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Absent Presence as a Nonprotest Narrative: Internment, Interethnicity, and Christianity in Hisaye Yamamoto’s “The Eskimo Connection”

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INTRODUCTION

Although very few remember, the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay (1969–71), known historically as part of the American Indian Movement (AIM), inspired sympathy from Asian American activists, especially Japanese Americans in the Bay Area. Claiming the island, a former federal prison closed in 1963, as their land and protesting the US government’s policy, the group of Native American activists stayed there for nineteen months. Their purpose was to build a Native American cultural and educational center, and their protest eventually became an interethnic site of memory that Japanese Americans, as “racial kinsmen,” could share with Native Americans.¹ Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita, for instance, fictionalized the occupation of Alcatraz in *I Hotel* (2010), which portrays three Japanese American characters bringing supplies to the Native American activists. “Of course, depending, they [Japanese Americans] could have been mistaken for Indian,” writes Yamashita, pointing out their physical resemblance to Native Americans. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone recognized the features that claim the same genes that crossed the Bering Strait or canoed across the Pacific.”² With an

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emphasis on the anthropological theory that Native Americans are racially related to the Japanese (Ainu), the occupation of Alcatraz presents an interethnic connection of these groups who fought for “self-determination” in the 1970s.

Although the social protest at Alcatraz is called the “Indian occupation,” the name is irrelevant when we focus on the process by which the Native American activists eventually came to stay on the island. According to the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) between the US government and the Sioux, abandoned or out-of-use federal land was to be returned to Native Americans. Since Alcatraz penitentiary had been closed since 1963 and the island was declared surplus federal property in 1964, numerous Native American activists thought the island qualified for reclamation. Troy R. Johnson reports, “The federal government could not take anything away from them [the Native American activists] because they did not own anything.”³ Japanese American activists’ sympathy for them stems from the government’s using the term, “occupation” to describe what they considered criminal activity by the Native Americans. In addition to the racial intimacy between Japanese Americans and Native Americans, as a federal prison, Alcatraz reminded Japanese Americans of their World War II internment. Several Japanese American activists overlapped the image of their internment with the Alcatraz occupation because, in both cases, the government was unrelenting in confining ethnic groups.

Although Japanese American writer Hisaye Yamamoto never comments directly on the occupation of Alcatraz, several descriptions in her short story “The Eskimo Connection” apparently refer to this incident. The setting of her story is 1975, a few years after the Alcatraz occupation. A middle-aged Japanese American housewife and writer, Emiko Toyama, who experienced wartime internment during her youth, has begun mentoring by correspondence a Native American prisoner who wants to be a writer. She feels an unusual intimacy with this inmate, Alden Ryan Walunga, who eventually becomes a fanatic Christian. Like her best-known stories, “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake,” in which Japanese American female protagonists interact with other ethnic groups, this later work in her “interethnic saga” comes close to the writer’s Japanese ancestry—in this case, alongside Native Americans.⁴

Yamamoto’s choice of Native Americans as a central theme suggests her journalistic interest in this ethnic group. Emiko’s act of supporting and mentoring Alden, for instance, is based on her viewing him as someone “young enough one of her children.”⁵ Such intimacy—that is, considering

another ethnic group as part of the family—was generally expressed in the popular Asian American journal *Gidra* during the 1970s, which stated Japanese American activists' intention of supporting Native Americans by calling them "Indian brothers": "They [the Native Americans] have a chance to create for themselves a new life, a new society. We, as Asian Americans, should support our brothers as much as we can."⁶ As for Yamamoto's characterization of Alden as an Alaskan Eskimo, one major figure in the actual Alcatraz incident was Joe Bill, a Hooper Bay Eskimo.⁷ In an interview, Richard Oaks, a Mohawk student at San Francisco State College, asserted that Alcatraz was just "the beginning of our fight for justice and self-determination" and that the Native American activists aimed to occupy part of Alaska next.⁸ In "The Eskimo Connection," Alaska is both Alden's birthplace and his final place of imprisonment. These factors indicate that Yamamoto, who once worked for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, a left-wing African American newspaper, and lived in Los Angeles in the 1970s, would have thus received detailed information about the Alcatraz incident.

"The Eskimo Connection" shows an interethnic resonance between Native Americans and Japanese Americans, but simultaneously it predicts the danger of falling into a simplified racial unity. After corresponding with Alden, Emiko feels strong intimacy with him because he is her racial "kinsman." She even expresses affinity with him by jokingly adding a letter to her name, turning "Emiko" to "Eskimo."⁹ In addition, her intimacy with Alden stems from her perspective that the prison and the internment camp are similar political state apparatuses. She, therefore, views this young Native American as "an Asian family member" who, like her, is spending his youth in an enclosed sphere—a prison.¹⁰ Her perceived closeness, however, soon fades into suspicion and criticism of Alden when she learns of his fanatical Christian beliefs from reading his letters. Emiko becomes intimidated by his dysfunctional psychological state, which is divided between his Native American heritage and Christianity. In the story's climax, Emiko is astounded by the vignette Alden composes called "The Coffin of 1974," which is about the main character's brutal rape and the murder of members of his family, implying Alden's actual crime and secret identity. Thus does Emiko's goal of mentoring Alden end in failure because of her limited imagination and her romantic sympathy for him.

