

Memory in Silence: Wakako Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance* and *The Music Lessons*

by

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An American woman of Asian descent, Wakako Yamauchi's first two plays *And the Soul Shall Dance* and *The Music Lessons* were originally published as short stories. By changing the genre from a short story into a theatrical form, Yamauchi heightens an awareness of rewriting the past for the Japanese American as the key concept to ethnic memory in the American theater. This paper, based on Yamauchi's first two plays, will explore how ethnic memory plays an important role for the Japanese American woman, whose voice has long been viewed as silent and whose appearance has largely been invisible in dramatic literature and art.

Velina Hasu Houston, who is also an American woman of Asian descent and especially calls herself "Japanese Amerasian," perceives Wakako Yamauchi as "a trailblazer for Asian American women writing in the American theater." Houston points out, "Yamauchi's work looks at the past and tries to separate the illusion from the reality to find that delicate balance between the sustaining of dreams and coping with reality that allows human beings to survive and endure" (Houston 41). This viewpoint must be further examined by ethnic memory as the key to the past and as a bridge between the present and the future in Yamauchi's plays.

Before the multicultural initiatives in the 1990s, not only the voice of Japanese Americans had been long unheard, but also Asian Americans' very existence had been marginalized in the so-called "mainstream" American theater. We can clearly see it in actor, director and writer David Oyama's review of Yamauchi's *The Music Lessons* in the *New York*

Times of April, 1980 which is entitled "Asian-Americans Take Center Stage at the Public."

In particular, the image of the Asian American women has often been stereotyped, if not completely distorted. Admittedly, the American audience maintains the idea that the images of "the Asian woman as decorative accessory, model minority, dragon lady, exotic, the tragic butterfly, the prostitute, or the docile and deferential woman-child" (Houston 29) and the perception that they are silent are naturally reflected on Asian American women. An important question, however, will be raised; are Asian American women in fact silent? It is through their silence that I propose to uncover and articulate ethnic memory across unspoken words in Yamauchi's plays.

In the case of the Japanese American women to be discussed here, I argue that their silence is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, which holds that silence does not literally express nothingness and indeed, has significant meaning. A third generation Japanese American writer Philip Kan Gotanda also realizes the importance of silence, in Michael Omi's words, as "a crucial dimension of Japanese American dialogue." By quoting from an interview conducted with Gotanda, Omi states in his introduction to Gotanda's anthology entitled, *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays*, "'What's not said is as important, if not more important,' Gotanda notes, 'than what is said'" (xx). For a Japanese American, silence mirrors his/her inner voice.

In both plays, Yamauchi makes her audience conscious of the female characters' inner voice in ethnic memory that can be clearly heard in the pause or space; this is the concept

called "ma" in Japanese. The Japanese structure and sensibility of "ma" can be explored in the language of silence, the meaning of the unexpressed, and the nonverbal and yet expressed language (Kenmochi 208). The process of remembering and silence are closely intertwined in theater. Through "memory in silence," we come to see that the women's memory is inseparable from truth in the unspoken and unexplained aspects of communication. It is this Japanese sense of silence that Yamauchi self-consciously portrays as a strategy for the Japanese American women's survival.

Yamauchi is intensely aware of her Japanese ancestry, while she is profoundly conscious of her identity as an American, stating definitively, "I'm an American writer. I'm not a white American but I'm writing American stories..." (Uno 54). According to Garrett Hongo, editor of Yamauchi's first collection *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, she "grew up in a household that constantly looked back to Japan for its traditions, values, and rewards" (3). As Yamauchi herself remarked in an interview with playwright and scholar Roberta Uno, these plays are a "landscape of her early childhood" (Uno 51). In this respect, her plays represent in depth the inner landscape of her autobiographical recollection.

In her Introduction to *the Soul*, Yamauchi clearly states, "The play is based on a memory, but I embellished it" (Berson 130). Her women-centered plays present both the personal memories and the collective memories linked to the Japanese American women's historical experiences. Moreover, on the American stage she recreates a visual memory to convey the story of their struggle for survival. My primary interest is how Yamauchi attempts to stage her individual memory, which is at the same time part of Japanese American women's collective memory, and reflects their historical reality and their socio-cultural position in the United States.

