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Traise Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 304 pp. ISBN 0520210344.

Reviewed by Seiji Lippit, University of California, Los Angeles

In *Masking Selves, Making Subjects*, Traise Yamamoto undertakes an ambitious study of the construction of Japanese American women's subjectivity in post-World War II American culture and literature. The study ranges across different genres and media, including film, autobiography, fiction and poetry, in an attempt to trace the various historical and cultural discourses that have shaped the representation of Japanese American women and to analyze the theoretical issues involved in their efforts at self-expression. Ranging from the period of internment during World War II to the transformed cultural landscape of contemporary America, Yamamoto's book focuses upon the point of contact between images and identities imposed from the outside and the attempts at resistance and self-expression originating within. It is on the shifting borderline of these two processes—one whose materialization is the body itself—that a complex subjectivity is produced. It is a process encapsulated by Yamamoto's metaphor of masking, which is a recurring motif throughout the work. The trope of masking identifies the site both of an orientalized, discursive construction of Japanese American women's bodies as exotic and sexualized objects of desire, as well as the counter-process of their appropriating an active mode of subjectivity. Yamamoto's impressive study offers not only a cogent and sophisticated analysis of questions surrounding the particular self-representations of Japanese American women, but also provides insight into the general problems of subjectivity for any marginalized group existing within a dominant culture.

The book opens with an intriguing family photograph: a portrait of a husband and wife and their young daughter, taken in a photographer's studio. By the daughter's side is a doll, seated on a miniature chair, as though a member of the family. The woman in the picture, Yamamoto writes, is her own maternal grandmother, pregnant with her second child. The photograph was taken four years before she would be placed in an internment camp, separated from her husband, who would be taken elsewhere. Her first daughter, Ayako, is about to be sent to Japan, to be raised by Yamamoto's grandfather's parents as their daughter. A great deal could be written about this photograph alone—what, for example, is the role of the Western doll in the picture? Yet Yamamoto's autobiographical intervention is used primarily to frame the main theoretical and historical issues of the book: the history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the complex relationship between mother and daughter, the sense of living on the borderlines between two cultures. Above all, she reads in the face of her grandmother (in the "mask" she presents to the camera) the process of creating and maintaining an inner, private self against repressive social circumstances.

The mask, for Yamamoto, is a double-edged trope. On the one hand, it indicates the construction of racial otherness, the obsessive focus, in Western representations of Japanese women, on the face as a marker of "oriental" difference. Yet, for Yamamoto, it also names the site where Japanese American women have been able to carve out a space of resistance against this persistent "subjectification": "In response," Yamamoto writes, "they have deployed the very surface whose opacity has denied them particularity and humanity in order to claim and preserve both" (3). The mask thus exists within the parameters of dominant discourse, yet also somehow

exceeds the categories of gender and race that it imposes. In this sense, the subject of this study can be understood as the appropriation of a negative stereotype (often circulated in terms of passivity, silence, and inscrutability) and its transformation into a site of resistance and the creation of a private self. As its title intimates, the book aims to negotiate between a humanistic concept of self and the deconstruction of subjectivity—i.e., to maintain the latter's critique of essentialized constructions of identity while simultaneously trying to avoid the simple valorization of flux and fragmentation.

The first two chapters of the book establish the general conceptual parameters of Yamamoto's approach. The study is, on the one hand, situated within the general context of Asian American studies. As such, Yamamoto addresses the construction of Asian American identity within the framework of American discourse on race. In particular, she analyzes the peculiar dialectic of visibility/invisibility by which this identity is constructed—a result of being located within the overarching dichotomy of "white" and "black" that serves as the basis for American racial discourse. Asian Americans occupy an unstable position within this racial dichotomy. On the one hand, Yamamoto writes, Asian Americans are rendered invisible as subjects, yet they are simultaneously represented as "highly visible racially marked objects" (64). It is a double bind that establishes a conflicted and ambivalent relationship with the body.

At the same time, Yamamoto argues for the specificity of Japanese American experience within this larger framework. This specificity is tied not only to the history of internment, but to the broader context of orientalized representations of Japan and the Japanese in American culture. These representations are shaped by the complicated cultural and political relationships between the two countries dating back to Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival in Japan in 1853. This relationship has undergone dramatic transformations in the century and a half since that moment of forced contact, marked most prominently by the cataclysm of World War II, the postwar American-led occupation, and most recently the intensified economic rivalry that peaked in the 1980s.

The first chapter of the book focuses on the feminization of Japan in American and European culture throughout this history. Yamamoto's analysis ranges from the writings of Lafcadio Hearn to Roland Barthes, but focuses primarily on Hollywood films such as *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Sayonara*, as well as popular travel writings such as John David Morley's *Pictures from the Water Trade*. In these diverse cultural artifacts, Yamamoto sees a constant process of representing Japan as both feminine and infantile. This double feminization and infantilization constructs Japan as both an object of desire as well as "a site of instruction and an object of knowledge subject to the West's ideological gaze" (12). Relations between the West and Japan have, in other words, consistently been figured as a sexual relationship, but one that is always based on hierarchical relationships between subject and object. The female Japanese body, as exotic and sexualized site of a phantasmatic desire, thus comes to signify an underlying relationship of power and dominance between the West and Japan.

