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Thrice Muted Tale: Interplay of Art and Politics in Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"

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Despite a growing recognition of the ways race and gender shape literature, one still discerns a separation of scholarship between those who see themselves primarily as cultural critics and those who engage exclusively with literary texts. The one group tends to view close reading—associated with New Criticism—as conservative and elitist; among the other group are critics who suspect that works by women or people of color are being studied today on purely ideological grounds. Through exploring "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" by Hisaye Yamamoto, a woman writer of Japanese descent, I wish to demonstrate the intricate relationship between aesthetics and politics, between textual silence and social repression.[1] The formal structure of the story cannot be appreciated fully without knowledge of the underlying and deliberately muted concrete historical situation. At the same time, only through a detailed textual analysis can one ferret out the political allusions hidden between the lines.[2]

The way "The Legend" conceals and reveals political persecution substantiates Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's insights regarding women's "anxiety of authorship"—that it is frequently projected onto a "mad" female character—but a theory focusing on gender alone cannot do justice to the complexity of "The Legend." This haunting story portrays a *nisei* (second-generation Japanese-American) woman driven "insane" by the combined pressures exerted upon her as an "other"—but not only as woman—in her own family, ethnic community, and American society at large. This essay attempts to unravel the tripartite exclusion of Miss Sasagawara and the means by which it is enforced.

To tease out the concatenate elements and to unfold the Chinese-box structure of the story, I will look at domestic, communal, and political relations, respectively. In the portion devoted to domestic and communal analysis I deliberately read close to the text. The final

portion introducing a broader historical and political frame suggests that the story is in fact much more complex—structurally and thematically—than my earlier reading reveals. I separate the story into "layers" for analytical purposes in order to bring out its levels of signification and to duplicate its shifting effect on the reader. But the story achieves its quiet power precisely through the *interfacing* of layers. My close reading is both enriched and challenged once it is placed within the political setting—a "background" that will be foregrounded as an integral part of the (sub)text.

"The Legend," narrated by a young woman named Kiku, is constructed on a suspended plot. Kiku and the title character, Miss Sasagawara, are both inmates at Poston, Arizona, one of the internment camps for Japanese-Americans during World War II (and where Yamamoto was herself interned). Mari Sasagawara, a ballet dancer, has transferred to Poston with her Buddhist minister father from another camp after the death there of her mother. At Poston her apparently aloof and eccentric behavior causes tongues to wag, and she becomes a general spectacle. After a number of admissions to the camp hospital, Miss Sasagawara is sent to a sanitorium, is found to be a friendlier person on her return to the camp, but she soon suffers a relapse and is committed to an asylum. When the war is over, Kiku comes across a published poem by Mari Sasagawara, which describes the agony of someone living in close proximity with a spiritual man oblivious to human emotions. Kiku's paraphrase of the poem—the center of the Chinese box containing the dancer's own voice—comes at the end of the story.[3]

The man portrayed in the poem, which Kiku finds "erratically brilliant and . . . tantalizingly obscure" (32), bears an unmistakable semblance to Reverend Sasagawara:

> This man was certainly noble, the poet wrote.... The world was doubtless enriched by his presence. 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.... 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. (33)

The saintly father with his devotional fanaticism, we infer, stifles

the human passions of "someone else"—his daughter. Who then is mad? Through the story we have been given several suggestive glimpses of the Reverend. Kiku describes him as wearing "perpetually an air of bemusement, never talking directly to a person, as though, being what he was, he could not stop for an instant his meditation on the higher life" (22). The anguished revelation in the autobiographical poem suggests that the seeming illness of Miss Sasagawara stems from some unspoken friction between herself and her father. Reverend Sasagawara is apparently blind to both the physical and the psychological suffering of his daughter. He is notably absent during her times at the hospital, even when she is visibly in pain. His absent presence may have compounded her sense of loss following her mother's death, since this death has freed the father for a holy pursuit, enabling him to "extinguish within himself all unworthy desire" (32). The bereft daughter, as a result, is left alone by her surviving parent as well. In addition, the saintly asceticism jars with the sensibilities of the dancer, noted for her long "shining hair," "bright mouth," "glittering eyes," and her "daily costume, brief and fitting closely to her trifling waist...and bringing together arrestingly rich colors" (20). If Buddhism demands unflinching spiritual discipline, ballet dancing—while also requiring unremitting discipline—is very much an (em)bodied art. The artist's self-repression in her father's presence—an attempt that might have translated as her general unsociability—seems to heighten her latent sexuality. In the poem sexual overtones are insinuated in the close juxtaposition of the words "companion," "selfsame room," "human passions rising, subsiding, and again rising," and "scented scenes...in the other's sleep."

