

Writers find solidarity in the past, present, and poetry

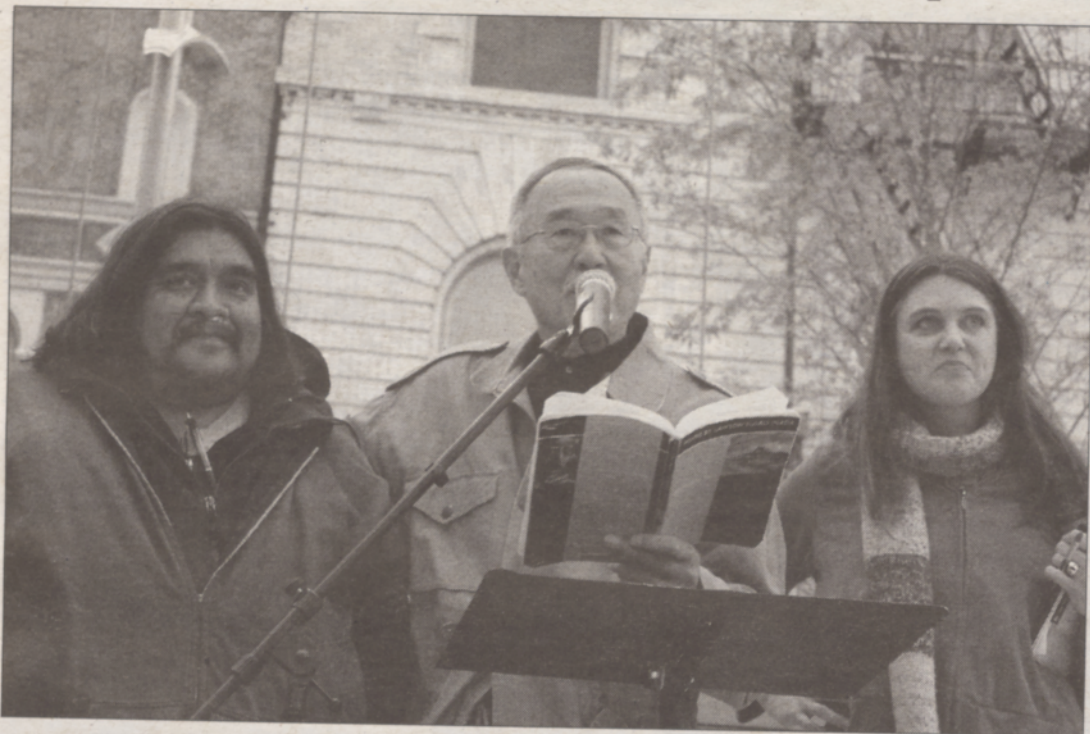


PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

From left, Leo Rhodes, Lawson Inada and Kaia Sand at the Poetry Excursions event June 3.

BY ISRAEL BAYER AND
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STAFF WRITERS

On June 3, in the drizzling cold, a crowd of around 50 gathered to hear several local poets read their work in downtown Portland's Director's Park. Among them were vendor, poet and Street Roots columnist Leo Rhodes, who was invited

specifically to read with Oregon Poet Laureate Emeritus Lawson Inada.

Both Rhodes and Inada share a common ground, solidarity beyond even poetry.

At the age of four, Inada, a Japanese American, was taken prisoner for the duration of World War II and held in internment camps throughout the West. Inada has written

extensively about his experiences, including the poem "Healing Gila, For The People" (below) about Japanese experiences on the Gila River Indian Reservation in Arizona during that time period.

Rhodes is a Pima Indian who grew up on the Gila River Indian Reservation in the 1970s.

Two weeks ago, during a workshop facilitated by local poet and author Kaia

Sand, Rhodes was introduced to Inada's work, and the poem "Healing Gila, For The People." Realizing the poem was generated by an experience from the very reservation he grew up on 30 years before, he was immediately touched, and set out to work on a complementary piece about his experience in the context of Inada's poem.

In a twist of fate, Inada and Sand were scheduled to read together at the June 3 event titled Poetry Excursions, put on the by Literary Arts program of the Multnomah Arts Center and the Portland Parks Bureau that is featuring a series of one-day writing excursions this summer called "Writing Places," to be held in locations around Portland and led by local writers.

She invited Rhodes, and, in front of the gathered crowd, introduced the two poets. Inada and Rhodes then read their poems inspired by the Gila Reservation experiences in the context of the internment camps.

Sand, along with several other well-known poets, also read at the event, including David Abel, Alison Cobb, Chris Daniels, and Joseph Bradshaw.

Sand has been featured in Street Roots and is currently working in partnership with the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, Street Roots, Sisters of the Road, and TPI. The project is exploring the parallels between people experiencing poverty and the treatment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II. The project will be highlighted during the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Japanese Plaza in July.

Gila, the Internment Camp on Gila Indian Reservation

By Leo Rhodes

I didn't know their names or faces
I really didn't know too much of their history
All I've seen was slabs of concrete in the ground
Foundations I was told for peoples long ago
Elders spoke of soldiers, barbed wire, and barracks
"Prisoners?" I would ask
"No" would be the reply
With stares of pain and concern

Healing Gila For the People

By Lawson Inada

The people don't mention it much.
It goes without saying,
it stays without saying —

that concentration camp
on their reservation.

And they avoid that massive site
as they would contamination —

that massive void
punctured by crusted nails,
punctured pipes, crumbled
failings of foundations...

What else is there to say?

This was a lush land once,
graced by a gifted people
gifted with the wisdom
of rivers, seasons, irrigation.

The waters went flowing
through a network of canals
in the delicate workings
of balances and health...

What else is there to say?

Then came the nation.
Then came the death.

Then came the desert.
Then came the camp.

But the desert is not deserted.
It goes without saying,
it stays without saying —

wind, spirits, tumbleweeds, pain.


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