A simple reading of "The Eskimo Connection" indicates the psychological, racial, and ethnic barrier that cannot be transcended between Japanese Americans and Native Americans. A closer reading, however, of Emiko's optimism expressed in the final scene suggests a more nuanced, complex

dimension of interethnicity that denies the story's central theme of failed interethnic connection. Although disgusted with Alden's horror story, Emiko still misses him: "Emiko—holding fast to the Lord Jesus Christ and refusing to consider any other alternatives—imagined [Alden] was probably much too busy back there on his home ground [Alaska] to continue to be the pen pal of some old woman way down there in California."¹¹ At least Emiko knows "alternatives"—that is, life as a Native American but not like Alden's.

Here I want to trace Yamamoto's perspective on Native Americans by exploring how she portrays the Japanese American subject in relation to the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. Yamamoto bestows a unique resonance on this ethnic group, revealing a complex mechanism that transcends the ethnocentric theme. She does not foreground the Japanese American internment experience.¹² In fact, in very few of her works is the central theme the internment.¹³ Instead, in her major works written after World War II, such as "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake," she focuses on life on Japanese American farms in the 1930s.¹⁴ Her primary theme is commonly acknowledged to be intraethnic family conflict between first-generation Japanese mothers and second-generation Japanese American daughters.¹⁵ In Yamamoto's later works, however, such as "The Eskimo Connection," we see an interethnic theme not circumscribed by the category of ethnocentric literature.

I focus here on Yamamoto's portrayal of the Japanese American subject in the 1970s, to borrow Caroline Chung Simpson's phrase, an "absent presence," whose history of internment has been represented as elusive in the United States. While, in general, the term "absent presence" as applied by critics in ethnic studies is associated with the tragedy of the "subaltern" whose existence has been deleted from US history, I focus here more on autonomy than on dysfunction. In other words, Yamamoto's narrative about "absent presence" effectively illuminates the Japanese American subject by resisting adopting both the social protest point of view in the 1970s, which emphasized the ethnic unity of Native Americans and Japanese Americans, and Christianity as used in the US discourse of national ideology. The internment is represented as an absent presence not only because Americans in general did not know (or did not want to know) the history but also because Japanese Americans did not want to or could not talk about it. Furthermore, in the 1970s, the Asian American movement was at its peak. At the same time, Japan was achieving high economic growth, and this success raised the status of Japanese Americans over that of other Asian American groups. I argue that this peculiar position contributes to the

formation of Yamamoto's nonprotest narrative in relation to the internment discourse. Her unique narrative approach avoids the US racial and multicultural politics that categorizes each ethnic group. To analyze Yamamoto's interethnic resonance, I draw particular inspiration from the Native American writer and critic Gerald Vizenor, whose concepts of "absence" and "presence" in the representation of Native Americans synchronize with Yamamoto's perspective.¹⁶ Finally, grounded on the concept of absent presence, I textually analyze Yamamoto's use of Christianity in "The Eskimo Connection." To highlight both the presence and absence of the Japanese American subject, Yamamoto uses Christian discourse as a parameter of national ideology to visualize or (in-visualize) American ethnicity.

ABSENT PRESENCE: YAMAMOTO'S INTERNMENT DISCOURSE

Regarding the US nation-state policy and its discourse in regard to Japanese Americans during and after World War II, Caroline Chung Simpson asserts that Japanese Americans were faced with the notion of "absent presence," which involved "the historical process of remembering by forgetting, of discursive inclusion that works to evade or dispute."¹⁷ Simpson's analysis explores the justice policy of the US nation-state in the Cold War era of the 1950s, which did not completely suppress the internment from its history but worked to visualize Japanese American existence only in order to erase the shame and mistake of governmental policy. Japanese Americans, based on this American view of justice, are only "visible" when they are presented as immigrants who are "successfully" assimilated into the United States.

Pushing Simpson's historical analysis further, I argue that the intraethnic syndrome and the generational gap among Japanese Americans also contribute to the formation of the "absent presence." To elaborate the key term—absent present narrative—in Yamamoto's works, I focus on two different eras: the 1940s (World War II and the internment) and the 1970s (the Japanese American redress movement and the American Indian Movement) as the times for portraying the unique subject position of Japanese Americans. Because of Japan's high rate of economic growth in the 1970s, Japanese Americans began to be classified as a model minority, an Asian racial stereotype of quiet middle-class educated conformists. This image separated Japanese Americans from other ethnic groups involved in "self-determining" ethnic movements of the time. I argue how the history of

the internment contributes to Yamamoto's nonprotest narrative, which eventually becomes a counter narrative to the social protest of ethnic unity in the 1970s.

For a Japanese American writer, in this case Yamamoto, who experienced internment in the 1940s, spontaneously to engage in social protest against the nation-state in the 1970s was very difficult. The expression that best portrays the condition of Japanese Americans just after the World War II is "social amnesia"—"a group phenomenon marked by attempts to suppress feelings and memories of particular moments or extended periods. It is not a psychological pathology but a conscious effort to screen memories . . . to suppress unpleasant experiences."¹⁸ The act of suppressing is not equivalent to forgetting; rather, it is an intraethnic psychic syndrome among Japanese Americans who consciously or unconsciously conceal their emotional anger, grief, and protest arising from this trauma. In the 1970s, this syndrome created a difference in degree of enthusiasm for redress, depending on the generation. The redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s mainly consisted of Nisei who came of age inside the camps and their Sansei children. There were, however, internal differences of perspective in these two groups, as acknowledged in a 1973 article by Minako Maykovich: "The Nisei is being currently criticized by the Sansei for being quiet, docile, and self-effacing, and for not violently protesting real or imagined prejudices."¹⁹ The Japanese Americans in the 1970s movement presumably separated into two groups: third-generation children who were aggressively involved in the redress movement and second-generation parents who experienced the internment and passively engaged in the movement. The parent groups who experienced internment did not want to talk about it. The children who were born and raised in the camps, however, did not remember the internment as a time of persecution. Instead, they eagerly desired to know the history of the internment.

