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# Double-Telling: Intertextual Silence in Hisaye Yamamoto's Fiction

*King-Kok Cheung*

Feminist scholars Joan Radner and Susan Lanser have demonstrated how women writers use “strategies of coding” to express “ideas and attitudes proscribed by the dominant culture” (412). Elaine Showalter, taking off from anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener’s model of women’s culture, argues that women’s fiction can be read as a “double-voiced discourse”: “The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint” (34). And Susan Stanford Friedman proposes a “psycho-political hermeneutic” for reading women’s narratives as the “return of the repressed” (142). While borrowing these interpretive strategies in my own textual analysis, I feel also a strong need to go beyond the critics’ theories in accounting for the multiple levels of silence embedded in the fiction of Hisaye Yamamoto, a *nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) writer. Although the critics acknowledge that a woman from a racial minority may be twice muted, they make no allowances for differences in cultural manifestations and evaluations of speech and silence. What some American linguists (e.g., Lakoff, O’Barr and Atkins) regard as “women’s language” or “powerless language” is shown, for instance, to be the communicative norm in Japan (Wetzel 555–58). Non-verbal communication and indirect speech remain pervasive in traditional Japanese American families, at least among the first two generations (Fujita 34, Miyamoto 35). Hence the use of indirection by a *nisei* woman writer must not be attributed to gender alone. Furthermore, in focusing exclusively on female silence under patriarchy, feminist scholars generally overlook the degree to which men, too, must repress their emotions because of conventional definitions of manhood, especially in cultures where silence is associated with fortitude. This article contextualizes Yamamoto’s method of what I call “double-telling” within Japanese American culture and illustrates her artful deployment of thematic and rhetorical silences. I hope

also to stretch the bounds of prevailing feminist analysis by showing how Yamamoto uses muted plots and bicultural codes to reveal the repression of both women *and* men.

## 1

Born of immigrant parents in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California, Yamamoto started writing when she was a teenager and contributed regularly to Japanese American newspapers. During World War II she was interned for three years in Poston, Arizona. Awarded a John Hay Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowship in 1949, 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 (“Seventeen Syllables,” “The Brown House,” “Yoneko’s Earthquake,” and “Epithalamium”) appeared in Martha Foley’s lists of “Distinctive Short Stories,” with “Yoneko’s Earthquake” also included in *Best American Short Stories: 1952*. In 1986 she received the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation.

Yamamoto’s literary acclaim derives in part from her consummate narrative strategies. Her technique of double-telling—conveying two tales in the guise of one—involves an intertextual use of a familiar device. In two of her most haunting stories, “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake,” the overt “action” is presented through a naive narrator who reflects the mind of a young girl, while the covert drama concerns the conflict between the girl’s issei (first-generation) parents. Though undoubtedly influenced by modernist experimentation with limited point of view, Yamamoto tailors the method to the Japanese American context. Her two stories capitalize not only on the infrequent verbal communication between issei spouses (Yanagisako 105, 122) but also on the peculiar interaction between issei parents and nisei children. Issei parents (especially fathers) tend to be authoritative and protective toward the young, so that free verbal exchange between parents and children is frequently suppressed (Kikumura 98). By playing the naive nisei point of view against the pregnant silence of the issei, Yamamoto constructs hidden plots and deflects attention from unsettling messages. Suspense develops in both stories in part because the parents refrain from disclosing adult problems to their children; only through the ingenuous telling of the nisei daughters do we catch the dark nuances of adult reticence.

The elliptical style more than captures the interaction between the two generations; it also provides an escape valve from other pressures. As a woman writing at a time when feminist sensibilities were scarcely publishable, Yamamoto couches her sympathy in a disarming style that keeps alarming subtexts below the surface. We may infer her self-consciousness as a woman writer and her awareness of her verbal power from the telling pseudonym—Napoleon—she once adopted, purportedly “as an apology for [her] little madness” (Yamamoto, “Writing” 128). Belonging to a racial minority undoubtedly heightens her “anxiety of authorship,” especially in face of the anti-Japanese sentiment that came to a head after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Though the incarceration of over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry ended with the war, political and social constrictions imposed by the dominant culture necessitated textual constraints beyond the duration of the physical confinement (cf. Schweik 89). Finally, as a nisei brought up to observe Japanese etiquette, Yamamoto may remain influenced by the “interpersonal style” (Miyamoto’s term) of her own ethnic community, one which discourages verbal confrontation and open protest. If American women in general have been brought up to be more polite than men in their speech and writing (Lakoff), Japanese American women, whose feminine reserve is reinforced by the cultural decorum of yet another tradition, are likely to be even more circumspect in expressing themselves—at least on the surface.<sup>1</sup>

