UCLA
UCLA Previously Published Works

Title
Introduction [to Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4kc3151g

Authors
Cheung, KK
Yamamoto, H

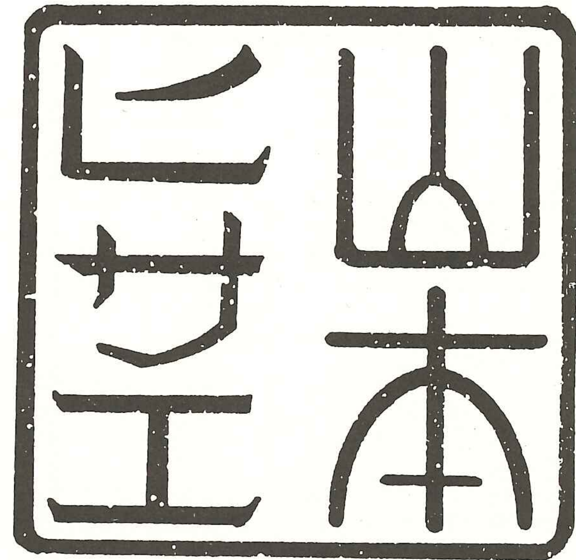
Publication Date
2001-06-12

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org
Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

SEVENTEEN SYLLABLES
and other stories

Revised and Expanded Edition



Hisaye Yamamoto

Introduction by King-Kok Cheung

Rutgers University Press
New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

Original edition first published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in 1988;
published by Rutgers University Press in 1998

Revised and expanded edition published by Rutgers University Press in 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yamamoto, Hisaye.
Seventeen syllables and other stories / Hisaye Yamamoto ;
introduction by King-Kok Cheung.—Rev. and expanded ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8135-2953-0 (alk. paper)
1. Japanese Americans—Evacuation and relocation, 1942–1945—
Fiction. 2. United States—Social life and customs—20th century—
Fiction. 3. Japanese Americans—Fiction.
I. Title.
PS3575.A43 S4 2001
813′.54—dc21 00-067362

British Cataloguing-in-Publication information is available from the British Library.

This collection copyright © 2001 by Rutgers, The State University
All stories in this collection reprinted by permission of Hisaye Yamamoto DeSoto

All rights reserved
No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. Please contact Rutgers University Press, 100 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway, NJ 08854–8099. The only exception to this prohibition is "fair use" as defined by U.S. copyright law.

Manufactured in the United States of America

For Paul, Kibo, Yuki, Rocky, and Gilbert.

INTRODUCTION

I first met Hisaye Yamamoto at a conference in Irvine, California in 1987. Long an admirer of her short stories, I asked which was her favorite. "None of them is any good," said the recipient of the Before Columbus Foundation's 1986 American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement, with a seemingly straight face. But her words, like her stories—often told by unreliable narrators and laden with irony—cannot be taken literally.

Born in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California, Yamamoto "had early contracted the disease of compulsive reading" and started writing as a teenager (for a time under the pseudonym Napoleon). She received her first rejection slip at fourteen and her first acceptance by a literary magazine at twenty-seven.[1] Much of her work is intimately connected with the places and the events of her own life; to borrow her own felicitous compliment about Toshio Mori's writing, she "shapes the raw dough of fact into the nicely-browned loaf of fiction." For instance, she reveals that "Seventeen Syllables" (her most widely anthologized piece) is her mother's story, though all the details are invented.[2] During World War II Yamamoto was interned in Poston, Arizona (the setting for "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"). There she served as a reporter and a columnist for the *Poston Chronicle* (the camp newspaper) and published "Death Rides the Rails To Poston," a serialized mystery. It was also in Poston that a lasting friendship between Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi began to develop. (A painter then, Yamauchi has since become an accomplished writer and playwright.) Like many of the Nisei[3] who left the camps to seek work or education in the Midwest and the East, Yamamoto worked briefly as a cook in Springfield, Massachusetts, an experience recounted in "The Pleasure of Plain Rice." She went back to Poston upon receiving the news that one of her brothers had been killed in combat in Italy. After the war she worked for three years from 1945 to 1948 for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, a Black weekly; "A Fire in Fontana" is an artful memoir of her job as a reporter.

