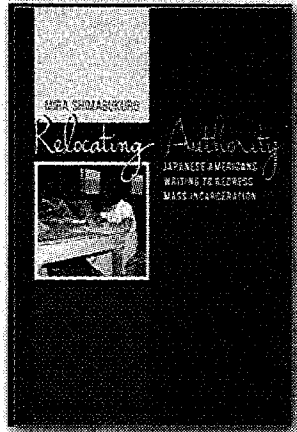


IE ARTS

'Resistance Capital': Writing in the camps as an act of defiance

By Frank Abe
Special to the IE



'Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration' by Mira Shimabukuro. University Press of Colorado, 250 pages. Paper, \$26.95.

I want to thank the author of this study for putting a name to the sense of purpose I felt in writing an essay for the old Northwest Nikkei in 1992, on my feelings upon first reading the manifestos of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee. What I was obeying, she says in citing that piece, was my "inheritance of resistance capital"—the idea that writing by Japanese American camp resisters in 1944 created a kind of currency that can be grown and reinvested generations later by their spiritual descendants.

It's one of several useful rhetorical constructs framed by Mira Shimabukuro, poet and lecturer at the University of Washington, Bothell, in her revelatory new work cleverly called *Relocating Authority*. Her title plays upon the name of the civilian War Relocation Authority that was created to imprison Japanese Americans in ten wartime incarceration camps, while subverting euphemism to put the authority back where it belongs: in those

incarcerees, especially the women, who used the written word to "talk back" as a means to take back some measure of power and self-worth.

It is in part a very personal story, as Mira examines her place in this narrative and the resistance capital she inherited from her father, one-time *International Examiner* editor Bob Shimabukuro. The audience for much of the book is scholars in the field of cultural rhetorics, with extended meditations that seek, for example, "A Culturally Relevant Model of Nikkei Intersubjective Receptivity."

Within that discipline, Shimabukuro shows how private scribbles in camp diaries and public statements in handbills were acts of resistance excluded from popular accounts of Japanese American history, which she says "tend to either cover up or downplay the community's long legacy of dissidence" under the sway of the wartime Japanese American Citizens League and field secretary Mike Masaoka. "In such JACL-inspired chronicles," she writes, the struggle to survive in camp was always characterized as "a great hardship overcome by the community's extreme loyalty, obedience, agreeableness, and quietness"—traits often reflexively attributed to *gaman*, the ability to "endure adversity" and "quietly accept oppression" with "subservient behavior" and "without complaint," the ethos ludicrously celebrated as a virtue in a song of the same name in the Broadway musical *Allegiance*.

Shimabukuro's accomplishment is to look beyond such passivity to advance what she calls "writing-to-gaman:" screaming in writing that which could not be yelled in public. At a reading May 5 at the Wing Luke Museum, she cited an unexpected example: future children's book author Yoshiko Uchida, who turned to her diary "to release her own indignations" and "declares that the proposed draft of already-incarcerated Nisei men makes her 'SICK!' capitalizing each letter, ending with an exclamation point, and underlining the

word twice for additional emphasis." Later, "she rhetorically sticks out her tongue at the announcement of the Nisei's segregation in the army, punctuating 'foie!!!' with three exclamation points."

Shimabukuro goes on to capture the full and undocumented scope of protest writing, what she calls "writing-to-redress," all codifying the desire to set right what was wrong: the Ladies of Hunt Relocation Center who wrote to complain of the lack of hot water for bathing babies and cleaning; the petition signed by half of the adult Issei and Nisei at Heart Mountain demanding removal of the nine guard towers and the barbed-wire fencing which made them feel, in their words, like "prisoners of war in a concentration camp;" the resolution of the resident committee at Topaz challenging the imposition of the loyalty oath; and an appeal from the Delegates of Manzanar Draft-Age Citizens challenging Selective Service for the Nisei.

The best-known of these writings is of course Bulletin #3 from the Fair Play Committee, refusing induction into the Army to force a test case and crossing the line from protest to organized civil disobedience. Here Shimabukuro recovers the role of women, with Frank Emi's sister Kaoru "adding her labor to the amassing of collective authority" by taking copious notes at talks given by a JACL leader to quote him correctly and thereby "helping enable the FPC to compose its public responses." Plus, like Gloria Kubota, she was a faster typist.

Perhaps the greatest revelation in the book is that of the organized protest against the draft by the Mothers Society of Minidoka, which Shimabukuro points out actually predated the organized resistance of the Heart Mountain group. These were more than 100 Issei women—our grandmothers!—themselves barred by law from U.S. citizenship, who signed a two-page typewritten letter to FDR and other high officials to restore the citizenship rights of their sons, who after Pearl

Harbor were reclassified as 4-C, the designation for enemy aliens. These *ba-chan's* had seen their families stripped of their homes, farms, and businesses; it was the last straw for the government to now want their sons.

Shimabukuro reports the surprising part played in this story by Supreme Court plaintiff Min Yasui. A "folk hero" after challenging the military curfew, Yasui had just been released to Minidoka and asked by the Mothers Society to help write their petition. But Yasui in fact favored Selective Service for the Nisei and opposed any draft resistance. He composed a groveling letter that the Issei mothers deemed "too weak." Three of the Issei women in one block took it on themselves to rewrite the letter to ask Roosevelt to "please consider the suspension of the drafting of citizens of Japanese ancestry" until their citizenship was first clarified—precisely the argument being formulated by the boys at Heart Mountain.

"These women were careful, thoughtful, and strategic about their public use of language," says Shimabukuro. Eleanor Roosevelt sent a curt reply, and two months later Yasui would accompany Mike Masaoka's brother to the jail in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in a failed attempt to intimidate the Heart Mountain resisters into naming names to help the FBI prosecute FPC leaders.

This is original, cutting-edge work. Mira Shimabukuro sets a new standard in camp studies with her finely crafted writing and her framing of "writing-to-redress." Her recovery of this wide range of writing that challenges authority, much of it by women, is itself a significant act of redress that once again changes the way we look at the Japanese American response to incarceration, and belies Masaoka's claim in our film that resistance in the camps was limited to "a relatively small number of dissidents." ■

Frank Abe wrote, produced, and directed *'Conscience and the Constitution,'* a PBS film that recovered the story of the Heart Mountain resisters.