The last explanation may accentuate the stereotype of the “inscrutable oriental” and blur the distinction between Japanese and Japanese Americans. My intention is quite the reverse: I wish to explode the stereotype by demystifying rather than denying the Japanese American preference for nonverbal or indirect communication. Important as it is to distinguish between Japanese and Japanese Americans, continuities between ancestral and ethnic cultures—especially in the first two generations—must also be acknowledged.<sup>2</sup>

Yamamoto herself replies indirectly to the question of cultural influence: “Since I was brought up like most Nisei, with Japanese ideas of *gaman* and *enryo* and that whole etiquette structure, I imagine my writing has been influenced by such behavior patterns—it would be strange if it wasn’t” (Letter). *Enryo* and *gaman* are Japanese terms associated with proper behavior. The interaction rules related to *enryo* (often translated as “reserve,” “deference,” or “diffidence”) are learned early in a Japanese family: “A child quickly learns the importance of

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reticence, modesty, indirection, and humility and is punished for boastful, aggressive, loud, and self-centered behavior” (Kikumura and Kitano 54). In the interaction between Japanese subordinates and their superiors or between Japanese Americans and whites, “One of the main manifestations of *enryo* was the conscious use of silence as a safe or neutral response to an embarrassing or ambiguous situation” (53). *Gaman*, meaning “internalization . . . and suppression of anger and emotion” (Kitano 136), is further associated with dogged perseverance: “The *Issei*’s ability to *gaman* (stick things out at all costs) was often what carried them through times of hardship, disillusionment, and loneliness” (Kikumura and Kitano 55).

Yamamoto thus parlays cultural precepts into literary gambits. She makes strategic use, for instance, of a particular conversational technique that Stanford Lyman attributes to the *nisei*. Lyman argues that their conversations “almost always partake of the elements of an information game between persons maintaining decorum by seemingly mystifying one another.” The listener must “ascertain the context of the speech he hears and . . . glean from his knowledge of the speaker and the context just what is the important point” (53). Both “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” engage us in decoding messages scripted into the seemingly random observations of two young girls. Each girl confides to us matters of utmost concern to *her*—events that constitute the manifest plot—while observing in passing her family’s “routine.” Between the lines lurks another plot that focuses on the child’s parents, whose repressed emotions grip us as in an undertow.

## 2

The opening of “Seventeen Syllables” is deceptively merry and straightforward: “The first Rosie knew that her mother had taken to writing poems was one evening when she finished one and read it aloud for her daughter’s approval. . . . Rosie pretended to understand it thoroughly and appreciate it no end, partly because she hesitated to disillusion her mother about the quantity and quality of Japanese she had learned. . . . Even so, her mother must have been skeptical about the depth of Rosie’s understanding, because she explained afterwards about the kind of poem she was trying to write” (8). Right from the start we witness and participate in an “information game.” The anecdote introduces us to both the motif and the technique of indirection. Mother and daughter relate to each other tactfully

and evasively, and they refrain from acknowledging or confronting the problem of communication: Rosie conceals her limited knowledge of Japanese; her mother avoids embarrassing the daughter by not challenging her understanding.

