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"Talking to us" "inside our silence," "a recent history": The Internment of Japanese Americans in Amy Uyematsu's Poetry

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Amy Uyematsu is a Sansei (third generation) Japanese American poet from Los Angeles, who has published five books of poetry: *30 Miles from J-Town* (1992), winner of the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize; *Nights of Fire, Nights of Rain* (1998); *Stone Bow Prayer* (2005); *The Yellow Door* (2015); and *basic vocabulary* (2016). She was born in the city of Pasadena in 1947, and raised in Sierra Madre, a small town nearby, in Los Angeles County. An activist involved in the Asian American movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, she is known for her essay, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America" (1969), and the co-editing of a widely-used UCLA anthology *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (1971). She helped shape UCLA's newly founded Asian American Studies Center.

In her poetry, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II is an essential experience, even if she was born after the war. To her, as to many Japanese Americans, particularly from the West Coast, the World War II internment camps were a decisive event:

> At least for the first three generations of Japanese-Americans, our lives have been very much affected by the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. And so, even though I was born after the camps, still, my growing up as a child was so affected by the camp experience, by the fact that the United States was fighting Japan during World War II. (2006 *National Book Festival*)

In fact, both her parents and grandparents were interned during World War II. Writing about her family's wartime internment experience, "by far the most popular Asian American subject" (Robinson 46), she is part of a "narrative tradition that [is] distinctive of Asian American literature" (*Cambridge Companion* xxii), and which is, as for other minority Los Angeles poets, a traumatic 20th century historical-geographical landmark embodying her American ethnic identity, setting her apart from others[1].

[1] For example the 1965 Watts riots for African American poets; or the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots for Chicano poets. See my book, *A Higher Form of Politics*.

Addressing the Internment Camp Experience: from Activism to Poet-as-activist

The Removal and Incarceration of the Japanese Americans During the War

Only two months after Pearl Harbor's attack in 1941, and the USA's declaration of war on Japan, then Italy and Germany, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, allowing military commanders to designate "military areas" from which "any or all persons may be excluded [...] and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion." (Executive Order No. 9066). This led to the evacuation of those deemed a threat to the US, i.e. Japanese Americans, and to a lesser extent German Americans and Italian Americans (Rosenfeld). In May 1942, General DeWitt issued Civilian Exclusion Order No. 34 demanding that all people of Japanese ancestry—up to 1/16th ancestry, or with one great-great grandparent—on the West Coast, from Washington to Arizona, report to one of eighteen Assembly Centers, to then be transferred to Relocation Centers, otherwise known as internment camps (or concentration camps by Japanese Americans and other progressives today[2]). These ten Relocation Centers were mostly situated throughout the West—Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming—and South—Arkansas.

Uyematsu's family on both sides were among the 110,000 to 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the Pacific Coast who were evacuated and incarcerated. Her mother and maternal grandparents were interned in Gila River War Relocation Center in Arizona, her father and paternal grandparents at Manzanar War Relocation Center, in Central California, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in the Owens Valley. Among those interned, more than 60% were US citizens (*Semiannual Report*), notably the Niseis (or second generation Japanese Americans), like Uyematsu's mother and father and uncles and aunts: they were the American children of Issei parents who had immigrated from Japan to the United States before 1924—like Uyematsu's grandparents on both sides, who had all come from the Shizuoka Prefecture. The Immigration Act of 1924, which had banned all immigration from Japan (and other Asian countries), meant that the Issei—those of the first generation born in Japan—could not become citizens or even own property (until 1952) because of alien land laws, while the Nisei (second generation) and Sansei (third generation), who were all born after 1924 in the US, were US citizens. This created distinct generational groups, within and without the camps: on the one hand the Issei, those who came before 1924, and on the other the later generations, who were US citizens.

[2] "Japanese Americans and other progressives now refer to the camps as "concentration camps." If you look at current discussions, you will see that term used." (Uyematsu "Re: Article Response 2").

Only in January 1944 did the War Relocation Authority (WRA) reinstate the military draft for the Japanese Americans. In June 1944, the Japanese American 442nd Infantry Regiment nicknamed "Go for Broke," the most decorated combat unit in World War II and beyond (Shenkle), proved Japanese Americans' loyalty through their valour in combat on the European stage. In December 1944, Public Proclamation Number 21 allowed internees to return to their homes, which they did in January 1945. The Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of the removal in 1944. It was only in 1980, under Jimmy Carter's presidency, that an investigation commission was appointed, which concluded the incarceration was the fruit of racism. In 1988, Ronald Reagan signed into law the Civil Liberties Act, apologizing officially to the Japanese American community, and offering financial reparations to the camp survivors.

After the war, many Nisei who had been interned stopped speaking Japanese and gave their children American first and middle names[3]. Before the war, they had been farmers and small businessmen. After the war, many did not find their farms and businesses again, which had been appropriated by "'white interests' in the nursery and florist businesses" among others (McWilliams 127). As a result, many returnees became gardeners—including Uyematsu's maternal grandfather, Jiro Morita, who had had a popular grocery store on wheels serving the San Gabriel Valley before the war (*Yellow Door* 61)[4].

Denial

Despite the importance of the internment, and the trauma, it was mostly not talked about or even known when Uyematsu was growing up in a white Los Angeles suburb in the 1950s and 1960s. Her white schoolmates at Pasadena High School, where she was one of the very few people of color—let alone Japanese Americans—in the student body, not only did not know about the camps, but did not believe her when she told them about them:

> In a senior government class, I was talking about the camp experience that my grandparents and parents suffered through during World War II. Nobody, but the teacher (who was old enough to know), believed me. And I remember my sense of frustration and anger that my white classmates doubted what I said and that our history textbooks didn't mention the camps at all. (Sonksen)

In her poetry, like other Japanese American writers, she addresses that lack: by telling both the history and the stories that lack denotes. Why wasn't this historical episode in the history

[3] "Prior to and during the detention, 20% of Sansei were given European middle names. During the resettlement years, 70% of Sansei received European middle names." (*Densho*).

