and so forth."<sup>7</sup> Yamaguchi was able to utter this philosophical line so eloquently that it makes you wonder if he has practiced it for numerous times before. According to Yamaguchi, it is not how much money you have that earns your respect from the Japanese community but how dedicated you are to your chosen profession. It becomes clear that "dedication" whether to one's profession or community is Yamaguchi's key philosophy in life.

Having no previous knowledge about this concept of shokunin, I steered the conversation into another direction: "After receiving your education in Japan, what made you decide to come back to the United States? Why Las Aires specifically?" Yamaguchi seemed to be a bit surprised by the question. He started to say something that sounds like a typical American dream narrative. After leaving Hawaii for the Japanese rural town of Kushima for middle school and high school, Yamaguchi found himself dissatisfied with the prospect of life in Kushima. If he chose to work for a family fish stall in a local market, Yamaguchi could imagine his tedious, monotonous life fifty years later. "No, I will not accept being everyone else," Yamaguchi pronounces the word "everyone" with noticeable resolution. Therefore in 1930, at the age of 17, Yamaguchi bought a one-way ferry ticket from Osaka to Las Aires to live his American dream. Why Las Aires? Because Hawaii wasn't big enough for him.

The first few years after returning to the United States was an upsetting period for Yamaguchi. Finding Las Aires much more racially segregated than he expected, Yamaguchi

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<sup>7</sup> 職人 (Shokunin in Kanji, a writing system in the Japanese language)

initially attempted to force himself into the mainstream white American culture. “Always dreaming about being a chef, I started my first job as a busboy at the Bourdieu, a French restaurant just down the street. I meant Caesar Boulevard.” Of course, Yamaguchi was not content with being a busboy for life; he made a mildly ambitious plan for himself: one year as a busboy, one year as a waiter, one year as a kitchen porter, two years as a Commis Chef, three years as a sous-chef, then an executive chef, and eventually Yamaguchi dreams of opening his own French restaurant in the Caesar Boulevard. Ironically, Yamaguchi did end up opening his own restaurant in the Caesar Boulevard. Instead of a French one, Yamaguchi adhered to his Japanese tradition.

One year later, with perfect working attendance while making few mistakes as a busboy, Yamaguchi approached his manager to discuss the prospect of being promoted to the position of a waiter. The response from his manager was not just a disappointment but also disillusion with his American dream: “You should be satisfied with where you are right now. In fact, it is a privilege for you to be working at the Bourdieu. You know, Fu Manchus only get to be laundry workers.” “Fuck you” was the last words Yamaguchi said to his manager before he formally resigned from his job at the Bourdieu. Yamaguchi thought that he would be ready to cope with any technical hardships that he faced, but the racial glass ceiling was just unacceptable.

It needs to be admitted that despite the discrimination, Yamaguchi did receive a stable income from his busboy job. After that, Yamaguchi hopped around several other jobs such as a bellboy at a three-star hotel in downtown LA, a laundry worker in little Italy, and a helper at a cotton factory in the suburb. It was during the most desperate moment when Yamaguchi failed to

pay his apartment rent that he found his support community for life: Kibei Nissei in Las Aires'

Japan town. Before his encounter with his fellow Kibei Japanese, Yamaguchi felt this sense of frustration of being stuck between his Japanese identity and American identity. Unable to

identify with Issei, the first generation Japanese in the United States, who are "too Japanese"

Yamaguchi also found it hard to communicate with the Nissei, the second generation Japanese Americans: "They are too white-washed," Yamaguchi complained without reservation.

Fortunately, Yamaguchi was readily accepted by the Kibei community who support fundamental Japanese traditions such as filial piety and unity as a group. However, they also embrace some parts of their American identity such as not being ashamed of standing out and making a name for oneself if one has the ability to do so. Within Yamaguchi's kibei friend group, Ito-san is a professional bonsai artist; Takahashi, a skilled welder; Saito, a respected Asian furniture supplier; Yasuo, a well-known writer, and the list goes on. Many of the Kibei are in fact living their American dreams. The only difference is that to them, the American dream is about fulfilling your potential instead of making a fortune or being able to assimilate into mainstream society. "I realized that you can live your American dream within the Japanese community in Las Aires," excitedly stated by Yamaguchi.

