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Through the Arc of the Rain Forest. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1990.

Tokyo Carmen vs. L.A. Carmen. 1990. This play was produced at Taper, Too, Los Angeles, as part of "Thirteenth Hour: A Festival of Performance." Parts 1 and 2 have been published in *Multicultural Theatre: Scenes and Monologs from New Hispanic, Asian, and African-American Plays*, ed. Roger Ellis (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Metriwether, 1996). The entire play is available through the New World Theater, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Godzilla Comes to Little Tokyo. 1991. Musical produced at the Northwest Asian American Theatre, Seattle.

"The Orange." *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 30 June 1991, 12-13, 36. Reprinted in *Chicago Review* 39, nos. 3-4 (1993): 12-16, and *Hermes* (Tokyo) 55 (1995): 121-125

Brazil-Maru. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1992.

GiLApwrecks. 1992. Reading performance produced at the Japanese American Cultural Community Center, Los Angeles. *GiLApwrecks* is also known as *Godzilla Comes to Little Tokyo*.

Nob Bozos. 1993. Produced at the Japanese American Cultural Community Center, Los Angeles.

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Tropic of Orange. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1997.

Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi

Interview by
KING-KOK CHEUNG

A lasting friendship between two acclaimed Nisei writers, Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi, blossomed in the desert of Poston, Arizona, where the two women were interned during World War II. Yamamoto, author of *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1988), received the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1986. Yamauchi's *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir* (1994) received the Association for Asian American Studies' 1995 National Book Award in literature. But Yamauchi is best known as a playwright. Her plays include *The Music Lessons*, *12-1-A*, *The Chairman's Wife*, and *And the Soul Shall Dance*, which won the 1977-1978 American Theatre Critics Association's first regional award for outstanding playwrighting.

Some of the themes that recur in the work of these two writers—whose lives have been intertwined at various points—are remarkably similar. But their temperaments are markedly different, as becomes evident in the joint interview I conducted with them as part of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration

of the Japanese American internment. I wanted to interview them together because they know each other intimately and I hoped that, being exceeding modest, they would speak more freely that way. Allowing them to talk about each other brought up information I would have had a difficult time eliciting in a one-on-one conversation. The interview took place at Yamauchi's home in Gardena after the hostess had plied us with a generous assortment of sushi. Throughout the interview, Yamamoto is referred to as Si (pronounced *Sai*), as she is called by her friends.

KKC When did you two meet, and how long have you known each other?

HY About 1940, when I went down to Oceanside. As soon as I got there, my brother, who was in the same class as Wakako at Oceanside Carlsbad High School, would tell me about this smart Japanese girl that was in his English class, and it turned out to be her.

WY When I was a girl, I lived in Brawley. I used to read Si's columns in the *Kashu Mainichi*,¹ and I thought, My goodness, who is this person? This was the first time I had read a Japanese American who spoke about our culture, the food we ate, and I thought, This is wonderful! You can be honest. So I read her column for quite a while, and then we moved to Oceanside because my father had suffered an enormous crop disaster, and it was like fate. Somebody said that Si Yamamoto lived here. I wanted to meet her, and I did, one day, at the meeting they were trying to develop for the young people's club. I'd already known Johnny, her brother, because we were in the same class, and I used to see her other brother, Jemo; and I met her.

HY She said at that time she got the impression I was cold, but I distinctly remember playing tick-tack-toe with her on the blackboard in the schoolhouse where we had the meeting.

Words Matter

KKC What was your impression of Wakako?

HY I thought Wakako and her sister really worked hard because they would come out with these sun hats and work out in the fields picking Kentucky beans while I just puttered around the house and went back and forth to the library.

WY Our family lived in town. My mother had a boarding-house, so, when the farmers came to pick up, we'd go out to the fields, too, and we'd get paid! We'd be so tired that at lunchtime we'd just lie in the dirt.

HY I didn't know that. I would have invited you in.

WY I didn't even know you lived there, and, yes, I did think you were cold. I was so effusive. I thought she should have been responsive to that, but she wasn't. She was very calm and very august.

KKC And you met again at Poston?

WY Yes. The first time we met in Oceanside I don't think I saw Si much then. But in camp we both were working for the *Poston Chronicle*. That's when we became friends.

HY Yes, and Jeanie Inokuchi. The three of us would try to scandalize the camp by walking around with red or blue knesocks, all matching.

WY We were the beatniks of our day.

KKC How did each of you decide to become a writer?

WY Si was already a writer when we were in camp; I didn't even dream of being one. When I was a girl, I thought I would write an epic poem. I used to read Tennyson and say, "I'm going to write like that one day." But, as I grew older, I realized how difficult it was to write and how much you had to know; so I never aspired to be a writer. I thought maybe when I grew up I would get a job in an advertising agency and maybe wash brushes.

Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamauchi

HY She was an artist. That's how she came to the newspaper in camp—as a cartoonist.

KKC Why did you switch from painting to writing?

WY Si said the reason I gave was not valid, so I won't give that one.

KKC Do tell us.

WY Well, I was under the impression that Si stopped writing for a while. I thought maybe one of us should be writing, but she says that's not true. The reason why I did write was that there were stories I really wanted to tell. I didn't have to know a lot as long as I knew what I felt, and so I just wrote these stories. One of the first ones I completed was "And the Soul Shall Dance."

KKC How did you get started, Si?

HY Not long after I first learned to read, my father and mother brought in these bales of Japanese American newspapers so they could make hot caps to fit over young shoots in the fields. I had a field day looking through all the English sections, thinking, Oh, maybe I can write, too, one of these days and get my name in the paper. . . . All vanity.

KKC Which writers had the strongest influence on you when you started?

HY I don't know because I read one book after another in those days.

KKC But didn't you say somewhere that the Japanese American writers had had the strongest impact on you?

HY Because they were of the same background, and that didn't prevent them from writing, so that kind of encouraged me to do likewise eventually.

WY I started off just like she did. We would order these bales of newspapers—we called them brush covers—to cover the plants, to keep them from being attacked by the frost, and there was nothing to do in the country but read, so I would look through these papers, and I found Si, and I thought she was the best writer among them all. I just enjoyed her articles; they were humorous, intelligent, and grammatical—something that I discovered to be rare.

HY All that stuff I used to write couldn't have been very elevated.

WY Well, it was funny, and you were honest. You talked about things I knew about, like *gohan* [cooked rice] and *tsukemono* [pickles].

KKC But some of the stories in *Seventeen Syllables* are sad rather than funny.