The author likewise grants us the daughter's impressions while teasing us with the mother's unknown thoughts. We know that although Rosie responds enthusiastically to her mother's literary effort by saying "Yes, yes, I understand" (8), she feigns her appreciation to gloss over her linguistic deficiency. She herself has read a haiku written in English and would like to share it with her mother, but she finds the task of translation daunting: "It was much more possible to say yes, yes" (9). The mother's thoughts, by contrast, are presented only in speculative terms. We are told that she "must have been skeptical" about Rosie's comprehension and that (after Rosie's halfhearted compliment) she resumes composing, "either satisfied or seeing through the deception and resigned" (8). Along with the daughter, we share the uncertainty implied in the subjunctive clause and the either-or conjunction. But the daughter's quandary prompts us to imagine the mother's parallel predicament: Rosie's inability to share what she reads (in English) points to her mother's even greater frustration of being unable to share what she writes (in Japanese). The mother's creative activity must be largely a lone venture, for she cannot discuss her writing with either her daughter or, as we soon learn, her husband. Rosie's explicit responses will continue to serve as oblique analogues to her mother's hidden thoughts.

The daughter's immediate perspective and the mother's removed one set in motion two parallel plots. One recounts Rosie's adolescent experiences, particularly the joys and fears of incipient sexuality. The other describes the mother's increasing impulse to write and discuss haiku—a drive almost as insistent as sex. While we know from the beginning that the mother (Tome Hayashi), under the pseudonym Ume Hanazono, has become "an extravagant contributor" to a Japanese American newspaper (9), the narrator's tone, which reflects the "rosy" temperament of the daughter, diffuses the gravity of the suspended plot. (There is little distance between the breezy discourse of Rosie and that of the narrator.) Tome Hayashi and Ume Hanazono apparently lead a peaceful coexistence: the formidable amount of housework and fieldwork Hayashi performs does not deter Hanazono from writing. Only in retrospect do we register innuendoes. Use of a pseudonym is common among Japanese poets, yet the pen name also gives Hayashi a separate personality: she can write only when she assumes an

identity independent of her husband's. The adjective "extravagant" further hints that even her daughter considers her poetic contribution to be a luxury incompatible with the exigencies in the "sweltering fields" where the mother picks tomatoes (9; cf. Wong). Finally, the narrator portrays Hanazono as a "muttering stranger," suggesting that the mother's poetic self is alien to father and daughter, both of whom feel excluded from her creative life, which we learn was "very brief—perhaps three months at most" (9). The reader is then left wondering about the cause of the mother's aborted creativity, but is "distracted" by Rosie's adolescent concerns. For instance, when the Hayashis visit the Hayanos, the new coat of one of the teenage daughters becomes the center of the discursive attention. The adults remain very much in the background, with Mr. Hayano and Mrs. Hayashi discussing haiku, Mr. Hayashi reading a magazine, and Mrs. Hayano sitting by herself. We share Rosie's puzzlement when Mr. Hayashi leaves abruptly, without even telling his wife. The episode exemplifies what Radner and Lanser call "distraction"—the muffling of a "feminist message [by] creating some kind of 'noise,' interference, or obscurity that will keep the message from being heard except by those who listen very carefully" (417–18). In this instance the "noise" is the girls' hoopla over clothing, a fittingly feminine preoccupation to provide an unspoken contrast to Mrs. Hayashi's "abnormal" obsession, one which incurs her husband's displeasure.

Although the minds of the couple remain closed, the author guides our response indirectly through the daughter's reaction. When Mrs. Hayashi rejoins her husband, she apologizes: "You know how I get when it's haiku . . . I forget what time it is" (11–12). Watching her parents, Rosie feels "a rush of hate for both—for her mother for begging, for her father for denying her mother" (12). Yamamoto suggests that unspeakable feelings similar to Rosie's may lurk beneath her mother's abject excuse and apparent contrition. Furthermore, when Rosie, in her anger, fantasizes a car collision leaving "three contorted, bleeding bodies, one of them hers" (12), we are given a sidelong glance at the subdued conflict between her parents that will culminate in a real act of violence in which the three lives will indeed be enmeshed. Rosie, for all her internal agitation, remains quiet and demure on the surface. Like her parents, who refrain from speaking their minds in the child's presence, she has learned to contain her emotions.

No sooner has the parental conflict been intimated than it is upstaged by Rosie's first brush with the opposite sex, the focus of the next two sections. During a rendezvous in which Rosie



meets Jesus Carrasco (the son of a Mexican couple who work for her family), she swoons by the book: “kissed by Jesus, Rosie fell, for the first time, entirely victim to a helplessness delectable beyond speech” (14). In itself, the meeting between the youngsters heralds the beginning of love, but seen in retrospect against the adult plot, Rosie’s budding romance is foreboding, even foredoomed (see Radner and Lanser on “juxtaposition” 416).