In the preface to her first collection, Yamauchi clearly states her theme, "My stories are about immigrants. There have always been immigrants.... We are a tribe of wanderers remembering a garden we'd left or looking for an Eden that waits" (vii). Both plays are set in southern California's Imperial Valley. She presents the drama of the Japanese immigrants to California in the early 1930s from the perspective of a second generation Japanese American. These immigrants were mostly impoverished farmers or apprentices in Japan.

They came to America expecting to "Make money, go home and live like a king" (*the Soul* 138). Under the Alien Land Act of 1913 most Japanese immigrants were forbidden to own their land in California, so they did not tend to think in terms of permanent residency.

Yamauchi, writing about their struggle to adapt to their lives in the New World, focuses on the Japanese American woman's struggle to keep her dreams alive despite isolation and the racial and economic oppression peculiar to her gender and class. In David Oyama's review, as I have mentioned earlier, Yamauchi's *The Music Lessons* is characterized as "a kind of memory piece that recapture a vanished life." However, I would rather characterize Yamauchi's first two plays as memories of "lost dreams."

The Music Lessons was first produced at the New York Public Theater by Joseph Papp under the direction of Mako Iwamatsu in the spring season of 1980. It mainly explores the dream and memory as well as "sexual competition" in the mother-daughter relationship. The female protagonist Chizuko and her American-born daughter Aki encounter Kaoru, a Japanese itinerant laborer, with whom Aki will fall in love. Chizuko, a widowed mother of three, works as a farm hand laboring under the burden of paying back all her late husband's debts. There is an implication that Chizuko came to America by arranged marriage scarcely knowing her now dead husband.

Unlike their male counterparts who were imported as a labor force, Japanese American women were brought to America as their spouses to be more of "maid" than a wife, compelled to not simply raise their families but to sacrifice their entire lives for them. Kaoru as a schoolboy once lived and studied the violin with a rich white family. Ironically, he is forced to realize that "there's no chance for a Japanese violinist in America" (57). Chizuko and Kaoru have both lost their dreams of having a better life which they expected to come true in America.

Chizuko's words to Kaoru echo this message: "I'm forgotten too. My dreams are lost too"(82). These words undeniably suggest that (ethnic) memory is a part of their existence. On the whole, the Japanese American woman has been culturally and socially a "lost memory." Thus, she wishes to assure us that they themselves are the memories which must be expressed, however, the reconstruction and expression of such

memories occur in voluntary silence.

We can see gender differences even in memories of "lost dreams." While Kaoru is allowed to "start something new", Chizuko and Aki are not free to do so and yet they yearn for it. By discovering his future plan, living is still dreaming for Kaoru. He still wants to escape from his past in Japan and to retrieve his vanished life in America as well. Kaoru does not cling to memory and his past does not affect his present: "What does it matter? It's past. Gone"(89).

The past is not simply a memory of "lost dreams" for Chizuko but is rather, thoroughly connected to the present. Crying is a kind of nonverbal expression, an appeal to life's hardship. Working hard is Chizuko's way of crying. Because she works very hard she does not have time to look back over the past; she is able to endure her harsh and bitter life without a word. Yet it pains Aki to see her mother's silent endurance. For American-born Aki, her mother's way of living is as good as being "dead." However, self-assertion, in a woman, has traditionally been viewed as a sign of immodest or insensitive in Japanese culture. As a result, Japanese women have been taught by their mother to reserve their feelings.

Later in the play, when arguing about her forbidden love for the much older Kaoru, who Chizuko believes "immoral," Aki calls her mother "a witch." Chizuko then voices her opinion for the first time, "...You think I like this life? ...You believe this is all I want? What do you know about my feelings?"(92). These words and Aki's own response show that Japanese women do in fact have emotions but they are kept in silence. In other words, although they appear expressionless, there lie concealed within themselves a wealth of emotions, which they can project as anger, anxiety, and sorrow as well as joy and hope.

Furthermore, silence has been culturally regarded as being more eloquent and communicative than verbal language. By controlling their feelings and not articulating them, the Japanese believe that it is possible to convey to people intense emotion deep within themselves. Yamauchi show this use of silence as part of a woman's power to survive. Her female characters overcome their subordination and marginalization by choosing voluntary silence. In this silence, they can survive their unbearable reality by intensely clinging to a memory of Japan. For them "Japan is both the country to escape

and the romantic memory for which one saves frugally to re-capture" (*Songs* 252). Thus, she modestly intensifies ethnic memory lost in silence and tells it in unexpressed words.