HY I'm what you call a humorist manqué. Every time I started a story I would try to be funny, and it would always end up kind of tragic sometimes, so I don't know what happens between my intention and the outcome. Those characters take over and go down to destruction.

KKC Can you two say something about the influence of Japanese American tradition on you as women and as writers?

WY Well, I've always been a Japanese American, and, in those days, racism was so prevalent that, from early childhood, you naturally went toward your own, and from where I came from there were no Chinese, no Koreans, so all I had were Japanese playmates at school. When we came home, there was nobody but your sister and your brother. As a woman, I was very much influenced by the Japanese culture. My saving grace is that my mother was an extremely strong woman, a person in her own right; she took no guff from anybody, including white people, and I think that helps. Also, my position in the

family—I was a third child after a sister and a brother; by that time my parents were just tired of disciplining the kids. They just let me go around. I was extremely strong willed, very headstrong, and I got away with it.

KKC Have your stories—about mothers—actually told the story of your own mother?

WY I was trying to tell it to myself. I was trying to figure out where she came from, what happened to her, and why. The way women were brought here in those times seemed so unfair, and I think I was trying to set it right.

HY They didn't fare much better in Japan.

WY I know, but this is all I knew: my mother was a woman who pined to go back to Japan, and she didn't seem to fit into this country, in this dry, hot, dusty area, and grubbing in the dirt like she had to to help my father. Maybe that's why I write about her, to see why, and to get it straight in my own mind.

KKC And you, Si?

HY I say I'm telling my mother's story in "Seventeen Syllables," but I'm probably telling my own, that women express their creativity under all kinds of circumstances, and the way that story has been reprinted so much I think she's behind it all, getting everybody to reprint it. So I call it her story. Yet it is not just about Japanese women here. All over the world I think women are kept from doing what they are capable of doing.

KKC Was your mother encouraging when you were writing?

HY Oh, yes. When she found me writing on either butcher paper or the back of paper bags or something, she said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm writing a story." And she said, "Then you should live in a house on top of a hill where

a cool breeze blows so you can write." I felt that was surely encouraging.

KKC What about the fathers? How did they react to your writing?

WY I never wrote until they were both dead. My father died when I was about twenty, and my mother died when I was thirty-one.

KKC You said earlier that it's unfair the way the women came to this country. What about the men?

WY I don't think they came because they had to. They wanted better for themselves. The women were kind of sold into it, as picture brides. But my mother was not a picture bride. She came here with dreams of returning rich; that's why she could never go back. She had promised her sister, "When I come back, I will be rich." So she could never go back because she was never rich.

KKC But did your fathers have any influence on your writing?

HY Mine never objected to it that I recall. Yes, once a neighbor in Oceanside was told by his children that I was writing unseemly things, so this neighbor asked my father to tell me to quit writing. I got very indignant and kept writing. I don't know what they were talking about.

WY She was very honest; she talked about her neighbors, her brothers, her friends.

HY I don't know if anybody complained to the English-section editor, who was Roy Takeno at the *Kashu Mainichi*, but I remember him writing to me, in a letter that enclosed five dollars—token payment for the whole year. He wrote, "Don't be so hard on the ubiquitous characteristics of the Nisei." So I must have been making fun of us.

KKC Were either of you brought up according to any particular religion? Did your beliefs change later?

WY I was brought up as a Buddhist, and I haven't changed my belief. Religion was not that important to me, or else it was so ingrained that I didn't notice it.

HY I was brought up Buddhist, too. We didn't go to church exactly, but we went to Buddhist funerals and weddings. I was already in my thirties when I accepted the idea that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. That automatically makes me a Christian, right? But I don't reject any of that Buddhism. It's like taking Catholicism down to Mexico and coming up with Our Lady of Guadalupe. You can synthesize.

KKC What are some of your fondest memories of childhood or of adolescence?

WY I loved my mother very much, and I loved listening to her stories and listening to her songs. In adolescence, I loved being alive, and I loved falling in love, and those kind of things made life so exciting for a country girl.

HY For me, adolescence was painful. But during childhood we had all this outdoor space to roam around in, all kinds of food growing on the trees and bushes. In those days, there was no smog, except when they had to start up those fires for the orange groves when the temperature dipped too low. I had a wonderful time. But it was very hard for me to adjust to high school, and I remember more pain than pleasure from that period.

KKC How comfortable are you with the label *Asian American writer*?

WY I feel very comfortable. I'm an Asian American, and I write Asian American stories, so I am an Asian American writer. And Asian American people are interested in my writing. I don't think anybody else is.

HY Yes, it's all right. Whatever I'm called is not going to affect what I do.

KKC Do you think that, being women of your generation, you have had a harder time writing?

WY The women of my generation are brought up to hold down our emotions, to be more passive, and to censor before we even think. I have a very difficult time writing because of that. I have to try not to censor before I get it on paper. Nowadays, people have more freedom; they accept their passions, their emotions, their sorrows, and their joys. We were taught not to do that because you had to hold your head up; even if it hurts, you smile and say, "Oh fine, fine."

HY Yes, but she was one of the first Nisei I met that was so free about her feelings. I didn't think so much about my feelings then. In camp, when we got to be pretty good friends, she would confide things like sunset making her sad, and I never reacted to sunset that way. All these things were revelations, and I got an education in sensitivity from her that I never would have had otherwise. I never even thought about stuff like that. For me, the sun went down, and that was it. I just accepted the change of the seasons and rolled with the punches, so to speak.

WY But that's the nature of people like us that are very close to the earth, like the bear. They say that you get depressed in the winter. I used to feel like that every winter. . . .

KKC Do either of you feel any political obligations as a writer? As an Asian American writer or a woman writer?

WY I try not to. I write as a person, as a woman, as an Asian American, and, if I fulfill my political obligations in being honest, then great. I try not to think like that because I'm a very simple person and I have to tell my story as simply as I

can. If I feel politically inclined, or if something enrages me, maybe it will come out.

HY My politics are radical; I don't know if it comes out in the writing because I don't deliberately try to inject it. I don't even vote because I consider myself anarchist.

WY I believe that, whatever you write, your social consciousness comes out no matter how you try to camouflage it.

KKC Both of you started publishing in Japanese American newspapers. Now your work is read by people of different ethnic backgrounds. Does that shift in audience affect your writing in any way? Do you find yourself writing for a specific audience or trying to reach out to everyone?

WY I try not to think about audience. I don't know if everybody is reading my stuff. I don't think so.

HY I don't think a writer aims at any audience.

KKC But, when you wrote for Japanese American newspapers, you knew that people would understand all the Japanese American terms.