Rosie herself makes no connections. Returning to the house after her newfound experience, she finds her mother talking with her relatives about a haiku competition. When she runs into her father, his gruffness makes her assume that he is cross with her. We suspect that he is upset instead at his wife’s continuing interest in haiku, though we do not know the extent of his unstated disapproval, since Rosie—our source of information—is too dazed herself at this point to discern any parental discord. Daughter and mother alike are absorbed in self-discovery; preoccupied with love or art, they pay little, if any, attention to Mr. Hayashi’s moodiness.

The two plots do not come together until the final section, in which again the focus falls initially on Rosie, who has been daydreaming about Jesus and feeling “grave and giddy by turns” (15). When her father tells her that she must help sort tomatoes after school—“This heat’s not doing them any good. And we’ve got no time for a break today” (15)—it is the only time we hear Mr. Hayashi speak more than one sentence. Unremarkable as his words are, they prove portentous. The pressing tomato harvest is interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Kuroda, a newspaper editor who comes to inform Rosie’s mother that she has won a haiku contest and who brings her the award—a Hiroshige print “sketched with delicate quickness” (17). When Mrs. Hayashi invites him into the house for tea, the father utters his first explicit comment about his wife or, rather, about her artistic fervor, “Ha, your mother’s crazy!” and soon asks Rosie to remind Mrs. Hayashi about the tomatoes (17). Finding her mother absorbed in the editor’s exposition of a haiku theory, Rosie merely relays the message and returns to the field, where she and her father work on in silence. “But suddenly, her father uttered an incredible noise, exactly like the cork of a bottle popping, and the next Rosie knew, he was stalking angrily toward the house” (17).

The hitherto muted plot explodes in a wrenching epiphany when Mr. Hayashi emerges with the picture, which he proceeds to destroy with an axe: “Smashing the picture, glass and all . . . he reached over the kerosene that was used to encourage the bath fire and poured it over the wreckage” (18). Rosie rushes

to the house and finds her mother, who appears “very calm” (18), watching the fire through the window. Her frightening calm reveals the depths of her misery. Though her reaction to her husband’s outrage is not told, the incinerated picture speaks for the way rage and despair consume her. The word *cremation* links object and person: the burning of the art object mirrors the expiring artist. We now understand why the mother’s “life span” as a poet is so brief. In keeping with a tale spare in dialogue, the climax consists not in verbal confrontation but in a devastating action: the reader, like the daughter, is made to gaze in horror at the husband’s wrath and the wife’s desolation.

The two plots are then deftly conjoined. As mother and daughter watch the dying fire together, their lives are intertwined. Rosie, who has newly experienced the thrills of romance, must look squarely at her mother’s chastening marriage and re-view her adolescent world through the darkening lens of Mrs. Hayashi’s hindsight. When the mother asks, “Do you know why I married your father?” (18), Rosie has a premonition that “the *telling* would combine with the other violence of the hot afternoon to level her life, her world to the very ground” (18; emphasis added). No longer condensing her private thoughts into a haiku, the mother reveals her secret past to the reluctant listener in a torrent of words. Her outpouring, like the father’s reckless act, deviates from the code of emotional and verbal restraint observed thus far in the story.

Mrs. Hayashi’s confession traces her endless heartaches back to a dire romance and spells a cautionary tale for Rosie. Pregnant by a lover in Japan, she could not marry because of their unequal social status (a factor also potentially dividing Rosie and Jesus, whose parents work for the Hayashis). Spurned by her family, she wed Mr. Hayashi as an alternative to suicide. Her child, were it not stillborn, would have been 17. The number connects past bereavement with present loss. She may have tried to distill her grief into her nightly scribbles. But her creativity—poetry within 17 syllables—is also prematurely doomed.