As "Yamauchi struggled to pass on the Japanese culture of her mother to her daughter" (Houston 37), it is hardly possible that American-born daughter is able to have the same recollection of Japan like her mother. Chizuko hopes to share the same memory with Aki, but as there has been a conflict for the Japanese American second generation concerning ethnic, cultural and linguistic "double-identity" issues, she must have struggle with the common memory in this mother-daughter relationship.

Aki's memory is very active, binding to her love of Kaoru. Aki asks Kaoru to play the romantic tune with which he can recall her wherever he may go. Aki decides to leave her mother and run away with Kaoru, yet her love ends with his refusal to take her in. That Aki's broken heart over Kaoru will never be mentioned in Chizuko's family is implied; her memory of love will be silenced. Yet it is a source of her power to stay alive. Besides, Chizuko's warning to "remember tonight" means that Aki's memory has to be actively instructive in her life. Yamauchi also illustrates that memory is used, possibly not at the same level as her mother, as a strategy of survival.

And the Soul Shall Dance was produced professionally by the East West Players, in 1977, under the co-direction of Alberto Isaac and Mako Iwamatsu, who encouraged Yamauchi to expand her short story of the same title into a play. The play deals with the social and economic struggles of two neighboring farm families, the Okas and the Muratas.

Oka's second wife Emiko's past is relentlessly unveiled every time they fight. Emiko, who was trained as Japanese dancing master, was expected by her parents to marry a wealthy man but fell in love with an "Etta" (sic). The "Etta" specifically were Japanese under class extremely segregated largely because of their occupation. Subsequently, she was reluctantly sent to America to marry her deceased sister's husband by proxy. Despite her privileged cultural training in Japan, Emiko finds that all that is needed a Japanese immigrant is a "strong back and strong will."

Her neighbor Murata's words, "Out here a man's horse is as important as his wife" (136) is a grim but accurate reflection of the socio-cultural position of the Japanese American woman

during the post Depression-era. When Murata's wife Hana hears her husband casually speaks of selling her to another farmer, she takes it quite seriously. Yamauchi deals with the issue of women as property which can be disposed of when no longer useful, making the audience aware of the historical reality of Japanese American women.

The Japanese American women's lives might have, in David Oyama's terms, "vanished." In their youth, dreaming was a large part of their life in Japan and now "memories of a vanished life" are constantly with them. Accordingly, it can also be said that their existence might have already become invisible to other Americans. Hana's American-born daughter Masako asks her a simple yet severe question, "How come they don't write books about us... about Japanese people?" Hana replies "Because we're nobodies here" (154).

Moreover, Hana makes Masako aware of racism in America, warning her that "White people among white people... that's different from Japanese among white people" (153). Japanese American women "have nothing but each other" (153). Yamauchi states in an interview, "A lot of us Nisei are unsure and inarticulate, having grown up in racist America, bound to our parents' *enryo* syndrome. *Enryo* means self-restraint--retreating from your space and your due. If somebody makes a statement that your heart rebels against, you don't say anything" (104). There is, therefore, absolutely no room for the Japanese American woman to endure and survive in silence.

Living is dreaming. Emiko emphasizes, "the dream is all I live for" (152). She has to "keep the dream alive" (152), in other words, keep her soul dancing to escape from her husband's humiliation as well as his occasional violence, not to mention her own feelings of being in exile. Valerie Miner points out, "Dreams are central to these people--whether as refuge from their daily lives or as the source of their ongoing grief" (250).

In fact, Emiko has long dreamed of returning to Japan which she considers as her "real home." She had prudently planned to go back by saving money, but is unexpectedly forced to give up the dream when Oka spends all of her money on fashionable American luxuries in an effort to instantly Americanize his newly arrived daughter, Kiyoko.

Emiko, while translating one of her favorite Japanese songs,

"And the Soul Shall Dance," is struck by depression and says that dreams are "unbearable" and "insufferable." In particular, for Japanese American women, "the dreaming makes the living harder" (154), as Murata's wife Hana warns her American-born daughter Masako. This warning comes from the Japanese American mother's historical experience. Thus we can observe that the past is an inseparable part of the present and in essence, memories of the past and present are one with dreams of the future.