HY Sure, I'm writing for my fellow Japanese Americans. I don't know how I felt when I was sending stories to other places. Maybe I had to do a little more explaining about Japanese terms.

KKC How would you characterize the reception of your work? Are there any particularly upsetting or gratifying responses?

WY I never got any response. That's one of the reasons why I quit writing for *Rafu Shimpo*.² I thought, Nobody's reading my stuff; I'm going to quit, and then the paper will be deluged with people saying, Where's Wakako Yamauchi? But nobody said a thing.

KKC A lot of people are commenting on your plays now.

WY Oh, yes, a famous playwright. But it hurts me when they tear me up, and they do tear me up.

HY You mean the critics?

WY Yes. As far as the audience is concerned, I feel that what one likes the other hates. But, as far as the critics are concerned, if they don't give you a good review, nobody will come to see the play.

HY I never got published for many, many years; I just wrote for the Japanese newspapers.

KKC That's publication, too.

HY But nobody responded to my writing that I remember. I remember Henry Mori asking us every October to write something for the holiday issue, and I would always do it no matter what. And he got us pretty good payment.

KKC Good reinforcement.

WY/HY Uh-huh.

KKC How old were you when Executive Order 9066 came? Do you remember your reaction when you first learned that you were to be herded into camps?

HY I was twenty. I remember this neighbor girl who belonged to San Diego JACL [Japanese American Citizens' League] evidently coming around to ask us to sign these JACL petitions that said that, to prove our patriotism, we would willingly go to camp. I said, "No, I'm not going to sign any such thing." She was appalled because Nisei don't treat each other that way; they all try to get along with each other. I felt bad about making her feel bad. So I don't know if I signed it or not. I hope I didn't.

WY I was seventeen. My first recollection was reading the Japanese papers and seeing these pictures of people going to

camp. I guess a lot of people went ahead to prepare the places—camps—for us, and these people were waiting in lines, holding tin plates for their dinner. I was not a very political person. I didn't know what was going on—I knew that Japan was at war with America, and I knew that, for many, many years, there were hostilities, and I knew that we suffered a great deal of racism—but I didn't like the idea of it. In civics classes, we were told that all men are created equal. But we went.

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KKC Who started the camp newspaper *Poston Chronicle*? Were both of you recruited to work for it?

HY No, I was working as a waitress in the mess hall, and then my friend—my neighbor Jeanie—and I heard about them recruiting staff for the paper, so we went over there and started working, if you could call it that. It was called *Press Bulletin* to start with, and then it became *The Chronicle*. We got our sixteen-dollar-a-month allowance that everybody got. The doctors and other professionals got nineteen dollars a month, and apprentices got twelve dollars. Later on, everybody started gravitating toward the hospital for the three dollars extra.

KKC What did each of you do exactly for the *Poston Chronicle*?

WY There were three of us artists, and we were all teenagers, and I guess nobody who's a real artist would want to do that work. It's just mimeographing, cutting stencils, and getting textures: you put a little plate under there, and you just rub it, and you get little different textures. There was one fellow named George Okamoto who was very good. I was terrible, but I didn't want to work in the mess hall, and I'd heard they were looking for artists to do advertising, and I said, "Oh, I can do that." But how do you advertise in camp? What is there to advertise?

HY The editor would send me around from office to office asking for news, and I'd take anybody that wanted to come

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along. Wakako and Jeanie and I, we all walked around together to get my no-news from every office, making wry comments about this person and that person as we went.

KKC What was it like to be living with so many Japanese Americans all of a sudden?

HY You got used to it. I'd lived on this mesa where there were about twenty different Japanese families farming, so it wasn't that new to me. But you never saw that many Japanese all in one place at one time.

KKC With so many young men and women living together in camp, was there a surge in romance?

WY There were a lot, but guys didn't like me. I was sort of antisocial, anyway, so I didn't fit in very well. I pretended to; I wore this veneer of superiority.

HY In our block, we had this bachelor's dorm, where there were people like Howard Kakudo, a cartoonist at Walt Disney Studios, prewar.

WY Who was very, very handsome.

HY And Coburn Nakamura, the hairdresser. They would drop in once in a while and chat and see me picking at my athlete's foot. And some of them would make a suggestive remark. But I don't think I was interested in boys. I had this idea of being a writer first. So this was all extraneous stuff that you put up with.

WY But didn't you feel the natural juices? I mean, I didn't even want to think of guys; my nature would just feel that attraction.

HY Oh, these girls were always asking me questions like, "What Nisei would you rather be if you could be anybody?" I would say, "I don't want to be anybody but me." But one time they wore me down. And I said that, if I had to be some

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other Nisei, maybe Jim Yamada—who was at Topaz and wrote for *Trek* and wrote very nice short stories. So what do you know, he came to our camp.

WY And one of the things that happened to me—because I thought so highly of Si as a person and as a writer, when she told me that she would like to be this Jim Yamada, I immediately fell madly in love with the guy, and he didn't even know I was alive! But he used to come swimming at the swimming hole next to his block. We—Edith and I—would stand neck deep in this icky, muddy green water while we watched him swim. He did a wonderful swan dive, jackknife, and he sat on the barge and contemplated the sunset, and, finally, Edy—Edith, one of the reporters for the *Poston Chronicle*—called him over and asked him to teach us how to swim.

KKC What was best and worst about camp life when you look back?

WY The worst is the colonization of the mind. You think you are less than what other people are because you are there. Best, like Si said, are friendships that we made and the growing up we did, too. I learned a lot in camp. I was really, really green. I'm still not there, but I sure was green.

HY Just before the war, my father was finally able to resume farming in Oceanside, and he'd planted his first crop of strawberries. That was sold along with all the other stuff on the farm to this man named Pierson from El Monte who bought it all up, and then we all went to work just before we were evacuated, picking the strawberries and everything for him. I guess he paid the farmer's cooperative there for the produce, but I'm sure he made a lot of money.

WY After my father had this big fiasco in Brawley and we moved to Oceanside, my mother started to operate a board-

inghouse for farm laborers, like the transient immigrants. They call them *buranke kassugi* [lit. blanket carriers]. They travel the length of California harvesting—in Oceanside, strawberries; in Bakersfield, Fresno, grapes and celery. My mother ran this boardinghouse, and it seemed like she was just paying the debts and, possibly finally, after all these years, making enough money to realize her dream of going back. And then the war came along, and we lost everything except the stuff that we carried in our hands to camp.

KKC How were the families affected in camp?

HY In some mess halls, they had the family system, but eventually most young people started eating with their friends.

