

**Asian American Feminism's Alliances with Men:
Reading Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables"
as an Antidraft Tract**

The work of fiction writer Hisaye Yamamoto has been widely read, taught, and researched within the sphere of US literary studies. Yamamoto was confined at Poston, a Japanese American internment camp during World War II, and her literary career began soon after her release when the war ended. She started publishing short stories in periodicals from the late 1940s onward. In 1988, Kitchen Table Press compiled a collection of her work titled *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, which was reissued by Rutgers University Press with four additional stories in 2001. The themes that most readily lend themselves to analysis in *Seventeen Syllables* are those that would be familiar to women-of-color feminism. Much of the early literary-critical scholarship on Yamamoto's oeuvre focuses on the multiple oppressions her female characters face and the strategies they use to maneuver the limited spaces of agency that are open to them (Yogi 1989; Cheung 1993; Yamamoto 1999). There has also been a recent body of scholarship that foregrounds the significance of cross-racial contacts and coalition building in Yamamoto's work (Lee 2004; Hong 2006; Elliot 2009).

My treatment of the title story in this collection reveals the extent to which Yamamoto's Asian American feminism not only addresses the sexism to which women are subjected but also unpacks how gendered and racialized forms of violence affect men, too. When readers recognize this critique in "Seventeen Syllables," Yamamoto's exposure of the oppression that Asian American men face becomes more legible throughout the range of her fiction. At first glance, it is easy to condemn the actions perpetrated by her male characters; certainly, these men can be cruel—even brutal—to the women around them. However, a closer read of these texts indicates that a more nuanced consideration of complex dimensions of power is operating under the surface of Yamamoto's prose. With respect to "Seventeen Syllables," I aver that this critique takes the form of a show of support for the men in internment camps who actively resisted their draft into the US Army during World War II. Using the feminized sphere of the home and invoking its attendant themes of love, marriage, and childbirth, Yamamoto

launches a condemnation of US wartime policies that singled out Japanese American men in a chain of actions that played out in public spaces.

In early 1943, the War Relocation Authority distributed a survey among all internees above the age of eighteen in its Japanese American camps. Despite a US State Department report compiled in 1941 concluding that people of Japanese ancestry were not a national security risk, the attack on Pearl Harbor—after which the report was suppressed—stoked the fears of the American public about Japanese Americans and incited a regime of increased surveillance.¹ Two specific questions in the survey, now known as the loyalty oaths among Japanese Americans, generated extreme discord among the camp population: the first asked the respondent if he was willing to serve in the US armed forces, if ordered, and the second asked the respondent if he was willing to forswear allegiance to any foreign power, including that of the Japanese emperor. The questions had the most serious ramifications for men who were Nisei, or second generation, many of whom were young adults at the time of their internment. The Issei, or first generation, had aged past their eligibility for the draft by the time of the war.²

Answering either “yes” or “no” to the questions had potentially dangerous implications. Although many respondents felt reluctant to volunteer for a war effort on the part of a country that had stripped them of their legal rights, they understood that a “yes” response could be key to affirming their patriotism to the public. Moreover, the War Relocation Authority had already won the trust of the Japanese American Citizens League, whose accommodationist leadership sought hard to convince internees to volunteer for the army. Answering “no” to the questions or refusing to answer at all subjected respondents to more stringent forms of surveillance. These men were relocated to Tule Lake, a segregated camp designated specifically for potentially seditious members of the Japanese American population, from which they awaited their court date. Colloquially known as “no-no boys” for their negative responses to the two key ques-

¹ The “Report on Japanese on the West Coast of the United States” is often known as the Munson Report after its author, Curtis Munson. Although commendable for its attempt to deflate anti-Japanese paranoia, it nevertheless reproduced racist caricatures of Japanese Americans that were circulating at the time. For an account of the suppression of the report, see Weglyn (1976).

² Due to mounting nativism in the early twentieth century, Congress passed a series of laws both curtailing the rights of Japanese immigrants already in the United States and restricting the entry of new immigrants. These legislative actions culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, which cut off virtually all immigration from Japan. Hence, the last wave of arrivals from Japan—who would have been young adults in the early 1920s—tended to be of middle age during the war. It was not until 1965 that restrictions on national origins were lifted in US immigration law.

tions from the loyalty oaths, draft resisters underwent hasty trials and eventually served prison sentences of between two and three years in federal penitentiaries such as Leavenworth and McNeil Island (Muller 2001, 112–21).