[4] Not all Japanese Americans lost their businesses during their internment, for example Uyematsu's paternal grandfather, Miyosaku aka Francis Uyematsu, who was a rich man, known as "'camellia king' [who…] could grow anything" (*Yellow Door* 80-1), and who owned three nurseries, "still had his nurseries [after the war], which he had my father (eldest son) run." (Uyematsu "Re: Article")

books? And why was there disbelief on the part of the white students of her class? She answers those questions by addressing poems to those white classmates, and beyond them white mainstream American society, which tell them about her history—both collective and personal—and denounce from the inside the racism she and her community have suffered.

"Thriftstore Haiku" (*Yellow Door* 63-4) sums up the internment experience for the Japanese Americans in six haikus describing the internment process in stages: first slanted eyes, then piano lessons and artworks in the camp deserts, next Sansei heroes enlisting in the American forces after being locked up, and finally the denial the camps existed at all. The last haiku of the poem, entitled "A Little Matter of History," refers to Uyematsu's painful memory of the high school incident, which is a metonymy for the denial of the whole American society:

> A Little Matter of History, circa 1965
>
> "Relocation camps"—
>
> not in the history text
>
> you won't believe me ("Thriftstore Haiku" *Yellow Door* 64)

"A Little Matter of History", which is also the title of a section of her 2015 book *The Yellow Door*, could be seen as a reference to Native American activist Ward Churchill's book entitled *A Little Matter of Genocide,* about the extermination of American Indians in the Americas and its denial, which the author compares with that of the Jews by the Nazis[5].

Yellow Power Activist

Feeling connected with other Japanese Americans and Asian Americans by the same experiences of racism and historical traumas, and the need for redress and assertiveness, she became engaged in the rising Asian American movement in the late sixties. Looking to the Black power movement that had set an example for minorities' struggle for visibility, she embraced the term Yellow Power, "a popular phrase in those early days of our movement." ("Five Decades" 23). A class she took as a senior at UCLA while majoring in math in 1969 was a major influence in her life and poetry. As she explains in a piece she wrote in 2014 for the *Huffington Post*:

> At UCLA, the best class I took was 'Orientals in America,' in my senior year 1969. The students, mostly young Japanese and Chinese Americans, crowded every class,

[5] Amy Uyematsu says she was not aware of the book when she wrote this poem, though she added, in an e-mail, "then again, maybe I'd heard the title somewhere and it was floating in my head." (Uyematsu "Re: Article").

> cheering, raising fists, and in my case going home and pouring out poems. How liberating it was to release our pent-up anger for decades of racial discrimination and injustices. On a big white-majority (at that time) campus like UCLA, we finally had a home in activist-scholar Yuji Ichioka's class; Ichioka is credited for coining the term 'Asian American.' ("Old Asian American Poets Never Die")

For that class, she wrote a paper, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," which was published in 1969 in *Gidra*, the Los Angeles Asian American militant newspaper (1969-1974), and the *L.A. Free Press,* Los Angeles's widely distributed underground press (1964-1978; 2005-). This led to her hiring by the new UCLA Asian American Studies Center, where she co-edited (under her married name Amy Tachiki) the aptly named *Roots: an Asian American Reader*, "once the major anthology used by early Asian American Studies classes" ("Old Asian American Poets Never Die."). She was in charge of the first section on Identity. In it, she included "The Emergence of Yellow Power," "one of the most important early assertions and discussions of Yellow Power, decrying 'token acceptance' by white America, the psychological empowerment found in racial pride, and the explicit links between Black and Yellow Power" (Bayor 768).

Through the mid-1970s, she was an activist[6]—radical, bold, marching against injustice, her "years of noisy outrage" (*Yellow Door* 84) as she calls them now.

Poetry

Poetry was intrinsically linked to her activism, and it featured regularly in movement newspapers and magazines. In fact, to "many of us in the early Asian American movement, poetry was integral to our political education" ("Five Decades" 28). Yet her "leftwing" radicalism became increasingly antithetical with writing poetry in those ideological times, as she explains in an interview with *Poetry LA*:

> My earliest poems that I wrote when I was in the Asian American movement—some of them did get published. And then I began to become more and more leftwing, and was studying works from China, and Marx, Lenin [...]. I was in these study groups where the kind of poetry I was writing I could hear other people make comments like 'that's really too personal.' And it was kind of frivolous. So it made me very secretive. Other people didn't know I was writing poems. (*Poetry LA Interview Series* 2015)

[6] The reason Uyematsu " wasn't that active in the late 70s" is that she "became a schoolteacher and working mom." ("Re: Article Response 2").

Poetry was deemed too ideologically impure, and activism demanded that she take sides. In her poem "A Question of Scriptures," she looks back at herself in that period ironically, drawing a parallel between her radical politics and her "old Sunday School," both dogmatic, intolerant and violent. In the end, poetry offers a place where all beliefs can coexist harmoniously, and revolution come about[7].

> Meanwhile I became a student
> of war—from Marx to Malcolm X,
> instilled to worship
> the idea that one side
> is always absolutely right.
> But just like my old Sunday School,
> I couldn't ask questions,
> held my poems in secret.
> […]
> And I found myself
> in a temple of poets—where
> Buddha resides comfortably
> with Rumi, Gandhi, Neruda,
> and Guan Yin, goddess of mercy—
> revolution possible
> even in the simplest
> act of writing. ("A Question of Scriptures" *Yellow Door* 70-71)

On the face of it, she resembles a post-activist poet, as George Uba calls them, "express[ing] at once an affinity for and a sense of distance from the activist tradition," as time, demographic changes, increased Asian American diversity, heterogeneity and dispersal have "thrust back" the former activist poets "upon their sense of an individual self." As other Sansei poets, she would find it more difficult to establish a connection with a "tribe," for tribal identity "is [now] always in doubt" (Uba 35). Yet despite this distance, and self-criticism, and contrary to the individualistic, cut off post-activist poet Uba evokes, she is keenly aware of "how being a movement 'radical' in [her] early twenties continues to shape [her] thinking and writing as a now aging sansei baby boomer" ("Five Decades" 21), and of her still and ever deeply political role as a poet, a writer and an artist, "expressing political concerns through poetry" (27). In fact her sense of the collective and her loyalty to her tribe are intact, as that tribe is inclusive, harking back to "the broad-based coalitions of the sixties,"

[7] In an e-mail to the author, Uyematsu adds: "I think there are MANY places where revolution is possible, including music and the other arts, spirituality, possible political/social systems yet to be developed and imagined." (Uyematsu "Re: Article")

(34) "including nonwhites working together alongside other progressive groups" (33) for change. As she concludes, in a recent retrospective article entitled "Five Decades Later: Reflections of a Yellow Power Advocate Turned Poet," discussing her past and continuing activism through poetry: "Lessons learned fifty years ago remain true. [...] The demand for black, brown, red, and yellow power—21st- century-style—is as urgent as ever" (35). She will play her part in the new revolution, as a poet, as she has always done.