A John Hay Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowship (1950-1951) allowed Yamamoto to write full time for a while. Drawn to the pacifist and selfless ideals advocated in the *Catholic Worker*, she lived from 1953 to 1955 as a volunteer, with her adopted son Paul, in a Catholic Worker rehabilitation farm on Staten Island, where "Epithalamium" is set. She then married Anthony DeSoto, returned to Los Angeles and became mother to four more children. She confides that when she has to fill out a questionnaire, she must "in all honesty list [her] occupation as housewife."[4] Yet her best stories are equal to the master-

pieces of Katherine Mansfield, Toshio Mori, Flannery O'Connor, Grace Paley, and Ann Petry.

Our appreciation of Yamamoto's fiction and achievement will be enhanced by knowledge of Japanese American history, of which only a glimpse can be given here.[5] Most Japanese immigrants came to the U.S. between 1885 (the year the Japanese government permitted the emigration of Japanese nationals) and 1924 (the year the Asian Exclusion Act was passed). The first waves of immigrants consisted mainly of single young men who saw North America as a land of opportunity. Only after establishing themselves in the new country did they contemplate starting a family. Some returned to Japan to seek wives; others arranged their marriages by means of an exchange of photographs across the Pacific. Hence a large number of Japanese "picture brides" came to this country after the turn of the century to meet bridegrooms they had never seen in person. By 1930 the American-born Nisei already outnumbered the Issei, and about half of the Japanese American population lived in rural areas in the western U.S. Japanese was the language generally spoken at home, so that many Nisei (including Toshio Mori and Yamamoto) spoke only Japanese until they entered kindergarten.

Interest in literature was strong among Japanese Americans. Despite the strenuousness of survival in the New World, a number of Issei maintained their interest in Japanese poetry. There were literary groups engaged in the traditional forms of haiku, tanka, and senryu, and numerous anthologies and magazines (e.g. *Tachibana* and *Remoncho*) devoted to Issei poetry. Nisei with a literary bent, on the other hand, mostly expressed themselves in the English sections of Japanese American newspapers such as *The New World, Kashu Mainichi,* and *Nichibei Shimbun* (Yamamoto contributed regularly to *Kashu Mainichi* as a teenager.) In the 1930s and 1940s, there were magazines such as *Reimei* and *Current Life* that published fiction and poetry by Nisei. *Yokohama, California,* a collection of short stories by Toshio Mori, probably the first Nisei writer read outside of the Japanese American community, was scheduled for publication by Caxton Printers (Caldwell, Idaho) in spring, 1942, but did not appear until 1949 because of the war.

The life of just about every person of Japanese ancestry living in the U.S. was drastically altered by World War II. Within four months of the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, over 110,000 Japanese Americans (two-thirds being American-born citizens) were forced to abandon homes, farms, and businesses throughout the West Coast and were detained in various internment camps as potential enemies despite

overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Besides dislocating Japanese Americans physically, socially, and psychologically, the internment also disrupted their nascent literary tradition. The creative activities of most, if not all, Issei were arrested. Many destroyed all traces of their own writing in Japanese to avoid being suspected of disloyalty. But a few Nisei writers persisted in writing, even while in camp. Poems and short stories appeared in camp magazines such as the *Poston Chronicle, Trek* (Topaz, Utah), and *Tulean Dispatch Magazine* (Tule Lake). Almost every interned Nisei who wrote after the war—notably Miné Okubo, Monica Sone, John Okada, Yoshiko Uchida, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston— sought to express the bewilderment of massive uprooting.[6] It is also significant that "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," Yamamoto's haunting story about derangement, is set in camp. Looking back on the internment, Yamamoto writes:

> Any extensive literary treatment of the Japanese in this country would be incomplete without some acknowledgement of the camp experience....It is an episode in our collective life which wounded us more painfully than we realize. I didn't know myself what a lump it was in my subconscious until a few years ago when I watched one of the earlier television documentaries on the subject, narrated by the mellow voice of Walter Cronkite. To my surprise, I found the tears trickling down my cheeks and my voice squeaking out of control, as I tried to explain to my amazed husband and children why I was weeping.[7]

Yamamoto was one of the first Japanese American writers to gain national recognition after the war, when anti-Japanese sentiment was still rampant. Four of her short stories found their way to Martha Foley's yearly lists of "Distinctive Short Stories." (These lists are included in Foley's annual *Best American Short Stories* collections.) They are "Seventeen Syllables" (1949), "The Brown House" (1951), "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951), and "Epithalamium" (1960); "Yoneko's Earthquake" was also chosen as one of the *Best American Short Stories: 1952.* Because of her extensive reading of American and European writers and her own cultural background, Yamamoto writes out of both an Anglo-American and a Japanese American literary tradition. But all her protagonists are Japanese Americans, and her sympathy is invariably with those who are on the fringes of American society.

