



Voices  
from the  
Gaps **Vg**

# Nellie Wong

*You came out of disability  
out of skin and teeth  
and bones and rage  
at inequities  
of race, gender, class*

*You walked out into the sun  
with the ferociousness  
of a tiger  
You teethed in Selma, Little Rock,  
in the Third World Strikes  
out of free speech  
and Blacks who refused  
to sit any longer  
at the back of the bus*

*You came in different sizes and shapes,  
heights, skin tones  
You were hanged, gunned down,  
chased out of town, murdered,  
sold, put on the auction block*

*But your humanity shone through  
the voices of the Fannie Lou Hamers,  
Robert Williamses, Ella Bakers,  
and countless unknowns,  
the Browns, Yellows, Reds, and Whites  
who fought alongside you  
who saw a vision of this life,  
on earth, on the plains, valleys,  
through rivers and forests  
and urban sprawls*

— From “You Were Born” in Voices of Color



## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1934
- \* Asian-American poet, activist, and academic
- \* Author of *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park*

This page was researched and submitted by: Helen Gilbert on 7/8/2003.



# Nellie Wong

## Biography

Nellie Wong is a poet and revolutionary feminist activist living in San Francisco. She was born on September 12, 1934 in Oakland, California. She was the first U.S. -born daughter of Chinese immigrants. Her father emigrated to Oakland in 1912. He married twice and fathered six daughters and one son. Three of Nellie's siblings were born in China.

When WWII began and Japanese Americans were evacuated to concentration camps, Wong's family worked in a grocery store in Berkeley. Consequently, the family borrowed \$2,000 to start a restaurant in Oakland's Chinatown. During the WWII years, Wong attended public school and worked as a waitress at her parents restaurant, The Great China.

After graduation from Oakland High School, Wong began to work as a secretary. She worked for 46 years before retiring in 1998 as a senior analyst in affirmative action at the University of California, San Francisco.

When in her mid-30s, Wong's world split open when she began attending classes at San Francisco State University; this is when she began to write and publish her poetry. While at the University, Wong learned that she had much to offer as an older woman among young people. Wong credits her feminist classmates at SF State with keeping her writing. A male professor had once told her to throw away an angry poem she had written. One classmate told her, "You don't have to listen to him!"

Wong was also involved with the Women Writers Union on campus, organizing around issues of race, sex, and class. There she encountered members of two affiliated socialist feminist organizations, Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, and within a few years had joined their ranks.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wong co-founded and performed with an Asian American feminist literary and performance group, Unbound Feet, at colleges, universities and community centers. Lesbian poet, educator, and sister socialist feminist Merle Woo was also part of this groundbreaking troupe.

In 1983, Wong traveled to China on the first U.S. Women Writers Tour to China sponsored by the U.S. -China Peoples Friendship Association with Tillie Olsen, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, among others.



# Nellie Wong

## Biography continued

During the 1980s and 1990s, Wong keynoted at many national and regional conferences, including Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives, Women Against Racism, and the National Women's Studies Association. She has read her poetry in China, Cuba, and throughout the U.S. She has also participated on panels concerning labor, Asian American literature, and poetry. Furthermore, Wong has taught Women Studies at the University of Minnesota and poetry writing at Mills College in Oakland, CA

Excerpts from two her poems have been permanently installed as plaques at public sites at the San Francisco Municipal Railway. She has received awards from the Women's Foundation (San Francisco), University of California, Santa Barbara's Asian American Faculty and Staff Association, and Kearny Street Workshop (San Francisco). She is currently the Bay Area Organizer for the Freedom Socialist Party. She is active with Radical Women and Bay Area United Against War.

Wong's first collection of poetry, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* (1977), was published by Kelsey Street Press. This book went through four printings and was the most successful release in the history of Kelsey Street Press. Her other titles are *The Death of Long Steam Lady* (1986), published by West End Press and *Stolen Moments* (1997). Her work has appeared in approximately 200 anthologies and publications.

Wong writes directly from her working life as well as from her family history, bridging China and Asian America. Her poetry spans issues of feminism, the fight against racism, workplace injustice, and finding identity as a writer and activist.

In 1981, Wong participated with Mitsuye Yamada in a documentary film, "Mitsuye & Nellie, Asian American Poets," produced by Allie Light and Irving Saraf. The film recounts the experiences and hardships that affected the writers and their families. Significant to the film's focus is how WWII and the bombing of Pearl Harbor encouraged divisive perceptions of Japanese as "bad" Asians, while the Chinese were seen as "good" Asians. "Can't Tell," one of the poems Wong recites in the film, highlights the author's attempt to understand why her Japanese neighbors were being sent to internment camps when she and her family, as Chinese Americans, were considered patriotic citizens.



# Nellie Wong

## Biography continued

The film also shows lively exchanges between Wong and her siblings, highlighting the feistiness of her older sister, Li Keng, and her youngest sister, Flo, who fought to attend university despite the family's limited financial resources. Wong's family members are artists, writers, and journalists. Her brother, William Wong, is the author of *Yellow Journalist: Dispatches from Asian America*. Her sister, Flo Oy Wong, is an installation artist.

Wong was featured with other artists and writers in the documentary, "Art as Revolution," Forward Films, 2003.

Wong has donated her papers to the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*Three Asian American Writers Speak Out on Feminism*, co-authored with Merle Woo and Mitsuye Yamada (2003).

Editor of *Voices of Color* (1999).

*Stolen Moments* (1997).

*The Death of Long Steam Lady* (1986).

*Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* (1977).



# Nellie Wong

## Selected Bibliography continued

### Works about the author

*The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, ed. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (W.W. Norton and Company, 2000).

Lum, Cindy. "Review of *Stolen Moments*" (Hawaii Pacific Review, 1999).

Kawaoka, Dana. "Revolutionary Spirits: Profiles of Asian Pacific American Activists" (American Studies Senior Thesis, 1998).

Light, Allie and Irving Saraf. *Mitsuye & Nellie, Asian American Poets* (Women Make Movies, 1981).

Rountree, Cathleen. *On Women Turning 60: Embracing the Age of Fulfillment* (Harmony Books, 1997).

Kesselman, Amy, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind, eds. *Women: Images and Realities, A Multicultural Anthology* (Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995).

Annie Finch, ed. *A Formal Feeling Comes* (Story Line Press, 1994).

Cheung, King-kok, and Stan Yogi, eds. *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (Modern Language Association of America, 1988).