

ENGLISH 1102M

Student: Cecilia Schoenbaum

Instructor: Ms. Liz Vasconcelos

Silence as Beauty, Silence as Self: The Asian American Identity

The label “American” encompasses many different cultures and races. However, American society is often guilty of assuming there is only one true, certainly white, “American” face, voice, and behavior. Associate Professor of Sociology, Minako Maykovich, states that “the criteria for physical characteristics are generally determined by the dominant group in society,” thus “racial difference is the greatest obstacle to the process of assimilation” (68). In Traise Yamamoto’s nonfiction narrative, “Different Silences,” and Janice Mirikitani’s poem, “Breaking Silence,” the authors explore their Asian American identities as defined by American culture. The quest to eliminate stereotypes and expectations through visible behavior coincides with an Asian custom that “value[s] silence more highly than North Americans” (Donahue 265). Mirikitani’s poem, “Breaking Silence,” focuses on her mother’s experience testifying to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Japanese American Civilians in 1981. Yamamoto, who is also a poet, takes a more assertive and personal stance in her autobiographical narrative, “Different Silences.” These Japanese American authors seek to reclaim their heritage by aggressively confronting their white American audience, while retaining an empowered, wise attitude that uplifts the seemingly invisible and silent Asian American community.

Yamamoto’s “Different Silences” and Mirikitani’s “Breaking Silence” both recognize how Asian Americans in the past and present have used, or use, silence for protection. As Japanese Americans of the third generation, or *Sanseis*, Yamamoto and Mirikitani both reflect on their ethnic heritage and personal position regarding the internment of Japanese nationals and U.S. citizens during World War II. Mirikitani and Yamamoto address how the Asian American community kept their silence during this difficult and degrading time. Yamamoto uses the same excuse as her interned Japanese ancestors to explain the embedded Asian disposition: “One doesn’t speak because there is no use in it, *shikata qa [sic] nai*, no use to calling so much attention to oneself, to one’s family; no use to shame others, both inside and outside” (47). The Japanese phrase *shikataganai*, translated as “it cannot be helped,” refers to the Asian Americans who tried to justify their forced internment at camps across the United States during World War II (Leitner-Rudolph 7). Yamamoto does not necessarily support this behavior but comments on it because of its psychological impact on present generations of Japanese Americans. The *shikataganai* mentality has “contributed to the stereotype of the passive, obedient, non-trouble-making Asian as seen through Western eyes” (Leitner-Rudolph 7). In the same manner, Mirikitani encompasses all Asian Americans who shamelessly obeyed U. S. orders when she says that “we were told / that silence was better” and “don’t make waves” (lines 8-9, 14). Yamamoto and Mirikitani stress the damaging effects of silence that still linger within the Asian American community.

These authors also observe that there is the disappointment in “speaking” that causes Asian Americans to use silence as a safety net. In “Breaking Silence,” Mirikitani creates the image of a hopeful, blossoming garden that represents her mother’s faith in creating a prosperous

life in the United States; however, her aspirations become suffocated: “The land she built / like hope / grew quietly / irises, roses, sweet peas / opening, opening. / And then / all was hushed . . . / . . . / silenced” (lines 66-76). Yamamoto notes in a different, more direct way the idea of being forcibly silenced when she states that to “speak is to begin trust” (48). She elaborates on this statement and uses the word “speak” in a vague way to perhaps represent broader, deeper situations that her audience of Asian Americans can define on their own terms: “I am telling you that, for me, silence is part of speaking; silence is also habit, protection. I am telling you that your desire for me to speak, to tell you where I am, is synonymous with asking me to take a risk that I have taken too many times before, with asking me to repeat and repeat and repeat myself without getting anywhere” (48). The anticipation of shame and disappointment, or the risk of not being heard, is another facet of silence that Yamamoto and Mirikitani explore.

However, when this silence leads to complacency, it must be “broken,” as Mirikitani’s poem illustrates. Samples of Mirikitani’s mother’s testimony to the Commission are woven into her poem for emotional and realistic emphasis. Toward the end of “Breaking Silence,” Mirikitani takes on the persona of her mother testifying to the Commission in order to release her own poetic cry: “I tell you this: / Pride has kept my lips / pinned by nails / my rage confined. / But I exhume my past / to claim this time. / . . . / Words are better than tears, / so I spill them. / I kill this, / the silence . . .” (lines 81-93). In Yamamoto’s narrative, “Different Silences,” she also finds comfort in “breaking silence” and highlights the power of words with intense passion: “For me, none of this can dampen the pleasure of articulation, the sensual satisfaction of words on the page and, most of all, the sense that to speak is necessary - because the alternative is the silence that . . . cannot speak through fear, frustration, [and] doubt” (50). Yamamoto and Mirikitani each lyrically emphasize the empowering effect of words, yet they realistically acknowledge the unforgettable way silence has protected or still protects Asian Americans.