All the same, her writing encompasses a wide range of subject matter, from vignettes of sexual harassment in "The High-Heeled Shoes," her first major publication, to an Issei odyssey that spans Japanese

American history in "Las Vegas Charley." Several themes, however, recur in her work: the interaction among various ethnic groups in the American West, the relationship between Japanese immigrants and their children, and the uneasy adjustment of the Issei in the New World, especially the constrictions experienced by Japanese American women. Intent on depicting human complexity, Yamamoto seldom casts her characters as heroes or villains, and rarely presents personal interaction in simple black and white terms. Discernible in her treatment of all three themes is a voice that is at once compassionate and ironic, gentle and probing, one that can elicit in rapid succession anger and pity, laughter and tears.

Having lived among both whites and non-whites, Yamamoto captures both the tension and the rapport among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Like Ann Petry, she can portray instances of racism in realistic and galling detail. Like Flannery O'Connor, she can do so without explicit accusations but with incisive irony. The white protagonist of "Underground Lady," for example, betrays her own bigotry while complaining about her Japanese American neighbors to a Nisei listener. In "Wilshire Bus," a story set in postwar Los Angeles, a drunk white man on a bus heaps racist slurs on a Chinese couple who are fellow passengers and demands that they return to where they came from. Soon the couple (one of whom is carrying a plant) get off at the veterans hospital—most likely to visit a son who is an American veteran injured in the war. "Life Among the Oil Fields" shows the insolence of a neighboring white couple who run over a Japanese American child in their car but who refuse to apologize or make compensation. By framing the incident with allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda, and by linking this couple to the heartless one in the story, Yamamoto insinuates that the callous racism exposed in her story also characterizes the attitudes and work of some celebrated white writers.[8]

There are, however, touching instances of cross-cultural bonding as well. In "The Eskimo Connection" a friendship develops through the exchange of letters between a middle-aged Japanese American housewife and a young Eskimo prisoner. In "Epithalamium," we are privy to the thrills and heartaches of a Nisei woman who has fallen in love with an Italian alcoholic. "A Fire in Fontana" tracks the growing political consciousness of the narrator, whose inner self turns "Black" in empathy after reporting on a fire that has "accidentally" killed a Black family residing in a hostile white neighborhood. In each of these stories, a Nisei woman is drawn to persons who are marginalized as members of other ethnic groups.

Yamamoto's inter-ethnic encounters contain not just sober reflections but also funny touches. "The brown house"—the gambling establishment in the story of the same name—does not discriminate among races. During a police raid, its "windows and doors . . . began to spew out all kinds of people—white, yellow, brown, and black." A Black man seeks refuge and is granted shelter in the car of a Japanese woman, Mrs. Hattori, who with her five children is waiting for her husband. Before long Mr. Hattori joins them and drives away without knowing that his car carries an extra passenger. When the Black man reveals his presence and asks to be let off, the driver receives a shock:

> Mrs. Hattori hastily explained, and the man, pausing on his way out, searched for words to emphasize his gratitude. He had always been, he said, a friend of the Japanese people; he knew no race so cleanly, so well-mannered, so downright nice. As he slammed the door shut, he put his hand on the arm of Mr. Hattori, who was still dumfounded, and promised never to forget this act of kindness. (page 42)

Once the fugitive is gone, Mr. Hattori reproaches his wife for offering sanctuary to a Black person, and Mrs. Hattori retorts that her husband has no misgivings about mixing with men of other colors when he is inside the brown house.

The episode is interwoven with humor, pathos, and irony. Besides presenting a comic sketch of "one minority stereotyping another,"[9] it plays on the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Mr. Hattori, whom the Black man thanks profusely, has performed an act of charity against his will. Assumed to be "well-mannered" and "downright nice," he refers to the thankful man derogatorily as "*kurombo*," which is somewhere between "Blackie" and "Nigger" in its connotation. The ensuing argument about what Mrs. Hattori has done culminates in Mr. Hattori beating his wife later that night. Finally, one must reflect sadly on the irony that it is a gambling den that embraces people of various hues, and that it is only there that the inmates are above racism. Unlike overtly political statements that can be abstract and one-sided, Yamamoto presents race relations with an eye to nuances and resonances. The author, who identifies strongly with other people of color, satirizes both white and Asian prejudices. Yet her satire is ever so subtle. She exposes human narrowness not with the biting sarcasm of Joan Didion or the pungent rhetoric of John Okada, but with the acerbic wit of Grace Paley and the piquant understatement of Toshio Mori.