Perhaps the most important insight that emerges from this section deals with the threat posed to the West by the "illegibility" of Japanese culture. In reference to Robert C. Christopher's *The Japanese Mind*, which claims the existence of an unpredictable emotional character underlying the outwardly calm Japanese demeanor, Yamamoto writes: "At stake, of course, is a dominance

that is otherwise threatened by the unreadable surface of Japaneseness: whether constructed as inscrutability or ornamentality, the surface, or mask, of Japan conceals an astonishing central lack that sits uneasily beside a potentially malevolent hysteria" (20). In Yamamoto's analysis, the reduction of Japan to the eroticized female body—most typically represented by the figure of the geisha—is ultimately an attempt to maintain some sense of racial otherness while simultaneously asserting a measure of privileged access to and mastery over that difference. It becomes a means of controlling the anxiety produced by genuine difference, by a radical unreadability. Yamamoto writes: "The West's obsessive articulation of racial and sexual alterity places the Japanese woman's body in a fetishistic economy of difference, in which it is discursively and literally the site of the East's receptivity to the West, a vestibular conduit to Japanese culture" (45). Yamamoto's analysis provides a powerful and insightful elucidation of the recurring feminization of Japan in Western writings.

In turn, Yamamoto argues that these images of Japanese women also provide a framework for the culturally constructed identities of Japanese American women. The second chapter includes analyses of two autobiographical narratives by Sansei (third generation) writers, Lydia Minatoya's *Talking to High Monks in the Snow* and Dorinne Kondo's *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, both of which involve the authors' journeys to Japan. These works represent a counterpart to the travel writings by Western males that were analyzed in the preceding chapter. Strict distinctions between the (Western) self and (Japanese) other found in those narratives are unsustainable here; at the same time, however, these writings also complicate the commonplace equation between Japanese and Japanese American identity. As Yamamoto writes: "It is a necessary journey in the process of disentangling Japanese American identity and subjectivity from racist configurations that elide the differences between Japanese Americans and Japanese" (82). For these authors, the "return" to Japan is an attempt to overcome a sense of dislocation and alienation that they experience in the United States; yet ultimately, there can be no recovery of an authentic Japanese identity. Minatoya, despite the fact that she finds herself feeling at home in Asia, also realizes that in Japan too she cannot escape the status of outsider; as one Japanese person concludes, she is "an American with a Japanese face" (87). Kondo for her part writes that in Japan she was a "living oxymoron, someone who was both Japanese and not Japanese" (89). Yamamoto notes that "[g]oing back' to Japan in these narratives is the occasion for the moment of contradiction when the Japanese American subject both does and does not fit in" (92). In the end, there can be no simple overcoming of the fracture in Japanese American identity, for the shift to Japan merely displaces it into a new context. What emerges from this experience, in Yamamoto's reading, is the possibility of a Japanese American subjectivity that finally exceeds categories of nationality and race: "[T]he sense of fragmentation that inaugurates these textual narratives is recuperated, through reclamation of the body, as a disjuncture that is nevertheless experienced as itself the ground of a viable subjectivity" (81).

The core of Yamamoto's study is an examination of different strategies of negotiating this internalized split in consciousness in Japanese American women's writing. The analysis focuses on three different genres of writing: autobiographies (by Nisei, or second generation, writers), fiction, and poetry. The three genres provide examples of different approaches to the issues of racism and the construction of Japanese American identity, ranging from the least polemical (the autobiographies) to the most politically engaged (the works of poetry). Although Yamamoto

links almost all of these different approaches to the strategy of masking, her readings are also sensitive to the differences of individual voices and individual contexts.

For Yamamoto, Nisei autobiographies provide the ground for examining the relationship between private, individual consciousness and a social identity violently imposed from the outside. This violence is most explicitly associated with the history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. "For Japanese Americans, particularly of the Nisei generation," Yamamoto writes, "the fact of the internment is the crucial and inescapable ground for the construction of self, all the more so because the internment was an event based on and forged by the denial of individual subjectivity, resulting in a negativized group identity" (109). The internment in this sense constitutes a type of originary trauma that underscores a fundamental anxiety and dislocation at the base of Japanese American identity. Nisei autobiographies, Yamamoto asserts, begin with an awareness of a split subjectivity. This split is manifested not only as the difference between American and Japanese identity, but also between the individual and the community, between private and public. In this context, the technique of masking emerges as a survival strategy, an attempt to maintain a private, inner dignity in the face of the humiliation and suffering of internment. The very tools of racist oppression are reversed and transformed into the basis for the creation of a private self.