The private affair of a rejecting father and an admiring daughter is set against a communal tribunal. Both the Reverend and Miss Sasagawara maintain a certain distance from the *nikkei* community, which nevertheless judges the father's and the daughter's aloofness differently—evidently on account of gender. Traditionally man has been socialized to pursue individual goals, religious or otherwise; woman, only to socialize. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Reverend's blankness is deemed lofty and religious, while the daughter's similar expression comes across as unfriendly and unhealthy. His attitude is respected; hers, suspected.

As depicted in the story, Miss Sasagawara alternates between flamboyant display and reclusiveness. The latter mode is particularly remarkable in light of her profession. As a ballerina she must be accustomed to intense regard from an audience, directed both at her every movement and at her bodily contours. Even in camp her deportment attracts attention, literally at every step: "her measured walk said, 'Look, I'm *walking!*' as though walking were not a common but a

rather special thing to be doing" (20). Yet she seems acutely self-conscious. Preferring not to eat in the mess hall, she has her meals in her own room; she never willingly uses the shower room when anyone else is present.

The story suggests that excessive scrutiny by fellow internees may be an additional source of Miss Sasagawara's anxiety. Communal curiosity peaks during one of the times she is "kept...for observation" at the hospital (26):

> The whole hospital staff appeared to have gathered in the room to get a look at Miss Sasagawara, and the other patients...were sitting up attentively in their high, white, and narrow beds...she must be aware of that concentrated gaze...and of everyone else who tripped in and out abashedly on some pretext or other in order to pass by her bed. (26)

Miss Sasagawara had tried to escape and, when asked why, "said she didn't want any more of those doctors pawing her" (26). Her allegation of being "pawed" by the doctors can be construed in two ways. If one assumes (as does everyone in the story) that Miss Sasagawara overreacts, then she is guilty of "misinterpretation" (Yogi 118). Her "misreading" of the doctor's gestures foreshadows several subsequent events in which her own behavior is possibly misread. Nevertheless, in view of her physical beauty, there is reason to suspect that excessive groping did occur during the medical examinations. But no one takes her allegation seriously; it is automatically dismissed as one of her hysterics. The dismissal is quite understandable. The predominantly male medical profession has traditionally been sanctified as an unquestionable authority. The female patient who dares to challenge and literally turns her back on such authority becomes the one conspicuously on trial.[4]

Like Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes are Watching God* and Toni Morrison's eponymous Sula, Miss Sasagawara runs afoul of the gender expectations of her community and is consequently subject to a critical gaze from her people. As Shoshana Felman points out, female defiance of gender roles is often interpreted as mental deviance: "From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of *serving* an image...of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife" (6-7). She cites Phyllis Chestler: "What we consider 'madness'...is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (qtd. in Felman 7; see also Yalom 3). Miss Sasagawara is female, thirty-nine, evidently remarkably beautiful, and unmarried. Whether one gauges her by the traditional Japanese norm that views marriage as *giri* or obligation (Yanagisako

95) or by the romantic Western norm by which a woman defines herself in relation to a prince charming, her single status is sufficient to set her apart. (Kiku and her friend Elsie share the conventional feminine expectations—to find "two nice, clean young men, preferably handsome, preferably rich, who would cherish [them] forever and a day" [21].) In addition, she has spent most of her adult, pre-war, life away from her own ethnic group in an unusual profession and probably is seen by the internees as an "outsider" from the start. We may further assume that Miss Sasagawara's attire, though in line with her aesthetics, raises eyebrows among the inmates, especially at a time when *nikkei* least wanted to call attention to themselves. The community subtly distances itself from the dancer by addressing her as "Miss Sasagawara...although her first name, Mari, was simple enough and rather pretty" (22).