Uyematsu will use poetry in her quest for her personal multifaceted identity, as a Japanese American Sansei babyboomer Los Angeles woman, an identity containing the political, and "not dictated by mainstream stereotypes and distortions" ("Old Asian American Poets Never Die"), or even her own stereotypes. This identity is multiple, at once personal and collective, at the intersection of an intricate network of defining relationships: historical, generational (she is a Sansei, and a 60s babyboomer), political (an activist still, her world view shaped by "certain anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist ideas [she] embraced in [her] earlier activist days" (Uyematsu "Re: Article"), familial, spatial (California, Los Angeles, Sierra Madre and Pasadena), Japanese American, Asian American, American, "ethnic," female.

The Internment

As Kristine C. Kuramitsu notes, in an article about internment art fifty years after Executive Order 9066, the Japanese American internment "is a clear reference point marking the confluence of the personal and collective" (Kuramitsu 641), at once comforting and killing, to follow Gayatri Spivak's famous metaphor (Spivak 781[8]): "'comforting' (in that it was a shared experience that was in some ways pleasurable and now serves as a site of ethnic solidarity) and the 'killing' (in that the experience is overlaid with pain and can inspire factionalism or stagnating anger)" (Kuramitsu 641).

The collective—represented by Uyematsu's repeated use of the pronoun "we," standing for the Japanese American Sansei—combines with the personal, embodied by the "I," as history makes them intersect. We and I, the "comforting" pronouns of shared experience and solidarity, are confronted to the pronoun "they," the dominating white Anglo Americans, who are also directly addressed—angrily or painfully—as "you" by the poet, to be warned or apprised about the consequences of their acts and attitudes.

To make the "we" whole again, the "I" must not only break through the silence of "they" and "you" but also of "we," meaning family and community, for the silencing of the internment camps "did not simply exist within mainstream histories and cultural productions; it also existed within the Japanese-American community, within Japanese-American families."

[8] "History slouches in [the notion of origin], ready to comfort *and* kill."

(Mura 613). To make up for the silenced parts of stories, she lets her imagination dwell on objects, paintings, fragments of stories. This, to her, characterizes the poet's art form: "As many of us poets will do, we'll get little bits and pieces like that and we'll come up with our own version of what's going on" (2006 National Book Festival). Thus through her poems, she is not only "talking now," she is talking "within our silence," and "talking to us:"

> I was forced into desert camps
> where you didn't hear me counting what was stolen
> and afterwards when I returned in silence
> you even praised me
>
> but I am talking now
> a recent history
> that you are still afraid to hear—
> the issei you deported
> nisei who refused
> the rioters you shot
> sons you sent away to fight your worst battles
> and those of us who stayed behind
>
> I am talking now inside our silence
> after forty years of waiting
> a nisei mother's public statement
> the poems which could not be thrown away
> and the grandfather who could never
> take me back to Manzanar
> where he rebuilt his garden
> loud with sand, rock, and pine
>
> I am talking to us now.
> (from "The Shaping of Pine," *30 Miles* 41)

An "absent presence"

As poet and editor of UCLA's Asian American Studies Center's *Amerasia Journal* Russell Leong points out in his noted article "Poetry within Earshot: Notes on an Asian American Generation 1968-1978," "those Japanese American writers who were the Sansei, or third generation, tended to see their history—and literature—tied to the World War II internment

experience of their parents" (Leong 169-70). Even if she had not experienced the camps, and her family did not say much about them[9], Uyematsu was preoccupied with restoring "historical lineage, and recover[ing] a 'cultural bloodline,' through tracing the first and second generation experiences" (Leong 168).

But, as she had not gone through those experiences herself and those who had mostly kept silent, as for other Sansei, the internment was conspicuous by its "absent presence" (Sturken 692): it was "a historical event that has spoken its presence through its absent representation," (Sturken 689). Indeed, cameras were prohibited in the camps, replaced by government propaganda films depicting the camps as beneficial and pleasant, and the internees themselves mostly kept silent, destroying the few objects they were allowed to take "in an attempt to obliterate their ethnic status through destroying its evidence" (Sturken 692). It is Marita Sturken's hypothesis that "the internment produced an image both too disruptive and too domestic to conform to the war's narratives" (694). She further notes that "the remembering of the internment camps [...] have come primarily through the interventions of Sansei, [...] haunted by both the silence of their parents and the sense of memory they cannot quite narrativize." (698). This is similar to what Marianne Hirsch has termed "post-memory," speaking of the children of survivors' memories of the Holocaust, or what Avery F. Gordon has called "haunting," or "ghosts."

Uyematsu herself is haunted by this "absent presence," which creeps up in every one of the five books of poetry she has written, including the last one, *basic vocabulary* (2016), starting with its cover which is a stylised depiction of drones which could also be read as Pearl Harbor's attack (an armada of black different sized planes in formation over a red background). Reminders of this "absent presence" abound, whether they are dates (the fatal date of Pearl Harbor December 7, or 1942 the year of the internment), figures (110,000 or 120,000 for the number of Japanese rounded up for camps, ten for the number of camps, Executive Order 9066), the names of the camps (Manzanar, Gila, Heart Mountain), the recurring allusion to stones which the internees wrote on or made into gardens, the desert camouflage netting the internees made, a sign saying "Closed for Business," gardening shears (gardening being the most common job returning internees could get), all ghost objects/post-memories signaling the internment of the former generations.