The 1970s is also a time when Japanese Americans invoked the memory of the internment in US regulations, specifically the Emergency Detention Act, Title II of the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950, which was dubbed the "concentration camp law." The act permitted detaining any individual suspected of being a threat to the nation. According to Masumi Izumi, in the late 1960s African Americans and members of the radical New Left were convinced that the government was building camps to incarcerate them.²⁰ The rumor continued until 1971, when Congress repealed Title II, because of the campaign by Nisei and Sansei activists between 1967 and 1971. The repeal is considered a precursor to the national campaign for

redress with the warning that the government should not repeat the same mistake that they did to the Japanese Americans during World War II. Izumi points out the passivity of the Nisei in contrast to the Sansei activists on this matter: “A handful of Nisei felt the necessity to take a stand on the concentration camp issue, although the Nisei generation had generally shown little interest in the rumor. Indeed some Nisei opposed taking any action on this issue.”²¹

Yamamoto creates the Nisei character Emiko, who occupies an anomaly: she performs as a conformist but also sympathizes with the 1970s activists. She is portrayed as a relatively quiet, educated middle-class Japanese American widow, whose livelihood is secured by her husband’s life insurance. Such characterization fits the model minority image. Emiko, however, also has great sympathy for the dissenters or outlaws sanctioned by the government, as her support and mentorship of Alden indicate. In two phases, as a “prisoner” in the 1940s and as a member of the “model minority” in the 1970s, Emiko adjusts to US society.

Based on her experiences as a second-generation Japanese American who experienced internment when she was young, Yamamoto during World War II created a unique nonprotest narrative by focusing on the child’s state of mind. In 1942, she wrote her first piece, “Death Rides the Rails to Poston,” a mystery, an enigmatic murder of a middle-aged Japanese American man, set among a group of Japanese Americans on the train to the Poston internment camp in Arizona. At that time, Yamamoto was twenty-one, but her story begins with the explanatory note that it was written as the “first attempt” at writing a story, when the narrator was “a ten-year-old girl.”²² Considering the genre—mystery—and the historical background—1942—the preadolescent narrative is impudently comical and somewhat controversial, as if this putative writer were enjoying the dark incident happening during the internment.²³ This point of view, however, also reflects the aspect of social realism: the narrator is too young to understand the implications of the internment. Avoiding discussion of the persecution not only reflects the Japanese Americans’ psychic syndrome in those days but also Yamamoto’s experimental accomplishment of creating a nonprotest narrative to reveal the narrator’s position as absent present—the young narrator observes those involved in the internment not as a trauma but as an onlooker.

Yamamoto uses a similar strategy in “The Eskimo Connection.” Only one sentence—“As a young woman in camp, she [Emiko] had hung out sometimes with people who wrote and painted”—indicates Emiko’s

background as an internee, and this flashback invokes only her artistic activity—not shared trauma or suffering—with the other internees.²⁴ In parallel with this narrative, which avoids describing the persecuted history of the internment, through Emiko’s voice, Yamamoto invokes the danger of speaking up. The story introduces “the horror of the year before”—that is, the government’s use of cutting off infrastructure and the police by a group of dissidents, “the mousetrapping and cooking alive of five young men and women who had gotten disillusioned with the establishment and taken matters into their own hands.”²⁵ Emiko criticizes the government’s unrelenting purge of disloyal activism, but simultaneously she implies the danger of militant protest against the nation-state that eventually terminates the dissenters themselves. In thinking about the 1970s, Emiko sympathizes with the protesters but opposes their articulation of the protest itself.

Absent presence as a discourse of the internment reveals the irrelevance of protest as well as the survival skill of the generational, intraethnic problem of Japanese Americans who do not or cannot give voice to memories of persecution. Writing in a post internment era, when ethnic groups freely articulated their identities in acts of “self-determination,” Yamamoto did not conform to this social trend but used absent presence as an artistic strategy to delineate the Japanese American subject.

THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT AS AN INTERETHNIC SITE

Another reason that Yamamoto does not straightforwardly support a protest narrative in the 1970s movement is that she seems to believe that the act of protest invokes a discourse of persecution that occasionally reiterates and even romanticizes colonial history. In “The Eskimo Connection,” she criticizes Emiko’s imagination for so easily associating the Japanese American internment with Alden’s prison life. Her association is based on her desire to seek a place where she can share a similar memory of persecution with a different ethnic group. This illusion is easily shattered, however, when she sends Alden an Asian American magazine and receives notification from the prison office that no material of a political nature will be accepted in the prison: “She felt something like a cold hand touch her . . . that was what being in prison was, was it...?”²⁶ Through Emiko’s romantic sympathy for Alden, Yamamoto criticizes the social current of the 1970s in which Japanese Americans searched for a resemblance to their internment in other locations.

