A Radical Finds Her Voice Through Poetry

Nellie Wong, honored poet, radical feminist, political activist and Glen Park resident since 1990, has left her mark all over the Bay Area and beyond.

Wong, who turned 81 on Sept. 12, grew up in Oakland’s Chinatown, where her immigrant parents had a restaurant. Now she has a building named after her at her alma mater, Oakland High School, where she once worked in the office for 75 cents an hour.

In her 30s, she enrolled in the creative writing department at San Francisco State, taking night courses. She signed up for one in poetry, assuming it was a literature class.

“I thought I was going to learn about poetry, but it turned out we were supposed to be poets,” Wong recalled. The only poetry she had written up until then was some early attempts at haiku.

One memorable early poem was about Miss Chinatown USA, she said. The instructor called it an “angry poem” and told her to throw it away. Luckily, she ignored the advice.


Wong never got her college degree, but the poetry experience set the course for the rest of her life. She said that “race, sex and class perspectives” came into her writing.

On the SF State campus, she met radical feminists who would become her lifelong friends. She joined Radical Women and the San Francisco-based Freedom Socialist Party, which describes itself, in part, as “a revolutionary, socialist feminist organization, dedicated to the replacement of capitalist rule by a genuine workers’ democracy.”

Wong is still active in the party, and a regular contributor to its newspaper. In her latest endeavor, she has edited “Talking Back: Voices of Color,” a compilation of essays published in the Freedom Socialist newspaper and elsewhere, about the experiences and perspectives of race and racism, gender and sexuality, immigration, age and home-grown radicalism. “Together we help each other find our individual and collective voices,” Wong writes in her introduction.

Nancy Reiko Kato and Merle Woo, both with ties to Glen Park, are among the contributors. In addition to her introduction, Wong has included an essay about Assata Shakur, an African-American radical who has taken refuge in Cuba, where Wong met with her. Another essay, by Chris Faatz, is entitled “Luscious Poems by Nellie Wong on Love, Family, Revolution.”

“Talking Back” was published by Red Letter Press, and is on sale at Bird & Beckett Books, where Wong gave a reading in July. It follows an earlier book that she co-edited, “Voices of Color: Reports from the Front Lines of Resistance by Radicals of Color.”

One target audience for “Talking Back,” she said, includes students of labor, ethnic, women’s and LGBT studies. All those populations are under attack, she said, “It’s a struggle to even learn our histories.”

Wong, Woo and Mitsuye Yamada joined forces to produce “3 Asian American Writers Speak Out on Feminism,” in 2003. Wong and Yamada were the subjects of a 1981 documentary film on Asian-American poets. She is one of the founding members of the Chinese-American women’s writing collective, Unbound Feet. She has taught poetry and women’s studies at the college level, and one of her poems was installed on a Muni platform on the Embarcadero.

An elegant, gracious woman, Wong supported herself as a secretary, including a long stint at Bethlehem Steel, until she retired in 1998 from her final job, as a senior analyst for affirmative action at UC San Francisco. Through it all, her passion for poetry and politics has been constant.

Showing no signs of slowing down, Wong said she is “toying with” writing a memoir. It would make great reading.