Stephen Holden reviewed the Pan Asian Repertory production of *the Soul* in the *New York Times* of March, 1990; "...The only things sustaining her [Emiko] are her memories of Japan and her determination to return. A secretive, mercurial woman perpetually drunk on sake, she tiptoes unsteadily about the stage in a trancelike state of suppressed rage and dreamy longing for the past." Indeed, as Hana stresses, "She [Emiko] has nothing to live on but memories" (148). I argue that for the first generation of Japanese American female immigrants, it is these memories that are inevitably predominant over dreams as the harbor from their bitter and harsh daily lives or the certain source of their continuing dislocation. For them, ethnic memory is not time lost in the past, yet it is also an inner landscape of Japan.

Music displays the genius in the overall structure of both plays. Memory is overtly related to music. In *The Music Lessons* the title itself demonstrates this. Kaoru, whose violin is a metaphor for his lost dream of being a musician, instructs Aki on how to play: "Think of yourself as the violin. Feel the music coming from inside. Deep inside. Listen to it. Does it tell you what you want hear?" (82). Yamauchi uses the music to draw the audience's attention to the interior memory that has been symbolized by the music instrument. Through the play, we can almost constantly hear the memory expressed by the music, let alone music by Kaoru's violin.

In *the Soul*, Masako believes that the delicate sound of a glass wind chime calls upon her mother's Japanese sensibilities; however, Hana no longer cares. She would rather bury her memory of Japan to deep inside, although that sound brings back to her so many memories of her homeland. It must be noted that the tone quality of a wind chime is deeply connected to the truth of her interior memory and the sound will evoke Masako's involuntary memory of Japan even if she

does not know anything about it.

Accordingly, the music evokes the interior memory on the stage; when Emiko, with her head cocked, listens to a record whining out "Kago No Tori," she "becomes wrapped in nostalgia and memories of the past..." (142). "Kago no Tori" is a Japanese nursery song about a bird that cannot be freed from its cage and signifies that one must resign himself/herself to his/her fate as well. In the same manner, by listening to a lively Japanese folk music, Hana recalls a festival in Japan and feels nostalgic.

According to Miner's analysis, "Images of various Japan float in and out of Yamauchi's work, fermented into spectral melodies..." (252). Moreover, with the melodies and lyrics of the song "And the Soul Shall Dance," Emiko's dancing in the desert symbolizes her belief that she has to keep her dream alive. Only in this song, Emiko's hidden dream that is unconsciously bounded to the memory of a lost Japan come true, and she can thus transgress the boundaries between Japan and the U.S.

Yamauchi finds in Japanese lyricism an unspeakable feeling that gives expression to something Japanese American women have in common. She thus attempts to apply music in order to present fully their emotional and spiritual experiences on stage. Consequently Yamauchi employs music as a way of conceptualizing memory, and moreover, understanding the interior memory of different generation of women.

By reliving her own experience of love, Emiko tells Masako how such memory of love can strength a woman's power to survive: Yamauchi illustrates this woman's obsession with her memory of love, which is not clearly verbalized and yet hinted in silence. After battling with her husband about her "going-home money," Emiko immediately recalls her lover physically and psychologically without uttering a sound. In this silence, the inner music of Emiko floats in through her action and takes her back to memory. Memory itself takes a certain rhythm.

At the end of the play, two lonely women Emiko and Hana, sitting in silence, are depressed by a memory of "lost dreams." Then, a small breeze moves the wind chimes as if its sound is speaking for them. Given this silent space, they are engaged in trying to find the right words to convey their feelings, yet they cannot articulate them. Hana is touched by

Emiko's inescapable fate, one beyond human control. The memory of "lost dreams" is transformed into a collective memory that they can share with each other. Ethnic memory, therefore, shapes their future. At the same time, ethnic memory is the unifier for woman's relationships such as sisters and mother/daughter.

In contrast to Emiko, Hana is realistic enough to realize her longing for Japan as homeland will not turn into reality because of her responsibility for her children and "Eventually everything passes" (162). In Yamauchi's plays, while ethnic memory haunts the soul as long as one lives, memory of one's homeland might be weathered and finally disappear as time passes by. Nevertheless, they assure us that women's memories will be passed on generationally beyond her individual memory.