The mother’s regrets run counter to the daughter’s dreams and desires. The contesting emotions are superimposed in the dramatic last paragraph of the story:

Suddenly, her mother knelt on the floor and took [Rosie] 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. . . . 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. (19)

The passage poignantly double-tells. The mother's request, so unexpected in the light of the Japanese conception of marriage as *giri* (obligation) and as "a natural stage in the course of one's life" (Yanagisako 95), underscores her thorough disillusionment with men. Deserted and stifled, Mrs. Hayashi tries to prevent her daughter from meeting the same fate. Yet her sudden kneeling, anxious clutching, and reiteration of "promise" oddly and ironically correspond to the posture, gesture, and entreaty of an ardent suitor proposing marriage.

Though not deaf to her mother's appeal, Rosie drifts into a romantic reverie at the very moment Mrs. Hayashi implores her to remain single. Rosie's reaction to the demand is couched in words that recall her recent sexual awakening. "Jesus" here 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: "When he took hold of her empty hand . . . her vocabulary had become distressingly constricted and . . . all that remained intact now was yes and no and oh" (14). The affirmative answer—albeit a hollow acquiescence extorted by the mother—also extends the proposal analogy (cf. Molly Bloom's famous response). As an earnest plea against marriage and as a travesty of a proposal, the passage pits Mrs. Hayashi's cynical wisdom against Rosie's dampened but inextinguishable hopes. Through Yamamoto's sleight of "hand," Mrs. Hayashi's embitterment and Rosie's initiation are together encapsulated in the delicate understatement that concludes the story. The tactile images—"the embrace and consoling hand"—once more recall Rosie's encounter with Jesus, but the timing here tells much more. The disconsolate mother, taking umbrage at Rosie's insincere reply, cannot bring herself to hug her sobbing daughter immediately. The image of delayed embrace, as Stan Yogi observes, also "suggests the maturity that Mrs. Hayashi now expects of her daughter, who has been initiated into the excitement, pain, and disillusionment of adult life" (174). Yamamoto condenses

meaning at once through verbal echoes and by dramatizing nonverbal interaction.

## 3

In “Yoneko’s Earthquake,” the manifest plot depicts a young girl’s passing crush on a farmhand and her contingent, short-lived, Christian faith. The latent plot hints at her mother’s secret love affair with the same man and her eventual conversion to Christianity. But unlike “Seventeen Syllables,” in which the submerged plot flows along with the story and swells up at the end, the second plot in “Yoneko’s Earthquake” is completely and persistently masked. A third-person limited point of view makes the opaqueness possible: we see the story through the eyes of ten-year-old Yoneko Hosoume, the eponymous protagonist. By imitating the haphazard manner of the child, the narrator drops telling hints as though they were random digressions. For instance, the seemingly trivial anecdote at the opening of the story, in which Yoneko’s brother Seigo mistakes his sister’s praying posture for an outburst of grief, reminds us that perception often falls short. Just as Seigo misreads his older sister’s religious posture, Yoneko fails to understand a series of adult gestures.

Through Yoneko’s separate evaluations of Marpo (the Filipino farmhand who works for her family) and her mother, we learn that both adults are remarkably attractive. Yoneko idolizes Marpo and enumerates at length his multiple accomplishments as Christian, farm worker, athlete, musician, artist, and radio technician. We suspect that such a versatile man charms not only little Yoneko but older members of her sex as well. Through Yoneko we also learn that Mrs. Hosoume is a rare beauty: “She had once heard someone comparing her mother to ‘a dewy, half-opened rosebud’ ” (53). The seductive Mrs. Hosoume surely has other admirers besides her daughter. We infer the likelihood of mutual attraction between the two adults from Yoneko’s adoration for both. An affair between the two presumably begins around the time when there is an earthquake and also a car accident in which Mr. Hosoume is apparently rendered impotent. Unable to farm after the accident, he is confined to the house while Marpo and Mrs. Hosoume work in the field and run errands together. We get our first hint of intimacy between the two when Mrs. Hosoume gives Yoneko a ring, saying, “If your father asks where you got it, say you found it on the street” (52).

Neither the affair nor Mr. Hosoume's impotence is openly told, since Yoneko cannot fathom the sexual dynamics in the adult world. For Yoneko, whom Marpo has converted to Christianity, the greatest consequence of the earthquake is losing faith in God: her belief is permanently shaken when her fervent prayers seem unheeded during the prolonged heavings. Because of her high-strung reaction, the whole household refers to the disaster as "Yoneko's Earthquake." Only toward the end do we discover that the earthquake also has had physical and emotional aftershocks for Yoneko's parents and Marpo.