It was, in fact, a general and natural syndrome in those days that Japanese

American activists' protest overlapped internment discourse on the Native American occupation. On March 7, 1970, the *San Mateo Times* reported, "Tom Hisata, San Mateo Chapter President of the Japanese American Citizens League, with 50 Japanese Americans" brought supplies to Alcatraz and one of their declarations was to Repeal Title II: Concentration Camp Law.²⁷ Indeed, Alcatraz stood as another internment site for Japanese American activists. Based on the same logic, Japanese Americans were involved at Wounded Knee, another major site of the American Indian Movement. One Japanese American journalist asserted, "We cannot allow the kind of isolation and lack of support experienced by the Japanese Americans when they were 'relocated' into concentration camps to happen to us or to any other people again."²⁸ Several Japanese American associations, especially the Manzanar Committee and the Metropolitan Los Angeles chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League, supported the Native American activists at Wounded Knee. Needless to say, Manzanar is one of the ten Japanese American internment camp locations. The Japanese American activists sympathized with the Native Americans by synchronizing internment discourse with the discourse of Native American reservations.

Going against the current, Yamamoto warns Japanese American activists who facily emphasize interethnic union. The complex historical formation of the internment in relation to Native Americans segregates those Japanese Americans who cannot easily own their persecution. In her poem "Exile: 1942–45," Yamamoto refers to the Poston internment camp in Arizona, which was built on a former site for Native American relocation.²⁹ She highlights racial segregation in the US policy toward Native Americans while simultaneously illuminating the doubly erased Japanese American internment history. In a 1987 interview, held a few years after the publication of "The Eskimo Connection," she talked about a friend of hers who returned to the former camp with her family and reported on her state of mind:

A friend went to the Grand Canyon once and on the way back she and her husband and child visited Poston, where we were, and she said that the camp and grounds had all been taken back by the Indians, and they were growing alfalfa on it, and they were living in the adobe school building that we all built with *our own hands*, and cooking in them, and about all that remains of us was the little plaque that dedicated the school, and told us how it had been built.³⁰

The internment site and the collective were doubly erased by the "hand"

of the Native Americans under US policy. She criticizes confrontation created by the US nation-state, which visualizes Native American history at the forefront and drives Japanese American internment into oblivion. As a former internee, Yamamoto presents a realistic portrait of these groups' interethnicity, which nevertheless cannot be summarized with the idealistic notion of ethnic unity.

In addition to interethnic conflict around the internment site, the Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands in 1942 reveals another chasm between Native Americans and Japanese Americans. Because of the Japanese invasion, the US government evacuated the Aleuts from their ancestral homeland to southeastern Alaska. The government's treatment, however, "denied their [the Aleuts'] freedom, placing them in camps unfit for human habitation."³¹ Although both groups experienced relocation during World War II, in contrast to the internment of the Japanese Americans, whom the US government considered "an enemy," the Aleut citizens were relocated for their own "protection." In fact, "camp conditions were actually worse among the Aleuts than among the Japanese-Americans."³² This history provides more evidence for Yamamoto's emphasis on the difference between Emiko, a former Japanese American internee, and Alden, an Alaskan Eskimo, in "The Eskimo Connection." The ethnic unity emphasized by the American Indian Movement activists does not work for Emiko and Alden because of their different and conflicting historical backgrounds.

From a perspective similar to that of Yamamoto, who criticized social protests that invoked the history of colonization, the contemporary Native American (Anishinaabe) novelist Gerald Vizenor has warned Native Americans against protest through occupation of lands. Vizenor criticized the occupation of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1973; this protest began in Minneapolis with two Anishinaabe activists, both of whom were heavily involved in the Alcatraz occupation, Dennis Banks and Russell Means.³³ As a journalist at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Vizenor strongly opposed their extreme political protest. He was not against the act of protest, but he believed that theirs appealed easily to violence: "The militants speak a language of confrontation and urban politics. They were not elected to speak for reservation tribal people."³⁴ Vizenor also insisted that the American Indian Movement was not acting as a social movement but "a radical urban organization whose followers have dreamed of returning to the ideal reservation as the new tribal warriors."³⁵ He characterized the occupation of land, such as Alcatraz or Wounded Knee, as a dangerous return to colonial discourse—that is, because of their pain at being colonized the occupiers try

to reclaim their land and make it into their own utopia. In the process, the history of colonization remains alive and influential in their minds. Vizenor indicated the danger to the American Indian Movement of reviving and perpetuating the persecution discourse.

As for the ethnic subject positions controlled by colonial discourse of persecution, Vizenor presents the concept of “*indian*” as a term circumscribed in the discourse of Manifest Destiny. By introducing the term “manifest manners,” a Euro-American discourse applied to current life from the colonial, imperial concept of Manifest Destiny in the mid-nineteenth century, Vizenor discriminates “*indian*” from “*native*.” “*Indian*” is the term created by manifest manners, while “*native*” is the subject position of absent presence that cannot be circumscribed within this colonial discourse:

The *indian* is an imprinted picture, the pose of a continental fugitive. The simulation of the other is the absence of the native; the *indian* is an imprimatur of a theistic civilization. Native resistance was abstracted as a fugitive pose in national histories; at the same time, the *indian* was a cultural concoction of bourgeois nostalgia and social sciences evidence.³⁶

“*Indian*” is a name acknowledged by manifest manners, a colonial discourse. It is represented by the tragic history of persecution, romanticism, and wronged compassion. “Noble savage,” for instance, is one representation of “*indian*.” Likewise, the perspective that considers the Native Americans’ occupation of lands “the idealization of the reservation” enacts “*indian*.” On the contrary, “*native*” is free from this colonial discourse, positioning itself outside the colonial matrix. “The *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives; the *indian* transposes the real, and the simulation of the real has no referent, memories, or native stories,” says Vizenor.³⁷ “Native,” thus, represents the elusive sphere of what Lacan calls “the real,” which the US colonial discourse cannot capture within national imagery. The history of victimization relates to the acts of protest, and self-visualization and is thus considered a part of ethnicity as surveyed by the US nation-state.