Stephanie Arnold suggests this, by analyzing the female character's personality; "Emiko, erratic and rebellious; Hana, practical, consistent, present; Masako will grow up to recreate both women's experiences, to find the survival instincts of both inspiring" (192). What is more essential to the women's survival, in particular, to the survival for women of color is the process of remembering as being conceived as interior, private activity, yet externalized through dialogue in silence. For "the ethnic self," "Memory is," as Ben Xu relevantly observes in his reading of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, "a socializing ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and *survival instinct*." (6, italics mine)

This is reflected in Yamauchi's portrayal of the climax of *the Soul*. In the desert, Masako witnesses Emiko, loose hair and dressed in a beautiful kimono, singing the song "And the Soul Shall Dance" and dancing in a beautiful kimono with a branch of sage. On the stage her action of turning around embodies a fantasy of memory. The drama is a capturing "a living moment" and the memory is its recapturing. After Emiko leaves the stage, Masako will pick up the branch that Emiko drops. Her action assures us that Emiko's memory will persist into collective memories of the Japanese American women.

In this final scene, Yamauchi, by highlighting the image of Masako's face, attempts to create a vivid visual memory that will be carried in the audience's heart; we are reminded of Tennessee William's well-known stage direction in *The Glass Menagerie*, "The scene is memory and therefore

nonrealistic...for memory is seated predominantly in the heart" (Williams 143). In essence, the play is memory--namely the memory play, a term that has come to be associated with not only William's plays but with modern American drama in which the presence of past is explored.

It is not surprising to find William's influence in Yamauchi's plays. In an interview with Garrett Hongo, Yamauchi said that she loved reading William's plays, and in fact, she was greatly moved by the production of *The Glass Menagerie* in Chicago during the war. The main difference in dramatic treatment of memory between Williams and Yamauchi is, that, while in *The Glass Menagerie*, memory is structured by Tom's narrative voice, in Yamauchi's plays, memory is engraved by the female character's inner voice in silence.

Yamauchi's focus on women and memory results in some similarities in structure and theme across different plays. It may be worth pointing out that Yamauchi's own memory of the past is inevitably linked to her internment camp experience in Poston, Arizona. Therefore, her plays such as *12-1-A* and *Shirley Temple, Hot-Cha-Cha* consists primarily of memory along with the subjects-- war and evacuation-- that have mentally long affected women's lives. In these plays, memory is not simply the apparatus from which information about character or historical facts is derived. In particular, ethnic memory functions as the medium to convey the deepest, unexpressed women's feelings in silence, reflecting their inner reality as a spiritual landscape.

In addition, Yamauchi's play *The Memento* digs out a memory of the past friendship of two Japanese American women. Ruth and Marie had common romantic memories of Ruth's late husband John, but different truths of love in their youth. At a reunion after twenty-five years, as a memento of John, Ruth gives a Noh mask to Marie, and this mask is used to become another character in the scene of memory. In it, Yamauchi's vision of memory is clearly shown: John tells Marie that there are some things one can never forget; ethnic memory is in her soul even if she never knew it.

To conclude, Yamauchi, by balancing between the remembering of the socio-historical past and the staging of ethnic memory, insists on keeping Asian American's dreams alive and surviving American's reality. Yamauchi brilliantly frames the memory play for the Japanese American women

by weaving their historical experiences into a huge tapestry of "memory in silence" as a strategy for their survival.

*Part of this paper is a revised version of my presentation, "Memory in Silence: Wakako Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance* and *The Music Lessons*" at American Women Writers of Color Conference held on October 16, 1994 in Maryland, USA.

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要 旨

沈黙のなかの記憶

— ワカコ・ヤマウチの『そして魂は踊る』と『ミュージック・レッスン』 —

原 恵理子

アジア系アメリカ女性として、ワカコ・ヤマウチは、『そして魂は踊る』と『ミュージック・レッスン』の両劇作品において、アジア系アメリカの歴史から周縁に押しやられた日系女性の歴史的経験に焦点をあてている。日系二世のヤマウチ個人の記憶と日系コミュニティの共同体の記憶から歴史を語り直すこれらの戯曲において、日系女性の〈沈黙〉は民族の記憶とどのような関係性をもつのかを考察した。『そして魂は踊る』と『ミュージック・レッスン』では、沈黙は、とくに女性の登場人物の内なる心象風景を表象しており、語られない声、すなわち沈黙のなかで民族の記憶は語られ、表現されている。このような沈黙は日本の文化に根ざすものである。戯曲のタイトルから想定されるように、ヤマウチは日本の歌や風鈴など音楽を用いて、沈黙のなかでさえも民族の記憶は女性のあいだで共有され、世代を超えて継承されていくのだと明らかにしている。したがってヤマウチの作品においては、この「沈黙のなかの記憶」は、日系女性にとって、アメリカでの歴史的経験を生き抜くための戦略として描かれていると結論づけた。