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Family Secrets: Turning Shame into Honor

Brenda Wong Aoki

Digging under the foundation of a family story can reveal the striations of prejudice and persecution within the historical bedrock on which a narrative rests. Here Brenda Wong Aoki talks about creating her show, Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend. The story, which premiered in 1998, was funded in part by Congressional allocations for Japanese reparations following the federal government's mistreatment of Japanese Americans during WW II. Aoki dug into a legacy of family shame to locate its source. She followed feelings, facts, family history, and newspaper accounts, looking for the truth about her family's legacy. Her investigation was bolstered by synchronicity and the efforts of a graduate research assistant who spoke Victorian Japanese. She unearthed a family secret wrapped in silence and scandal for generations, and discovered a love story with roots in forgotten family honor and cultural pride.



Every piece of art I ever create seems to have its own nature. So each time I think, okay, I've found my process, but then the next piece I do completely changes. So here I'll talk about the particular process for *Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend*. I had been wondering why I walk around with this sense of shame? Why do I always have to pretend instead of just feeling like I belong at the table? I noticed all my sisters are this way and all my immediate family. It was kind of weird, because here we are not only Asian-American, but we're Japanese-American, the model minority. I had heard that the reason why we had this feeling of unworthiness was because of the Japanese internment camps. So I went to talk to our elders to find out what exactly happened in those camps to make us feel like this. But I discovered

we had not been in camps; my family already lived in Utah during the internment of Japanese Americans, so there was no reason to move us there. Then I wanted to find out how we got to Utah at the turn of the last century. In 1909, we were the first Japanese in Utah. Why did we go there when most Japanese were on the coast?

That's when my hundred-and-three-year-old cousin, Sadae, told me a story about our family heritage. All I knew was that we were sharecroppers from Utah. She said, "No, we were not sharecroppers. We were gentry." I didn't believe her, but she gave me dates for my grandfather's arrival in the US from Japan; Peter C. Aoki was an Episcopal priest who founded the mission to Japanese dockworkers in San Francisco.

He had traveled to this country with his younger brother Gunjiro.

I went to the public library and found articles in American newspapers across the country about my great uncle Gunjiro Aoki and his marriage to Helen Gladys Emery, the daughter of Rev. John A. Emery, archdeacon of the Episcopal diocese of California. Theirs was probably the first Japanese-Caucasian marriage in the country. Possibly the first documented Asian-Caucasian marriage in the US, certainly the most celebrated one.

But the whole story didn't really emerge until I found the Japanese newspapers from the Victorian period. The Japanese press from the Victorian era is not accessible to the public; the newspapers are falling apart, turning to dust.

A faculty advisor to PhD candidates at the University of Nagoya saw me perform. After the show, I spoke of my work-in-progress on *Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend*. This advisor was so fascinated by my attempt to unravel a family mystery that he offered the assistance of one of his graduate students to help with my research. Using our family crest and family scroll, that student, Takao Asano, researched who the Aoki clan was back in Nagano, Japan. And then he came here.

It was Takao who broke everything open. My cousin Sadae had forgotten her English and she could only speak Japanese. But it was Victorian Japanese and

Above: Wedding picture of Helen Gladys Emery and Gunjiro Aoki in March 1909.

nobody could understand exactly what she was saying. We could understand, "Pass the tea," but once you went into deeper things nobody could understand. It turns out that Takao was raised by his grandfather, the foremost authority on the folklore of Mt. Fuji, the sacred mountain of Japan. His grandfather was a storyteller who spoke Victorian Japanese and so Takao did too. Previously I had brought three interpreters to Sadae and all she would do was smile at them. With Takao she was just so thrilled to have someone to talk to. That's when she said that she had been holding this story about something that had happened to her family and she wasn't going to die until the story was told. And she told Takao about Uncle Gunjiro and Helen.

Using the dates Sadae provided, we examined the Japanese press and found all this new information. Takao, being able to speak Victorian Japanese, was able to talk to the keeper of the Victorian Japanese archives. The archivist felt he was holding onto the history of the Japanese in America, which he was: the first Japanese settlement in America was San Francisco. But Takao knew what kind of presents to bring and how many times he'd have to come back again before he would be allowed to look at the newspapers. So he did all of that for a long time, until this man let Takao read the newspapers.