If we read “The Eskimo Connection” as the story of Emiko, not Alden, we can interpret it as a different “Eskimo,” one who can escape a disastrous ending like Alden’s. In a way that articulates Vizenor’s concepts, Alden performs as an “*indian*,” with whose actions Emiko cannot sympathize. In contrast to the story’s title, nothing *connects* Emiko and Alden, and she has noticed her difference from him from the beginning. She does have a critical

viewpoint on Alden's writing despite being strongly attracted to him as a person. She judges his writing "confused," mixing "a passionate cry against the despoiling of his native land" with "a sermon repeating the Biblical prophecy that such an evil was only part of the wholesale corruption to precede the return of Christ."³⁸ At a glance, Alden is caught in the trap of colonial discourse; thus, he "didn't know whether to laugh or cry," when he articulated his feeling toward nature, split as he was between his cultural heritage and Christianity as the discourse of Manifest Destiny.³⁹ More problematically, in the prison, he thinks his uncontrollable native "cry" is "evil" and thus needs to be controlled. Considering the historical times when many Native American youth were arrested, imprisoned, or killed as they participated in the American Indian Movement, we can assume the process that Alden might have been going through: the awakening of his ethnic heritage, with the erupting "uncontrollable passion," causes him to be observed and surveyed continuously by the power of the nation-state. The problem lies in Alden's protest as an "*indian*" being caught by the colonial logic of manifest manners or, in the story, Christianity.

Alden is portrayed as performing what Vizenor calls "*indian*." When Alden is transferred to McNeal Island in Washington state, he is deeply impressed and satisfied with the beauty of nature: "It's beauty that I am after in my writing. There is lots of beauty in McNeil. The air's odor reminded me of home quiescently and of my love." The nostalgia and sorrow of parting from his sweetheart at home, however, are soon replaced by his Christian belief: "I had allowed my mind to stay away from Jesus Christ and that attitude chain reacted to a sin that reinforced the negative feeling." He also emphasizes, "God was soothing me, telling me that I am His child and he forgives," as if his missing home and family is somehow not Christian.⁴⁰ Every time he feels connection to his Native American heritage and his unity with nature that "Native" connection is admonished and restrained by his Christian belief. Christianity is not represented as a religion but stands as a surveyor that censors him. Alden's mind wavers in this hide-and-seek politics between his "native" culture and Christianity.

CHRISTIANITY AS THE SURVEILLANCE

The Christian frame in Yamamoto's works marks a national sphere in which ethnic groups can be supervised or disciplined by the nation-state. After 1960, Yamamoto began to portray enclosed "Christian" spaces of prison and hospital established by the nation-state as settings for her

interethnic theme, which reflect her position as an internee. “Epithalamion” (1960), for instance, portrays a Christian community and hospital in which the protagonist Yuki Tsumagari, a caregiver and former internee, falls in love with Marco Cimarusti, one of the patients and an Italian sailor. Similar to “The Eskimo Connection,” Christianity works as “a remedy” or “salvation” for people in these state institutions: they undergo rehabilitation through the act of believing Christ to be an “ordinary” American citizen and thereby are returned to their “normal” lives. The Japanese American protagonists Yuki and Emiko also act as caregiver or mentor to ethnic antagonists and as guides to support them; however, their failed attempts make them realize that they themselves stand outside the national and religious narratives, and this eventually invokes their subject positions as internees.

In Yamamoto’s stories, Christianity encapsulates a discourse of assimilation in the US nation-state. It is an ideology for visualizing ethnic groups and simultaneously evokes the Japanese American protagonists as “absent presence” in this national-religious matrix. How Yamamoto adopts this religious motif is associated with the conditions of the internment. During and after World War II, some Protestant denominations, especially Quakers, Congregationalists, and Methodists, were vigorously engaged in supporting the internees against the xenophobia being directed toward Japanese and Japanese Americans.⁴¹ Protestantism in general, however, supports a national discourse of assimilation.⁴²

In addition, Protestantism was compatible with the US capitalist orientation toward the internees. In his research on the religion of Japanese Americans during and after World War II, David Yoo reports that at a time when everything Japanese was considered a threat to the nation, the internees began to see Protestantism as a tool for accessing American society. Protestantism, at the same time, created ethnic solidarity for Japanese Americans; the internees “discovered Protestant missions that offered English language classes, lodging, job information, and referrals.”⁴³ The white Protestant American patrons, however, still maintained their discriminatory views; thus internee believers were positioned in Christianity “as a servant to master.”⁴⁴ In this racial hierarchy, the internees recognized their status as subcitizens: Japanese American Protestants were largely refused “integration.”⁴⁵ Being Protestant, therefore, did not mean becoming American but, rather, acknowledging and establishing a “secondary” qualification for belonging. Japanese Americans were visible only when they were presented as a “secondary” ethnic group, “successfully”

assimilated through the US discourse of Christianity. In contrast, Japanese Americans who were not circumscribed within this discourse remained invisible, an absent presence. Declaring herself “an anarchist Christian,” Yamamoto affirmed that her inclination toward Christianity was not based on an intention to belong to a specific religion.⁴⁶ She professed a Christian belief while rejecting assimilation into this Euro-American discourse of capitalism.