In a sociological study on the effects of the incarceration on the Sansei generation, based on over 700 surveys, Donna K. Nagata comes to the conclusion that the prevailing silence of the

[9] "Actually, my mother did talk a little about the camps. She was a popular high school student in camp and had a good time; but she also told me about how horrible it was to be sent away on a train from Pasadena (I refer to that in "December 7 Always Brings Christmas Early"). My father, who was a talker, also had some stories about his camp years. What was significant to me was that they did not share what they and their parents were feeling during the camp experience." ("Re: Article Response 2").

internees—the parents and immigrant grandparents who had been in the camps—about their incarceration, "left a hole in the personal histories of the Sansei" (Tachibana 566). The poem "Three Pulls of the Loom" literally echoes this feeling: it is a poem in three parts about three different generations of women—Uyematsu's grandmother, herself and her sister, and an Indigenous Latina "brown woman" met in the Yucatan jungle. The second part entitled "Sisters," about her and her sister Mary's generation, depicts a lithograph of herself that her sister drew, which she describes, tellingly, thus:

> There is a hole in my side
> that Mary has not etched onto metal
> so light breaks through on the blank surface [...]
> the light almost breaks my body in half
> and it's me at twenty
> and it's us
> and I have been healing the open side [...] ("Three Pulls of a Loom," *30 Miles* 53)

In the third part entitled "Maya," the poet encounters an indigenous woman in the Yucatan jungle, "a brown woman with eyes like mine, the same high cheekbones," another version of herself, linked by common Asian features, gender, and motherhood (54). The poem ends with the transmission between these women, who are at once daughters, mothers and even now grandmothers, the hole of silence and transmission being filled by a spiritual connection stronger than blood links, "each daughter explaining her time and place to the next woman so that I may know her." (*30 Miles* 55). Significantly, it is the daughter figure who symbolically does the transmitting.

Replaying the Uprooting

> they didn't force the usual
> customs on us.
> no kimonoed dolls in glass cases
> no pink and white sashes
> for dancing the summer obon
> we weren't taught the intricacies
> of folding gold and maroon squares
> into crisp winged cranes, but
> we never forgot enryo
> or the fine art of speaking
> through silences." (from "30 Miles from J-Town" *30 Miles* 8)

What Uyematsu has been chiefly transmitted by her family is "the fine art of speaking through silences." Poetry allows her to speak through the silence of the internment camp

experience—a metonymy for all other silenced happenings, and to connect with her Issei Japanese-speaking grandparents by a creative leap, through the inventing of stories. The internment is what has brought about the split within her family and herself. It replays the initial uprooting of immigration, another "absent presence" passed on to the next generation.

> There are stories I was never told—
> only a silk kimono
> passed on to me in an antique box,
> while the scent of incense and powder
> lingers in the robe's black folds.
> Or the repeated glimpse of a woman
> unknotting her long black hair,
> her blood in mine [...]
> I invent rituals without words—
> to acknowledge this stranger ("From a Ceremony Repeated" *30 Miles* 83)

As she is not able to communicate with her grandparents, the familial immigration stories cannot be told firsthand, and come only in "tiny bits and pieces"[10], particularly that of her paternal grandmother, who was beaten by her first husband in Japan and married beneath her in America to a man whose first wife had been sent back to Japan; or that of "a great-great-grandfather in debt" whose son sojourned several times in America and sent back money, and whose own son—Uyematsu's grandfather—immigrated to America because he was rowdy and was the second son, and thus would not inherit and had no future in Japan (*Yellow Door* 77-78). To that maternal grandfather, Jiro Morita, English and America are symbols of emancipation, which he espoused full-heartedly, no matter what the circumstances: he "learned to speak like an American" ("The Sugi Tree at Mishima Pass" *Yellow Door* 81), and

> never regretted leaving Shizuoka—
> no bitterness for
> the rocks hurled at him
> in San Francisco,
> or for the years lost
> in that Gila concentration camp ("The Sea Off Kazusa Province," *Yellow Door* 78)

[10]"These are stories I've heard from my mother and father (who assumedly heard them from my grandparents). So while I still ache deeply for the language gap between 3 of my grandparents and myself, I was still able to get tiny bits and pieces of their histories, which I'm grateful for." ("Re: Article Response 2")

However, his granddaughter's situation is different. In the eponymous poem "30 Miles from J-Town," she remarks:

> dad was a nursery man
> but didn't know that sansei
> offspring can't be ripped
> from the soil
> like juniper cuttings. (6)

Her parents and grandparents—three of whom spoke almost no English—after the triple trauma of immigration, white racism and the World War II camps, thought that cutting their own children from their Japanese culture and language would preserve them in turn from exclusion and stigmatization in American society; by eradicating their foreign roots and giving them only one culture and language, the American ones, their American born children would have to assimilate and be fully American, and thus be "saved from broken tongues," as Uyematsu notes in "A Shaping of Pine," a central 8-part poem in *30 Miles from J-Town* (36). Yet, as she reminds her parents, children are not plants, whatever immigrant generation they belong to[11], they cannot be torn from their heritage. To do so is to sacrifice them instead of saving them.

> by the third generation
> I was sacrificed,
> saved from broken tongues (*30 Miles* 36)

Language

This process of forced and willed acculturation has the opposite effect of that intended: because of it, she repeats the uprooting, passed on to the next generation, even as she is American, precisely because she has been isolated from her roots, and only been taught English, almost no Japanese words, culture or religion (her family is Protestant):

> My parents were bilingual but I think because of the camp experience, they weren't too motivated to have my sister and me learn Japanese. There were a lot of Nisei parents who forced their kids to go to Japanese school on Saturdays, my parents didn't. My parents and grandparents on my mother's side were very very westernized—much to my regret actually. I always kind of envied the other Japanese American kids who had more Japanese culture in their upbringing. (*Poetry LA Interview Series 2015*)

[11] In this Uyematsu is like the other Sansei – the Japanese immigrants' grandchildren, who have not lived through the camps – described by Donna K. Nagata as having "low self-esteem, pressure to assimilate, an accelerated loss of the Japanese culture and language, and experience of the unexpressed pain of their parents," p. 209.