The three works that Yamamoto focuses on—Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, and Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family*—are highly personal narratives, yet they are also thoroughly historical documents; Yamamoto sees their significance precisely in the intersection of the private and the communal. She notes that Japanese American autobiographies have been read as "conversion" narratives, recording the process of transformation from outsider to insider and the acceptance of an American identity. Indeed, the autobiographies under consideration here end on rather optimistic tones. For example, the author quotes the following passage from Sone's work: "In spite of the war and the mental tortures we went through, I think the Nisei have attained a clearer understanding of America and its way of life, and we have learned to value her more. . . . Somehow it all makes me feel much more at home in America" (138-9). Yamamoto argues against the view that these works represent a simple disavowal of a Japanese self and the acceptance of an American one. She points out that Sone herself has not entirely discarded her Japanese identity ("I used to feel like a two-headed monstrosity, but now I find that two heads are better than one" [138], Sone writes). Ultimately, however, it is impossible to escape the impression that these writings stop short of fully engaging the question of racism in American society. Yamamoto herself notes that the disjunction between the earlier traumatic experience of racism and the later easy acceptance of the American "way of life" in Sone's work is problematic, and that the "pain of bifurcation is masked by Sone's better-for-having-suffered platitudes" (139).

The fictional works that Yamamoto analyzes in the following chapter extend the thematics developed in Nisei autobiographies in more complex ways. Here, the conflicts between private and public selves are played out not only in relation to a dominant discourse that brands Japanese Americans as "enemy aliens," but also within the family structure itself. For second and third generation writers, the family—and especially the maternal figure—is inescapably identified with an imagined Japanese essence. For this reason, the relationship between mother and

daughter, one of the core motifs of these fictional writings, involves an ambivalence concerning both the connection to an older generation as well as to an "alien" culture. The process of working through the relationship with the mother thus becomes an integral part of the daughter's claim to both individual and cultural identity.

The work that most effectively illustrates Yamamoto's theoretical assertions is Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan*, whose story revolves around the absent figure of the mother. The mother of the protagonist, Naomi Nakane, had returned to Japan and was a victim of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Yet Naomi herself knows nothing of her mother's fate, as her aunt, who has raised her, has kept silent. As a number of critics have noted, the novel works through the thematics of speech and silence, as well as the ambivalent relationship of the protagonist to her absent mother. Yet Yamamoto, drawing upon the work of Trinh Minh-ha, argues that silence should not be coded only negatively as passivity or absence. Yamamoto writes: "The connection between silence and absence in the novel suggests that not only must silence be understood as a mode of agency, but that absence also must be recuperated as a site of subjectivity" (187). Yamamoto argues against the dominant psychoanalytic readings of *Obasan* that posit the novel as a narrative of separation from the maternal figure and an entry into the symbolic realm of language. Instead, she sees it as a process of the "growing understanding of the many different modalities of silence" (190). She distinguishes between "oppressed" silence (what is imposed from the outside) and "willed" silence, describing the latter as an active "refusal to speak" (190). This type of silence—like the masking of the private self—constitutes a withdrawal from and resistance against the dominant symbolic order. For Yamamoto, Naomi's story thus concerns the process of transforming the negative significations of silence and absence into a positive mode of agency. Ultimately, Naomi does not reject her mother, according to Yamamoto, but rather identifies with her precisely as absence. In her reading of this work, Yamamoto most fully and effectively resists the conventional stereotyping of Japanese American identity in terms of silence and concealment, showing how these terms can operate on a different level of an active and resistant subjectivity.

The final chapter in the book, which concentrates on poetry, reveals yet a different aspect of Japanese American women's writings. The works considered here are in many ways the most powerful writings treated in the book. The poets in this chapter—Mitsuye Yamada, Janice Mirikitani, and Kimiko Hahn—tend to be more openly polemical in their engagement with questions of race, gender and political resistance than the other writers. In fact one poet, Mirikitani, provides a counter example to the usage of "masking" that plays a central role in Yamamoto's analysis (as Yamamoto herself points out). In contrast to the complex process of transformation and appropriation described in the case of the other writers, Mirikitani rejects outright the very terms of identity imposed from the outside. As Yamamoto writes: "Within Mirikitani's poetic, one deeply rooted in oppositional politics, to reappropriate the Asian face as mask is to essentially accept the terms of its imposition" (221). Silence, for Mirikitani, results from the domination of a racist program of confinement and subjugation and does not allow for the creation of a private self. This sentiment is indicated in the following verse cited by Yamamoto: "We were made to believe our faces/betrayed us./Our bodies were loud/with yellow screaming flesh/needing to be silenced/behind barbed wire" (233). By bringing to light this alternative strategy, the final chapter demonstrates the diversity of Japanese American women's writing in negotiating the problematics of a split subjectivity. *Masking Selves, Making Subjects* is

a challenging work that is impressive both for its theoretical rigor as well as for the breadth of its coverage. While working through at times abstract theoretical propositions, Yamamoto's book nevertheless respects the individual voices of the authors under consideration, and her readings also reveal a sensitivity to historical context as well as to the different demands of the various genres under consideration. The strength of the book is the way in which it avoids the reduction of the problem of Japanese American women's subjectivity to any prefabricated theoretical schema, and instead develops a conceptual framework that accounts for specific contexts and specific conflicts. In particular, the theoretical elaboration of "masking"—by effectively capturing the complex ways in which a marginalized group responds to the violent effects of a racist discourse—will undoubtedly prove to be an essential framework for discussing Japanese American subjectivity.