Another theme that Yamamoto explores repeatedly is the precarious relationship between Issei parents and Nisei children. While generational

differences are by no means unique to Japanese Americans, in their case the gap between the old and the young is aggravated by language barriers and disparate cultural values. Rosie in "Seventeen Syllables" cannot appreciate her mother's haiku, though she pays lip service to its beauty:

> "Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely," Rosie said, and her mother, either satisfied or seeing through the deception and resigned, went back to composing.
>
> The truth is that Rosie was lazy; English lay ready on the tongue but Japanese had to be searched for and examined and even then put forth tentatively (probably to meet with laughter). It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no. (page 8)

The mother and daughter in "Yoneko's Earthquake" likewise talk at cross purposes. Out of guilt Mrs. Hosoume, who has undergone an abortion and then lost her younger son, envisions a causal link between the two premature deaths:

> "Never kill a person, Yoneko, because if you do, God will take from you someone you love."
>
> "Oh, that," said Yoneko quickly, "I don't believe in that, I don't believe in God."...She had believed for a moment that her mother was going to ask about the ring (which, alas, she had lost already, somehwere in the flumes along the cantaloupe patch). (page 56)

The mother's cryptic moral is entirely lost on Yoneko. Mrs. Hosoume is thinking of the abortion when she admonishes Yoneko against killing, but "someone you love" could refer either to the son who has recently died or to Marpo, her lover who has disappeared on the day of the abortion.[10] None of these possibilities occur to Yoneko, who merely balks at the very idea of God. She is more nervous about having lost the ring given to her by Mrs. Hosoume, who in turn has received it from Marpo. The daughter's loss of the ring symbolizes the mother's bereavement at the loss of her lover. A mere trinket in the eyes of the daughter, the ring is associated in the mother's mind with an inner tumult as intense as the earthquake that has unnerved Yoneko.

Despite difficulties and failures, these mothers at least attempt to impart their hard earned wisdom to their daughters, but the fathers, either preoccupied by material survival, bent on spiritual enlightenment, or shackled by vice, communicate even less effectively, if at all, with their children. Mr. Hayashi in "Seventeen Syllables" and Mr. Hosoume in "Yoneko's Earthquake" are earthbound men oblivious to the artistic or romantic inclinations of their wives and daughters. On the other hand, the Buddhist father in "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" is too absorbed in his spiritual pursuit to notice that his sensuous daughter is disintegrating

mentally right under his saintly nose. Then there are Mr. Hattori and Charley (the title character of "Las Vegas Charley"), inveterate gamblers unfit to set examples for their children.[11] None of these men is evil, but each is severely limited. Noriyuki's mixed reaction to his deceased father at the end of "Las Vegas Charley" is illustrative. The doctor has just said of Charley, "At least he enjoyed himself while he was alive."

> And Noriyuki—who, without one sour word, had lived through a succession of emotions about his father—hate for rejecting him as a child; disgust and exasperation over that weak moral fiber, embarrassment when people asked what his father did for a living; and finally, something akin to compassion, when he came to understand that his father was not an evil man, but only an inadequate one with the most shining intentions, only one man among so many who lived from day to day as best as they could, limited, restricted, by the meager gifts Fate or God had doled out to them—could not quite agree.[12] (page 85)

Noriyuki's reflections on his Issei father can be connected to the third theme concerning the aspirations and difficulties of the Japanese immigrants, and the temptations and frustrations that await them in America. As Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald and Katharine Newman aptly observe, "all those who seek but lose are of interest to Yamamoto."[13] Ineffectual as the Issei fathers may be in her stories, they are never reduced simply to stereotypes. Perhaps it is because Yamamoto can understand so well the hardships that beset the newcomers to American soil that she can afford tender strokes even while painting incorrigible souls such as Charley and Mr. Hattori. Once a successful farmer, Charley turns to gambling in his lonely hours after the death of his beloved wife. Twice he tries to kick the habit, but renews his addiction when the monotony of camp life and his isolation in Las Vegas become unbearable. By delineating the circumstances that turn this well-meaning man into a compulsive gambler, Yamamoto gives us insights into a life that is otherwise all too easily condemned. Mr. Hattori, who gambles in the hope of making a quick fortune after losing money on his strawberry crop, has less claim on our sympathy. Yet even this gambler disarms us with his sincere though short-lived resolutions to reform.

