

Performance for Community Building

—The Japanese Diaspora's Cultural Activities
in Early Twentieth Century Seattle

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As the number of immigrants from Japan increased in early twentieth century Seattle, Japanese diasporic communities developed their cultural activities such as publishing newspapers, forming literary groups, and running fundraising events. Recent research of Japanese-language literature is expanding its scope to these cultural fields of diasporic communities and deepening our understanding of the role of cultural infrastructure amid the constant transformation of communities in flux. To contribute to delineating these diverse cultural histories, this article examines an amateur performance by literary group members (bunshigeki), which was a fundraiser for their public library project, as an example of community building through collective creation. In order to do so, this article excavates Japanese-language newspapers and weeklies available in the Hoji Shinbun Digital Archive along with special collections at the University of Washington. Literary group members' voices in Japanese-language print media express that their engagement with amateur performance was public commitment to community building. Contextualizing their practices in the history of Japantown in Seattle, this article highlights the way in which people's participation in cultural activities was a public engagement that would create new infrastructure for unstable diasporic communities.

Keywords Japanese Diaspora(日系ディアスポラ), Japanese-language Newspaper (邦字新聞), Seattle Bundan(シアトル文壇), Bunshigeki(文士劇), Early Twentieth Century Seattle(20世紀初期シアトル)

Introduction¹

The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience houses a huge advertisement scrim. The scrim is 15-by-30-foot long and composed of colorful drawings of Japanese-owned local businesses' advertisements which include a bank, a drug store, a shoe company, a still-in-business Japanese restaurant Maneki, among others. The scrim has a history of more than one hundred years. It was used in the Nippon Kan Theater, the community center for immigrants from Japan in Seattle from 1909, forgotten during Japanese American internment, rediscovered in the 1970s by the new owner of the building, and now is housed in the Tateuchi Story Theater in the Wing Luke.² The scrim here is more than just a curtain separating the stage from the audience; I see it as a collage of people's lived experience including their businesses, their support of the community's events, and their community building aspirations. This article explores one of these cultural activities behind the curtain by the Japanese diaspora in very early twentieth century Seattle. By doing so, I would like to show the case in which Japanese diasporic communities harnessed their creative energy into community building in an immigrant land.

For the diasporic community in Seattle where people did not have stable infrastructure as new immigrants, creating their own media, groups, and spaces was a significant practice to express their voices. Literary Scholar Hibi Yoshitaka, author of *Japanese Americas (Japanīzu amerika)*, draws our attention to the importance of considering Japanese-language literature in terms of the "cultural infrastructure" that is necessary to make literature possible in immigrant lands in the first place.³ Hibi's research navigates us to explore the emerging process of production, circulation, and reception of cultural products, rather than completed products. This is accompanied by a set of questions about Japanese-language literature in a foreign country such as what to write about, how to publish works, and where books to read came from. In other words, in this particularly uncertain situation, what literary activities included was not self-evident. Thus we should examine the historical conditions of how people engaged with literary activities and what kinds of practices literary activities made

¹ All translations from Japanese to English are mine. Japanese names appear in Japanese order, with the family name followed by the given name, except Japanese names of authors who published their works in English.

² Marc Ramirez, "Nippon Kan's Long-Lost Curtain Back on Stage," *The Seattle Times*, May 19, 2008, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/nippon-kans-long-lost-curtain-back-on-stage/>.

³ Hibi Yoshitaka, *Japanizu amerika : Imin bungaku, shuppan bunka, shūyōjo* (Shin'yōsha, 2014), p.17.

possible. Drawing on Hibi's research, this article will consider what people who were united by their enthusiasm for literature could do for the cultural infrastructure of their communities.