The key events that follow can only be seen darkly, as through an ill-lit scrim, by connecting the isolated details furnished by the naive narrator. One day Marpo disappears abruptly "without even saying good-bye to Yoneko and Seigo" (54). On that day the Hosoumes, quite out of routine, go to the city on a weekday afternoon. Driving at top speed, Mr. Hosoume hits a collie: "The car jerked with the impact, but Mr. Hosoume drove right on . . ." (54). When the parents emerge from the hospital, the mother is "obviously in pain," which she attributes to "some necessarily astringent treatment" (54). The father admonishes the children to keep the excursion a secret.

The description of the trip to the hospital resonates with the parents' untold agitations. The unblinking killing of the collie, which symbolizes the life to be disposed of at the hospital, evinces the father's indignation at the liaison between Marpo and Mrs. Hosoume and his indifference to the life about to be destroyed. By contrast, Yoneko's unspoken pity for the animal reflects her mother's unspeakable grief. Mrs. Hosoume must have cringed inwardly while witnessing the act that foreshadows the fate of her unborn child. As in the picture-burning scene, extreme emotions are conveyed by remarkable verbal economy: we are made to react to what has not been said.

The "pregnant" silence remains unbroken. Yoneko never learns about the abortion; nor does she connect Marpo's departure with the visit to the hospital. Like Rosie, who has been too absorbed in her own romance to notice the conflict between her parents, Yoneko is too hurt herself by Marpo's "abrupt desertion" (55) to discern her mother's heartbreak. Only after Seigo has suddenly died of illness does Yoneko notice that her mother, who has "swollen eyes in the morning for weeks afterwards," is "inconsolable" (55). Yoneko attributes her mother's distress to Seigo's death, but the author has intimated additional causes. The mother is mourning for not one but two lives and perhaps also for her absent lover.

At the end Mrs. Hosoume, seeking to teach Yoneko a

lesson, adumbrates a causal link between the two premature deaths, but her cryptic moral is lost on her daughter: “‘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, somewhere in the flumes along the cantaloupe patch)” (56). Both Mrs. Hosoume’s “Never kill a person” and Mrs. Hayashi’s “Promise me you will never marry” are at once direct imperatives to the daughters and oblique indictments of the husbands. The verbal constructions fall under the category of “hedging,” or strategies “for equivocating about or weakening a message” (Radner and Lanser 420). But while Mrs. Hayashi and Mrs. Hosoume avoid explicitly referring to their husbands, they also heighten the blame, the one by denouncing men categorically, if circuitously, the other by viewing her presumably involuntary abortion as an act of “killing” by the husband.

As does the conclusion of “Seventeen Syllables,” this ending adroitly welds the juvenile and the adult plots. Yoneko has been converted by Marpo to Christianity, though she loses her faith soon enough; her mother, a nonbeliever at the beginning, becomes a devout Christian after Seigo’s death. That the latter conversion, too, may have been brought about by Marpo is left implicit. Marpo’s departure affects both mother and daughter, but Mrs. Hosoume’s sorrow far exceeds Yoneko’s fleeting sadness, no more lasting than her religious belief. The ring, to the daughter a mere trinket, must signify for the mother an inner tumult as intense as the earthquake that shattered Yoneko’s faith.

#### 4

What Showalter calls “double-voiced discourse” certainly informs these two stories, in which the muted sufferings of the mothers emerge belatedly. But Yamamoto’s plots also monitor male silences. If mothers and daughters in the two stories often talk at cross-purposes, communication between fathers and daughters is altogether restricted. In the few instances in which the fathers do speak, the tone is generally peremptory or critical. Interaction between the spouses is scarcely better. Yet the tight-lipped husbands, ostensibly “guardians of the prison doors” (Kim 99), are themselves bound by patriarchal conventions.