A rift in the Japanese American community emerged between those who believed that military service could confer cultural citizenship and those who continued to protest their participation in a war machine that refused to recognize their rights. These tensions played out publicly in town hall–style meetings within internment camps and in Japanese American newspapers, sometimes resulting in physical altercations between the two sides. The Fair Play Committee, a movement originating at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, was successful at organizing a critical mass of internees to resist the draft but not without a considerable amount of conflict (Muller 2001, 44, 76–99). These debates in Japanese America about complying with military service expectations would persist long after the war when no-no boys continued to be ostracized by other Japanese Americans because of their purported shirking of patriotic duty. For a population that still struggled with negative public perception following this difficult period, draft resisters were a source of resentment because they conjured the specter of the disloyal and unassimilable Japanese American that the community had fought hard to disavow. The no-no boy, binary opposite to the heroic soldier, allowed the injustices behind the internment to be elided and, instead, for outrage to be displaced onto the unruly male Nisei subject.

Writer John Okada is widely considered to be one of the early voices who expressed support for draft resisters in the postwar period. *No-No Boy* ([1957] 1976), his only novel, was published in 1957 during the height of Cold War paranoia, when critiques of US federal actions were not popular. Indeed, the novel's initial reception was chilly. It was not until the various civil rights movements of the 1970s that the novel found a more enthusiastic audience when a group of writer-activists rediscovered and reissued it. Given that the Japanese American Citizens League had supported the draft, for Japanese Americans to suggest any kind of stance against military service in the 1950s would have been damning. Although Okada may have been courageous for his sympathetic portrayal of a draft resister at this early time, Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" appears to be a more subtle contestation of these wartime events and one that emerged in literary Japanese America before Okada's.

I provide a brief overview of *No-No Boy* and its embrace by 1970s-era Asian American activists before turning to Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables," which I regard as a literary precursor to Okada's novel. The failure to recognize "Seventeen Syllables," published in 1949, as an antidraft trea-

tise may have resulted, at least partially, from the obliqueness of its argument. To be sure, Yamamoto dresses up her message with a story line and setting that is far removed from the topic of war, but at the level of her language, her antidraft stance is also patently obvious, even more so than Okada's. However, I contend that the tendency to bypass this polemical interpretation of the story stems, more significantly, from the narrow hermeneutic lenses that have informed both the masculinist cultural-nationalist celebrations of *No-No Boy* and the Asian American feminist readings of Yamamoto's short fiction. These well-worn interpretive paths, while valid and useful in their own right, ultimately wind up shortchanging Yamamoto when her concerns reach further than those that immediately affect or are associated with women.³ In fact, my analysis of Yamamoto's story recognizes the specific type of oppression meted out to Japanese American men during and after World War II as a feminist issue.

No-No Boy opens with the protagonist's reunion with his family and community in Seattle after his release from prison. Even though Ichiro Yamada is instantly shunned by many Nisei men who had served in the war, he discovers an unlikely friend in Kenji Kanno, a veteran with an amputated leg. Okada's narrative never provides a definitive political stance for Ichiro's decision not to enlist in the military. In fact, it withholds any explanation of the reasons behind his refusal in ways that seem purposefully designed to generate frustration. The hostility Ichiro experiences from those of his own ethnic group—including family members—is sustained and overwhelming, a continuation of the conflicts that arose when the topic of military service was raised inside the camps several years prior. The escalation of tensions among Nisei men comes to a head when a fight leaves a minor character dead, and the lack of narrative closure suspends the ethical dimensions not only of the death but also of the larger intraethnic conflicts that remain unresolved among Japanese Americans in the postwar period.

No-No Boy was initially published by Charles Tuttle Press, and it went largely ignored for almost two decades until writers Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—the founding members of the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP)—discovered a copy of it in a San Francisco bookstore. Chang, Chin, Inada, and Wong edited the first major anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeee!*, in

³ This is not to say that women did not also grapple with the topic of military service. Even though the drafting of internees during World War II is often imagined to be an issue specific to men, a small number of Japanese American women left the camps to serve in the Women's Army Corps and the Army Nurse Corps. As with the men, these women also had complex reasons for choosing to enlist. However, their participation in the war efforts was entirely voluntary (Moore 2003).

which an excerpt from *No-No Boy* appeared, and they eventually reissued the novel in its entirety with CARP in 1976 to great acclaim. The above four writers, often referred to as the *Aiiieeeee!* Collective for their editorship of the literary anthology and its sequel, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, were among the most visible public intellectuals associated with 1970s-era Asian American racial liberatory movements. *No-No Boy* was picked up by the University of Washington Press shortly afterward and has since never gone out of print. Sandwiched between an introduction by Inada and an afterword by Chin, Okada's novel bears the imprimatur of these writers who have gone on to establish a distinctive cultural nationalist bent to their work.