To be more specific, this article sheds light on a different aspect of the well-known Seattle bundan by reframing it as a fundraising group.⁴ Amid a trend of constructing new infrastructure such as the Nippon Kan Theater in 1909 and a new building for a Japanese language school in 1913, members of the Literary Society (Bungakukai), which was composed of Seattle bundan members, planned to build their own new infrastructure. As I will detail, the Literary Society was imagined as a communal space where unstable workers of the Japanese diaspora could share books and discuss literature. To accomplish this goal, they committed to fund a public library through their amateur performance event (bunshigeki). As this article's title indicates, their performance was for the purpose of community building. This does not mean the regular once-a-month discussion meeting run by the Literary Society was secondary. Rather, what I would like to emphasize is that the possibilities were open as for what the Literary Society could do, and their enthusiasm for literature could take various forms as practices. In what follows, I will delineate the amateur performance bunshigeki as a focal point where their creativity met their desire for a sense of community in this particular time and space: early twentieth century Seattle.

1 Local Newspaper as Cultural Infrastructure

By the end of the century, Japanese immigrants were building their own community in Japantown (Nihonmachi) in multiethnic Jackson Street south of downtown Seattle. Seattle was one of the places where imperial Japan's colonialism and America's westward expansionism collided.⁵ Detailing a history of Japanese diaspora communities in Seattle between two empires, historian Shelley Sang-Hee Lee underlines Seattle as the major Pacific port that embodied "cosmopolitanism." For this article's historical frame of the very early 20th century, the most significant events are the beginning

⁴ For research on Seattle bundan, see, for example, Ted Mack, "Seattle's Little Tokyo: Bundan Fiction and the Japanese Diaspora," *PAJLS: Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 7 (2006): pp.7-16.

⁵ For "inter-National" and "inter-imperial" perspective, see Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (University of California Press, 2019).

of regular steamship runs between Japan and Seattle in 1896 and the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific exposition of 1909.⁶ First, due to the negotiation between the Great Northern Railway and the company Nippon Yusen Kaisha, Seattle became a pivotal port for a regular route between the US and Japan, which boosted the population of Japanese migration in Washington from 360 in 1890 to 5617 by 1900.⁷ Second, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific exposition, Seattle's first world's fair, promoted Seattle as the "gateway to the Orient" by involving local businesses by the Issei (the first generation). As a minority group that was rapidly growing through these events, Japanese immigrants represented a "cosmopolitanism" of Seattle in a very ethnically diverse area where Chinese, Japanese, and African American communities were concentrated.

As their community in Japantown grew, the Japanese diaspora sought to build cultural infrastructure to share global and local news, cultural activity information, and entertainment for leisure time. To these ends, print media such as local Japanese-language newspapers played the key role. By 1910, the community had three major commercial Japanese-language newspapers, *The North American Times* (*Hokubei jiji*, 1902-1942), *The Asahi News* (*Asahi shinbun*, 1905-1918), and *The Great Northern Daily News* (*Taihoku nippō*, 1910-1942), published locally along with a number of weekly and monthly papers such as *The Japanese American Review* (*Nichibei hyōron*, 1908-1938) and *Donchiki* (1899-1921) to name a few.⁸ The newspapers covered a wide variety of issues ranging from political news about Japan and the U.S. to local gossip in Japantown. In addition to news, historian Sakaguchi Mitsuhiro points out the fact that most Japanese-owned businesses in Seattle advertised in the local newspapers, which reflects the strong influence of the conflicting trading companies in the community.⁹ In other words, the newspapers represented the network of the local communities. Providing international news with local information, Japanese-language newspapers created a sense of community belonging to the shared discursive fields among Japanese-language communities.

More importantly, newspapers also served as a participatory space for people who

6 Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *Claiming the Oriental Gateway: Prewar Seattle and Japanese America* (Temple University Press, 2011), pp.46-75.

7 Niiya Brian ed. *Encyclopaedia of Japanese American History Updated Edition: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present* (Facts on File, 2001), p.363.

8 This *Asahi Shinbun* 旭新聞 is not related to the major newspaper *Asahi shinbun* 朝日新聞 in Japan. For the information about Japanese-language newspaper in North America, see, for example, Tamura Norio, *Amerika no nihongo shinbun* (Shinchōsha, 1991).