With the information in the Japanese press, my perspective on the story completely changed. Before that I had seen only how the American press had portrayed Uncle Gunjiro—as this rogue who had run away with this rich damsel. A dark yellow man who rose up against his master and took away his master's daughter—that was basically the story in the *Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, and the *San Francisco Call*. If I had not had access to the Japanese press, I would have believed the perspective of the American press and that was completely wrong. But if you don't know exactly what happened historically, whatever the public attitude was when the event took place—that attitude goes straight into your cells and you pass it down to your kids. So all this residual unworthiness stuff was because of public opinion formed by the English-language press. I thought that was fascinating and awful. When you don't know the truth of why you're feeling ashamed, it's just crazy.

In the Japanese press I discovered that what my cousin Sadae said was true. The Aokis were from a class above samurais. We were Daimyō, or lords. And actually Gunjiro was of a higher class than Ms. Emery. But the marriage came at a really bad time for the Japanese in San Francisco when all these laws were being passed against them. And now this high profile marriage was



Peter Aoki and the Japanese Mission in 1905.



Brenda's cousin Sadae Aoki Takizawa in 1903.

happening. And my grandfather, Peter Aoki, the leader of Japantown, was standing up for it! In fact, the Japanese Ambassador was married to a German baroness; they had been excited about being part of this new global world. That's why the Japanese had come to the US. That's why they had sent an ambassador here. As opposed to the Chinese, who just sent their workers and peasants, Japan sent only the ruling class, the professionals and the intellectuals in the first wave of immigration. A lot of

Japanese viewed themselves as people who were created in the internment camps. Nobody had done any research on the first wave of Japanese in America to find out we were the first country to have an embassy here. And the people who came were educated; in fact, we owned Pacific Heights.

But because of the "scandalous" elopement of Gunjiro and Helen, my grandfather was kicked out of Japantown, kicked out of the church and banished to Utah. He never told my father or any of my uncles and aunts why they were there, living as sharecroppers. All they knew was that there was something that they'd done wrong. The performance of *Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend* was the first time all of his descendants, second generation and third generation, understood their personal history.

For the premiere of the show relatives came from both branches of the family, Gunjiro's side and my grandfather's side. Helen and Gunjiro's descendants had become whiter and whiter and whiter; they did not realize they were Japanese, until they saw this performance. I basically outed them at the show. My father and his brothers and sisters cried when they saw it. They cried because their father had not told them the truth about who they were and why they had gone to Utah.

It took a long time for the truth of this story to be digested into everybody's bones. But once it was told, there was a huge change in everybody's attitude about themselves and their worthiness. I can see it with my siblings, the way they've changed. I can see it in their children. It's amazing how powerful our story is; it created a paradigm shift. As Father John Rawlings, the archivist of the Episcopal diocese for the western region said, "*Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend* turned a secret family shame into a badge of honor."

Brenda Wong Aoki is a recipient of the NSN ORACLE Circle of Excellence Award, a storyteller, playwright, and artistic director. She creates works for theater, symphony, contemporary dance, world music, taiko, jazz, and western chamber ensemble. A descendant of Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Scottish ancestors, her work speaks to the essential hybridity of contemporary culture in the U.S. aokizu@firstvoice.org

Dramaturging The Storyteller

Antonio Sacre

Playwright and storyteller Antonio Sacre performed in the Midnight Cabaret of the 2014 National Storytelling Festival. He also mounts his one-man shows in Fringe Festivals and Solo Performance Festivals from coast to coast and abroad. Here he details the evolution of a new full-length work, his fourth collaboration with director Paul Stein. He writes about their process with the same candor, irreverent humor, and charm that he embodies in his work onstage. As one reviewer describes it:

"The Storyteller... is a defining moment for Sacre, who takes a different direction and a lot more risk in the material and the presentation than ever before. It's his exclusive, growing up, right of passage story told in 'real-time' without apology. And it is bold!"

—Tracey Paleo, *Gia on the Move*,
reviews of theater and art in Los Angeles.



The world premiere of my latest play *The Storyteller*, directed by Paul Stein, opened at VS. Theatre in Hollywood as part of The Solo Collective theatre ensemble in September 2014. It will be extended into 2015 before touring nationally. It is my eighth full-length, solo performance, and while each one is very

different, there are some constants about what goes into creating, rehearsing, producing, performing, and eventually touring one of my shows. The idea is the seed. The first public performance is the soil. Subsequent drafts expanding the story are the water. And my director is the