

## Loving the Unlovable Body in Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*

By *Christa Baiada*

Lois-Ann Yamanaka is one of the most widely known and published local Japanese writers living in Hawai'i, yet her work is rarely taught and receives less critical attention than it warrants. Moving from poetry with her first book *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre* (1993) to fiction, she has published a short story cycle, four novels, a young adult novel and a children's book, and has been nominated for and received prestigious awards, including the Pushcart Prize for Poetry, the Lannan Literary Award, and grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Carnegie Foundation. Much lauded for the politically powerful use of Hawaiian Creole English in which many of her books are narrated and for her emphasis on local Hawaiian culture and resistance, Yamanaka has also been severely criticized for objectionable portrayals of local Filipinos as sexual predators, a stereotype that emerged from bachelor camps of Filipino plantation laborers and continues to play a role in racial discrimination against local Filipino communities in Hawai'i. This necessary critique, primarily in response to *Blu's Hanging* (1997), has occasioned important critical engagement with Yamanaka's work as well as reflection in the Asian American literary community but has also overshadowed her other works and aspects of her writing.

For the past several years I have included *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre* with great success in my Asian American Literatures course at the large urban community college at which I teach. Students consistently respond strongly and generally positively to the work, which they have called raw, real, and paradoxically both familiar and unlike anything that they have read before. Despite the setting of the poetic novellas in the 1970s, decades before many of my students were born, and the very specific setting in Pahala, Hawai'i, a world apart from New York City, male and female students alike were struck by Yamanaka's taking on stories rarely told (or read in school) but nonetheless identifiable to them. For despite the specificity of the world of the book, the coming of age experience of her young protagonists – enmeshed in racial, class, and sexual politics they little understand and cannot escape – are recognizable to my students. I imagine the themes would resonate with various student populations, high school or college, from racially and ethnically diverse and lower- and working-class backgrounds (though in our contemporary political climate of education, "trigger warnings" for sexual violence might be advisable).

Yamanaka's pervasive and continual exploration of young, ethnic, working-class female experience throughout her oeuvre has been minimally explored in the scholarship but is worthy of continued critical attention and a reconsideration for inclusion in the classroom. Each of Yamanaka's works centers on the life of a young, female, local Japanese protagonist, either on the brink of womanhood or reflecting on her passage into womanhood. These texts, written in the first person, give voice to often

---

**Christa Baiada** is an associate professor of English at the City University of New York, Borough of Manhattan Community College. She has published in *African Studies*, *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, *The Explicator*, and *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*.

silenced figures and represent the lived realities and struggles of girls like those Yamanaka knew and herself used to be as they negotiate subjectivity in a complicated web of gender, sexuality, class, race and colonial factors.

For girls, the period of adolescence, with the onset of puberty, constitutes an intensely fraught initiation into their bodies as women's bodies and all that means in society. Yamanaka's young characters struggle in and over their bodies as what literary critic Brenda Boudreau calls battlegrounds, "sites of contestation" for agency and independence (55). These girls are socialized to discipline, if not disdain and punish their bodies, rendering them obstacles to an integral self, yet each resists to the degree she is capable and with the means available to her. Most meet dismal fates, playing out the negative consequences of female complicity with their own bodily discipline and degradation, lack of assertion and self-esteem, acceptance of abuse, and even self-abuse. Yamanaka goes further to illustrate a sense of hindered or abandoned subjectivity for those who, unable to endure the pain and shame inflicted on their lived bodies, reject or deny the body. However, Yamanaka also demonstrates that some girls, through circumstances of love and nurturance – with different meanings attributed to the female body and self – are able to achieve what Boudreau calls "a re-embodiment, one in which the body is not simply a negative obstacle to be overcome" (43-4), exemplifying the potentiality of fluidity in construction of the body. Such a positive potentiality is never simple or certain in Yamanaka's fiction but it is held out as possible.

As is common to female bildungsromans, Yamanaka's coming-of-age stories are attentive to the cruciality of the body in the formation of her protagonists' subjectivity. Western philosophy has traditionally posited and feminist theorists continue to explore along different lines how women are rooted in their bodies.<sup>2</sup> Western intellectual tradition posits the thinking self as disembodied, pure mind. Placed in dialectical opposition to the mind/soul, the body is coded negative, inferior. This fleshy site of unruly passions and appetites must be transcended, a feat that can only be accomplished by the well-ordered masculine body, which can be regulated and, thus, disregarded. The female body, on the other hand, has long been associated with disorder; it is leaky, unpredictable, uncontrollable (characteristics attributed to it largely in response to the vicissitudes of the female reproductive system). A body such as this cannot be ignored. A body such as this interferes with transcendence. Therefore, traditional philosophy suggests that women cannot be other than or separate from their bodies, and their bodies obstruct the path to thinking self and true selfhood.

Feminist thinkers, unsurprisingly, have challenged these beliefs. Though several noteworthy first-wave feminists such as Simone De Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone accepted this paradigm,<sup>3</sup> objecting mainly to the exclusion of women from the possibility of transcending the body, many second- and third-wave feminists not only

---

<sup>1</sup> Though Hawai'i is a state, scholars of Hawaiian and Pacific cultures generally agree that Hawai'i is an illegal settler colony. Haunani-Kay Trask describes a settler colony as "a society in which the indigenous culture and people have been murdered, suppressed or marginalized for the benefit of settlers who now dominate our islands" (qtd. in Fujikane "Introduction: Asian Settler Colonialism in the U.S. Colony of Hawai'i, p. 1) and identifies Asians, as well as whites, as settlers who benefit from the subjugation of Native Hawaiians.