9 Sakaguchi Mitsuhiro, *Nihonjin amerika iminshi* (Fuji Shuppan, 2001), pp.87-117.

wanted to publish original works and express their opinions about their communities in readers' segments. Hibi detailed two genres that *New World (Shinsekai)*, a Japanese-language newspaper in San Francisco, published as creative writings from the readers: poetry and fiction.¹⁰ Poetry like haiku has been and continues to be a popular activity for Japanese American communities due to its short format, making it easy to appreciate with others in creating and reciting in local haiku groups. As for fiction, Hibi named three types of published works in *New World*: reprints of popular fiction from Japan, works by already-established writers who came to the US from Japan, and original works by immigrants. In these types of works, Hibi emphasizes the hybridity of the readers, ranging from those who enjoyed popular fiction to those who submitted original works, which shaped the creative literary community of Japanese immigrants. Participatory culture was also observed in local newspapers and weekly papers in Seattle in the advertisements for literary work submissions and the publication of readers' haiku poems.¹¹

Publishing their works in newspapers, monthlies, and weeklies, literary fans formed a community called Seattle bundan.¹² According to journalist Itō Kazuo, the bundan community members had diverse backgrounds. Their occupations included a bookstore employee, a watch store employee, a cook, and a reporter for a Japanese-language newspaper. Their educational backgrounds were both in the US and Japan, including alumni of the University of Michigan, Stanford, Kokugakuin University, Waseda University, and University of Kyoto.¹³ Having meetings in their leisure time at Japanese restaurants like Maneki or bookstores such as Mitsuwa-dō, they discussed literary works and acquired a sense of literary community.¹⁴ With the rise of the local publishing industry as cultural infrastructure, the diasporic community including Seattle bundan

¹⁰ Hibi, *Japanizu amerika*, pp.68-84. Hibi notes that there were diverse segments for the creative writings such as regular serials, small segments for poems, and calls for literary novels.

¹¹ For example, the November 20, 1910 issue of *Nichibeï hyoron* calls for readers' submissions of novels, literary criticism, haiku, and other poems for its new year issue.

¹² The January 1, 1908 issue of weekly paper *Amerika* has a segment titled "Seattle bundan in 1907 (Yonjunen ni okeru shiatoru bundan)," which signifies that the readers of the magazine acknowledged the bundan activities.

¹³ Itō Kazuo, *Zoku hokubei hyakunenzakura* (Seattle : Hokubei Hyakunenzakura Jikkō Iinkai, 1972), pp.100-103.

¹⁴ As Hibi writes, the knowledge circulation of Japanese-language materials in the US heavily depended on bookstores. For the Seattle literary community, bookstore Mitsuwa-dō played a central role. Mitsuwa-dō was opened by Hashimoto Yoshikazu and Saburō in June 1907. For more information about Mitsuwa-dō, see Itō, *Zoku hokubei hyakunenzakura*, pp.373-374. These literary activities were reported as reaching a peak in 1908 with the burgeoning of publication outlets. See "Chōgen tango," *Amerika*, January 27, 1908.

found a place in the local newspapers in which they expressed their experience in Seattle, shared their political opinions, and presented their creative works.

2 The Literary Society Bungaku-kai

As *History of Japanese Immigration to the Northwestern United States (Beikoku seihokubu nihon iminshi)* chronicled in 1929, there were some smaller groups within the large bundan community dedicated to more specific art forms such as the Seattle Society (Shikō-kai) for haiku, the Coast Society (Kōsuto-kai) for poetry, and the Literary Society for literature in general.¹⁵ Okina Kyūin played a leading role in forming the Literary Society.¹⁶ To address the need for the Literary Society in Seattle, Okina wrote the series “On Establishing the Literary Society (Bungakukai setsuritsu ni tsuite)” in *Hokubei jiji*.¹⁷ Mentioning the failure of a previous literary group Kyōka-kai, a literary circle which exclusively focused on single author Izumi Kyōka, he laments the lack of a sense of community among people who relate to print media. It should be highlighted that, for Okina, the Literary Society was a site where even “people who disagree on social opinions and theories within the literary community” could cultivate their sense of community and develop a community in which, for instance, “thoughtful people donate their own books and other materials.”¹⁸ Okina writes,

In my opinion, such a society would be reassuring to literary hobbyists in any case. As floating and unsteady (fudō tsune narazaru) workers, we find comfort in such groups wherever we wander and wherever we fall. When we return to Seattle, we immediately visit the Literary Society. There we find a variety of books and magazines. People who have free time also drop by. The best place to be friends in

¹⁵ Takeuchi Kōjirō, *Beikoku seihokubu nihon iminshi* (Taihoku Nippōsha, 1929), pp.585-593.