WY Maybe some of these things would have happened anyway. Most of us were just at the median age of seventeen, just at that rebellious stage. We were asked to answer these very important questions at seventeen and eighteen without any knowledge of politics.³ And we were asked to denounce Japan or agree to fight wherever they sent us. And that really tore up the families! In our family, my brother was the only one that went to Tule Lake. My sister went out to Arkansas, got married to a U.S. soldier, and I went to Chicago.

KKC Both of you lost a family member during the internment.

HY My brother Johnny was one of the first to leave with the young men that were going out to Colorado to top sugar beets. Evidently, they needed a lot of labor there because there was sugar rationing during the war. They made a lot of sugar beets then, and they would top them so that the beet would grow larger by itself without the leaf. When that season was over, Johnny went to Denver and worked washing dishes in a boys' seminary, and then he was candling eggs, and he was going to night school, taking accounting classes,

and then all of a sudden we heard he'd volunteered for the 4-4-2d. Antiwar as I was or am, I didn't think he'd done a good thing. But it didn't take him long to get through basic and go over to Italy and get killed. He was only nineteen when he died; I don't know if that would have happened if we weren't in camp.

KKC Did your father try to stop him?

HY No, when young people want to go out, they go out, where there's promise of more money than the sixteen dollars a month.

WY There's the freedom, too.

HY Yes, freedom.

KKC What about your father, Wakako?

WY My father died during the last few weeks of camp, when they were pushing everybody out. He had a preexisting health problem—ulcers. He was a minor-league alcoholic. He was unable to express himself, so his pain just ate him up. When he got in camp, it got aggravated, and then it got better. Then Hiroshima was bombed. I believe the thought of going back out, starting from scratch, killed him. My mother said that, after Hiroshima was bombed, he got very sick and started to bleed, and he died in November, in camp. I was in Chicago, and, when my mother said, "He's going, come home," I came home, but it took about four days to get back on those milk wagons. (We called them *milk wagons*, those old trains.) By the time I got back, there was hardly anybody in camp. I could hear the voices of the people coming back from the wake, and I knew he died. Shortly after that he was cremated, and we left camp.

KKC Any other memories about camp?

HY Dust storms. One time, in the early months, there was

such a bad dust storm, and nothing had been planted yet. This mud was rushing horizontally past the windows. I was horrified because I'd never seen weather like that before. Wide-open spaces. Major lightning storms, which were frightening but beautiful to watch. And the vegetation that was there, unique to that area, like mesquite and cottonwoods and tamarisks.

WY And ironwood and manzanita.

HY If you didn't have to go there, you would find it maybe a beautiful place to visit.

WY The big November strike.⁴ As far as I remember, there were two guys who beat up on some of the JACL members suspected of being FBI informers. These two guys were put in the Poston prison, which was just another barrack with a lock on it. So the whole camp went on strike because the two guys were going to be taken to Tucson to be tried. There were other grievances, too, which were all put into one big package.

KKC What was your routine in camp? What did you do together?

WY Oh, walk around, and talk, and . . .

WY/HY [*Together.*] Argue!

WY One night, Si showed me a poem and said, "It's wonderful." I read it and said, "I don't think it's so good." And she said, "It's better than what you do." I was furious, and I rolled up this paper and started beating her up with it, and she was lying on a bench, letting it happen.

HY Well, I was laughing, too, because it was ridiculous.

WY I don't know how I stopped, probably grew tired or my arms flew off.

HY But that taught me a lesson about criticizing other people's poetry.

WY You should have told me when you read my poem that it was no good, but you didn't.

HY And we don't even remember the poem now.

WY No, but I told this story to Garrett Hongo once, and he laughed about it because, in his mind's eye, he was seeing these two old ladies fighting.

WY/HY But we were young.

KKC Were there other writers in camp?

HY Quite a few. Fuku Yokoyama was in Camp 2; she still writes in Honolulu, under her married name, Tsukiyama.

WY Jim Yamada was there, but he didn't write when he came to Poston. He was deep in his sociological surveys.

HY There were these people who were writing their books, like Alexander Leighton, who'd be down at the Ad Building once in a while. Dorothy Swaine Thomas and Richard Nishimoto showed up, too.

WY Nikki Sawada Bridges, who wrote a poem about camp.

WY The real artists were in Topaz: Miné Okubo and all those writers. . . .

HY Toshio Mori and Jim Yamada and Toyo Suyemoto.

KKC Did the incarceration determine what you did after camp?

HY In between, my two brothers and I had gone to Massachusetts, and I worked as a cook. I didn't know anything about cooking, and here I was cooking. My brother Jemo was supposed to be the butler. The other brother, since he was so young, got to go to summer camp with other kids, so he had

a fine time. I had asked for farm work because that's all I knew physically. They got us to Springfield to work for this millionaire lady whose mother had a farm out in a place called Longmeadow. But we never did get there because we got news of Johnny dying and our father asked us to come back to camp, so we went back. The following spring I went up to Manzanar to visit my aunt so that we could make relocation plans, and then on the bus down I met Emily, my good friend from Compton Junior College days. She had visited camp from Chicago, and she was coming down to Los Angeles. We both stayed at Evergreen Hostel, which was a place where a lot of the returnees stayed before they found places to go. And I found a job with the *LA Tribune* before I found a house, and then I found a house, and then about twenty people came to stay at the house at one time or another. Right?

WY I did. It was like a hostel at her house, and she did all the cooking.

HY I didn't do all the cooking. I remember Emily making stew and baking bread.

WY I had no idea, but every time I think about you and Jemo in Massachusetts as cook and butler it just makes me laugh.

HY The War Manpower Commission had sent the millionaire's chauffeur to work in the factory, and they had sent her cook somewhere else.

WY That's why the boys in our camp had to go out and top sugar beets, because all the white laborers were working in the defense industries.

KKC What happened to your home in Oceanside after the war?

HY Where we lived was called Stewart Mesa, and they had already been planning to turn that into Camp Pendleton (though we didn't know this). There were Engineer Corps

marching down the dirt road to survey the place, and there were big pipes from a company from Irvine, everything lying around in big stacks. We were doomed, but we didn't know it. There was no home to go back to—it was all Camp Pendleton. I had this sense of déjà vu when they sent the Vietnamese and Cambodians that escaped Vietnam there, in the Marine tents. So there were these Asians where we used to live. It was a beautiful place. You can see and hear the ocean from there, and I thought I would like to live there the rest of my life. But not the way it is now. It's all barracks and Marine stuff.