Chin, perhaps the best-known member of the *Aiiieeeee!* Collective, earned a reputation for his contentious interchanges with Maxine Hong Kingston, another writer from this period early in the emergence of an Asian American literary arts and culture movement. Responding to the publication of Kingston's semiautobiographical *The Woman Warrior*, Chin publicly condemned her feminist politics because of his belief that it pandered to Anglo-American fantasies of Asian patriarchy. Moreover, he deemed Kingston's work inauthentic for diverting attention from his priorities of recovering a masculinist heroic tradition in Chinese mythology in his own literary practices (Chin 1985, 1991). This dichotomy between Chin's cultural-nationalist sentiments and Kingston's feminism would become the linchpin on which much of the scholarship in Asian American literary studies would turn well into the 1990s (Cheung 1990; Wong 1992; Kim 1998). Hence, there is a long-ranging literary historiography on gender divides in Asian America—whether it comes from Chin's sympathizers decrying the purported denigration of men by women writers or from feminist critics who unpack cultural nationalism's heteropatriarchal avenues toward racial liberation. The field of Asian American literary studies understands these debates to be so central to its rise that it may be difficult to see the preemptive intervention that Yamamoto's short story made decades before any of these discussions took place.

"Seventeen Syllables" is inarguably one of Yamamoto's most widely read stories. First published in 1949 but set in the period before World War II, it is narrated from the perspective of teenage protagonist Rosie Hayashi. Rosie's family owns a tomato farm, and her mother spends her limited leisure time writing haiku for a Japanese-language newspaper. Tome Hayashi's poetry—which she publishes under a pen name—brings her great satisfaction. However, her husband dismisses it as a frivolous hobby, while her second-generation daughter, despite being enrolled in Japanese language classes, can only feign comprehension of her mother's native tongue when Tome shares her writing with her. One day, a representative from the

newspaper visits the house to inform Tome that she has won a haiku contest and presents her with a painting for first prize. Her husband—furious at this announcement—carries the gift outside, smashes it with an ax, and sets it ablaze. The story ends with an interchange between mother and daughter in which Tome explains the fraught circumstances of her marriage to Rosie's father and implores Rosie never to follow in her footsteps.

At the heart of this story is Rosie's growing understanding of the power-laden dimensions of the immigrant conjugal family—be it between husband and wife or parent and child. As the patriarch of the household, Rosie's father wields an iron fist in keeping himself, his wife, his daughter, and the Mexican hired hands in lockstep productivity in the tomato fields. He frowns on any activity not directly related to making his farm profitable. Conversely, the other characters may understand the economic necessities imposed by their respective situations, but theirs is an existence that does not wholly capitulate to the stark measures of labor, yield, supply, and demand. The poetry that Tome writes exists outside of conventional channels of capitalist exchange; she is not paid in cash for her haiku but receives a painting, completely unsolicited and unexpected, in return. Even when picking tomatoes, Rosie and Jesus, the slightly older son of the farmworker couple with whom she maintains an enjoyable flirtation, turn a repetitive and potentially tedious task into many playful moments: "What she enjoyed most was racing him to see who could finish picking a double row first. He, who could work faster, would tease her by slowing down until she thought she would surely pass him this time, then speeding up furiously to leave her several sprawling vines behind. Once he had made her screech hideously by crossing over, while her back was turned, to place atop the tomatoes in her green-stained bucket a truly monstrous pale green worm" (Yamamoto [1949] 2001, 12). Rather than an intensification of labor to keep up with an overseer's demands for production, Rosie and Jesus's game—like Tome's writing—attempts to carve out a way of living that goes beyond the quantifiable logics of capital even if, in the end, it does not escape it.