In these historical conditions, the government was able to implement internment. Yamamoto here inserts her criticism of the nation-state as identical with Christianity. The Christian motif satisfies the matrix of exclusion and inclusion in which the Japanese American protagonists recognize their absent present selves who cannot be assimilated and classified into the national discourse. In “The Eskimo Connection,” Emiko intentionally stays outside this national sphere. Between Christianity (the power of the nation-state) and the ethnocentric movements (the American Indian Movement and the redress movement), Emiko presents a unique subject position that invokes internment discourse as a counternarrative in order to criticize these two cultural poles.

“THE COFFIN OF 1974”: ALDEN’S STORY

“The Coffin of 1974,” a vignette written by Alden in “The Eskimo Connection,” best summarizes Yamamoto’s perspective on the historical discrepancy between Native Americans and Japanese Americans and her criticism of Christianity as a symbolic form of the nation-state. “The Coffin of 1974” also reveals the autonomy of the Japanese American subject position of absent presence during the 1970s. The vignette implies Alden’s murder of his family, and Emiko thinks he might have committed this horrendous crime in 1974. As the vignette’s title indicates, the protagonist experiences a symbolic death in 1974 and is later revived by “Christ, a new man, washed clean of his sins.”⁴⁷ The theme of the story is obvious—the protagonist’s crime and his salvation—but the story’s unbalanced structure, which has a full-page description of nature but only two short paragraphs about Alden’s murder and salvation needs to be discussed as the theme of the story.

Yamamoto invites us to a double reading of the vignette: the story, indicating Alden’s state of mind, can be separated into two parts. The major plot includes the Eskimo’s murder of his family and his sudden salvation by Jesus Christ. A side plot is about “the snowbirds” that observe this incident.

A question remains as to why Alden uses so much space to talk about this and why Emiko is so strongly attracted to this first half of the story, which, seemingly, has nothing to do with the protagonist's committing murder as the central theme. The answer might be apparent in Emiko's response: she is, in fact, impressed, "praising the poetry of the stark landscape with the snowbirds."⁴⁸ This is because she sympathizes with what is portrayed in the vignette's first half, which not only represents Alden's Native American culture but also her absent present position as "another Eskimo."

The snowbirds' presence invokes an anthropological theory to connect the Eskimo to the Japanese immigrants. "Snowbirds ran through the air, rapidly singing the Bering Sea Spring song," and they "[landed] upon the melting and softening snow, very wild, almost invisible as they blended with the snow and exposed gravel of earth."⁴⁹ The description symbolizes the Japanese tribe, both the Ainu crossing the Bering Sea and later Japanese immigrants adjusting to the new land in the United States. They stay quiet and "invisible," blending themselves into "the white snow," their new circumstances. The snowbird image serves as a double symbol of the ancient Japanese tribe and twentieth-century Japanese immigrants. It also shows the Japanese American subject position of the model minority: they blend into the "white" society by concealing their ethnicity.

The snowbirds then are "confused" and "getting scared" of "the little Eskimo boys with slingshots."⁵⁰ The boys represent the Native Americans' militant element, a great contrast to the snowbird's absent presence. The snowbirds' anxiety about these militant Eskimos disappears soon after they see the Eskimo's coffin. They are thus released from the Eskimo's threat, while simultaneously showing respect for his valor by "lining up in a file as if in response to a military and folk-hero who was honoring them a pass."⁵¹ If we read this as a social satire of the 1970s, we can see the racial politics: "the snowbirds"—that is, the Japanese Americans—recognize Native American militancy as threatening, but at the same time, the Native Americans' bravery is praiseworthy as social protest. The first half of "The Coffin of 1974," thus, indicates two ethnic groups: Native Americans and Japanese Americans whose strategies for survival and protest are diametrically opposed.

In the politics of the colonizers and the colonized, "the snowbirds" symbolically hide their identity and secure their positions. The Eskimo, conversely, meets a disastrous and confusing end: instead of fighting the nation-state, he kills his family. His crimes are forgiven, and he is given new life by Jesus Christ:

The mother was grieving for her oldest son. He [the Eskimo] was the one in the coffin. And if Emiko read the story correctly, it was the oldest son who, with a twenty-two Remington magnum rifle, had killed both his uncle (his mother's youngest brother) and a girl relative. The girl relative had also been raped.

There was a lot of blood in the story, both walrus and human. But there was, all of a sudden, a happy ending. The oldest son had not died, after all. He was reborn in Christ, a new man, washed out of his sins! Alleluia!⁵²

In this bizarre "happy ending," the protagonist does not seem to repent of his crime. Because he expresses no repentance, the vignette, nonetheless, follows one simple plot line: the protagonist cuts off his native heritage, symbolized by the act of slaughtering his family, and is assimilated in the United States through his conversion to Christianity. Alden's fanatical Christianity is, indeed, formulated within the state prison that filters incoming literature for "religious material only"; thus, Alden's vignette reflects his own life of leaving his ethnic heritage and being assimilated into the United States.⁵³ Christian salvation does not actually save him; instead, it justifies his brutal murders as the severing of his cultural roots.

Emiko observes Alden's insanity and confusion calmly and even with some humor, acknowledging that she herself is more invisible than he is. She relates her position as that of "a snowbird" that stands outside this national and religious matrix to criticize the dichotomy between the ethnic heritage and Christianity. Emiko, as the translation of her Japanese name "laughter" indicates, can even "smile at" the ironic consequence that prison is the only place where Alden can survive. At the end of the story, Emiko passively suggests her position of "Eskimo" as one of the "other alternatives" for Alden; however, he cannot see this option.