Her alienation is compounded by her popularity as a subject of idle gossip: "if Miss Sasagawara was not one to speak to, she was certainly one to speak of, and she came up quite often as topic for the endless conversations which helped along the monotonous days" (22). The words of mouth bandied about make her out to be a stereotypical spinster with notorious idiosyncracies. The first rumor is of an event that allegedly took place as soon as she and her father arrived in the camp. Mr. Sasaki, a fellow newcomer, apparently offers to help clean the barrack to which father and daughter were assigned, whereupon she shrieks: "What are you trying to do? Spy on me? Get out of here or I'll throw this water on you!" And, we are told, she duly carries out her threat. "Madwoman" is Mr. Sasaki's conclusion (21).

Another rumor is told by Mrs. Sasaki, who apparently catches Miss Sasagawara ogling a group of neighboring teenage boys—the Yoshinagas—playing basketball in the backyard. Mrs. Sasaki claims that the dancer "wore a beatific expression as she watched the activity...[She] was so absorbed a spectator of this horseplay that her head was bent to one side and she actually had one finger in her mouth as she gazed" (31). "What's the matter with you, watching the boys like that?" Mrs. Sasaki scolds, "You're old enough to be their mother!" (31). The sequel to this episode is told by one of those boys, Joe Yoshinaga, who awakes one night to find Miss Sasagawara sitting beside him, "her long hair all undone and flowing about her... And all she was doing was sitting there watching him, Joe Yoshinaga" (31). These oral reports paint a picture of a woman secretly obsessed with the opposite sex but who vehemently refuses to acknowledge the "fact." The disturbing "symptoms" lead to the patient's permanent confinement in an asylum: "Miss Sasagawara had gone away not long after" (32).

As several critics have noted, the narrator sedulously reminds us of

the second-hand nature of these reports and questions their veracity (McDonald and Newman 27; Yogi 118). Kiku receives all the details from Elsie, who has in turn picked them up from other sources. Even though Elsie supposedly "knew all about Miss Sasagawara," her knowledge is wryly undercut by the narrator: "Where had she accumulated all her items? Probably a morsel here and a morsel there, and, anyway, I forgot to ask her sources" (20). And the ones the narrator is given to know turn out to be possibly suspect:

> Elsie's sources were not what I would ordinarily pay much attention to, Mrs. Sasaki, that plump and giggling young woman who always felt called upon to explain that she was childless by choice, and Joe Yoshinaga, who had a knack of blowing up, in his drawling voice, any incident in which he personally played even a small part (I could imagine the field day he had had with this one). (32)

The narrator's misgivings in turn prompt us to reexamine the circumstantial evidence for Miss Sasagawara's alleged derangement. Mrs. Sasaki, as the wife of the man who has called the dancer a "madwoman," is likely to corroborate his conclusion. For all we know, Mrs. Sasaki may be projecting her own maternal frustration onto Miss Sasagawara who, as a dancer, may be fascinated merely by the physical movements of those boys playing basketball. Whatever the reason, the shrill reprimand seems uncalled-for, even downright rude. Faced with such rudeness, Miss Sasagawara has reason to express anger. Her progressive withdrawal may precisely be her reaction against idle speculations, her means of insulating herself from offensive tongues and intrusive gazes.

The unnerving effect of public scrutiny is illustrated humorously during the Christmas performance of a children's dancing class under Miss Sasagawara's tutelage: "And the little girls, who might have curtsied and stepped gracefully about under Miss Sasagawara's eyes alone, were all elbows and knees as they felt the block's one-hundred-fifty or more pairs of eyes on them" (29). The comic description reminds us of Miss Sasagawara's daily trial, and perhaps of what unremitting surveillance might do to mental balance.

Miss Sasagawara's role as a voluntary teacher suggests that she is not naturally anti-social. Beneath her apparent distance lies a longing for human connection, as also hinted when Kiku and Elsie find the dancer peeling a grapefruit in front of her porch. The dancer is at first unresponsive to Elsie's greeting; she merely "looked up and stared, without recognition" (22). Kiku, however, detects a further signal unnoticed by Elsie:

> We were almost out of earshot when I heard her call, "Do I know you?"

> and I could have almost sworn that she sounded hopeful, if not downright wistful, but Elsie, already miffed at having expended friendliness so unprofitably, seemed not to have heard, and that was that. (22)

Kiku's impression contradicts other reports concerning the strange woman. Miss Sasagawara seems eager to know someone and to be recognized as a person rather than viewed as a spectacle. But Elsie is offended and her foreclosed opinion anticipates that of many who remain distrustful of the dancer even after she returns from the sanitorium a changed person: "She said hello and how are you as often and easily as the next person, although many of those she greeted were surprised and suspicious, remembering the earlier rebuffs. There were some who never did get used to Miss Sasagawara as a friendly being" (28).