This has condemned her to fit in American society, even if she does not fit in due to her "slanted eyes." This is a clear case of "mistaken identity" as she says in her 1969 landmark essay "The Emergence of Yellow Power":

> Asian Americans have assumed white identities, that is, the values and attitudes of the majority of Americans. Now they are beginning to realize that this nation is a "White democracy" and that yellow people have a mistaken identity. [...]
>
> In the process of Americanization, Asians have tried to transform themselves into white men—both mentally and physically. Mentally, they have adjusted to the white man's culture by giving up their own languages, customs, histories, and cultural values. (8)

In fact, she fits in nowhere. Her not speaking Japanese prevents her from communicating with her paternal Issei grandparents and her maternal grandmother, first generation immigrants who cannot speak English. Language embodies the uprooting, the gap between Japan—the old country and its language, which has deliberately not been transmitted—and the new country—America and English, which are like a mask, a faked identity which will always be fake for racialized Asian Americans.

Amy Uyematsu cannot speak Japanese, she can only "say a few pidgeon phrases,"

> A crude japanese english
> offered to grandparents
> before they die ("30 Miles from J-Town" 9)

Instead, she

> sound[s] just like any other hakujin [Caucasian]
> [...]
> my lack of dialect
> revealed too many years in white classrooms. ("30 Miles from J-Town" 4)

She can pass for a white American when heard and not seen, though in public, like other Asian Americans ("we"), silence is her protection against white racism, and invisibility her safeguard against her conspicuous racialized physical appearance:

> we can fool
> sound just like an american
> over the phone,
> and in public places
> we usually don't talk at all. ("30 Miles from J-Town" 9)

English is the language of those with whom she does not belong and to whom she is invisible, constantly excluded, slighted, insulted, misunderstood. Japanese is no longer a mother tongue, nor a father tongue; it is a grandparent tongue, a foreign language cut off from her generation by history and racism. She has become foreign to her own people and history.

Yet the Japanese language and culture remain somewhere deep inside, beyond language:

> groping inside this buried place
> for the carelessly thrown out
> language of immigrants,
> only two generations
> since leaving Shizuoka. ("A Recent Conversation with My Grandmother," *30 Miles* 59)

In this "buried place," what Uyematsu calls "racial memory" has done the silent transmission:

> I do believe in something called racial memory. [...] It's something that I kind of concocted. Even though I wasn't raised to know a lot about Japan and Japanese culture, there's some sort of sensibility I feel I have, especially when it comes to my aesthetic toward beauty, and my love of certain things in nature like stones, and pine trees, and water, which is very much the area of Japan that I am from [...]. My parents never tried to get me to like these things. My grandparents didn't. I'm wondering: where is this coming from? (*Poetry LA Interview Series* 2015)

The sound of the language she can hear, though the understanding of the language itself eludes her, and thus direct communication and connection with her grandparents, and especially her grandmothers:

> If only I could speak with obachan [grandmother],
> [...]
> But I can't say the words.
> We gave up a language well suited to farmers
> and poets, its rhythm uneven with
> brush stroke and pause.
> It holds sound inside picture
> With a thousand possibilities for
> shadow and light.
>
> Instead I must use
> these words with no memory. ("A Recent Conversation with My Grandmother," *30 Miles* 59-60)

Even in Los Angeles, she is uprooted from her community as she lives "30 miles from J-Town," (Japantown, located in downtown Los Angeles). In Pasadena, where she is almost the only Japanese American in her high school, she is isolated and an outsider, never invited to social events, her classmates,

> who acted like they liked me
> but never asked me home ("1110 on My Transistor Dial" *Stone Bow Prayer* 54.)

She is also isolated from J-Town, also known as Little Tokyo, and yet

> this was the center
> this was the lifeline ("30 Miles from J-Town" 9)

She is isolated too from the other Japantowns in Los Angeles, like what is known today as Sawtelle Japantown, which was a tightknit community, proud of its ethnic identity, according to a longtime resident quoted in *the Japan Times*:

> We knew everybody. The best thing was that you knew who you were: You were not Japanese, you were not American—you were 100 percent Japanese-American. You were obviously raised with Japanese values by your parents who were the progeny of immigrants. [Another resident also] claims to have a strong sense of ethnic identity: "The Nikkei families that were farmers that lived here put emphasis on Japanese arts such as dance, kendo, karate and judo," Osugi says. "They taught the cultural things of Japan." (Okazaki 4 Nov. 2017)

Uyematsu's first poem "To All Us Sansei Who Wanted To Be Westside" in her first published collection of poems, *30 Miles from J-Town*, echoes this feeling of a strongly rooted ethnic identity in the various Japanese American neighborhoods of Los Angeles, open only to insiders. In her case, the Westside she yearned for as a teenager was the Crenshaw district, a mixed Japanese American and African American neighborhood in the 1960s:

> It didn't matter where we lived
> within a hundred miles of LA—
> if you were Japanese growing up here
> in the sixties, you weren't really buddahead
> unless you knew about the Westside,
> [...]
> By high school it was already too late for me.
> I was from Pasadena and never got over
> being forcefed a bleached blond culture [...]
> Somebody had decreed the only places
> you could stay Japanese and cool were the Westside,

Gardena, a few neighborhoods on the Eastside,
each with their own reputation—
hardly anyone from the outside ever got in.

This didn't stop me from hoping. ("To All Us Sansei Who Wanted To Be Westside" *30 Miles* 3)

Desperately wanting to belong, she and her sister are nevertheless betrayed by their accent, their way of dressing, even their way of moving when slowdancing:

But I really gave myself away when we slowdanced—
no one had ever taught me how
a genuinely rowdy sansei could slowdance
though she barely moved her legs. ("To All Us Sansei Who Wanted To Be Westside" *30 Miles* 4)

This painful uprooting from her origins, language and family has been caused in part by the World War II internment camps. The only ones in her family not to be touched by the internment experience are her father's sister and brother who died before the camps:

his sister and brother
never knew manzanar
kanji and english inscribed
on their gravestones ("30 Miles from J-Town" *30 Miles* 9)

It is only because they have not experienced the camps that English and Japanese can be united[12].