CONCLUSION

When we look into Yamamoto's major stories, "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake," that marked her career as a Japanese American writer just after World War II and compare them with her minor piece, "The Eskimo Connection," whose setting is the 1970s, we can see Yamamoto's strategy of positioning Japanese American subjects in relation to other ethnic groups. After the 1960s, Yamamoto saw the pitfalls of US

multiculturalism as delineated in Christianity as an ideological apparatus for categorizing ethnic groups. In “The Eskimo Connection,” to challenge this apparatus, she uses internment discourse to criticize the protest that led to reiteration of colonial history. The uniqueness of “The Eskimo Connection” is thus Yamamoto’s portrayal of how internment discourse is used to criticize both the Christian discourse and the social current of ethnic unity as manifested in the American Indian Movement. Her portrayal of Emiko, who neither assimilates into the Christian national discourse nor returns easily to her “*indian*” ethnic heritage, exemplifies the absent presence that challenges the colonial matrix of the United States.

Yamamoto was in a unique position as a writer to reveal the complex context of Japanese Americans of her time. In the 1940s, she created a nonprotest narrative in “Death Rides the Rails to Poston,” which observes the internees and their involvement in a murder mystery. As a strategy, her nonprotest narrative has been consistent, and in “The Eskimo Connection,” it is revealed as interest in Native Americans. Through Emiko’s perspective on the Eskimo Alden as a racial kinsman and her association of her own internment and his prison life, Yamamoto warns against intersection with the Native American discourse of relocation as articulated by the American Indian movement activists. Yamamoto, however, does not portray Emiko as a figure of complete naiveté: rather, through her interactions with this young Eskimo, she acknowledges her “alternative” position, which remains uninvolved in the persecution discourse that reiterates colonial history.

Yamamoto’s strategy is now correlated with the contemporary stream of Asian American literature, which is moving away from ethnocentric perspectives in the United States. As mentioned in the introduction, Karen Tei Yamashita in *I Hotel* portrays Japanese American characters influenced by the Native Americans’ occupation of Alcatraz. These characters were born and spent their early childhood in the Tule Lake internment camp during World War II. They do not exactly know what the camp means even though it was their birthplace; thus, they search for a similar location that invokes their “buried” collective memory. Yamamoto in “The Eskimo Connection” criticizes such a tendency for Japanese Americans to search for sites similar to internment sites through their easy identification with another ethnic group, while suggesting that the search simultaneously leads to the discovery that their place is in a totally different location. Emiko in fact discovers the locus of her identity in the process of tracing the Eskimo Alden.

In a 1987 interview with Charles Crow, Yamamoto refers to Yamashita,

whose works treat Japanese immigrants in South America. She comments about Yamashita's work: "It's interesting, because . . . it gives you alternatives . . . other things that could have happened. Possibilities."⁵⁴ Yamamoto observes that Yamashita portrays Japanese immigrants in Brazil as manifesting a different articulation of Japanese "American" identity from that of North Americans, whose articulation stems from the discourse of persecution. As Yamamoto sees it, the possibilities and "alternatives" for Japanese Americans who deviate from this discourse are surely handed down in Yamashita's writings. Yamamoto, in "The Eskimo Connection," therefore foresees the "alternatives" of the Japanese American subject who is not circumscribed by images of repression.

NOTES

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¹ The major historical figures involved in this movement are Greg Yung Morozumi and his family, Joseph and Steve, his friend Ko Ijichi, and Leroy Sanders. On February 14, 1970, they brought food and supplies to the island. Fung, "'This isn't your battle or our land': The Native American Occupation of Alcatraz in the Asian American Political Imagination," *College Literature* 41, no. 1 (2014): 149.

² Yamashita, Karen Tei, *I Hotel* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2010), 374.

³ Johnson, Troy R., *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 49.

⁴ Although Yamamoto never mentioned her married life with Andrew Desoto, a Spanish sailor, the varied and recurrent interethnic themes within the Christian framework in her literary work—a Mexican American boy, Jesus Carrasco, in "Seventeen Syllables"; a Filipino contract worker, Marpo, in "Yoneko's Earthquake"; an Italian American alcoholic patient, Marco Cimarusti, in "Epithalamion"; and a Native American prisoner, Alden Ryan Walunga, in "The Eskimo Connection"—reflects her personal interactions with people of other races. The recurrent interethnic theme compensates for Yamamoto's silence about her life.

⁵ Yamamoto, Hisaye, and King-Kok Cheung, *Seventeen Syllables* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 96.

⁶ Kudaka, Geraldine, "Indian Brothers," *Gidra* 2 (1970): 22.

⁷ Johnson, Troy R., *Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 52.

⁸ Hatanaka, Carol, "Indians Claim Rock." *Gidra* 1 (1969): 3.

⁹ *Seventeen Syllables*, 98.

¹⁰ Yamamoto calls herself and the people incarcerated “prisoner(s).” The statement is in *Hisaye Yamamoto Sakuhinshu-Jyuunana Moji hoka Jyuu-happenn*. [Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories], trans. Iwao Yamamoto and Mie Hihara. (Tokyo: Nan’undo Phoenix), 403.

¹¹ *Seventeen Syllables*, 104.

¹² Several critics have pointed out Yamamoto’s “passive” way of articulating her ethnic identity. See Ward Moore, “A Letter from Southern California,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1950, 5; Grace Kyongwan Hong, “Something Forgotten Which Should Have Been Remembered: Private Property and Cross-Racial Solidarity in the Works of Hisaye Yamamoto,” *American Literature* 71 (1999): 294; and James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and Fictions in Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 47.