Yet Yamamoto succeeds in unsettling any erstwhile conclusions we may have jumped to. We have been led, for instance, to see camp life as quite "normal." Life at Poston, as presented in the brisk tone of Kiku, seems at first glance tolerable, even gay. The gaiety, however, reflects more the evacuees' effort to create some semblance of normalcy under trying circumstances than it does the actual conditions. Internees such as Elsie and Kiku have managed to take imprisonment in stride as though the detention camp were a summer camp. After regaining freedom, the two even reminisce about "the good old days when we had worked in the mess hall together, the good old days when we had worked in the hospital together" (30). Granted that these statements may be somewhat sardonic, they no doubt reveal the survival strategies of people who wish to paint over the humiliation of being incarcerated.[5]

That their cheerful recollections hardly approximate grim reality is revealed by many a snippet throughout the narrative. The very first sentence of the story creates a stark contrast by placing the dancer against an arid and barren environment: "Even in that unlikely place of wind, sand, and heat, it was easy to imagine Miss Sasagawara a decorative ingredient of some ballet" (20). The climate bodes ill for the physical and mental health of the internees. And one can hardly look to the camp hospital for a ready cure. In fact, rather chilling information about its makeshift medical personnel can be gleaned from Kiku's offhand remarks. Introducing us to "Dr." Moritomo, the first physician to examine Miss Sasagawara, the narrator notes parenthetically that "technically, the title was premature; evacuation had caught him with a few months to go on his degree" (25). The only other doctor who appears in the story is "trembling old Dr. Kawamoto" who, we are told again in a parenthesis, "had retired several years before the war, but he had been drafted here" (26). As for Elsie and Kiku, getting a job

in the hospital is merely an alternative to working in the mess hall or with the garbage trucks.

By far the most unbearable feature of camp is the total lack of privacy, though this information is also presented casually—as a matter of fact. The narrator mentions passing in front of the Sasagawara "apartment," which was "really only a cubicle because the once-empty barracks had soon been partitioned off into six units for families of two" (22). We know the exact measurements from Michi Weglyn: "A degree of uniformity existed in the physical makeup of all the [relocation] centers. A bare room measuring 20 feet by 24 feet was...referred to as a 'family apartment'; each accommodated a family of five to eight members; barrack end-rooms measuring 16 feet by 20 feet were set aside for smaller families. A barrack was made up of four to six such family units" (84). Weglyn also deplores the absence of privacy in other areas: "Evacuees ate communally, showered communally, defecated communally...no partitions had been built between toilets—a situation which everywhere gave rise to camp-wide cases of constipation. Protests from Caucasian church groups led, in time, to the building of partial dividing walls, but doors were never installed" (80). In this light, Miss Sasagawara's decision to dine and shower alone seems eminently sensible and far from anti-social.

Also implicit in the story is the stockade around these tight private quarters and congested public places. Milton Eisenhower, former War Relocation Authority chief, said in his letter to President Roosevelt: "Life in a relocation center cannot possibly be pleasant. The evacuees are surrounded by barbed wire fences under the eyes of armed military police....[I]t would be amazing if extreme bitterness did not develop" (Letter, Milton Eisenhower to Roosevelt, April 22, 1943; qtd. in Weglyn 118). One begins to wonder whether the dancer—judged deviant by the community for not behaving "normally" under custody—is any more peculiar than Elsie and Kiku, who cherish their "good old days" in camp; or than her father, who upon his imprisonment "felt free for the first time in his long life" because, since "circumstances made it unnecessary for him to earn a competitive living," he could "concentrate on that serene, eight-fold path of highest understanding" (32).