The irony of the intergenerational dynamics of this family organized around its pecuniarily minded patriarch is that he legally does not own the farm over which he exercises his authority. According to the Alien Land Act of 1913, Japanese immigrants—as "aliens ineligible for citizenship"—were forbidden to own property or lease land for longer than three years. The law was passed to curb the increasing economic influence Asian immigrants were gaining, particularly in agriculture, at the turn of the century. There were several ways in which Issei were able to circumvent this

law. Many entered into unwritten lease agreements with white farmers but remained on record to appear as if they were employees rather than lessees. Other Issei leased or deeded the land they bought under the name of their Nisei children, who were citizens by birth (Takaki 1989, 205–6). In a case such as the Hayashis', there is a possibility that Rosie is the legal owner of the farm her father runs. "Seventeen Syllables" portrays explicitly the tensions that capital—which motivated the passing of the Alien Land Act in the first place—impresses upon the affective relations among family members in a number of ways. However, the story only alludes indirectly to this reversal of generational roles in the domestic and economic life of the Hayashi family. The emasculation of the father in his exclusion from the privileges of propertied citizenship coalesces in his only child, a daughter, whose status as a minor and as female is—within the eyes of the state—paradoxically more legitimate than his.

The story opens with a conversation between Rosie and Tome in which the form of the haiku is explained. As Tome describes it, the poem needs to compress all of its meaning into seventeen syllables—divided into lines of five, seven, and five each—and she illustrates this lesson to her daughter with an example from her latest writing session:

"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 was 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. (Yamamoto [1949] 2001, 8)

The double affirmative with which this passage begins, "yes, yes," appears innocuous at first, simply the utterance of a petulant child exasperated with the didactic moment Tome seizes in the midst of a hectic homemaking routine. However, this double affirmative appears immediately again in the presence of its opposite, "no, no," and this time, its significance cannot be ignored.

The declaration that "it was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no" was an unusual one to make in 1949 when draft resisters—recently released from prison—and those who supported them would have assuredly faced shunning by the Japanese American community. Although many Nisei men had couched their decision to enlist in the language of civic pride, the fact remains that the choice was narrowly circumscribed by

US federal imperatives and the pressures of a Japanese America overly eager to prove its loyalty to the United States.⁴ When “Seventeen Syllables” was first published, the war existed in very recent memory, even if the internment itself was being subjected to a process of willed forgetting. For a population that was benefiting from the GI Bill and from the marginally elevated status in the US body politic that comes with military decoration, the social cost of embracing draft resistance would have been substantial. Certainly, the negative reception of Okada’s novel eight years later attests to this fact. What is striking about Yamamoto’s allusion to the loyalty oaths here is that the central problem of the US government’s control over Japanese American men during the internment is transposed onto the power dynamics of the conjugal family.

Rosie’s admission that acquiescing is easier than refusing plays out a familiar theme of parent-child conflict in the canon of immigrant literatures. Tome’s insistence on passing down the cultural practices of the land of her birth is lost on her second-generation daughter, who merely nods and affirms without understanding because “English lay ready on the tongue but Japanese had to be searched for and examined” (Yamamoto [1949] 2001, 8). This interchange between the immigrant mother and the US-born child confirms for the reader the assimilability of Japanese American populations and thus reveals the shaky foundations that justified the internment itself. How improbable it seems that someone like Rosie might pose a threat to national security because of purportedly unalterable affinities with Japan. This dialogue also uses the parent-child dyad as a metaphor for the unequal relationship between the state and the Nisei male citizen. Imagined as a parent-child—indeed, mother-daughter—bond, this analogy transforms the wartime coercion on the part of US federal agents into maternal authority. However, Tome’s is one that seems benign if only for its subordination to the authority that Rosie’s father holds.

Rosie’s disdain for the gendered dynamics in the family becomes clear in the next appearance of the double negative. This “no, no,” repeated in

⁴ Senator Daniel K. Inouye wrote an autobiography wholeheartedly celebrating his service during World War II, but he came to acknowledge his ambivalence about it at a much later date. His foreword to Eric Muller’s *Free to Die for Their Country* expresses gratitude for the draft resisters “who had the courage to express some of the feelings that we who volunteered harbored deep in our souls” (Inouye 2001, xi). Okada himself alludes to this sentiment in his preface to *No-No Boy*, a stand-alone narrative about a Japanese American soldier’s conversation with a friendly white lieutenant who expresses incredulity about why he would volunteer for the army if his civil rights had been violated. The soldier’s terse and enigmatic response, “I got reasons” (xi)—uttered thrice but never explained—has often been read as the author’s call for Japanese America to rethink these simplistic links between military service and patriotism.