WY Because of the Alien Land Law, Asian immigrants couldn't own their own land. We didn't even own the hotel. It was owned by a white landlord. When the farmers didn't come back, there was no point in having a boardinghouse, which was like an employment agency: farmers came in and picked up the guys and then took them home. After the war, there was nothing to go back to. So my mother just joined the last contingent out, and we went to San Diego. My older sister and I looked for a job. All the papers were advertising—like the telephone companies were advertising for women to come and interview, and the defense industries were still advertising. We went everywhere, but we couldn't get a job. We were housed in a trailer—where they put us after we came out of camp. It was a navy yard. My sister and I were coming home one day, and the bus stopped just short of the trailer park. We were walking from the bus stop, and we went by this warehouse-looking place that said: "Help Wanted." It was a photofinishing place, and we said, "Let's go in there, and, if they say they've already hired, let's go to the window and tear up that 'Help Wanted' sign."

So we went in there fully expecting to be rejected, but they said, "Come in; we'll hire you!" It turned out to be morons' work. All we had to do was to put all the numbers together.

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The snapshots you take are printed with a number on them, a different number for each order. We just sat there and sorted these numbers: all the 158s go in one pile and the 159s in another and so on. But we started to get better jobs at this place, and my sister ended up being a printer for snapshots. She printed the negatives, and I sat doping [i.e., developing] them and threw them into the chemical solution. I sat all day, throwing. That's where I learned to smoke.

KKC How long were you at that job?

WY Off and on, I guess a couple of years, from one photofinishing plant to another. We struck, got thrown out, then found another job.

HY Didn't you do that in Chicago, too?

WY No, in Chicago I was running a candy-wrapper machine.

HY I thought in the end you worked in photofinishing.

WY Oh, yes, you're right. I wanted to get out of that candy factory, so I (when you're young, you have all kinds of guts) went to one of the bigger department stores called Carson Pirie Scott. I went to the photo department to ask if I could get a job doing retouching (which is not photofinishing). They said they sent their stuff out, but the lady was very nice, and she gave me the name of this guy they sent their stuff out to.

KKC Si, you said that you found your job before the house. Can you describe your job with the *Los Angeles Tribune*?

HY While I was staying at the hostel, I saw this ad in the *Pacific Citizen*—in those days a Negro newspaper—wanting a Japanese American man to work for them. I applied. Another applicant was Bean Takeda, a Nisei who had edited his own newspaper before the war. I thought, Shoot, I don't have a chance, because he was reeling off these names, like he went

Hisaye Yamamoto and Wakako Yamachi

to school with Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, who were big football players. What do you know—they hired me instead of him.

KKC Why do you think that was the case?

HY I figure they recognized some kinship in me. They weren't very business minded. (Bean Takeda was very success oriented.) What they wanted the Japanese for was to maybe make contacts with the returning Japanese community so that they could have a sort of joint newspaper. During the war, Little Tokyo had become Bronzeville—the blacks had moved in. Once the Japanese came back, they took over again. But I didn't go out to get Japanese ads for them, so they just kind of tolerated me.

KKC Did you like that experience?

HY Oh, yes. After a while I learned an enormous amount—on top of grammar—which they taught me. But the oppression and discrimination [faced by blacks] finally got to me, and the weight was just too much to bear. So after two, three years I left. I said I was going back to school, but that's when I started writing the short stories.

KKC But then you joined the Catholic Workers. How did that happen?

HY This *Catholic Worker* newspaper used to come in as a *Tribune* exchange, and I used to go through all the exchanges and combine stories, like there would be a story in one paper about how to live to be a hundred, and somebody would say that they went to church and went to bed early and got up early; somebody else in another paper would say they lived to be a hundred by drinking and smoking and eating everything they felt like. I would combine stories like that, including combining all the lynchings that took place during the week. One of the newspapers that came in was the *Catholic Worker*.

I felt attracted to it and to the work of the Workers. After I quit the paper I subscribed; the more I read it, the more I wanted to go join, to live in a community like that and take part in the work.

KKC What were you attracted to, particularly?

HY Peter Maurin [one of the founders of the *Catholic Worker*] believed in a synthesis of what he called "cult, culture, and cultivation," which meant going back to the land. His ideal was that a person could work out in the fields maybe four days—four hours a day—and then go back to the farmhouse and paint or write or do printing or whatever, all centered around the Catholic Church. They were also pacifists who believed in living out the Sermon on the Mount as far as humanly possible, and these things just appealed to me.

KKC Still, it was a pretty radical decision to drop everything and join.

HY Well, it took a while, corresponding and meeting Dorothy Day here before I finally went.

KKC Tell us about your experience with the Workers.

HY Oh, golly, it was so variegated. We used to go to daily mass, and I went with Paul, my [adopted] little boy, who was born a Catholic. (I got him when he was five months old.) He would say, "I'm the Catholic, and my mother's the Worker." We would end the day with compile if things were going right, but sometimes things got pretty wild there, with people having emotional problems, and alcoholics, and religious fanatics, and people who went there for the same reason I did, who believed in the work. And I got to do things like going around killing tomato worms and feeding the chickens and rabbits. Eventually, they asked me to review books and do the farm column and . . . cook.

- KKC** How many people were there?
- HY** It varied; maybe a core of about twenty to twenty-five, and then there were always people coming and going.
- KKC** Were you the only Asian?
- HY** I guess so, but there were visitors from Japan.
- KKC** And then?
- HY** Let's see. Oh, I got married and came back to California.
- KKC** I guess you don't want to talk about falling in love.
- HY** No, I don't want to talk about falling in love. . . . [*Sings.*] Falling in love. . . .
- KKC** Wakako, did the internship affect your career as a writer?
- WY** No, I didn't write until I was older. I started writing for *Rafu Shimpō*. . . .
- HY** You were doing the artwork.
- WY** Yes, and I was very happy with the work I was doing. I always wanted to write, but I didn't think I was good enough. One day, my ex-husband said, "Why don't you offer to do the artwork for free if they'll accept your stories?" That's the pressure I put on Henry Mori [postwar editor of *Rafu Shimpō*'s English section], who said "all right" as though he was doing me this big favor, and after a while I got really tired of his patronizing. And I wasn't getting any response from readers, so I said, I guess I'm not really a writer.
- KKC** Both of you have written about the internship, Si in "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" and Wakako in *12-1-A*. Are any of the people and events described in these works based on your actual experience?