¹⁶ Okina is an exceptionally well-known figure in Japanese diaspora literature. For more information about Okina’s biography, see Itsumi Kumi, *Okina Kyūin to imin shakai: Zaihei jūhachi nen no kiseki 1907-1927* (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2002), Mariko Mizuno, *Nikkei amerikajin no bungaku katsudō no rekishiteki henshen: 1880-nendai Kara 1980-nendai ni kakete* (KazamaShobō, 2013), pp.67-156, and Ikuko Torimoto, *Okina Kyūin and the Politics of Early Japanese Immigration to the United States, 1868-1924* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2017).

¹⁷ Due to the lack of the original issue of *Hokubei jiji*, the metadata of “Bungakukai setsuritsu ni tsuite” is missing but, according to Mizuno’s research, it is considered to be published in *Hokubei jiji* in 1909. The Okina Kyūin Research Group Materials (Okina Kyūin Kenkyukai Shozō Shiryō) at the Ritsumeikan University library owns a scrapbook of newspaper clippings which includes “Bungakukai setsuritsu ni tsuite.” My analysis is based on the scrapbook. Okina Kyūin, “Bungakukai setsuritsu ni tsuite,” Ritsumeikan daigaku Okina Kyūin Kenkyukai Shozō Shiryō (B-1-1).

¹⁸ Ibid.

solitude is at this society.¹⁹

Put differently, the Literary Society is a site where people are always welcomed, thus it should be driven by, to use Okina's term, "public effort (*kōkyōteki doryoku*)" beyond personal interests. Highlighting class dynamics as an unstable worker, Okina's idea about the Literary Society sheds light on the diaspora's cultural activities as a collaborative practice for the public goal of community building. Okina thought the Literary Society was necessary because diaspora communities desperately sought their bonds with friends under the unstable circumstance of the immigrant land.

For Okina, the goal of the Literary Society related to reshaping the diaspora community on a larger scale. While praising that literature could be "comfort in a foreign land" as "the highest and best hobby" in the article following "Bungakukai setsuritsu ni suite," Okina criticizes the state of the community as follows: "I hesitate to say whether or not the greatest comfort and the best of hobbies can be found in the incompleteness and disunity of the society at large in this immigrant land."²⁰ Then, he lists the social problems in the communities such as church corruption, fraud, and betrayal within the community. In order to change the problematic situation, Okina calls for literature as a "revolutionary weapon (*kakumei buki*)" and "meetings to pursue the truth and savor (*ajiwau*) life's difficulties."²¹ The purpose of the Literary Society is to appreciate "the life views of the great authors of the East and West" in the nighttime after struggles against "the circumstances of obedience or restriction" in daytime.²² For Okina, The Literary Society was a space for the emancipatory use of imagination which is separated from the hardship of daily life and to acquire an alternative view of the community's situation. As his use of the word "revolutionary" here shows, he considered the Literary Society to be a collective effort to reflect on, reconsider, and then change the community.²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Again, because of the lack of the original issue of *Hokubei jiji*, the metadata of this article is missing. The version I use here is based on the one quoted in Okina's complete works volume 2, in which Okina himself writes that he published this article after establishing Bungaku-kai but does not know the exact date. Okina Kyūin, "Ikyō no ian," quoted in *Okina Kyūin zenshū* vol. 2 (Okina Kyūin Zenshū Kankōkai, 1972), p.101.

²¹ Ibid., p.102.

²² Ibid., p.103.