But if Yamamoto portrays the failings of Mr. Hattori with tolerance, she extends the strongest sympathy to his long-suffering wife, who does not have the heart to leave her reckless husband permanently. At the end of the story, her family is mired in debt and she is pregnant again. Looking at Mrs. Hattori, Mrs. Wu (the Chinese proprietess of the brown house) "decided she had never before encountered a woman with such bleak

eyes." (page 45) Whether or not one sees the author as a feminist ahead of her time, Yamamoto does reveal through her fiction the sorry plight of many female immigrants caught in unhappy marriages. What made the lives of these Issei women especially bleak was that unlike Black women, for example, who in similar situations often turned to other women for support, rural Issei women were not only separated by the Pacific from mothers, and grandmothers, but were often cut off from one another as well. Having to take care of children and to work alongside their husbands on isolated farms, they had little time and opportunity to cultivate friendships with other women. The only members of the same sex to whom they could unbosom their thoughts were their own daughters, who all too often had engrossing problems of their own.

Mrs. Hayashi in "Seventeen Syllables" is a haunting portrait of a repressed Issei who struggles to express herself through poetry. Notwithstanding her long hours of work at home and on the farm, she takes to writing haiku. But her husband, a farmer who is indifferent to her creative endeavors, expresses disapproval and resentment whenever she engages in long discussions of poetry with people who share her interests. The conflict comes to a head when she wins a haiku contest sponsored by a Japanese American newspaper. On the day the editor comes in person to deliver the award, a Hiroshige print, the family is busy packing tomatoes. Mr. Hayashi becomes increasingly impatient while his wife discusses poetry with the editor in the main house, and finally stalks inside in anger and emerges with the prize picture. What follows is the most wrenching passage in the story, told from the daughter's point of view:

> ...he threw the picture on the ground and picked up the axe. Smashing the picture, glass and all (she heard the explosion faintly), he reached over for the kerosene that was used to encourage the bath fire and poured it over the wreckage. I am dreaming, Rosie said to herself, I am dreaming, but her father, having made sure that his act of cremation was irrevocable, was even then returning to the fields.
>
> Rosie ran past him and toward the house. What had become of her mother? She burst into the parlor and found her mother at the back window, watching the dying fire. They watched together until there remained only a feeble smoke under the blazing sun. Her mother was very calm. (page 18)

This haunting description attests to Yamamoto's genius at creating scenes that are powerful on both a literal and a symbolic level. The external calmness of the mother, almost frightening at this point, seems only to

suggest the depth of her anguish. Although we are not immediately told of her inner reaction to her husband's outrage, the incinerated picture speaks for her: we feel that she, too, is consumed by seething rage and smoldering despair. More effective than registering a host of angry screams or plaintive wails, the tableau sears into our consciousness the husband's cruelty and the wife's desolation.[14]

Another striking use of a symbolic scene (analagous to a near epiphany) to convey repressed emotions occurs in "Yoneko's Earthquake," when Mr. Hosoume drives his wife to the hospital to abort an illegitimate child. On the way the father hits a beautiful collie, but drives on as though nothing has happened. The unblinking killing of the animal enables us not only to perceive the father's intense anger and his total indifference to the life about to be destroyed but also to imagine the mother's contrasting psychological state. She must cringe inwardly as she witnesses the act that foreshadows the fate of her unborn child. The harrowing silence that accompanies the brutal burning in "Seventeen Syllables" and the unfeeling and unacknowledged killing in "Yoneko's Earthquake" heightens the horror of both episodes. We can almost feel the lifeblood slowly seeping from the two hurt women.

Two other narrative techniques contribute to the exquisite telling of "Seventeen Syllables," "Yoneko's Earthquake," and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara": the use of limited point of view and the juxtaposition of a manifest and a latent plot.[15] These two strategies are interconnected: the limited point of view allows the author to suspend or conceal one of the plots of a given story.[16] Though narrated in third person, "Seventeen Syllables" is told from young Rosie's point of view. While we are informed of Mrs. Hayashi's poetic interest from the beginning and are reminded of it periodically, the first part of the story revolves around Rosie's adolescent concerns, especially her secret rendezvous with Jesus, the son of the Mexican couple who work for her family. Only two thirds into the story does Yamamoto begin to unfold the submerged plot—the tragedy of the mother, whose artistic aspirations come to an abrupt halt in the wake of her jealous husband's fury. The burning of the award signals the end of Mrs. Hayashi's poetic career. As mother and daughter watch the dying fire together, their lives—separate strands at the outset—begin to intertwine. Rosie, who has newly experienced the thrills of her first romance, is made to look squarely at her mother's chastening marriage. Her "rosy" adolescent world must now be viewed through the darkening lens of Mrs. Hayashi's hindsight.