- HY** It's all so jumbled; nothing is really autobiographical because, for instance, in a story like "Yoneko's Earthquake," I've borrowed stuff that people said about Wakako and her relationship with her mother. In fact, I visualized Mrs. Hosoume as Wakako's mother. And then my own experience is in there and other people's, too.
- KKC** Then it is based on actual experience, even if it's not just your own.
- HY** Yes, that's right.
- KKC** What about *12-1-A*?
- WY** Everybody in there is somebody or parts of somebody I know, and everybody in there is me. Mr. Ichioka, who never came out of his barrack and who quietly died, is like my father. Yo I took from Si's character. Although Si certainly wasn't that active a feminist, she was nevertheless a feminist, and she taught me a lot.
- HY** I didn't recognize myself in her.
- WY** I hope you didn't. And Mitch, the young man that went to camp, I took from my brother. He did go to top sugar beets, and he did go to Tule Lake. I don't think that Mrs. Tanaka was my mother, but I took parts of her—the nagging parts.
- KKC** I read an essay by Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald and Katharine Newman about the two of you. They say that, whereas Wakako stresses personal involvement with her characters and writes totally within the Japanese American community, Si moves outward and sees the world in interaction. Do you agree with that assessment?
- WY** They are right about me because that's the only experience I have.

HY Me, too. The statement about personal experience would be just as valid about me, right?

KKC Except your stories usually have characters besides Japanese Americans. I believe that's what they mean by your going outward. In your experiences both with the *Tribune* and the Catholic Workers, you were actually not surrounded by any Japanese Americans.

HY I guess not, but I don't look at things that way. As long as I write and I'm Japanese American, it's Japanese American experience, isn't it?

WY I didn't have too much involvement with other races. In fact, the first Chinese I met was Shawn Wong.

KKC Was that before or after you became a writer?

WY After I became a writer.

HY We had a meeting here with Shawn and Lawson [Inada]. They were making this film about Lawson.

KKC So, even though you both grew up in rural communities, your experiences have been very different.

HY The kids I went to school with were of all nationalities: Dutch, Armenian, French, Mexican, Italian, just about every nationality that was in southern California.

WY When I was going to grammar school, the schools were segregated, but, because of the Japanese government's intervention, we were considered white. The Mexicans, the Indians, the East Indians, and other races were in a separate school—the bus would drop them off and then take us to the other school. But we Japanese Americans just congregated together because children do recognize their own and feel more comfortable with them. And then the kids in the segregated school were permitted to join us at the main school at sixth

grade. During sixth grade, I remember falling in love with a Mexican guy.

KKC You both grew up experiencing so much racism. Do you feel that the situation has improved?

HY No. Well, yes, in the sense that there's such a thing as multiethnic literature now and groups that promote it.

WY And also in the sense that most people are now aware of racism.

HY But discrimination is worse than ever, and hate crimes are proliferating. Does literature have any impact on what goes on day to day?

WY I remember going to the store and not getting waited on. But people are more aware of racism now. Although you have a lot of police brutality and so-called suicides in jail, if you have a lynching now, it's publicized, and those of us that care say something about it.

HY I remember in Oceanside when we were going to be evacuated, the Japanese community had to put up with a lot. Some businesses wouldn't take their checks. One girl asked the clerk for a certain style of clothing, and the clerk told her, "Where you're going it's not going to matter anyway." But there was this Mr. Zahniser that rescued everybody: he had this Red and White grocery store, and he cashed everybody's checks and sold them groceries, and he stored everybody's stuff in one of his warehouses, and then he brought it all to camp for us later.

KKC I've always been struck by the parallels (as noted by Stan Yogi) in "Yoneko's Earthquake" and "Songs My Mother Taught Me": both these stories describe rural families, both use a naive narrator, and both contain an illicit love affair and an unwanted pregnancy. And now Si discloses that Mrs.

Hosoume (in "Yoneko's Earthquake") is based on Wakako's mother.

HY I didn't realize that somebody could see the stories as similar because they seemed totally different to me.

WY Si wrote hers first. I didn't think of mine as being similar. That was a very traumatic year for me—the year that my little brother died—and I just had to tell it. I tried to be as honest as I could.

HY And mine is fiction. My idea was to reproduce the trauma of the earthquake, and I started out writing a funny story, right? And it turned tragic in between and went to that kind of conclusion.

WY We had an earthquake in Brawley, too, a very big one. "Yoneko's Earthquake" was very evocative for me.

KKC Despite the similarity, I thought there was a very interesting difference in the two stories, namely, that the lovers were attractive in very different ways. Marpo in "Yoneko's Earthquake" seems very Westernized: he's Christian, very chivalrous, and so forth. Yamada in "Songs My Mother Taught Me" is almost the opposite: he's more attractive than the husband precisely because he's more Japanese, being a Kibei (a Nisei educated in Japan). When you were growing up, did you fluctuate between Japanese masculine ideals and the Western masculine ideals?

HY I really based the physical aspects of Marpo on a Kibei fellow who was actually a friend of the family. I just made him Filipino.

WY I always liked Japanese men because we were brought up on Japanese movies. We looked at those samurai movies when we were kids. The samurai are masculine. They wear the kimonos tied with the low belt—open up to the navel; they split their legs, and you can see their thighs.

Words Matter

HY Their hairdo with the one ponytail. . . .

WY Their wild, wild eyes, and their grunts and their groans.

KKC What about the American movies? Weren't you brainwashed by those as well?

HY Oh, yes. Gary Cooper and Fred Astaire. We were impressed by those.

WY Sure. And Erroll Flynn, my God. But they were foreigners to me. Japanese were my people. You could feel an intimacy exuding from the screen.

KKC In "And the Soul Shall Dance," the narrator says, "It's all right to talk about it now. Most of the principals are dead." Since both of you write about real people and real events all the time, do you feel uneasy about publishing your stories right away?

HY No, my people aren't real, like Marpo is a composite of several different people. So who recognizes who?

WY When I started the story saying "all the principals are dead," it was because I was going to tell this very personal story—more or less autobiographical. The kind of thing I had in mind was just like the problem Si had with people resenting her talking about them. Now I realize—like Si was saying before—people don't recognize themselves.

KKC Both of you have written stories that have been turned into films. What is lost and gained in the process of cinematic adaptation?

WY I wrote "And the Soul Shall Dance" into a play first.⁵ Mako, the artistic director at East West Players at that time, asked me to do it. It got such great reviews that the producer of Hollywood Television Theater came to see the play and really loved it. So he approached me and Mako. I said, "I've heard about what Hollywood does to your stories; you have

to promise not to change one bit of it." He said he wouldn't change a word. There are a few things changed because it's a movie instead of a play. You could go all over the place in a movie, but in a play you have to stay on stage, on one or two sets, right? But he was true to his promise, and he made some good suggestions. He said, "Why do they have to move every two years?" Like most white people, he didn't know anything about the Alien Land Law. So the question and answer are inserted into the movie. More could have been changed. I could have dropped a lot of the dialogue and shown it just with eyes, shrug of the shoulders, but what did I know then?

