Northwestern | RESEARCH
ANNUAL REPORT 2015

CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE
Exploring American Literature

Can literature written in a language other than English be considered “American” literature? Is literature published in Japanese outside Japan truly Japanese? Andrew Leong, Assistant Professor of English and Japanese, addresses these questions by exploring an archive of literary works lost in the no-man’s land between common understandings of what makes a national literature. Leong translates and interprets poems, plays, and stories that were written in Japanese by and for a Japanese immigrant readership in the United States.

In introducing some of these works to an English-reading audience, Leong worked with a team at Kaya Press to publish Lament in the Night, a critical edition of his translations of two novels by Nagahara Shoson, a writer active in Los Angeles during the mid-1920s. The project’s original aim was to translate only the title novella. But while conducting research in the Japanese American National Museum’s microfilm archives, Leong discovered Shoson’s serial novel The Tale of Osato, which was published in more than 140 installments in the Rafu Shimpo (Los Angeles Japanese Daily News).

Written in an unflinching naturalist style, Shoson’s two novels portray the struggles of people on the lowest rungs of Japanese immigrant society: desperate vagrants and petty thieves, delinquent youths and aging gamblers, live-in maids and speakeasy waitresses, failed artists and nameless suicides. Shoson’s hardboiled depictions of Southern California anticipate by more than a decade such later English-language novels as Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep (1939), John Fante’s Ask the Dust (1939), and James M. Cain’s Mildred Pierce (1941).

Building on his Lament in the Night translations, Leong is writing a book exploring how works like Shoson’s novels can provide new insights about both American and Japanese literature.