Yamamoto's prose as if its first iteration might be overlooked, returns in a different context. While visiting a neighboring family, Mr. Hayashi cuts the stay short by brusquely reminding his wife and daughter that harvesting needs to begin early the next morning. Tome pleads to enjoy the company of friends a bit longer or, at least, to allow Rosie to have a sleepover with the girls, but to no avail: "As they rode homeward silently, Rosie, sitting between, felt a rush of hate for both—for her mother for begging, for her father for denying her mother. I wish this old Ford would crash, right now, she thought, then immediately, no, no, I wish my father would laugh, but it was too late: already the vision had passed through her mind of the green pick-up crumpled in the dark against one of the mighty eucalyptus trees they were just riding past, of the three contorted, bleeding bodies, one of them hers" (Yamamoto [1949] 2001, 12). The double negative in this instance indicates Rosie's ambivalence about assigning culpability in the conflict between her mother and her father. This tension is informed not only by the constraints of capital—as Mr. Hayashi's preoccupation with the harvest shows—but by the gendered asymmetrical contract of marriage. Rosie's resentful fantasy, followed by a negation, "no, no," and then a reversal of sentiments eventually leads to what could be a veiled reference to wartime casualties. Including herself among the "contorted, bleeding bodies" belonging to those who enlisted, Rosie's interior dialogue hints at the eventual fates of the girl protagonist's Nisei male brethren in the war yet to come.

Not dropping this indirect allusion to the Japanese American male body at risk, Yamamoto sustains it in her through-line to the story's conclusion. The final reference to the loyalty oaths resolves the story when Tome explains to her daughter how she came to be married to her husband. In Japan, having grown up impoverished, she had fallen in love with a young man from an affluent family. She became pregnant, but marriage was impossible due to their class differences, and her beloved had later wedded someone of his social standing. Tome's son was stillborn, and she became a source of resentment for her family, so she pleaded with her older sister, already in the United States, to send for her. This sister then arranged a match for her with a man recently arrived from Japan:

Finishing her story, Tome knelt on the floor and took [Rosie] by the wrists. "Promise me you'll 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's hand. . . . 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. (Yamamoto [1949] 2001, 19)

The dead brother Rosie learns about here is a recurring figure in Yamamoto's work, and its symbolic weight is hard to disregard when read in the context of the author's other stories. In "Yoneko's Earthquake," a story commonly regarded as the counterpart to "Seventeen Syllables," a girl witnesses but is admonished not to tell anyone of her mother's visit to an abortion clinic. Soon afterward, her younger brother too dies of a sudden illness. "Florentine Gardens" makes the significance of the dead brother more explicit; in it, a Nisei woman takes a trip to Italy to visit the grave of her brother who had been a casualty of World War II. The nonfictional essay "Life among the Oil Fields" narrates the incident in which Yamamoto's brother—a toddler at the time—became the victim of a hit-and-run accident involving a white couple but miraculously survived. The close call in "Life among the Oil Fields" and the slew of dead brothers in the author's other stories together point to an ongoing preoccupation with the fragility of the Japanese American male body. That the final instance of the double affirmative "yes, yes" in "Seventeen Syllables" arises in tandem with Rosie's discovery of an older male sibling—born seventeen years ago—who would have been of age during the internment (which the reader knows is imminent) further solidifies this text as a critique of US actions with regard to Nisei men.

Once again, the mother-daughter dyad stands in for the largely masculinist relationship between the nation-state and the Nisei male citizen that invests the former with the authority to impel the latter into war. It is easy to understand Tome's position as she pleads with Rosie in an attempt to save her daughter from replicating her own unsatisfying life decisions. These pitfalls that lead to oppressive circumstances, Tome reasons, have everything to do with idealized notions of romantic love that are not egalitarian when gender- and class-based inequalities exist. The irony of this warning, however, is that in Rosie's case, the class differences are reversed in her flirtations with Jesus. Although the Hayashis may experience the very real pressures that come with small farm ownership, as a middle-class family, they are more privileged than the Carrascos—whom they are in a position to hire—in the economic hierarchy. Indeed, the events that unfold in "Yoneko's Earthquake" indicate that should a corresponding situation arise with an unplanned pregnancy from one of the farmhands, the Carrascos would be the ones in a precarious situation because they would lose their jobs.