KKC What about you, Si? What do you think of the changes made by Emiko Omori in *Hot Summer Winds*,⁶ the film based on "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake"?

WY Emiko Omori is a woman I used to baby-sit when she was about a year old down in Oceanside, and she eventually grew up to become a cinematographer. She mentioned that she wanted to do a full-length film and wanted to know if she could do something with my stories, and I said, "Sure, go ahead." It took her several years. She wrote her own script and incorporated all these notes about Japanese Americans that she'd been saving, and she used the two stories as a loose frame on which to hang all her anecdotes. I like it; it's a beautiful film, but there are people who think it should have remained more faithful to one story or the other. And, since she liked happy endings, she tacked a happy ending onto it. So it is not really supposed to be my stories.

KKC What's your impression of *Hot Summer Winds*, Wakako?

WY I loved it very much. The happy ending didn't bother me. People have to live with what they have got. You might as well be happy with it; you might as well accept the situation. I loved the way Emiko did the love affair, and I loved the kids. They were not too precocious and not too cute, and

Natsuko Ohama and Sab Shimono were great. They went out there, and they got those tomatoes bobbing in the water—it was wonderful.

HY The set was already there because a Japanese production company had made this film called *Strawberry Road*. They leased the land for a year and grew strawberries on it. They were through with the movie, so they said Emiko could use the land. They had put a shack there, and she built it up even more and built a palm bathhouse and the packing shed.

WY It's very effective. I've seen movies made by Japanese producers doing our lives, and, Lord, they have some silly inconsistencies.

KKC What are the different demands for writing plays and writing short stories?

WY In the short story, you could take the reader anywhere—to the desert, to the sea. In the play, you have to consider the limitations of the stage, and everything has to be done by dialogue, and you can't do too much exposition because people fall asleep. But Momoko Iko said to me once, "I see why your plays work. It's because you write short stories and the short story is the most abbreviated form; to adapt it into a play would be easier than adapting a novel." A short story could be five minutes in a person's life. And so could a play.

KKC Did you ever try writing plays, Si?

HY No. Poetry is what I would like to write, but nobody likes my poetry. So I keep it hidden now. I don't even have time to write these days, the older I get, the . . .

WY The more fun it is to live!

HY No, the more time it takes me to do everything else.

WY I haven't written for years! Well, the good thing about plays: they get recycled without your putting one extra line in

there. I have to feel pretty bad before I write. And, lately, I've been feeling very good! I have to be depressed to write. That's why my stories probably are depressing.

HY People have to ask me for something, and then out of guilt I go to the typewriter when I can and put it together. With "Florentine Gardens," for instance, I sent it to David Wong Louie for his anthology. Once I sent it off, I became aware of all the mistakes in it, so I asked for it back, and about then my nephew asked me for something for the English section of *Hokubei Mainichi* [a Japanese American newspaper published from San Francisco since 1947], so I sent it to him. Meanwhile, I had gone up to the University of California, Santa Barbara, and they were starting a magazine and asked me for something. My nephew hadn't been able to use this story because he had a whole bunch of material for that holiday edition, so I asked for the story back, and I gave it to the people at UC Santa Barbara.

KKC Wakako, you said writing can be a pain, but isn't it also a pleasure?

WY It is. Once I get started, I find I am on a roll; I feel so good. It's one of the few pleasures I have left, besides going shopping! If I have a story I want to tell, it's generally already made in my mind, and it's just, How am I going to approach it? How am I going to present it? Once I've decided, it's very easy, and it's very much a pleasure. If I don't have a story to tell, it's very painful to write. Or, when I have a story to tell like "Songs My Mother Taught Me," it was still very painful for me to write. I found myself crying when I was typing.

KKC So you're not like Si, who can write as long as she is guilty.

WY I'm a little bit more emotional. There's got to be something that makes me want to talk and talk, and I think to

myself. Who wants to hear these old stories over and over again?

HY I would get about five stories started simultaneously in a notebook, but I haven't finished any of them yet.

KKC But you enjoy writing?

HY Ah, yes. If I had the time, I would have spent a lot of time doing it, but the yardwork takes me all day basically, and cooking, ironing—everything else takes a lot of time. The older I get, the slower I get.

KKC Don't you feel that your writing should have priority?

HY No, no, that's what I get to when I finish everything else.

WY It's a dessert. It's true. I sat at the typewriter, looked, and said, Oh, cobwebs! I got to clean that up. Then I got to go over there and mop the floor. And then I think it's just putting it off one more day.

KKC In the public eye, both of you are successful writers, but what is success for you personally? What do you consider as your most successful work?

HY I don't think I'm that successful, just that these old stories that I wrote a long time ago have been printed and reprinted, and I'm amazed. I didn't do anything to do that. If I had it printed once, that was enough. The rest is flabbergasting.

KKC But what's your personal idea of success?

HY If I get through the day! At my age . . .

WY Success? I don't know. You write a play, and some people like it, and some people don't. If you can get it in the theater, get it put on at all, that's a step. I have plays that have never been put on. I don't see myself as being well known,

and I don't consider being well known as [being] a success for me. I would just like to be happy. I am trying, and I find that, if my personal life is good, that's enough or that, if my professional life—my writing—is good, then that's enough. I don't have to have everything. I'm not used to getting everything; it's just a little here and there, and it's enough. If I can straighten out my personal life or the things that haunt me, I would consider that a minor success. Life is a series of pitfalls and successes.

KKC Of all the works you've written, which one is your favorite?

WY Let me think about that.

KKC Which one of Wakako's works do you like best, Si?

WY Oh, I love "The Handkerchief." I tried to write this short story called "The Yellow Serpentine." But she wrote it instead, and her story is so great. It's about this young fellow growing up while his mother leaves the house for a while.

WY What happened was my ex-husband told us this story of himself as a little boy, how his mother had left to go to Japan.

WY He used to go in the closet and look at the serpentine streamers and weep for his mother.

WY And Si wrote this beautiful story!

WY But nobody would print it. I tore it up.

WY So I said, "Well, if you are not going to use that story, I'll write it." And I wrote "The Handkerchief."

WY That's one of her best stories; I love it.

WY That's the only story that I knowingly took.

WY No, it wasn't my story; it was yours.