Yamamoto and Mirikitani also show that the complexities of silence are undeniably connected to the expectations thrust upon Asian Americans by American society. These authors refuse to hide their frustrations, and through the use of poetry and prose, they aggressively attack the way American society and government attempts, or previously attempted, to stereotype Asian Americans. Yen Le Espiritu, an Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego, comments on the obstacles Asian American women face: “Interchangeable in appearance and name, these [Asian] women have no voice; their ‘nonlanguage’ includes uninterpretable chattering, pidgin English, giggling, or silence” (94). Both Mirikitani and Yamamoto address an outside force that dominates or controls their American identity masked in an Asian body. Throughout Yamamoto’s narrative, “Different Silences,” she uses the phrase “you ask me to speak” as a reminder of how this phrase contradicts society’s expectations of a silent, passive Asian American. She furthers her argument, using the ambiguous “you” as representing American society, with a paragraph that attacks how her identity is dissected by American culture: “You tell me at parties how lucky I am to be Japanese (always forgetting ‘American’) . . . You ask me to speak. Sometimes, I do. And sometimes when I do, you say, ‘You’re so unlike most Japanese women. You are very articulate (funny, loud, strident, etc.)’” (46). Likewise, in “Breaking Silence,” Mirikitani recounts the damaging effects of humiliation and shame that her mother, along with thousands of Japanese Americans, experienced because silence was “useful,” “easier,” and “expedient:” “We were told / that silence was better / golden like our skin” (lines 8-10). Even Mirikitani’s mother is ironically silenced while giving her presumably liberating testimony: “Mr. Commissioner . . . / So when you tell me I must limit / testimony, / when you tell me my time is up / I tell you this: / Pride has

kept my lips / pinned by nails / my rage coffined” (lines 77-84). The uninhibited arena that literature provides allows Mirikitani and Yamamoto to use this forceful, intense tone as they confront their white American audience.

Although both Yamamoto and Mirikitani advocate for a more visible and audible Asian American identity, they each reflect on the natural “beauty of silence” (Yamamoto 50). For Mirikitani, Asian Americans are “lightening and justice,” which equates Asian Americans with the silent power of flashes of lightening (line 105). When Mirikitani’s mothers “spills” her words so that she may “kill” her silence, she implies that in order to achieve this release, one must sacrifice an internal comfort (lines 92-93). Although Mirikitani speaks from an acculturated Asian American point of view, the interculturalists, Satoshi Ishii and Tom Bruneau, observe in their study that this comfort of silence is more pronounced and accepted among Asians: “Contrary to outspoken and Western women . . . , many women in Eastern cultures view their silent roles as very powerful . . . There is power of control in silence and in the outward show of reticence. This power often goes unrecognized by those who value speech-as-power and by those who value assertiveness by all, equally and democratically” (quoted in Donahue 173). Although Yamamoto does not truly answer her own question of “to speak or not to speak,” she eventually concludes “that mine is a heritage that knows the beauty of silence, the many ways in which it articulates what speech cannot” (50). Ultimately, these authors take pride in their silence as integral parts of their identity as Asian Americans.

These women both contend that their Asian American heritage has struggled through the many sides of silence in order to find an appropriate, more visible, American identity. Yamamoto and Mirikitani address a common battle for multicultural Americans; the essential “American” identity continues to be challenged as it tolerates and integrates cultural characteristics from all over the world. The natural Asian condition that embraces silence appears to counteract the Westernized identity. However, this valuable piece of cultural character must not be sacrificed. For Yamamoto, there are “different silences” among Asian Americans; some are shameful silences that need to be “broken,” as Mirikitani observes, but the healthy silences are inherently part of the Asian American identity.

Works Cited

- Donahue, Ray T. *Japanese Culture and Communication: Critical Cultural Analysis*. New York: University Press of American, Inc., 1998.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- Leitner-Rudolph, Miryam. *Janice Mirikitani and Her Work*. Austria: Braumueller, 2001.
- Maykovich, Minako K. *Japanese American Identity Dilemma*. Tokyo: Wayside University Press: 1972.
- Mirikitani, Janice. “Breaking Silence.” *Shedding Silence*. Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1987. 33-36.
- Yamamoto, Traise. “Different Silences.” *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. Ed. Shawn Wong. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1996. 45-50.