Such reconsideration brings us to the outermost layer of the Chinese box—the political context. Fredric Jameson notes that Third World texts, no matter how private they seem, "necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69). His observation applies with peculiar force to "The Legend." The politics of the time not only contributes directly to Miss Sasagawara's distress but also figures indirectly as the allegorical level of the story. Within the individual

story, the congestion at camp intensifies the gaze on Miss Sasagawara and accelerates the spreading of gossip. As an allegory the scandal-loving and finger-pointing community has a counterpart in the white majority that allowed themselves to be swayed by prejudice and hearsay into endorsing the imprisonment of an entire people. In an essay in which Yamamoto refers briefly to "The Legend," she writes:

> Anthologists of this story have commented, "The author is far less concerned with the social significance of the external environment than with the internal state of the characters," and asked, "Is Miss Sasagawara insane or are those who accept the life of the camps insane?" ("...I Still Carry It Around" 15)[6]

That Yamamoto has chosen to highlight those two points made by commentators is instructive. Their first observation is, I believe, belied by the answer(s) to their second question—a narrative crux that connects the "internal state" to the "external environment" and glues together the realistic and the allegorical dimensions of "The Legend." Just as the rumors about Miss Sasagawara accord well with the stereotypes of dancer or spinster, much of the incriminating "evidence" leading to persecution conformed to the ruling culture's historical prejudice against people of Japanese descent.[7] Elsie's questionable reading of Miss Sasagawara's vacant expression and Mrs. Sasaki's dubious inference have parallels in the many official misinterpretations of *nikkei* activities, misinterpretations which built up into what Ronald Takaki calls "the myth of 'military necessity' for Japanese-American internment" (379). FBI director J. Edgar Hoover himself noted, at the time, that the claim of military necessity for mass evacuation was based "primarily upon public and political pressure rather than on factual data" (qtd. in Takaki 387).

Tendentious information snowballed, one could say, in a manner analogous to the gossip concerning Miss Sasagawara in Yamamoto's story. Official statements to the press, based on assessments subsequently proven inaccurate, "fueled rumors of sabotage committed by Japanese Americans in [Hawaii]—Japanese plantation laborers on Oahu had cut swaths in the sugar cane and pineapple fields to guide the Japanese bombers to the military installations, Japanese had parked cars across highways to block the traffic, and Japanese had given signals to enemy planes" (Takaki 380). The press, local and state politicians, patriotic organizations, and "voices from farming interests," joined the chorus clamoring for Japanese removal (Takaki 389).

Rumors did not cease after Japanese-Americans were put behind barbed wire. Weglyn reveals that "among some of the less educated members of the custodial staff...there was a pervasive tendency to

look down on their charges as an untrustworthy, sinister, and morally inferior lot by the very fact that their incarceration had been deemed necessary" (116-17). She quotes social analyst Alexander H. Leighton, who conducted a behavioral study of the camp population in Poston at the time: "In spite of the fact that the FBI was doing a thorough job of security control there were government employees who thought vegetable cellars dug to conserve food because of the heat were caches for Japanese paratroops, who saw kitchen cooks as admirals in disguise and believed athletic teams were Japanese soldiers drilling" (Leighton 279; qtd. in Weglyn 117).

While I am not arguing for any simple correspondences between the rumors enveloping the dancer and those hovering over *nikkei* at large, I believe that the story goes well beyond an individual tragedy and that the many indirect political allusions in "The Legend" press us to reinterpret the "reports" associated with Miss Sasagawara. Her hypersensitivity to being spied upon not only mirrors the wartime hysteria and paranoia of the white majority but also reflects back on the plight of her own ethnic group. Her visibility and susceptibility to scrutiny bespeak the *nikkei* predicament during World War II, which drastically sharpened the external gaze on this Asian minority. The communal assumption of Miss Sasagawara's pathology echoes the government's speculation that many *nikkei* residing on the West Coast could be devious spies. The isolation and eventual institutionalization of Miss Sasagawara correspond to the exclusion and ultimate detention of the race.

But the communal finger-pointing in camp must itself be seen in the context of the policing politics of the government. Historical circumstances turned *nikkei* into mutual informers. In an atmosphere of constant surveillance, informers issued inflammatory reports which led to false arrest and seclusion. Weglyn notes that as the drab conditions persisted despite protests, among some internees "passive forbearance" shifted to "angry militancy" (116). Many of the so-called "troublemakers"—dissidents who used threats and violence against the informers or those who simply publicized their disaffection with the government—were arrested without trial and imprisoned in highly guarded camps, notably Camp Moab (Utah) and Leupp Isolation Center (Arizona) (see Weglyn 121-28). "By a peculiar morality of the time in regard to the 'Japanese,'" Weglyn observes, "the traditional presumption of innocence was conveniently transformed into a presumption of guilt" (128). Judged by the patriarchal mores of the time, Miss Sasagawara, too, will always appear aberrant no matter what she does. The communal treatment of her echoes "the often capricious and arbitrary manner in which citizen dissidents were seized and isolated" by the government (Weglyn 126).