Several years after honing his sushi-making skills under the guidance of Chef Miyake at Taiyō<sup>8</sup>, a local Japanese restaurant, a turning point in Yamaguchi's life happened. In fact, it was a turning point for all Japanese Americans in the United States. "Attack on Pearl Harbor definitely undermined the peaceful life we had in our Japanese community." By February 1942, Yamaguchi

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<sup>8</sup> Taiyō literally means the sun.

and his fellow Japanese Americans were informed by the city council that all Japanese

Americans will be forcefully relocated to inland “internment camps” at some point in the immediate future. “I was appalled because what we, collectively as a Japanese community, have been building will end abruptly,” Yamaguchi recalled with melancholy. Yet Yamaguchi was one of the first 1,000 Japanese men who volunteered to set up the infrastructure in the Manzanar incarceration camp on March 23, 1942, when the camp was still referred to as “Owens Valley Reception Center.” “I have to sacrifice myself for the community because the community is what saved me during the most anguished moments of my life.” Noticeably, this commitment to community building is a crucial part of the Japanese tradition that Yamaguchi and his fellow Kibei Japanese strove to preserve. The current Japanese American community would not have been united if it was not for what the older generations have done to keep it together.

For Yamaguchi, life inside the incarceration camps is difficult to recall. Expectedly, there was physical hardship. Situated right next to the Sierra Nevada, the freezing temperature during winter could make nights unbearable. Just a little West of Death Valley, the heat during the never-ending summer made sure that everyone was sweaty and dehydrated all the time. Mess halls<sup>9</sup> were always crowded, and the last persons were often unable to get anything despite waiting for more than two hours in line.

However, the most traumatic aspect of incarceration was the psychological damage: separation from family members, seclusion from the outside world, and toward the end of the war, the sense that Japan was on the losing side. “Of course everyone in the camp supported the

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<sup>9</sup> Synonymous with dining halls.

Japanese Imperial Army.” That firm belief became the very reason why Yamaguchi was so

demoralized when he found out that some Japanese Americans answered “Yes” to the loyalty questionnaire designed by the US War Department to test if Japanese Americans would swear to renounce their support for the Japanese government. From believing that the Japanese army would claim victory over American soldiers to their resigned acceptance of Japanese final defeat, the Japanese Americans incarcerated found themselves in difficult situations regarding political loyalty.

The postwar re-assimilation experience was also not an easy one. Even now, Yamaguchi is clearly still conflicted with what role should the remembrance of the incarcerations of Japanese Americans play nowadays. First, Yamaguchi is definitely not claiming that the past should just be forgotten at all. In fact, Yamaguchi actively participates in the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage and volunteers to relate his incarceration experiences to whoever interested in his experience. However, Yamaguchi is hesitant about being too vocal about identity politics: “The animosity between the White Americans and Asian Americans is something from the past generation. How could one advance toward a better future if he still clings to the past? Could we just accept our landmark victory during the 1960s civil rights movement and move forward? I see nothing wrong with the designation of Asian Americans as ‘model minorities.’”

After the war, Yamaguchi continued his passion as a sushi chef and soon started his own restaurant in 1962. However, he was not content with being just another sushi chef in a commonplace Japanese restaurant. In the 1960s, when goods tagged with “made in Japan” were synonymous with cheap, low-quality products. Yamaguchi vowed to change people’s perceptions

of Japan and Japanese culture. “Japanese food can also be elegant and on the same par with classy French restaurants. And here are we now today.” For Yamaguchi, actions weigh much more than words. Although Yamaguchi remains reticent throughout the forty minutes of the omakase session, his skillful presentation of the art of making sushi did successfully change my impression of Japanese culture.

My conversation with Yamaguchi ended in an upbeat note. While the taste of Las Aires residents will remain fluctuant, it is certain that Yamaguchi, with his dedication to his art of sushi and sacrificial commitment to his Japanese community, will be a role model for Japanese Americans who aspire to assert themselves and fulfill their dreams.