Since Japanese American patriarchy, no less than Japanese American silence, is inflected by both history and culture, framing the two stories within historical and cultural contexts brings out the paternal contour of each muted plot. The first waves of Japanese immigrants (1885–1910) consisted mainly of single men who, after establishing themselves in the new country, sought wives either by returning to Japan or by exchanging photos across the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> The “picture brides” who came to America by the latter means (mostly between 1910 and 1920) were generally 10 to 15 years younger than their husbands (Ichioka 347). Trickery through long-distance marriage was not uncommon: men often “forwarded photographs taken in their youth or touched up ones that concealed their real age” (Ichioka 347). Judging from Mrs. Hayashi’s confession at the end of “Seventeen Syllables,” we can suppose that Mr. Hayashi, “who was never told why his unseen betrothed was so eager to hasten the day of meeting” (19), was himself deceived.

We can also see from the two stories that while the husbands strictly abide by the Confucian code demanding implicit respect from children to parents and from wife to husband, their young wives and children have begun to demand greater independence. The difference may be due to disparity in age and temperament, but it may also be traced to the altered status of Japanese males in America, which was intensely anti-Oriental at the time.<sup>4</sup> As farmers preoccupied with survival in a hostile environment, Mr. Hayashi and Mr. Hosoume are understandably earthbound, as reflected in Mr. Hayashi’s overwhelming concern for the tomatoes and Mr. Hosoume’s humorless refusal to let Yoneko make fudge because “sugar was not a plaything” (51–52). They can find the writing of poetry only “extravagant” and the application of cosmetics “gaudy.”

Governed by a code of masculinity that calls for rigorous self-restraint, the two men mostly keep their disquiet to themselves. While reticence is traditionally inculcated in both Japanese men and women, men in particular have been taught that any “outward appearance that is boisterous, excessively emotional, visibly passionate, obviously fearful . . . is distasteful and itself shameful, fit perhaps only for children . . .” (Lyman 52; see also Miyamoto 31–32, 40–42). Wakako Yamauchi, a contemporary of Yamamoto, alludes to this masculine code when she illustrates the socialization of Benji, the nine-year-old nisei protagonist in “Handkerchief”: “It had occurred to Benji to talk to Papa about . . . his unhappiness, his loneliness . . . no, not that. Loneliness was a weakness, a man didn’t expose that soft underside. Papa was a man, airtight, strong . . . a man of

few words, fewer emotions. . . . And if you said, 'I hurt,' it had to be something Papa could see—a ragged wound" (146–47). While this notion of manhood is not specific to Japanese and Japanese Americans, cultural rules reinforce the taciturn manners of Mr. Hayashi and Mr. Hosoume.<sup>5</sup>

The fathers' stories are told even more indirectly than the mothers'. Where the subjective responses of the daughters often reflect the mothers' hidden passions, only the daughters' offhand observations suggest the fathers' woes. Nevertheless, both narratives are punctuated with sufficient hints to indicate that mounting masculine anxiety, not habitual insensitivity, sparks violence. The seemingly impassive Mr. Hayashi may in fact be plagued by loneliness, inadequacy, and jealousy, though none of these feelings have been openly admitted by the character or noted by the narrator. The narrator does mention, however, that Mr. Hayashi and his wife used to play cards together before retiring jointly and that as a result of Mrs. Hayashi's new interest, he has to "resort to solitaire" (9). Since Mrs. Hayashi composes late into the night, we may further assume that her husband now goes to bed alone. His annoyance during the visit to the Hayanos obviously emanates from his feeling excluded from the intellectual discussion. But the reader may deduce jealousy as an additional provocation. Mr. Hayano, whose wife has already lost both health and beauty, is himself "handsome, tall, and strong" (10), at least in Rosie's eyes. Buzzing through the elisions is the suggestion that not fatigue (the reason voiced by Mrs. Hayashi) but jealousy drives Mr. Hayashi away. Mrs. Hayashi's former lover was a man from a higher social class; Mr. Hayashi—a farmer—came from a class lower than that of his wife's family. He may feel troubled by Mrs. Hayashi's verbal sophistication, itself a reminder of their disparate class origins. Above all, he may sense a compatibility or suspect a bond—physical and intellectual—between his wife and Mr. Hayano that is absent in either of the marriages.