The counterpoint emotions of mother and daughter are deftly superimposed in the dramatic last paragraph of the story:

> Suddenly, her mother knelt on the floor and took her by the wrists. "Rosie," she said urgently, "Promise me you will never marry!" Shocked more by the request than the revelation, Rosie stared at her mother's face. Jesus, Jesus, she called silently, not certain whether she was invoking the help of the son of the Carrascos or of God, until there returned sweetly the memory of Jesus' hand, how it had touched her and where. Still her mother waited for an answer, holding her wrists so tightly that her hands were going numb. She tried to pull free. Promise, her mother whispered fiercely, promise. Yes, yes, I promise, Rosie said. But for an instant she turned away, and her mother, hearing the familiar glib agreement, released her. Oh, you, you, you, her eyes and twisted mouth said, you fool. Rosie, covering her face, began at last to cry, and the embrace and consoling hand came much later than she expected. (page 19)

As an expression of the mother's cynical wisdom, the shocking request reveals her thorough disillusionment with her past and present relationships with men. Deserted by her lover in Japan and stifled by her husband in America, Mrs. Hayashi has abandoned all hopes for herself; she can only try to prevent her daughter from repeating her mistakes. Her sudden kneeling and anxious clutching, however, oddly and ironically correspond to the posture and gesture of an ardent suitor proposing marriage. One suspects that the ironic correspondence flashes across Rosie's mind as well. Though not deaf to her mother's plea, Rosie drifts into a romantic reverie at the very moment Mrs. Hayashi implores her to remain single. Rosie's reaction to the entreaty is couched in words that recall her recent sexual awakening. "Jesus" is both a spontaneous exclamation and a conscious invocation of her beau, whose arousing grip contrasts with Mrs. Hayashi's tenacious clutch. "Yes, yes" recalls not only the double affirmative at the beginning of the story, when Rosie pretends to understand the workings of haiku, but also her first kiss with Jesus in the shed, when she can only think of "yes and no and oh. . . ." The affirmative answer also extends the proposal analogy: it is an answer many a suitor wishes to hear and many a woman in love longs to utter.[17] In the present context, however, it is a hollow acquiescence extorted by the mother and given grudgingly by the daughter. As a desperate plea against marriage and as a travesty of a proposal, the passage conflates the mother's disenchantment and the daughter's dampened but inextinguishable hopes.

The degree of Mrs. Hayashi's embitterment and the extent of Rosie's transformation are conveyed in the delicate understatement of the last sentence. Taking umbrage at Rosie's insincere reply, the disconsolate mother cannot bring herself to hug her sobbing daughter immediately.

Although Rosie's "glib agreement" as well as Mrs. Hayashi's unspoken reprimand and temporary withdrawal hark back to the story's opening, when the mother treats Rosie as a child too young to grasp the intricacies of Japanese poetics, the last sentence also bespeaks Rosie's growth from a carefree child to a perplexed adult. As Stan Yogi observes, the image of delayed embrace "suggests the maturity that Mrs. Hayashi now expects of her daughter, who has been initiated into the excitement, pain, and disillusionment of adult life."[18]

Rosie's story and Mrs. Hayashi's story are inexorably enmeshed at the end. But in "Yoneko's Earthquake," one of the plots remains hidden throughout. Also told from a daughter's point of view, the seemingly light-hearted tale ostensibly describes ten year old Yoneko's crush on Marpo, the twenty-seven year old Filipino farmhand who works for her family. Yoneko confides to us matters of utmost concern to *her* while reporting in passing the daily occurrences in her family, such as getting a ring from her mother one day and being driven by her father to a hospital another day. But her random digressions are in fact pregnant hints dropped by Yamamoto. These hints allow us to infer that Yoneko's mother is also in love with Marpo and that their liaison leads to an abortion. Just as we must unravel these secrets by piecing together Yoneko's haphazard observations, so must we gauge the emotional upheaval in the adult world by monitoring Yoneko's changing moods. Her passing crush on Marpo and fleeting sorrow after his departure at once parallel and contrast with the mother's passionate affair and unremitting sorrow at being deserted.