¹³ In 1942, she wrote “Death Rides to the Rail of Poston,” which is her first work dealing with the issue of the internment. In 1950, she wrote “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” between the time when she was writing “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” (1951). She explores the issue of the internment through the life of the female protagonist, Mari Sasagawara, who was interned in Poston, Arizona. “Las Vegas Charley” partially refers to the internment as well.

¹⁴ Based on the dichotomy between extravagance and necessity, Sau-Ling Wong argues that the Japanese American family is caught between reclaiming “extravagance” as situated in Japan, whereas America is perceived as the land of “necessity” (174). Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Traise Yamamoto explores the American daughter’s inability to perceive her Japanese mother’s subjectivity, which is associated with the absence of mother figures in Hisaye Yamamoto’s works. T. Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). King-kok Cheung calls the nonverbal and indirect communications of Japanese American families portrayed by Yamamoto “rhetorical silence” to emphasize that continuities between ancestral and ethnic cultures exist and are important for differentiating Japanese and Japanese Americans. Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 31. Pushing Cheung’s approach to women’s silences further, Naoko Sugiyama specifically focuses on the meanings of silences in Japanese American mother-daughter relationships. Sugiyama, “*Issei Mothers’ Silence, Nisei Daughters’ Stories: The Short Fiction of Hisaye Yamamoto*,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 33, no. 1 (1996): 1–14.

¹⁶ Vizenor uses lowercase and italics “*indian*” to resist the official representation of indigenous people of the United States as Native Americans or the colonial misapplication of Indian.

¹⁷ Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁸ Kashima, Tetsuden, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 219.

¹⁹ Maykovich, Minako K., “Political Activation of Japanese American Youth,” *Journal of Social Issues* 29, no. 2 (1973): 167–85.

²⁰ Izumi, Masumi, “Prohibiting ‘American Concentration Camps’: Repeal of the Emergency Detention Act and the Public Historical Memory of the Japanese American Internment,” *Pacific Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (May 2005): 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

²² *Seventeen Syllables*, 131.

²³ The comical atmosphere is apparent throughout the story: The protagonist, Shu Shingu, assumes the role of a detective to solve this case; however, his amateur investigation only stimulates his irresponsible curiosity about the murder and cannot prevent the suicide of a pregnant woman who eventually turns out to be the murderer.

²⁴ *Seventeen Syllables*, 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁷ “Japanese Group to Alcatraz,” *San Mateo Times*. Saturday, March 7, 1970.

²⁸ Hamano, Merilynne, “From Manzanar to Wounded Knee,” *Gidra* 5 (1973): 9.

²⁹ This is Yamamoto’s minor poem, published in the journal *Rafu Shimpo*. “Exile 1942–45,” *Rafu Shimpo*, December 19, 1981, 20.

³⁰ Crow, Charles L., and Hisaye Yamamoto, “A *MELUS* Interview: Hisaye Yamamoto,” *MELUS* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 75.

³¹ Approximately eight hundred Aleut citizens were relocated from their village to southeastern Alaska. Madden, Ryan, “The Forgotten People: The Relocation and Internment of Aleuts during World War II,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 16, no. 4 (1992): 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 58.

³³ Vizenor, Gerald Robert, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 152–53.

³⁴ Vizenor, Gerald, and Robert A. Lee, *Postindian Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁶ Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁸ *Seventeen Syllables*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁰ All quotes, *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴¹ Taylor, Sandra C, “‘Fellow-Feelers with the Afflicted’: The Christian Churches and the Relocation of the Japanese during World War II,” in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, ed. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano. (Seattle: University of Washington, 1991), 125.

⁴² There is, for instance, an interesting contrast between the Protestant denominations and Buddhism, the other major religious group in the internment camps coming from outside. The Protestants inside the camp “continue to be significantly more negative in their recollection of the camp than Buddhists,” who did not consider their major concern to be the assimilation of the Japanese American internees to the American Way. Fujita, Stephen S., and Marilyn Fernandez, “Religion and Japanese American’s Views of their World War II Incarceration,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5, no. 2 (2002): 130.

⁴³ Yoo, David. *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture among Japanese Americans in California, 1924–49*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁶ *Seventeen Syllables*, 85. Yamamoto joined a Catholic lay community, the Catholic Worker movement, soon after she was released from the camp, although she did not convert to Catholicism. Rather, she seemed to use her interest in Catholicism to shelter herself from Protestant Christianity, the dominant religious grouping in the United States. As for Yamamoto’s adoption of a Catholic motif in “The High-Heeled Shoes” and “Epithalamion,” see my article, “Hisaye Yamamoto no sakuhin ni okeru katorikku teki furemu to torauma no jikkenn teki katari” [The Catholic frame and experimental narrative in Hisaye Yamamoto’s stories: The reconsideration of ‘High-Heeled Shoes’] in *Hyoui Suru Kako: Trauma, Memory and Regeneration in Asian American Literature* [The haunting past: Trauma, memory, and regeneration in Asian American literature], ed. Fukuko Kobayashi, Tsuyoshi Ishihara, Taeko Inagi, Eriko Hara, Takashi Aso, Kotaro Nakagaki(Tokyo: Kinsei-do, 2014), 232–48.

⁴⁷ *Seventeen Syllables*, 103.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 102–03.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ Crow and Yamamoto, “*MELUS* Interview: Hisaye Yamamoto,” 83.