²³ The question of the role of literature in the transformation of the community was further explored by the "immigrant land literature (*iminchi bungei*)" discourse. For the analysis of the discourse, see Hibi, *Japanizu amerika*, pp.242-262, Mizuno, *Nikkei amerikajin no bungaku katsudō no rekishiteki hensen*, pp.67-156, and Kristina S. Vassil, "Passages : Writing Diasporic Identity in the Literature of Early

Okina's call to action invited the bundan community's reactions and people's responses to the possible Literary Society emphasize the point of being inclusive as a group. "Personal Opinion on the Establishment of the Literary Society (Bungakukai setsuritsu shikan)" writes that literature can provide the community with "beautiful thoughts that can appeal to people's emotions" so it is not just for "happiness of a small number of people involved in literature."²⁴ Reflecting on Kyōka-kai, the author imagined the Literary Society as "not a small group like Kyōka-kai, but a group that studies matters related to literature in general."²⁵ The author stresses that the Literary Society should discuss a variety of literature to be inclusive for community members with diverse backgrounds, and this inclusivity was the key to be successful in reshaping the community as a whole. As in Okina's call to action, it is possible to see the aspiration for a sense of community through the emphasis on inclusive cultural activities in this response. These conversations among bundan members culminated in the first meeting of the Literary Society in April 1910.

I would argue, though, in terms of its contribution to community building, the significance of the Literary Society should also be considered to be a fundraising group for a public library project, not just a group to discuss literature with bundan members. Indeed, like other bundan-related groups, their main activity was a once-a-month discussion meeting.²⁶ And newspapers reported about its last meeting and advertised the next meetings, which kept the Literary Society open to the public.²⁷ Here I would like to underline that Okina imagined the Literary Society as a physical space for unstable immigrant workers to visit, share donated books, and talk about their interests in literature. Also, April 1910 when the Literary Society held their first meeting was a time when the diasporic communities were rapidly building their infrastructure such as the community center Nippon Kan Theater in 1909 and a new building for the Japanese language school in 1913.²⁸ Thus, it is not surprising that the Literary Society

Twentieth-Century Japanese America," (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2011), pp.80-128.

²⁴ Tekkansei, "Bungakukai setsuritsu shikan" *Okina Kyūin zenshū* vol. 5 (Okina Kyūin Zenshū Kankōkai, 1971), p.378.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.379.

²⁶ See, for example, "Zappō," *Nichibei hyōron*, April 17, 1910.

²⁷ "Shūhō," *Nichibei hyōron*, August 28, 1910.

²⁸ For more information about the Nippon Kan Theater, see Ed Burke and Betty Burke, "In a Chorus of Shadows: The Story of the Nippon Kan and its Restoration," in *Turning Shadows into Light: Art and Culture of the Northwest's Early Asian/Pacific Community*, ed. Mayumi Tsukawa and Alan Chong Lau (Seattle: Young Pine Press, 1982), pp.46-53, and Brian Niiya ed *Encyclopaedia of Japanese American History Updated Edition*, pp.308-309, and Gail Dubrow and Donna Graves *Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese American Heritage* (Seattle: Seattle Arts Commission, 2002), pp.62-79.

suggested to establish a public library for their community where people could visit and borrow books as a key infrastructure. And to that end, they hosted the amateur performance fundraising event called bunshigeki.²⁹

3 The Amateur Performance Bunshigeki

Members of the Literary Society made a concrete plan of the bunshigeki in 1911 for the purpose of fundraising for the community library project.³⁰ Praising the bunshigeki for its purpose of establishing the library, an article from the January 15, 1911 issue of *The Japanese American Review* writes, “The education of boys and girls is the duty of Japanese-language schools, but the education of young people and adults must be done in libraries. If you know the importance of education, you will agree that it is necessary to teach not only boys and girls but also young people and adults, especially in an immigrant land.”³¹ It is important to note the shared emphasis on public goals for the community between Okina’s purpose of the Literary Society which aimed at cultivating a sense of community and the public library which served as an educational institution for adults in the diasporic community. While Okina considered literature as a “revolutionary weapon” with the power to transform society, this library project was a more specific way to transform communities through public education provided by library books.

Since the participants of bunshigeki were composed of writers, editors, and reporters related to the local print media industry, it became a media phenomenon which drew public attention through its media coverage. *The Japanese American Review* reported that the participants started their practice in their temporary office and that the Literary Society would hold a special meeting to discuss the bunshigeki soon.³² Moreover newspaper *The Great Northern Daily News*, whose editor Takeuchi Seiran

As for the detail of construction of the new Japanese language school building, see, for example, Takeuchi, *Beikoku seihokubu nihon iminshi*, pp.420-426 and Dubrow and Graves, *Sento at Sixth and Main*, pp.104-125.