The arbitrariness was made abundantly clear by Paul G. Robertson, who was sent to administer the Leupp Isolation Center and who "saw no reason why eighty inmates had to be guarded by 150 armed troops," noting that most of the men "were not incorrigible at all." Through the time he "learned to like all of these fellows"; one became his gardener and "stayed with [his] children on numerous occasions. He wasn't in the least bit dangerous" (qtd. in Weglyn 128-29).[9]

Through Kiku we are similarly given second thoughts about the dancer's alleged lunacy. Estrangement by the internees has made Miss Sasagawara feel so much like a criminal that she feels the need to reassure young children: "'Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you'" (28). But during the most extensive meeting between Kiku and the dancer—"the only time [they] really exchanged words"—Miss Sasagawara, who "welcomed Kiku with a smile," seems most engaging and almost jovial. Upon hearing Kiku recount her sorry attempts with the violin, "Miss Sasagawara laughed aloud—a lovely sound" (28). She then goes on to tell Kiku about her own experience with the Spanish guitar. In this firsthand encounter with the dancer, there is no hint at all of her derangement .

Given the political circumstances, we may also modify our judgment of Reverend Sasagawara, whose insensitivity to his daughter parallels the government's callousness toward its own citizens (who made up two-thirds of the internees). But the parallel here is far from clear-cut. The Reverend, silent almost throughout the text, is no less enigmatic than his daughter. If his Buddhism seems to align him with the masculine side of "Western" binary thinking that places spirit (masculine) above the body (feminine), as an "Eastern" religion it also constitutes a form of cultural resistance against the religious patronage of the dominant culture. During the "Block Christmas party," for instance, each child receives an "eleemosynary package" sent by "Church people outside" to whom "every recipient must write and thank" (29).[10] Where Christmas is openly observed in camp, the Reverend must confine his own worship to his tiny room. As a well-known priest in the Japanese-American community, he would have been among the first arrested and interrogated after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The government also encouraged *nisei* to keep an eye on these "suspicious" characters in camp. (The dancer, being the Reverend's daughter, is therefore understandably wary of watchful eyes.)[11] Far from being a privileged patriarch, this father is himself subject to discriminatory legislation. His determination to achieve spiritual perfection may be a form of compensation for the travails he has encountered in the new world, where he is branded as a suspicious alien.[12] Unfortunately, in turning to religious absolutes, in blocking out the emotional needs of his daughter, he too becomes a virtual tyrant.

In face of the triple occlusion of Miss Sasagawara—as a daughter by the father, as a single woman by the community, and as a member of a persecuted people by the government—she exhibits perhaps the only appropriate response to the situation: "madness." Her illness is at once defined by deviance from societal norms and produced by those regulating mechanisms. Miss Sasagawara's poem which, at the end of the story, challenges our earlier perceptions of madness and saintliness, aberration and innocence, should also make us wonder who was the guilty party during those "years of infamy" (Weglyn) when Japanese-Americans became " the victims of gossip, their own and the nation's" (Chan et al. "Resources" 29).

The narration of the story replicates the gripping power of rumors well before their dubiousness is revealed. By constantly shifting our attitudes toward the title character, and by giving her the last word via the poem, "The Legend" catches the conscience of any reader too ready to accept tendentious reports or to pronounce judgment. In terms of the coding strategies feminist critics have associated with women writers, this tale is thrice muted: there is neither direct confrontation with the father, nor explicit criticism of the Japanese-American community, nor open protest against the government. The involuted presentation of gender and race in "The Legend" bears comparison with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Both stories treat female suppression and repression indirectly. In Gilman's tale a physician husband's implicit faith in science objectifies his wife and stifles her imagination till she loses touch with reality. Reverend Sasagawara's spiritual discipline similarly unhinges his daughter. However, the attic in which the doctor confines his wife is by comparison a commodious version of the cubicle inhabited by the Sasagawaras. The dancer must either remain in close proximity to her father—a situation that might have driven her insane in all senses of the word—or expose herself to the prying eyes of a community thirsty for sensationalism to relieve their boredom. Though both the physician husband and the Buddhist father are well meaning, in their singleminded pursuits they fail utterly to heed the needs of their female companions. Madness becomes the only release for both women—whether to unleash imagination or to escape confinement, even of "Buddhist idealism" (McDonald and Newman 28).