"War Stories"

In her first book, *30 Miles from J-Town*, Uyematsu has a section of poems called "War Stories," mostly dealing with the camps. In "December 7 Always Brings Christmas Early" (27-28), Christmas presents are metaphorically passed around space and time, embodying the helpless interned Japanese being removed, like her mother, then passed on to the next

[12] Amy Uyematsu has informed me that she learned, after writing the poem, that her aunt Alice actually went to the camps, contracted tuberculosis there and died a year after the camps closed. As she told me: "As you can see, that poem from 30 Miles is inaccurate. When I wrote the poem in the 80s, that was what I knew; in later years, I learned more about Aunt Alice. ("Re: Article Response 2"). We can conjecture that the poem would have taken a different turn if she had known, and that our hypothesis of the union of Japanese and English only being possible before the camps, would still hold true.

generation and finally to all Asian Americans suffering from white racism: from Pearl Harbor's "neat white packages" (i.e. coffins) to her mother being "taken away in a long railed box" to be "delivered [...] to a box in santa anita" (i.e. an Assembly Center), then "to a tarbacked box/ in that flattened arizona desert (i.e. Gila internment camp); down to her, her teenage daughter, who was put "in an airless box/every december 7/ when the history lesson was me" in her white high school; and finally, "forty years later the presents arrive" throughout the US, and notably in a Detroit bar where Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death in 1982 by two autoworkers who ironically mistook him as Japanese, a nationality deemed responsible for layoffs in the auto industry (a famous news story at the time). The poem concludes:

> the evacuation of bodies resumes
> judged by the same eyes that watched mama's train ("December 7 Always Brings Christmas Early" *30 Miles* 28)

Thus the violence of war and forced incarceration is being reenacted by the next generation in different guises—involving all Asian Americans, linked by white America's violent racist exclusion/evacuation//incarceration/eradication. In Amy Uyematsu's poetry, as "for much Asian American writing," "war has functioned as a defining context" (Parik and Kim xxiii). To her, everything is interconnected: space, time, ethnic identity, white racism. This she shows through constant parallel structures, juxtapositions and repetitions, and using the paradigmatic nature of language, substituting one word for another, and thus creating their intimate connection, and that of the situations described: in the above poem, the word "box," which is repeated four times, refers to something different each time, though it serves to link the different experiences in time and space and equate them with the same feeling of confinement (the train evacuating the Japanese; the horse stalls where they stayed in Santa Anita's Race Track turned into an Assembly Center[13]; the barracks made of tar which housed the internees in the various camps; the white high school classroom on December 7 for their descendant). Similarly, the substitution of the word "packages" into "box" into "presents," and that of "mama" ("her") into "me," into "vincent chin" serves to collapse time and space and equate the different experiences of exclusion and racism of the Asian Americans through different historical periods in America.

[13] "In 1942, racing at Santa Anita was suspended due to the Second World War, when Santa Anita was used as an "assembly center" for Japanese Americans excluded from the West Coast. For several months in 1942, over 18,000 people lived in horse stables and military-style barracks constructed on the site" (Wikipedia).

Beyond Silence

"the silence of fathers"

As we have said earlier, what characterizes the camp experience is the silence of those who have lived through them. This is particularly true of the men, "the silence of fathers" ("Rock," *30 Miles* 30). As Takashi Fujitani explains, "haunting memories about the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans [...] still resist public representation and even individual recollection" (Fujitani 6). They resist everyone in Uyematsu's family, including her cheerful maternal grandfather, the one who "could even speak good english" ("War Story" *30 Miles* 32) "like an American" ("The Sugi Tree at Mishima Pass" *Yellow Door* 81), and "was good at persuading the others" at camp to work, "raising everyone's spirits" ("Desert Camouflage" *Stone Bow Prayer* 50)[14],

> Though Grandpa Jiro loved to tell stories,
> He didn't talk about camp ("The Sign Says 'Closed for Business'" *Yellow Door* 62)

Camp is:

> Where our men
> Will forget to talk ("Rock" *30 Miles* 30)

The last poem of *30 Miles from J-Town*'s "War Stories" section is "The Shaping of Pine," a long poem in eight parts. It starts with her being silenced by the painful rupture between her and her paternal grandfather, again through language:

> 1
> for a lifetime
> I did not speak
> my grandfather's language ("The Shaping of Pine" *30 Miles* 35)

Silence has been passed on, though she does not know if it consists in her not hearing or in there being no talk to hear:

> I'm not sure when
> I was taught
> not to hear our talking
> or if our talking
> actually stopped. ("The Shaping of Pine" *30 Miles* 35)

[14] As Uyematsu pointed out, "Grandpa was just trying to make the best of a bad situation. As soon as they could, the Morita family applied to leave Gila - first grandpa's two sons, got into University of Nebraska; then the rest of the family followed and also moved to Lincoln, Nebraska." ("Re: Article Response 3").

Through the “we,” she is now talking about her generation of Sansei, concluding:

> by the third generation
> I was sacrificed,
> saved from broken tongues.
> the grandmother who still survives
> can no longer recognize me,
> cannot pronounce my western name. (“The Shaping of Pine” *30 Miles* 36)

She heals and overcomes her sacrifice as a Sansei and alienation from her grandmother, with whom there is not only no shared language but no recognition, by trying to learn Japanese, “learn[ing] each word again,” starting with the word “onna/ woman” (“The Shaping of Pine” 36.)

And when her father won’t sing a lullaby in Japanese for her to sing to her own son, a lullaby which his own father sang to him and he to his daughter, she will improvise the notes for her son—recreating and reinvesting a transmission of her own, “invent[ing] rituals without words” (*30 Miles* 83).

Writing poems is another such ritual, enabling her to fill in the silence, and bridge the language, cultural and generational gaps with her grandparents. As she explains to Los Angeles poet Mike Sonksen reviewing her book *The Yellow Door*, “I think writing about my Issei grandparents in poems has helped me connect with them" (Sonksen).