²⁹ Bunshigeki, started by literati troupe Kenyūsha in Japan in 1880, is a special term for amateur performance by writers, critics, reporters, and painters. Fujiki Hiroyuki, “Bunshigeki,” in *Nippon daihyakka zensho* (Shogakukan), JapanKnowledge, accessed June 28, 2022.

³⁰ For research on this particular bunshigeki in Japanese-language scholarship, see Sakaguchi, *Nihonjin amerika iminshi*, pp.109-111.

³¹ “Keibaiichidakanbashi,” *Nichibei hyōron*, January 15, 1911. On the relationship between Nisei (the second generation) education and the Japanese-language school, see Yuji Ichioka, *Before Internment: Essays in Prewar Japanese American History* (Stanford University Press, 2006), pp.75-91.

³² “Shūhō,” *Nichibei hyōron*, January 15, 1911.

was a leading figure and screenplay writer for the bunshigeki, serialized the plot summary of one of the plays, *Onna keizu*, for the reader.³³ Along with the summary, the same newspaper started a series of “Bunshigeki ni tsuite no shōhō (Detailed information about the bunshigeki)” which elaborated about the situation behind the scenes of the event. According to the series, the Literary Society suggested establishing the library in Summer 1910, held the first meeting for the bunshigeki on January 3, 1911, and the participants practiced every night from 7:30 pm to 11:00 pm. While there was a difference of opinions among members about to what extent the Literary Society as a whole supported the bunshigeki, the goal of the library helped them move forward.³⁴ There is also an article about theatrical troupes, the Reform Group (Kakushin-dan) and the Seattle Performing Arts Group, who helped the participants with the performance.³⁵ As such, the wide media coverage created a larger narrative of the bunshigeki as a collaborative project for the public benefit of the community library.

The bunshigeki was held at the Nippon Kan Theater on February 11 and 12, 1911. They played both new style plays including *Onna keizu*, of which the plot summary was serialized in *The Great Northern Daily News*, and traditional plays on the same night.³⁶ A review expressed the lively atmosphere of the audience of the bunshigeki on the second night.³⁷ When the reviewer arrived at the Nippon Kan Theater at 6 pm, which was an hour earlier than the performance, the theater was already packed. Once the performance started, the reviewer heard the female audience’s favorable reaction to the main actor’s performance in *Onna keizu*. As the audience used handkerchiefs to wipe away tears, the reviewer also could not stop his tears. They played the tragedy well, but at the same time, the reviewer laughed hard at

³³ See “Toshokan setsuritsu kikin boshū bunshigeki shonichi dashimono : *Onna keizu*” *Taihoku nippō*, January 17, January 18, January 20, January 21, 1911. I was not able to locate part 3 of the script, but it is highly likely that the January 19 issue had it because of the serialization.

³⁴ See “Bunshigeki ni tsuite no shōhō,” *Taihoku nippō*, January 20, 21, 23, 24, 1911. Also the January 27 issue of *Taihoku nippō* told how each performer practiced in “Bunshigeki toridori no uwasa (Rumors of the bunshigeki).” The February 5 issue of *Nichibei hyōron* covered an interview with Takeuchi which narrated the purpose of establishing the library.

³⁵ “Zappō,” *Taihoku nippō*, February 9, 1911.

³⁶ On the first night (February 11, 1911), they played the new style play *Wareya hitozuma* by Aoki Sentei and the traditional play Kiri-Kyōgen *Onai hitomi no sekimori*. On the second night (February 12, 1911), they played *Onna keizu* by Izumi Kyōka and the traditional play Kiri-Kyōgen *Ichinotani futaba gunki (Kumagajinya)*. The information about the casting is available in “Nippon Kan Theatre photograph, moving image, and ephemera collection” at the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections (Collection Number : Ph0508).

³⁷ Sau, “Gekihyō,” *Taihoku nippō*, February 17, 1911.

different scenes such as an actor's unprofessional gesture of pouring a glass. The review can be hyperbolic, especially considering it was about the reception of *Onna keizu* published in Takeuchi's *The Great Northern Daily News*, but overall the review conveys an exciting scene of the performance and the picture of the community's support for the bunshigeki.