At the same time, both stories also conceal unsettling references to contemporary politics of color. Susan Lanser has called attention to the long overlooked adjective in Gilman's title: "In California, where Gilman lived while writing 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' mass anxiety about the 'Yellow Peril' had already yielded such legislation as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882" (425). She then asks provocatively: "Is the wallpaper, then, the political unconscious of a culture in which an

Aryan woman's madness ...[is] projected onto the 'yellow' woman who is, however, also the feared alien?" (428-29). Lanser has cautioned earlier that hers may be an "overreading" (424), insofar as the implications about race are completely subdued in the text. In Yamamoto the allusions to white racist hysteria are muffled to such a degree that she is charged with ignoring the "external environment." My "overreading" suggests, on the contrary, that the dancer's psychological condition is precisely bound up with the spatial configuration of the story. The claustrophobic surroundings lend an ironical note to the reason given by Miss Sasagawara for remaining single: "she said she wasn't sorry she never got married, because...she got to go all over the country a couple of times, dancing in the ballet" (21). Artistic movement is here coupled with the freedom to travel; both are curtailed in the "cubicle," the hospital, the camp and, finally, the state institution.

Why did Yamamoto camouflage the political allusions? Probing an author's intentions is perilous business and is at best speculative. I will merely venture that Yamamoto herself might have felt the pressure of personal, communal, and societal censorship. In accord with the theory of Gilbert and Gubar, she might well have projected her anxiety of authorship onto Mari Sasagawara (dancer *and* poet), but it is an anxiety compounded by culture and race.[13] The odds against a Japanese-American woman writing shortly after the war were many, especially against one who dared to treat the sensitive subject of internment, not to mention a treatment that impugned the community and the government. Reliving that experience through writing was in itself taxing. As Yamamoto has noted, "looking over the whole of Japanese-American creative literature...we will find the Nisei writer choosing not to dwell on his camp experience. Perhaps this was all to the good, for his own health and well being" ("...I Still Carry It Around" 12). For over a decade after the war, Japanese-Americans on the whole wished to present a positive image to the larger society that had found reason to incarcerate them. Out of concern for public opinion, they were likely to frown on writers who uncovered cracks in the ethnic circle or who challenged white racism. John Okada's *No-No Boy*, a novel doing just that, was rejected by both the Japanese-American and white communities when it was first published in 1957.[14] Before that time, *nisei* wishing to vent openly their anger and bitterness would be hard pressed even to find a forum, since white publishers were generally reluctant to issue stories containing an explicit political challenge to the dominant culture.

Here Yamamoto's narrative elusiveness may have stood her in good stead. Like the poem written by Miss Sasagawara, "The Legend" is "erratically brilliant and...tantalizingly obscure" upon first reading. The external setting seems no more than an incidental backdrop to a

personal memoir about an intriguing figure. Not once do the barbs of the author's covert social commentary puncture the smooth narrative surface. It is through orchestrating telltale details, eroding narrative authority, and encoding volatile political material in allegory that the author criticizes the ethnic community and the larger society for their intolerance of difference and for their mechanisms of exclusion. Meanwhile, the breezy description of camp life may well have deflected the censorious gaze of white editors. "The Legend" appeared in *Kenyon Review* in 1950.

Socio-historical considerations form an inalienable part of aesthetic judgments. The interlocking of thematic and strategic silence in Yamamoto's fiction should make us rethink the debate on the distinction between literature and social history, between art and politics (see for example Kolodny, "Some Notes"; Myra Jehlen 80-88). Because the relationship between life and art is here as elsewhere an indirect one, a text like "The Legend"—which weaves together a particular tale about human passion and saintly impassiveness, a feminist critique of conventional gender expectations (defining who is normal and who is not), and a political allegory of racial prejudice and persecution—demands and deserves meticulous "close reading." However, only by anchoring them culturally and historically can we fully disclose the author's formally complex design and the sedimented layers of emotions embedded in her ellipses.