If the men choose silence, and

> wear disguises
> for the white man
> and often forget to remove them
> for us. (“The Shaping of Pine” *30 Miles* 40)

Women are the ones who do the transmitting, because they

> have carried the child
> and the father,
> holding the unwritten places
> […]
> our tools are simple.
> lullaby. gossip. talkstory.
> and what cannot be said,
> passed on in rhythm,
> gesture, and memory. (“The Shaping of Pine” 40)

No Longer Silent

The eighth and last section of "The Shaping of Pine" addresses Anglo Americans and warns them that this Sansei generation will no longer remain silent, beginning with the camp experience. It will speak for the voiceless Issei and Nisei, whose silence is welcomed by the white oppressor who fears looking at him-herself and facing his / her acts.

> I was forced into desert camps
> where you didn't hear me counting what was stolen
> and afterwards when I returned in silence
> you even praised me ("The Shaping of Pine" 41)

The history must be told of the various Issei and Nisei who remained silent though they resisted or fought in various ways[15]:

> but I am talking now
> a recent history
> that you are still afraid to hear—
> the issei you deported
> nisei who refused
> the rioters you shot
> sons you sent away to fight your worst battles
> and those of us who stayed behind ("The Shaping of Pine" 41)

Uyematsu ends the poem proposing a resolution to the damaging silence about the trauma and shame of the camps, a resolution to the rupture between the generations, sexes, and languages they have caused. She offers healing from within, the reuniting of generations through recovered collective talk and self-recognition, thanks to female transmission and poetry:

> I am talking now inside our silence
> after forty years of waiting

[15] The story of that resistance is increasingly coming to be known, notably that of the camp of Tule Lake Segregation Center, where those deemed "disloyal" were taken away, as Uyematsu observes, from a film she saw on the subject: "As far as resistance during the camp years...I just saw a film on Tule Lake. Many of the nisei and issei who didn't go along with what the government wanted were sent to Tule Lake and gained the reputation of "troublemakers." With new information being uncovered about that particular camp, it's clear many of them were speaking up and resisting. According to the film, there is even evidence of torture at the Tule Lake prison. Coincidentally, when I went to the film in Little Tokyo, I had the privilege of meeting one of the "no-no boys" from Heart Mountain; he went to prison for refusing to enlist in the army." ("Re: Article Response 4").

a nisei mother's public statement
the poems which could not be thrown away
and the grandfather who could never
take me back to Manzanar
where he rebuilt his garden
loud with sand, rock, and pine

I am talking to us now. ("The Shaping of Pine" 41)

The Different Meanings of Silence

In fact, silence has more than one meaning, as we can glean from the various excerpts quoted above.

It is first defined negatively, as the opposite of talking: not to talk or forget to talk, not to speak, not to hear, stop talking, being unable to pronounce or to recognize; it is equated with the written word, or rather the "unwritten places." It also arises from things themselves: "what cannot be said," what cannot be counted, "a recent history you are still afraid to hear."

Silence is also a demeaning stereotype associated with Asian Americans, which Uyematsu denounced early on in the famous essay she wrote as a young student activist in the late 1960s: "The yellow people in America seem to be silent citizens. They are stereotyped as being passive, accommodating, and unemotional. ("The Emergence of Yellow Power" 8). Here silence is identified with passivity, compromise and lack of emotion. She then shows this negative stereotype has unfortunately been embraced by the Japanese Americans themselves, but then explains why: it is a question of cultural values that have been translated from Japan, where the concept of *enryo* for example is a noble one, meaning self-restraint, but by no means lack of expression or emotion. Translated into the United States, it has become misinterpreted as mostly denoting fear, whereas it is actually closer to a survival strategy: she reminds her readers that from the beginning Asian Americans who immigrated to the United States, starting with Chinese immigrants, "were subjected to extreme white racism," including murder. She concludes: "Perhaps, surviving Asians learned to live in silence" ("The Emergence of Yellow Power" 8.)

When it comes to the internment camps, silence is associated with erasure from history, shame, fear and racism. The internees have been reproached with going in silence to the camps, keeping silent there, leading an American life with all the signs of normalcy during their internment, and keeping silent afterwards. In this case silence means compliance, lack of resistance, resignation and adjustment—in other words accommodation—throughout the

whole process, from removal to assembly centers to living in internment camps to dispossessed reintegration.

> When Japanese Americans were ordered to leave their homes and possessions behind within short notice, they cooperated with resignation and did not even voice opposition. According to Frank Chumann, onetime president of the Japanese American Citizens League, they "used the principle of shikataganai—realistic resignation—and evacuated without protest." ("The Emergence of Yellow Power" 8)

This has been misunderstood and resented especially by the internees' own children and grandchildren, those who did not experience the camps. This includes Amy Uyematsu and her generation, who in their youth turned to Yellow Power activism in the 1960s and 1970s, in part as a reaction. The poem "War Story," addressed to her interned family, in particular her mother, and beyond to the Japanese American internees, deals precisely with that resentment and anger:

> once I was angry with you
> for letting them take you away.
> [...]
> you could have yelled
> burnt your homes
> told f.d.r. to go to hell
> or at least declared
> your bitterness to me
>
> once I was angry with you
> for telling me only of the good times
> two thousand nisei teenagers hanging out
> in mess halls, canteens, by the north gunpost gate.
> sneaking away to haystacks, a lovers' rendez-vous.
> see and hear each other all the time. [...]
> mama was homecoming princess
> but should've won,
> anyone could tell from yearbook pictures,
> gila class of 43. ("War Story" *30 Miles* 32)

But silence can also be positively connoted, as something that binds the community together ("inside our silence"), or that spurs other creative ways to communicate: through "rhythm, gesture and memory," or "loud with sand, rock and pine." It can be broken by a counterstereotypical "nisei mother's public statement" (*30 Miles* 41). Through her poetry,

Uyematsu can reclaim her personal, familial, ethnic and American story and history, as the other Sansei artists, remaking and reclaiming history through their art.