Mr. Hosoume's behavior suggests also that his male pride is chafed by an unspeakable cause—his sexual impotence. Out of his own sense of injured manhood he grumbles about his children's disrespect, slaps his wife for contradicting him, and threatens to fire Marpo for interfering. Furthermore, he links everyone's "impudent" behavior to his "illness" (54), betraying an obsessive anxiety. Given that he thinks his family is turning against him out of scorn, his wife's love affair and ensuing pregnancy must be an ultimate affront to his masculine image. His aggression on the way to the hospital can be better under-



stood in the light of his mortification: the fetus is an irksome reminder at once of cuckoldry and impotence.

Mr. Hosoume's manner softens noticeably after the abortion, for he is able to resume, literally, his role as the "supporter" of his now feeble wife. He even becomes "very gentle" toward her during her long bout of dejection after Seigo's death (55). Sadly enough, these tender moments can take place only when she is falling apart physically and emotionally, and when Mr. Hosoume is no longer threatened by her insubordination. But that does not mean that his own suffering has diminished. Seigo's death is no less a blow to the father than to the mother and is perhaps another ironic turn in the muted drama of masculine anxiety. The warning of divine retribution that Mrs. Hosoume gives to her daughter applies to her husband with withering vengeance: he has lost his only male heir and can never have another again.

To mitigate the initial negative impressions of Mr. Hayashi and Mr. Hosoume is not to condone their actions but to show that their behavior deserves more sympathetic analysis than dismissal as the general "failure of the [issei] fathers" (Crow, "Issei Father" 34). Had the fathers been able to reveal their vulnerability, the tragic endings might have been averted; instead they *gaman* till their escalated anger erupts in violence. Meanwhile, their taciturnity may have widened the gap between themselves and their spouses, who not surprisingly become drawn to the likes of Mr. Hayano, Mr. Kuroda, and Marpo; physical and intellectual attractions aside, these men communicate verbally with the women.

The two stories may have encoded Yamamoto's own ambivalence toward her cultural inheritance. Her use of native narrators embodying the free spirits of the young nisei sets off the rigid conventions that riddle the lives of issei women and men. Seen through the startled or uncomprehending eyes of bicultural daughters who must soon come to grips with their maternal legacies, the mothers' private sorrow and the fathers' brooding rage reverberate ominously. On the other hand, Yamamoto's stylistic restraint pays a tacit tribute to those cultural forerunners who can say more in less, who can funnel vast meaning and feeling into seventeen syllables.<sup>6</sup> Her strategy of double-telling is especially suited to evoking suppressed feelings, revealing the anxieties and hurts that lie beneath the surface of language. The hushed climax of each story is captured in a verbal snapshot: by zooming in on the deliberate destruction of the Hiroshige and on the steady crushing of the collie, she

transmits and trans-mutes the characters' unspoken emotions through her own articulate silence.

### Notes

This article is adapted from King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Narrative Strategies of Three Asian American Women Writers*, forthcoming from Cornell University Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

1. Yamamoto believes that "there is something in the nature of the Nisei" which checks the impulse to write: "For a writer proceeds from a compulsion to communicate a vision and he cannot afford to bother with what people in general think of him. We Nisei, discreet, circumspect, care very much what others think of us" ("Writing" 126).
2. Yanagisako observes that "at the same time that Japanese American families were formed through Issei marriage, Japanese family relationships were transported. . . . Issei marriages were from the beginning embedded in families that crossed national boundaries" (29).
3. The practice, an extension of social customs in Japan, was denounced as immoral by American exclusionists and was terminated in 1921 (Ichioka 342-43).
4. Discriminatory laws such as the Alien Land Acts of 1913 and 1920 in California made Japanese and other Asians "aliens ineligible for citizenship" and prevented them from owning lands. Some bought lands under the names of their American-born children.
5. Speaking of Mr. Hayashi in an interview, Yamamoto said that "he was only acting the way he'd been brought up to act, the way men were supposed to be" (Crow, "MELUS Interview" 80).
6. Yamamoto reveals that although all the details in "Seventeen Syllables" are invented, it is based on the story of her own mother, a writer of *senryō* (a form of satirical verse that contains 17 syllables) (Koppelman 162).

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