Because the story operates on multiple levels of consciousness—those of the young girl, the reader, and the author—there are unlimited occasions for dramatic irony. For instance, it is through Yoneko's separate admiration for Marpo and for the mother that we learn the likelihood of mutual attraction between the two adults. After Marpo's disappearance Yoneko only notes as a matter of fact that the new hired hand is "an old Japanese man who wore his gray hair in a military cut and who, unlike Marpo, had no particular intersts outside working, eating, sleeping, and playing an occasional game of *goh* with Mr. Hosoume." But the reader can appreciate the humor and the pathos behind the replacement: this time the father has taken precautions. The new worker is Marpo's antithesis in every way, devoid of youth, industry, and talents. Instead of being a constant companion for the mother, he is the father's playmate.

In "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," we are presented not so much with two plots as with shifting perspectives. The word "legend" nicely calls into question the veracity of the information provided in the story, in

which we are often misled into looking at a character or an event in a certain way, only to have our perceptions radically altered by the end. The title character is introduced to us through various secondhand reports, made up of gossip and rumors, the gist of them being that Miss Sasagawara is highly eccentric, if not downright crazy. As for her family, we know only that her mother is dead and that her father is a devout Buddhist priest. At the end of the story, however, the narrator discovers a poem written by Miss Sasagawara in which she intimates the torment of being tied to someone "whose lifelong aim had been to achieve Nirvana, that saintly state of moral purity and universal wisdom." The poet continues:

> But say that someone else, someone sensitive, someone admiring, someone who had not achieved this sublime condition and who did not wish to, were somehow called to companion such a man. Was it not likely that the saint, blissfully bent on cleansing from his already radiant soul the last imperceptible blemishes...would be deaf and blind to the human passions rising, subsiding, and again rising, perhaps in anguished silence, within the selfsame room? The poet could not speak for others, of course; she could only speak for herself. But she would describe this man's devotion as a sort of madness, the monstrous sort which, pure of itself, might possibly bring troublous, scented scenes to recur in the other's sleep. (page 33)

This revealing poem, the veiled record of a passionate daughter's anguished remonstration with an ascetic father, not only gives us new insight into Miss Sasagawara's tragedy but forces us to revise our earlier judgment of who is sane and who is not. The daughter, who feels circumscribed emotionally and aesthetically in the presence of her father, is also literally incarcerated. Because of the internment, father and daughter are condemned to live "within the selfsame room." Her mental illness seems an unconscious act of resistance against the chilling influence of her father and against the senseless decree of the U.S. government. By contrast, the other internees conduct their lives in camp as though they were at liberty. Miss Sasagawara's father, who "had felt free for the first time in his long life" during this confinement, offers the most bizarre example. The line between sanity and insanity is a hard one to draw in this story.

Though Yamamoto persistently confronts religious and moral issues, she is never dogmatic or moralistic in her judgment. Instead she can find fault with the seemingly divine and perceive redeeming grace among erring humanity. Her characters are often caught in circumstances that

render unqualified approval or condemnation difficult. Thus Miss Sasagawara's father, so close to sainthood, is yet hopelessly oblivious and insensitive. By contrast, Charley the gambler and Mrs. Hosoume in "Yoneko's Earthquake" engage us not despite but because of their susceptibilities to vice and passion. Whether Yamamoto uses a Buddhist or a Christian frame of reference, her overriding tone is one of human questioning accompanied by understanding rather than of moral certainty coupled with religious complacency.

Not given to effusive rhetoric and militant statements, Yamamoto appeals to us in another way.[19] Reminiscent of the verbal economy of haiku, in which the poet "must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables only," Yamamoto's stories exemplify precision and restraint. We must be attentive to all the words on the page to unbury covert plots, fathom the characters' repressed emotions, and detect the author's silent indictment and implicit sympathy. Many of her stories give added pleasure with each new reading, but some may actually have to be read at least twice to be fully appreciated. Then may we find ourselves echoing Rosie by saying, without glibness, "Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely."

King-Kok Cheung
University of California, Los Angeles

King-Kok Cheung is Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is author of *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993); editor of *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1996), *"Seventeen Syllables"* (1994), and *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers* (forthcoming); and co-editor of *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988).