Yamamoto's positing of Rosie's resigned acquiescence, a promise never to marry, as an analogue to the Japanese American men who chose to enlist

reveals the jarring ambivalence both circumstances present even if their ethical underpinnings are far from equivalent. The transposition of a public event—that of the federal government’s draft of male internees—onto a scene that unfolds in the private sphere between mother and daughter is what seals this polemical reading of “Seventeen Syllables” as Asian American feminism’s investment in condemning the race-based oppression of men. Although this interchange purportedly concerns Tome’s insightful critique of asymmetrical relations in the marriage contract, it also involves a benevolent form of coercion that is read as overwhelming for Rosie and for Nisei army recruits alike. In this final scene, the mother’s imperative conjures in Rosie’s mind the intimacies shared with Jesus, suggesting that the daughter plans to defy her mother’s words in the future, even if it is easier to acquiesce in the present. The narrative tension turns on Rosie’s response in the double affirmative—“yes, yes”—even as the plot’s trajectory implies that a “no, no” is actively concealed underneath.

As imperfect as it is, the parallel that Yamamoto draws between the adolescent girl in the throes of first love and Nisei men forced to decide between the risk of death, on the one hand, and incarceration and ostracism, on the other, fully works within the logic of the story’s argument. Rosie’s bullheadedness with her mother, with which it is easy for the intended reader to sympathize, legitimates the draft resister’s choice not to serve in the military. In fact, it convincingly links the no-no boys with the men who enlisted only for fear of defying the US government, showing how they are far from being binary opposites, as they commonly have been cast.

The reading of “Seventeen Syllables” I have offered, which departs significantly from the corpus of scholarship that has preceded it, rethinks some of the simple divides that have informed Asian Americanist critique. Not only does this analysis of an iconic short story trouble the dichotomy between the draft resister and the soldier, it also connects the political interests of women with the political interests of men. A formative study of Asian American literature declares triumphantly that “Yamamoto’s stories are consummately women’s stories” (Kim 1982, 160), in contrast to the work of male writers such as Louis Chu, John Okada, and Carlos Bulosan. However, it becomes obvious that these so-called women’s stories are grappling with the same concerns that permeate throughout the literary tradition of Asian American men against which literary critic Elaine Kim places this text.

To be sure, when read through the sedimented logic of Asian American feminism that informed the field of Asian American literary studies in early years, “Seventeen Syllables” is already complex in its own right. The literary-critical record on Yamamoto treats her short fiction with levels of

sophistication that attest to the nuanced intersections of race and gender in Asian America. A recurring focus in this scholarship revolves around the quietly subversive strategies the author employs to broach sensitive issues. According to the critics who have read her in this way, these purposefully oblique maneuvers temper messages that may be difficult to accept and, thus, generate a less direct critique that may in the end be more effective for its subtlety. These academic conversations about Yamamoto's writing—which are also present across a range of women's and multiethnic literatures—attest to the care and forethought with which minoritarian subjectivities must negotiate their voice in the world.

One of the first articles to point out this strategy in Yamamoto's narrative style follows the work of early feminist literary theorists such as Elaine Showalter and Annette Kolodny. Stan Yogi claims that Yamamoto's repeated use of the "buried plot" (1989, 170)—that is, a story hidden by the so-called main or "surface plot" (179–80)—is suggestive of the subtle rebellion not only of women, as Showalter and Kolodny have established, but of Japanese Americans as well. Given that Yamamoto was one of the few postwar Japanese American writers who found a mainstream readership, as Yogi observes, the coding of her critique lent it a greater efficacy than if she had been more forthright. King-Kok Cheung's analysis builds upon Yogi's in her reading of what she calls Yamamoto's "technique of indirection" (1993, 33). Noting that US authorities censored internees' writing and that even after the war, many Japanese Americans continued to censor themselves, she reads this trend in Yamamoto's work as an effect of the conditions of internment and its aftermath. Traise Yamamoto's comprehensive study of Japanese American women's literature continues this line of reasoning, echoing Yogi's and Cheung's recognition of Hisaye Yamamoto's muted style as purposeful strategy. For any change to come about in white America's impression of Japanese Americans, Traise Yamamoto argues, Japanese American writers needed to mask their messages in order to make them more palatable for their intended audience, one that could be anxious about having their racial prejudices exposed. Like Yogi and Cheung, Traise Yamamoto regards Hisaye Yamamoto's subordinate position within the gender hierarchy as adding yet another dimension to the subtlety of her fiction. However, unlike the previous two critics, Traise Yamamoto engages postmodern theories of identity to complicate the binary between an inviolate inner self and the masking that is strategically deployed even as she reserves a space for thinking about a "critical humanism" (1999, 3) that does not wholly capitulate to the vagaries and instabilities of performative identity.