> Art by the children of internees that references the internment reclaims and physically remakes histories. As these artists come to terms with their histories, they come to terms with themselves and articulate a connection to an unspoken past by articulating this space in both collective and personal pasts. (Kuramitsu 641)

From *Enryo* to *Shikataganai*

In fact silence is a double-edged word, just like *enryo*, or *shikataganai*. In "A Pinch of Bonito" (*30 Miles* 98), a poem about her father's art of preparing fish, and habit of talking ceasessly at dinner, Uyematsu states: "I liked the silence/once we started to eat" (*30 Miles* 99): this is a sacred moment, eating together the typical Japanese food prepared by the expert hands of the father. Silence can be associated with meditation, mystery, dignity, peace, wisdom, or the natural world, like fish or the stones Uyematsu loves so much.

Enryo can be defined on one hand as what "the Japanese use to denote hesitation in action or expression" ("The Emergence of Yellow Power" 8), or, on the other, express "the narrow Western view" as "'quaint' Japanese non-presumptuousness" (*Roots* 1). In the poem "30 Miles from J-Town," already quoted above, she defines it as an involuntary silent ethnic transmission from her parents to her and her sister, which profoundly shapes her identity as a Japanese-American woman:

> they didn't force the usual
> customs on us.
> No kimonoed dolls in glass cases
> No pink and white sashes
> For dancing the summer obon
> [...] but
> we never forgot enryo
> or the fine art of speaking
> through silences. ("30 Miles from J-Town" *30 Miles* 8)

Beside the silencing of history, this concept is linked here to sexism and female repression of expression; as she says in the aptly named poem "Women's Lib, Asian-American Style," she was "raised to nod and smile" (*Yellow Door* 60). Yet it can also be assimilated to a dance, self-mastery, and respect.

As time passes, and the silence is broken then filled, she undergoes a transformative healing process with the past, her roots, and herself. This healing process can be grasped in the

evolution of the meaning of *shikata ga nai* in her writing. This Japanese phrase which translates into "it cannot be helped," seemed to epitomize Japanese-American resignation during the internment camps, at the opposite of the American cultural values of action and heroism. It is also what the Yellow Power movement has stood against, "call[ing] for Asian Americans to end the silence that has condemned [them] to suffer in this racist society," and claiming a "new role for the Asian American: [...] a rejection of the passive Oriental stereotype and [...] the birth of a new Asian—one who will recognize and deal with injustices" (Kubota 3).

In Uyematsu's poetry, the term only appears in her 2015 volume *The Yellow Door*, in a pacified way. The poem, "Under the Wave of Kanagawa," is inspired by Hokusai's universally known woodblock print, part of his series *Thirty Six Views of Mount Fuji*. It should be noted that Mount Fuji can be seen from Shizuoka, a Prefecture Uyematsu's families on both sides come from. In this poem, addressed to her grandparents, her personal story and history seem to come full circle, in deeper understanding and forgiving. The poem is addressed to her grandparents, those beloved grandparents she missed speaking to and hearing, but who passed on to her, beyond language, deep affinities:

> I am your granddaughter but your words were lost
> by the time I was born. I couldn't hear your stories
> of how you crossed the ocean,
> you couldn't tell me the names. [...]
>
> How could you guess this yearning I hold
> for a language I was never taught, this delight
> in putting woodblock prints on my walls,
> or this reverence for stones? ("Under the Wave of Kanagawa" *Yellow Door* 83-84)

Again, the internment camps make up a central part of their legacy, but this time in empathy instead of misunderstanding or acrimony:

> I can only guess what you gave up
> during those long years in Manzanar and Gila.
> you didn't waste time on bitterness
> or anger—strange, that I should harbor
>
> So much, thinking that's what mattered—
> my years of noisy outrage to tell the world
> how much you suffered unfairly.

But now I'm not so sure if you needed

The vindication. [...] ("Under the Wave of Kanagawa" *Yellow Door* 84)

This could be her new approach to the notion of *shikataganai*—and we may add its attendant one of *enryo*—resented by that angry, rebellious, youthful self, as the quieted, older poetess comes to a much deeper spiritual understanding of the concept, transcending "a binary of assimilation or resistance" (Sokolowski 90):

Would you be pleased I grew weary of anger
and finally really understand "shikataganai"—
that certain tragedies cannot be avoided,
so make the best of it, like you.
("Under the Wave of Kanagawa" *Yellow Door* 85)

She reinstates her grandparents' generation and behavior, including their silence and passivity in the camps, which she recognizes for what they are, "the flexible strategies for survival of Asian Americans," thus exercising what Sokolowski calls "divine citizenship" (Sokolowski 90):

> Performances of divine citizenship in which individuals bear witness to the wrongs of the state, deliberately practice forgiveness, and look forward to a new and different future—place the power for transformative change in the hands of those groups who have endured traumatic experiences, as have the Japanese Americans. (Sokolowski 90)

Now she is reconciled with her own history and family, she can finally belong and enjoy the freedom to be her multiple self as a Japanese American, and join the Obon dance, this Japanese Buddhist celebration of ancestors. The tone is no longer that of tragedy, estrangement from self or alienation from community, but of humorous confidence, light communion and gentle self-mocking, opening possibilities. She can now be part of the circle, dance the dance, and experience life from within and not without—a truly transcendental, spiritual experience.

So I finally do it, after four decades
of wanting to dance the summer Obon—
a Buddhist festival honoring the dead—
no more looking on from outside the circle,
too self-conscious to simply join in
And fumble my way through the steps—

no more the cultural voyeur
thinking I'm too old, too assimilated,
too torn from my Japanese roots
to follow an ancestral tradition
that even my issei grandparents
gave up by turning Christian. [...]

So the big night is here, after four decades
of foolish yearning. I dance inside the circle. [...]

And the view inside *is* more
than I can imagine. I'm surrounded
by dancers I don't even know
but normal boundaries disappear.
This is all that matters,
even the steps and missteps get
lost in something bigger. I can't stop
smiling and want the drum beat
to last forever. I look at those who watch
from the sidewalk, close enough
to touch, all of us
such lucky, lucky fools. ("Tankō Bushi, LA Version 59," *Yellow Door* 49-51)

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Personal Communications

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