Most importantly for their library project, the bunshigeki was a financial success. According to a detailed report on the income and expenditures of the bunshigeki published by *The Great Northern Daily News*, gross revenue from ticket sales was \$809.45. Expenditures for preparations for the bunshigeki was \$567.80. They also received a congratulatory gratuity from an individual, which in total brought the funds raised for the library project to \$244.15.³⁸ Using some magazines for comparison on the value of currency, according to Hibi's research, a six-month subscription to imported Japanese literary magazine *Taiyo* around this time was \$2 and *Bungei kurabu* was \$1.65, for example.³⁹ As the report called it a "huge success," the bunshigeki was successful in bringing in funds for establishing the library, such as those used for book purchases.

Alongside praise of the success of the bunshigeki and a report of a practice scene of the performance, the February 19, 1911 issue of *The Japanese American Review* published a "Confession (Kokuhaku)" by leading figure of the bunshigeki Sasaki Ōgadō in which the author detailed the dream of the library.⁴⁰ While mentioning the difficulties of creating a concrete plan for the library, he writes:

To begin with, the library itself is a public humanistic institution, even if it was started by the Literary Society. If it is a public institution, we should not dare to say that it was built by any person. As long as it's done, that is all that matters. Given that it stands as public (kōkyō), it should have this level of awareness. This is even more true in the case of the non-membership group Literary Society which has no social influence whatsoever.⁴¹

In reality, according to this confession, they were groping in the dark for a concrete

³⁸ "Bunshigeki shūshi kessan hōkoku," *Taihoku nippō*, February 18 and 21, 1911. The February 19, 1911 issue of *Nichibei hyōron* reported \$241.65 as the fund, which is the total before adding the gratuity from an individual.

³⁹ Hibi, *Japanizu amerika*, p.103. It should be noted that this data on book prices is based on *Shinsekai* in 1900.

⁴⁰ See Hino Banpō, "Bunshigeki no owari ni," and Kikujūrō, "Keikoba," *Nichibei hyōron*, February 19, 1911.

⁴¹ Ōgadō, "Kokuhaku," *Nichibei hyōron*, February 19, 1911.

plan of the public library; they did not know how to secure the budget, how to select books, and who could use it. The “Confession” underlines that the role of the Literary Society and its public project were open to diverse opinions on multiple levels in creating the idea of what kind of library it should be as a public institution. To put it another way, it was still a moment at which the possible outcome of such a fundraising event was uncertain, and the meaning of the public institution to the diasporic community was an open question.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of archival materials, it is difficult to track the whole situation surrounding the library project. After the bunshigeki, a meeting for the library project was held on March 28, 1911, and the Literary Society members formed the library founding committee.⁴² Since then, as more and more articles about the new Japanese-language school building project appeared, the library project became unobserved in the media. However, it is certain that the library did come to fruition in Seattle. Two years later, *The Great Northern Daily News* reported the budget raised by fundraising through the bunshigeki to buy books. The savings for the library project was \$211.65 and the interest it made was \$15.15, so the total budget was \$226.80. They bought \$150 worth of books in September 1912 and the shipping cost was \$16.53. The remaining amount was \$61.73 which includes the additional interest of the rest of the money from October 1912. From this budget report, we can learn that it took a year and a half to select and purchase books for the project.⁴³ According to another article about the move of the library on May 28, 1914, the library was open to anyone and the annual membership cost \$1.⁴⁴ As Takeuchi comments that “the library itself was not widely used,” it seems that the library was not able to fully play a role for the community as the Literary Society members dreamt of in the early 1910s.⁴⁵

There is one possible reason why it is hard to delineate the progress of the literary community’s dream public library: the unstable nature of the literary community as the driving force of the library project. First of all, as Sasaki Ōgadō noted in the above “Confession,” it was initiated by a non-membership group for people who like literature, so the organizing members were not solidified. Second, in 1911, travel groups to Japan known as Kankōdan began and Seattle bundan members, including Okina Kyūin, joined.⁴⁶

⁴² “Zappō,” *Taihoku nippō*, March 29, 1911.