Hidden in plain sight, the antidraft message in "Seventeen Syllables" may also risk obscuring itself altogether. The critics who have worked

through the different substories that form the underlying counterpoint to the surface plot have tended to focus their attentions elsewhere, missing this interpretation altogether. Yogi reads “Seventeen Syllables” as a meditation on Japanese American women’s negotiation between “freedom and restraint” (1989, 172). Ostensibly about an adolescent girl’s coming of age, the story, Yogi argues, is also about a mother’s need to find pleasure in the interstices of a life governed by multiple oppressions. Cheung’s locating of the two strands of Yamamoto’s narrative resembles Yogi’s analysis. According to Cheung, Rosie’s plot arises as the surface plot, with Tome’s plot hidden until the very end. At that point, the trajectories of both women converge at the story’s climactic ending where the mother reveals to her daughter her history of unsatisfying relationships with men (Cheung 1993, 39–40). Traise Yamamoto also recognizes the consolidation of Rosie’s subjectivity with that of her mother at the conclusion of “Seventeen Syllables.” In contrast to the repeated failures of communication throughout the narrative, this moment marks an instance when there is complete understanding between mother and daughter, the latter’s attempt at obfuscation notwithstanding (Yamamoto 1999, 175). Despite these literary critics’ citation of passages from “Seventeen Syllables” that contain double affirmatives or negatives, however, the unmistakable significance of the words “yes, yes” and “no, no” to Japanese America has never before been addressed.

As evident in these and other treatments of Yamamoto’s fiction, her narrative technique—almost riddle-like in many instances—is a popular topic of analysis. This literary device invites critics to speculate about what is only partially conveyed or what is merely alluded to in these stories. However, what the bulk of this scholarship misses about the motivations behind Yamamoto’s subtlety is the possibility of it functioning to alleviate conflict within Japanese America. The aforementioned critics’ emphasis on the need for Japanese American dialogue with white America in the postwar period assumes a cross-racial dynamic between a racially marked author and a racially unmarked audience. In fact, an indirect approach might be even more crucial for initiating dialogue among Japanese Americans about the histories of violence that divided them. If speaking out in support of draft resisters seemed as impossible in 1949 as it did in 1957 when Okada was writing, it is all the more important that this message behind “Seventeen Syllables” be delivered in a way that would not exacerbate existing conflicts in Japanese America on the topic of the wartime draft.

Also, the fact that a concern most directly affecting young Japanese American men has been so long overlooked in one of Yamamoto’s most widely read stories wrongly suggests that women also were not stakehold-

ers in discussions about involuntary military service. Certainly, Okada falls prey to this fallacy when the only female Nisei characters in *No-No Boy* are those who appear not to be invested in the heated interchanges among the men in their peer group. “Seventeen Syllables” intervenes in these debates and in the assumption of their male exclusivity by transmitting its antidraft polemic inside a plot about marriage and domesticity, a realm that is commonly associated with women. However, Yamamoto’s message is also patently obvious in the language she chooses for her protagonist’s spoken and interior dialogue. Although *No-No Boy* never takes an explicit stance against US actions, perhaps because Okada surmised that his sympathetic and multidimensional portrayal of Ichiro was sufficiently subversive on its own, Yamamoto makes her position in this debate clear-cut and unambiguous. There is no doubt where the author stands when her protagonist asserts that “it was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no” ([1949] 2001, 8).

That this reading of “Seventeen Syllables” has gone unnoticed for so long attests not so much to the author’s overzealous skill in sugarcoating it but to a complexity of interpretation that is lost when women writers of color get pigeonholed in their reception. The predictable lenses through which Yamamoto’s fiction has been read lock the array of potential meanings in her work into a set of narrowly limited possibilities. During an interview, the topic of Yamamoto’s motivations behind writing “Seventeen Syllables” came up in ways that revealed these assumptions about the author’s priorities:

Interviewer One of my students said about “Seventeen Syllables” that you were giving voice to an inarticulate person, that is, the mother and the child can’t communicate with each other, but you are communicating their story, and so you are giving a voice to the voiceless, to people who can’t speak their own words.