Notes

This essay is adapted from portions of Articulate Silences *(forthcoming from Cornell UP) and printed with the permission of the publisher. My thanks to Stan Yogi, whose M.A. thesis heightened my awareness of the political echoes in "The Legend."*

1. Yamamoto was born of immigrant parents in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California. During World War II she was interned for three years in Poston, Arizona. In 1986 she received the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement.
2. Elsewhere I have discussed at length Yamamoto's habitual use of narrative indirection ("Double-Telling"; see also Yogi).
3. Yamamoto reveals that Mari Sasagawara is "based on a real woman" and that "she really was a writer," though Yamamoto didn't know that at the time she wrote the story (Crow, "*MELUS* Interview" 79-80).
4. My second interpretation might strike some readers as being overly influenced by current media coverage of sexual harassment. As far as I know, however, Yamamoto was the first writer who openly addressed that topic (in substance if not in name) in "The High-Heeled Shoes: A Memoir" (1948).
5. That the internment was no laughing matter for Yamamoto herself is evident in her moving memoir: "...the camp experience ... 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" ("...I Still Carry It Around" 11).

6. In the same essay Yamamoto points out that in real life there are Japanese-Americans who remember the anguish of camp life and those who recall "its carefree joys." She makes a wry comparison between the two types by way of an anecdote about a poet and a columnist: "I bring up this [example] to point up a possible clue to the creative personality. Hiroshi Kashiwagi, who remembers the pain, became the poet; and the other fellow, who lays claim to happy memories, has pursued a career centered around athletics" (13).
7. Yogi, who uncovers numerous political allusions in "The Legend," points out that the two major documents produced by the government to justify the internment—*Final Report: Japanese Exclusion from the West Coast. 1942*, authored by General John L. DeWitt, and the Justice Department's brief in *Hirabayashi v. United States*—are "grounded in a series of misinterpretations." For example, Japanese-language schools were thought to be hotbeds of Japanese propaganda, when in fact most of these schools were conducted by Christian and Buddhist churches for evangelical purposes; *kibei* (*nisei* raised in Japan) were cited as a possible threat though many of these children were sent to Japan to free mothers for family labor; DeWitt further implied that Japanese-Americans settled in sensitive military areas with possible subversive intentions when their settlement was established long before the war; the Justice Department cited the dual citizenship of *nisei* as ground to suspect their American allegiance, but *nisei* were Japanese citizens by heredity rather than by choice (112-15). For detailed discussions and divergent opinions on the two official documents, see Ogawa 19-22; Eric Sundquist; Jacobus tenBroek et al. 268-82.
8. For instance, "JACL [Japanese American Citizens' League] activists in the camps were still being used as the government's liaison with the detainee population, an arrangement made conspicuous by their prestige jobs and ready access to privileged treatment. This, while a paranoiac distrust of the Kibei worked to further alienate these marginal native-born citizens who sought solace in the disaffected Issei camp, a group keenly resentful of being categorically denied the right to hold office in the community government established in the centers" (Weglyn 119). The situation worsened with the administration of the so-called "Loyalty Questionnaire," conducted in conjunction with an Army recruitment drive. The "no-no boys," *nisei* who refused to fight for the American government (partly to protest the internment), were ostracized by their own ethnic community for their defiance. The psychological upheaval that results from such rejection is dramatized in John Okada's *No-No Boy*.
9. According to Weglyn, "The 'crimes' of the inmates varied widely. There were young men accused of having instigated work stoppages; of having made bravado statements of disloyalty; of throwing jars of filth in apartments of informers; of making pin-ups of Japanese soldiers" (126).
10. Barbara Rodriguez points out in her dissertation (in progress) how humiliating such requirement must be. I am indebted to her for the observation.
11. I would like to thank Brian Niiya for suggesting this point. For a biographical account of the travails of a Japanese-American Buddhist priest during World War II, see Shinobu Matsuura.
12. The title character of Yamamoto's "Las Vegas Charley" is another father who ostensibly welcomes camp life, though it has left him handicapped: "he would be quite content to remain in this camp the rest of his life—free food, free

housing ...It was true that he had partially lost his hearing in one ear, from standing by those hot stoves on days of unbearable heat, but that was a small complaint. The camp hospital had provided free treatment, free medicines, free cotton balls to stuff in his bad ear" (80). The two fathers' attachment to camp provides a telling indictment of life "outside."

13. Yamamoto has more than once diagnosed herself as "abnormal." In her youth she adopted the pseudonym "Napoleon" avowedly "as an apology for [her] little madness" ("Writing" 128).
14. See footnote 8 for an explanation of "no-no boy."

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