⁴³ “Zappō,” *Taihoku nippō*, March 4, 1913. According to Sakaguchi, there was a second bunshigeki for another round of fundraising for the library on March 18 and 19, 1916. See Sakaguchi, *Nihonjin amerika iminshi*, p.111.

⁴⁴ “Shuhō,” *Nichibei hyōron*, June 7, 1914.

⁴⁵ Takeuchi, *Beikoku seihokubu nihon iminshi*, p.502.

Their instability as a community was not ideal to establish the library as a long-term project across multiple years. The open and participatory nature of the Literary Society was a good fit for hosting amateur theatrical performance events, but the planning of the library required long-term commitment by fixed members.

Conclusion

By examining the development of bunshigeki, this article shed light on one aspect of cultural activities of the Japanese diaspora community in early twentieth century in Seattle. First, I introduced a historical background of Japantown in Seattle and local newspapers published there. A sense of the Seattle bundan community was cultivated by expressing their political opinions, sharing local news, and publishing creative works in Japanese-language papers. Then, this article examined a group focusing on literature in general: the Literary Society. By focusing on Okina Kyūin's writings about establishing the Literary Society and responses to Okina's call to action, I reframed the Literary Society as a creative force of a new diaspora community based on their dedication to literature. The literary community members sought not only to produce their own literature, but also to cultivate friendship under the circumstance of being unstable workers. With the goal of creating a public library as an educational institution for adults, the Literary Society members decided to hold a fundraising event, culminating in the bunshigeki. The bunshigeki was a case in which the creative energy and the historical condition crystallized into one concrete example of a fundraising event for community building.

The history of amateur performance by Japanese Americans in Seattle did not end with the bunshigeki. "Shibai: Seattle Japanese American Theater Collection" by the Wing Luke shows, alongside pictures of people performing in costumes, the shibai (drama) tradition beyond the period that this article focused on: the shibai club Art Association (Geijutsu kyōkai) in the 1920s, dance groups during the internment time, and so on. The most fascinating part is people's memories of shibai as a family connection. Stacy (Yuasa) Nakata tells the story of how she was terrified by her mother's performance of a devil with a mask; "it was fascinating to watch my mom and bachan (grandma) transform into these completely different looking people."⁴⁷ The theatrical

⁴⁶ Mizuno, *Nikkei amerikajin no bungaku katsudō no rekishiteki hensen*, pp.102-103.

⁴⁷ "Shibai : Seattle Japanese American Theater Collection," Wing Luke Museum, accessed June 3, 2022,

performance was a site where families got together and experienced funny, horrifying, and moving plays. Fusae Yokoyama, hostess and bartender at Maneki, recalls that “It was people performing, amateurs trying to act. They were closer to you, not an actor or an actress.”⁴⁸ As these people express, participating in performance was a part of everyday life with family, friends, and community members.⁴⁹ These are examples in which participatory performance can be a strong way to build and empower one’s own community.

The bunshigeki generates further questions for future research about the role of cultural activities in Japanese diasporic communities. The most important one is about the possible roles of the library as cultural infrastructure. Considering the importance of bookstores as institutions which circulate Japanese-language knowledge in diasporic communities, we should also investigate the multiple roles that libraries could play for people. Comparing the aforementioned \$2 half-year subscription of one magazine from Japan with the \$1 annual library fee, it is possible to speculate that libraries could be a more accessible site of knowledge circulation for those who could not afford to purchase books from Japan. Further archival research is necessary to learn more about the possible contribution of libraries to diasporic communities. Exploring libraries such as these, including the community library funded by the bunshigeki, can further contribute to delineating a more diverse cultural history of Japanese diasporic communities.

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<http://collections.wingluke.org/exhibits/show/shibai->

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ About the relationship between shibai and everyday life, Takami writes, “Practice for *shibai* was held five nights a week. Sometimes the children would stay up to midnight waiting their turn to rehearse their lines. Performances were generally from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. During intermission, everyone would spread out the food they had brought like a picnic.” See David Takami, *Executive Order 9066 : 50 Years Before and 50 Years After* (University of Washington Press : Wing Luke Asian Museum, 1992), p.25.

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