Yamamoto Well, aren’t most stories like that? (Yamamoto 1987, 80)

True to form, the voiceless subjects are presumed to be female. The coy response Yamamoto offers about whether or not she speaks for Rosie and Tome diverts the gender specificity behind this interviewer’s vision of silence and casts the writing of fiction as an act of ventriloquism imagined as universal. Nowhere in this conversation does the possibility of Yamamoto speaking on behalf of silenced Japanese American men arise. In fact, this interchange imagines men only as intraethnic victimizers of women even though the close readings I perform with “Seventeen Syllables” show something very different—a more nuanced fashioning of political alliances across gender lines.

Given the foci of feminist literary criticism on Yamamoto thus far, we might be able to speculate that some of her less popular stories—which happen to feature male protagonists—may be so because they do not register in ways that would be easily accommodated by the existing scholarship. “Las Vegas Charley,” one of her lengthier narratives, features an Issei man struggling to eke out a living as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant after the evacuation and internment caused him to lose his farm. Wracked with sorrow from his son’s death during battle in Italy, he turns to gambling and alcohol and eventually dies from cirrhosis. The story shows that the triumphalist narratives about upward mobility, patriotism, and unity in the postwar period are far removed from many Issei men’s experiences of isolation and economic loss.⁵ “My Father Can Beat Muhammad Ali” is a later story that adopts this theme of Japanese American emasculation again. It is an acutely rendered account of the protagonist’s failure to wield paternal authority in his household as his two sons ridicule him while his wife attempts unsuccessfully to mediate. Even “Seventeen Syllables” invites a sympathetic reading of the patriarch of the Hayashi family. It could be argued that the circumstances that misled Mr. Hayashi into a poorly matched marriage parallels the US government misleading Nisei men who attempted to earn their cultural citizenship through war decoration. In the end, the expectations these men were encouraged to hold were revealed as part of a duplicitous ruse.⁶ Much could be said about how Yamamoto foregrounds the gendered forms of racism her Asian American male characters experience, with particular attention paid to their attempts to convey normative masculinity in order to mitigate their oppression. However, the existing academic conversations about her work have not adequately explored this area.

Recognizing that the concerns of men of color are an issue for feminism means that we can read Yamamoto’s body of work (and, by extension, the work of similar writers) with greater attention to how the cultural and intellectual productions of women actualize a coalitional sensibility that does not capitulate to a naive and facile ranking of oppressions. That Yamamoto can expose and theorize the sexism her female characters face does not preclude her from seeing with an equally critical eye the multitude of factors affecting her male characters. As Lisa Lowe (1991) has suggested in her oft-cited call for recognizing difference within the coalitional category “Asian American,” social justice initiatives and acts of social critique based

⁵ Yamamoto (1987, 76) acknowledges that the main character in “Las Vegas Charley” is loosely based on her father.

⁶ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for *Signs* who suggested this interpretation.

on the solidarity model do little if they, first, homogenize entire political action groups; second, rely on essentialist notions of cultural purity and authenticity; and, finally, fail to recognize the material circumstances and consequences of difference within coalitions. Her piece has commonly been read as an offering that provides an alternative to the impasse between the male-dominated world of Asian American literary arts in the 1970s and the ensuing feminist challenges to it. These debates around the aforementioned Frank Chin/Maxine Hong Kingston divide persisted almost to the end of the twentieth century. Although calls for more complex forms of alliance building in liberatory racial politics tend to hinge on urging men to recognize their privileged location with respect to women, Yamamoto's reach over the gender line—long before any of these discussions took place—uses her women characters to contest federal wartime policies that targeted men with violence.

At the same time, the fact that Yamamoto's effort to present, as tactfully as possible, a message meant to mediate conflicts among men has gone unnoticed calls into question the efficacy of her intervention. Like the wife in "My Father Can Beat Muhammad Ali," she gets relegated to the feminized role of peacemaker, a task she exercises with such delicacy that it seems all but ineffectual. However, if we place more accountability on her audience to read her work with new lenses, the wealth of political possibilities she offers becomes clear. The intersubjective alliances that form—across gender, positionality, and temporality—when we imagine, for instance, a teenage farm girl speaking out against the draft of Japanese American men, can lead us in different directions.

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