Notes

1. Hisaye Yamamoto, "Writing," *Amerasia Journal* 3.2 (1976): 127, 128, 130. Yamamoto said that she hid under the pseudonym "as an apology for [her] little madness" (i.e. her immense zeal to write; 128).

2. Yamamoto, "Introduction," *The Chauvinist and Other Stories* by Toshio Mori (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1979), p. 12; Susan Koppelman, ed. *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories Across a Generation* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1985), p. 162.

3. Nisei are second generation Japanese Americans, children of the Issei, or Japanese immigrants. Sansei are the third generation.

4. "Writing," 126.

5. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between Japanese American history and literature, see Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1982), 122-72. For a detailed study of Issei history, see Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

6. Miné Okubo, *Citizen 13660* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1946; Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press; 1983; Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (Boston: Little Brown, 1953); John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Vermont: Tuttle, 1957; Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1977); Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1982); James Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

7. "...I Still Carry It Around," *RIKKA* 3.4 (1976): 11.

8. I want to thank Barbara Smith for this suggestion.

9. Robert Rolf, "The Short Stories of Hisaye Yamamoto, Japanese-American Writer," *Bulletin of Fukuoka University of Education* 30.1 (1982): 75.

10. The ambiguous reference is noted by Charles Crow in "Home and Transcendence in Los Angeles Fiction," in *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984), p. 202.

11. Not surprisingly, Charles Crow argues that Yamamoto's portrayals of Issei fathers are uniformly unflattering; see "The *Issei* Father in the Fiction of Hisaye Yamamoto," in *Opening Up Literary Criticism: Essays on American Prose and Poetry* (Salzburg: Verlag Wolfgang Neugebauer, 1986), pp. 34-40. Yet interestingly enough, unlike Maxine Hong Kingston and Alice Walker, who have been attacked by critics for reinforcing the negative stereotypes of respectively Chinese American men and Black men, Yamamoto has not had to answer similar charges. I believe this is due to Yamamoto's ability to soften her critical vision by rendering the vulnerabilities of Japanese American men sensitively, as in "Morning Rain" and "My Father Can Beat Muhammad Ali." Although the father figures in these stories are not of heroic mold, they are too human to be judged as caricatures.

12. The poignancy of this ending recalls the ending of Hemingway's "My Old Man," but Yamamoto is closer to Steinbeck and Mansfield in her uncanny ability to shift imperceptibly from a comic to a tragic key. As in her presentation of interracial contact, her juxtaposition of Issei and Nisei can be funny as well as sad.

13. "Relocation and Dislocation: The Writings of Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi," *MELUS* 7.3 (1980): 28.

14. The cremation scene reminds me of the many poignant accounts about Issei who burned everything associated with their country of origin after Pearl Harbor, so as to avoid being suspected by the War Relocation Authority. Yamamoto herself must have witnessed actual incidents whereby family heirlooms and literary manuscripts were turned into ashes, and the experience might have added to the graphic and heart-rending quality of her description.

15. For a detailed analysis of the technique of the double-plot, see Stan Yogi, "Legacies Revealed: Uncovering Buried Plots in the Stories of Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi," MA thesis, Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1988. To Yogi I owe many insights; in particular, his thoughtful reading of "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (pp. 117-28) informs my own interpretation of the story.

16. Although experimentation with limited as well as shifting points of view is common among both Modernist writers (e.g. James, Faulkner, Conrad, and Durrell) and women of color writers (e.g. Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Silko), Yamamoto might have been inspired by the communication pattern characteristic of Nisei. According to Stanford Lyman, "conversations among *Nisei* almost always partake of the elements of an information game between persons maintaining decorum by seemingly mystifying one another. It is the duty of the listener to ascertain the context of the speech he hears and to glean from his knowledge of the speaker and the context just what is the important point" ("Generation and Character: The Case of the Japanese Americans," *Roots: An Asian American Reader* [Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971], p. 53). Similarly, both "Yoneko's Earthquake" and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" engage the reader in information games.

17. Perhaps the most famous literary example is Molly Bloom's reverie of her proposal that concludes Joyce's *Ulysses*: "...I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes."

18. "Legacies Revealed," p. 52.

19. Yuri Kageyama considers Yamamoto's style (and that of Issei and Nisei writers in general) to be superior to the polemical style of some Sansei ("Hisaye Yamamoto—Nisei Writer," *Sunbury* 10:41). I tend to agree.