WY My ex-husband's. But there were some wonderful things

in your story about going to the burlesque show, going to the bar, ordering fruit cocktail, thinking "he" was getting an alcoholic drink, and it turned out to be fruit salad.

KKC Si, I am disturbed to learn that you actually destroyed your own work just because no one wanted to print it.

WY I threw away lots of stories if they didn't get accepted the first time or, once in a while, the second time. Well, it's no good, so . . .

WY I sent that short story "And the Soul Shall Dance" out many times, and I finally said, "Nobody wants it." So I gave it to *Rafu Shimpō*. And then Si told me that these fellows—Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong [the editors of *Aiiieeee!*]—were putting this anthology together. She advised me to send them five stories, and I did. They chose "Soul." That's how it worked out.

KKC Speaking of "And the Soul Shall Dance" and "The Handkerchief," I notice that many of your stories are about the plight of women stuck in unhappy marriages; some stay, some leave. Do you feel that the situation for women is better now?

WY For the younger people there's a lot of options. Many Nisei have put up with unhappy marriages and will continue to do so.

WY Not just Nisei. That's in all cultures.

WY That's true. But then the Nisei, because of the culture, are much more prone to put up with bad marriages, endure, and *gaman* [persevere].

WY I read somewhere—it was either Ann Landers or Dear Abby—that, after answering tens of thousands of letters every weekday for years, the columnist has decided that any successful marriage means the woman is a martyr.

WY I don't believe in that; I don't think that's true at this day and age. There are more options. I mean, if you want to be a martyr, you're a martyr, but, if you don't want to be, you don't have to be.

KKC You feel that you would be more free if you were to start all over now?

WY I don't know if I want to be young again. There's so much pain, and there are so many perspectives.

HY Also, I would recall this one young starlet being interviewed on one of these talk shows, and somebody asked her about the men in her life, and she looked around, and she said, "There must be something else." And I said, "Right."

KKC Wakako, what is your favorite work?

WY Of Si's?

KKC Of yours, and also of Si's.

WY Of Si's, I like "Epithalamium." I like my play *12-17-A*. Of the short stories, "A Veteran of Foreign Wars" is one of my favorites.

KKC And, Si, what's your own favorite?

HY The one I wrote last, or I wouldn't have written it.

KKC What are you working on now?

WY I started a one-act comedy, and it has been sitting there for a little while. Now what I'm going to do is probably let it sit for a little while longer and then rewrite the play that I was working on about a Nisei woman because I know what I need to do for it and I don't mind rewriting. I don't even have a computer, but I don't mind retyping over and over again; it makes me feel close to the play.

HY I'm working on at least five or six short stories. One is

going to be called either "Sunflowers" or "Monet's Garden." And another about peacocks, and another one I've started about transportation—trains, planes, taxicabs. And what is another one? I can't even remember all of them. I've got the beginnings or ends or the middles of about five stories, but I haven't gone to the typewriter with them yet.

KKC Do you feel it's easier to be an Asian American writer now because of all the interest surrounding Asian American literature?

WY I suppose. It never occurred to me to ever be published, except in the *Rafu Shimpō*, and Henry Mori only did it because I drew pictures for him. This may sound like a lot of false modesty, but I think my reputation is undeserved because I have no training. I am just persistent, and I just try to tell it as truthfully as I can.

HY One of these days I'll figure out why I write. I'm comfortable being an Asian American writer because that's what I am, a Japanese American writer. You can write only out of your own experience because I've tried to write fantasy or use other background and it just doesn't ring true to me.

KKC Do you have any advice for young Asian American writers who are starting to write?

WY You just have to practice, practice, practice. You have to keep doing it, and you can't give up. Because the time will be ready, right for you, when you get the feel of yourself, your material, the language—and it takes a long time. Some people are more mature at an early age, have more command of the language and more idea of what life is all about. I was totally ignorant. Whatever story you have to tell, as long as it's honest, it's valid, and it's a matter of how to present it, how to give it its best shot.

HY I don't feel qualified to advise anybody else. If people

have this urge to write, they will, no matter what; wild horses can't stop them.

WY Wild horses can stop you.

HY Not permanently.

Notes

1. A Japanese American newspaper published in San Francisco.
2. A Japanese American newspaper based in Los Angeles.
3. Yamauchi is referring to two questions designed to test the loyalty of interned Japanese Americans: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?" and "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or to any other foreign government, power, or organization?" Positive answers to the two questions made male Nisei of draft age eligible for service in the army and made citizens and aliens of Japanese ancestry eligible for resettlement outside the West Coast exclusion areas. Dissidents were deemed disloyal and segregated in Tule Lake, one of the ten internment camps.
4. The Poston strike was a manifestation of long-standing tensions. The Community Council in the camp consisted entirely of young Nisei (only Nisei were allowed to hold elective office) and those who were seen as stooges for the administration were sometimes physically attacked. On 14 November 1942, a Kibei (a Japanese educated in Japan) council member was beaten almost to death. About fifty evacuees were investigated, two of whom were detained. A general strike occurred on 18 November out of sympathy for the two detainees.
5. *And the Soul Shall Dance*, directed by Paul Stanley, produced by KCET (Los Angeles) for PBS, and aired nationally in 1977-1978.
6. *Hot Summer Winds*, directed by Emiko Omori, produced by KCET (Los Angeles) for the PBS American Playhouse Series, and aired nationally in 1991.

Selected Works by Hisaye Yamamoto (DeSoto)

"After Johnny Died." *Los Angeles Tribune*, 26 November 1945, 20-21. Reprinted as "Life and Death of a Nisei GI: After Johnny Died," *Pacific Citizen*, 1 December 1945, 5.

"Seventeen Syllables." *Partisan Review* 00 (November 1949): 1122-1134. Reprinted in *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1988) and *Seventeen Syllables* (1994).

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Introduction

KING-KOK CHEUNG

My work as an activist . . . is inextricable from what I write.
—Janice Mirikitani

The whole enterprise of writing for me is spiritual.
—Li-Young Lee

You write because you have no choice.
—Wendy Law-Yone

What does it mean to be an Asian American writer? Is it the same as being a writer of Asian descent? Or just a writer? As the epigraphs to this introduction demonstrate, the authors interviewed in this collection have remarkably different literary compulsions. Even more varied are their styles, their sensibilities, and the settings of their stories, which include Burma, Brazil, England, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Sudan, Thailand, and Vietnam as well as California, Hawai'i, Kansas, and New York. Yet in this country these authors are all designated as *Asian American writers* by academics, publishers, the media—and in this volume.

Like most artists of color, authors of Asian ancestry in the