<sup>2</sup> In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz provides a discussion of traditional philosophical thinking about the body along various lines leading into feminist theories. Most notable among feminist works on the body, in addition to Grosz's, are Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1995), and Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990). Yamanaka's *Saturday Night* (1993) was written at the same time that this academic discourse was developing.

<sup>3</sup> See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) and Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979).

object to the purported desirability of a separation between body and mind but have also asserted the significance of embodiment and the centrality of the material body in the formation of subjectivity. Subjectivity, feminist theory contends, is inextricable from one's experience of her body and its historical, cultural meanings. In other words, the body does not obstruct subjectivity and selfhood; rather, one's lived experience in her body shapes subjectivity and selfhood. Postmodern and post-structural feminisms have produced provocative and influential theories of the body that we might summarize, at the risk of oversimplifying, as asserting that there is no natural body, but rather the body is fluid and differential in its meanings and is therefore a site of potentiality (for different constructions of the body, of self, of sex, of gender, of the human, even).<sup>4</sup> As feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz asserts, "The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographic inscriptions, production or constitution. [...] it is a cultural, *the* cultural, product" (23). In other words, the body is not a given but is constructed by the interplay of the physicality of the material body and of the discourses of the body, or rather of different bodies and bodily aspects (their forms, shapes, features, movements, and behaviors).

For this paper, I will focus only on Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre* and more specifically on three of its six main characters in the different sections of the collection, which is divided into four sections introducing several twelve-to-thirteen-year-old girls at the same time in their lives in the same world of Pahala, Hawai'i. The poems move through various permutations of girls struggling on the battleground of their bodies for some sense of control and self-realization. Collectively the poetry problematizes "initiation into womanhood" as having multiple forms and meanings bound up with but not limited to sexuality.

The polyphonic and multi-narrative form of *Saturday Night* incorporates various trajectories of this struggle over and through the female adolescent body and its meanings during this period of sexual maturation. Girls strive to find a relationship to their changing bodies while navigating the treacherous and confusing landscape of sexual desire, violation, and propriety. The meanings ascribed to the female body render embodiment difficult and undesirable. Disembodiment becomes a form of escape, not into pure self or mind but into nothingness, away from unified self, away from living self. The juxtaposition of multiple girls' stories that simultaneously reinforce and diverge from one another provides a rich exploration of what Yamanaka sees at stake in her protagonists' attempts to claim as their own and love their bodies. Too often, as the cumulative effect of these narratives suggests, the transition to womanhood takes the form of objectification, fragmentation, violation and consumption. The consequence is disassociation from the body and unrealized selfhood, fates perhaps easier than living in the pain of a degraded body, and easier than asserting new meanings of the body, because doing so would entail changing the socio-political-cultural discourses that construct the girl and her developing woman's body and that deny her the vision to see herself as different from detrimental meanings ascribed to her and her body.

However, this is not the only model. A very different story is told in the voice of Lucy, who closes the collection with the realization of re-embodiment – an embrace of body, desire, and selfhood. Re-embodiment is achieved when womanhood, and initiation into a woman's body, is characterized by pleasure, comfort, and the mutual

---

<sup>4</sup> A useful reference for feminist theories on the body is Janet Price and Margrit Shildrik's *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999).

recognition of one's lover. Through an explication of significant tropes in the collection related to female identity and coming of age, I explore how *Saturday Night* encompasses paradoxes of embodiment and disembodiment, disempowerment and empowerment, critique and hope for female selfhood.

### Part I: Kala

Kala is one of the key figures introduced in the first section of the book. When first introduced, she appears confident and brassy, if naïve, but through a series of three key events in which she is forced to see and feel herself exploited sexually by men, she is rendered silent and divided from herself. Kala is forced to accept the cultural message that her body is vulnerable to male violation and consumption and thus insufficiently hers, and just plain insufficient.

From the opening poems, Yamanaka clearly communicates a general awareness and even acceptance on Kala's part of the powerlessness associated with the female body and sexuality. The opening poems "Kala Gave Me Anykind Advice..." & "Sitting on a Bike..." present conversations between two seventh-grade girls, in which Kala, attempting to assert a knowledge she lacks to feign a power of which she is also denied, takes it upon herself to advise, inform, and essentially taunt her friend with what growing up local Japanese and female in Pahala means. Much of Kala's advice, such as not to use another's deodorant or risk catching her b.o., reveals her ignorance and characterizes her as an unreliable narrator. At the same time, she conveys a nascent cognizance of the very real denigration and vulnerability of their maturing female bodies as well as their privileged racial status in relation to demonized local Filipinos. In "Kala Give Me Anykind Advice Especially about Filipinos When I Moved to Pahala," the second girl recounts Kala's instructions:

No whistle in the dark  
 or you call the Filipino man  
 [...]
 ...he going drag you to his house,  
 tie you to the vinyl chair,  
 the one he sit on outside all day,  
 and smile at you with his yellow teeth  
 and cut off your bi-lot with the cane knife.  
 He going fry um in Crisco for dinner. (Yamanaka 15)

This poem illustrates the kind of damaging stereotype of Filipinos for which Yamanaka has come under attack. While the controversy regarding the portrayal of Filipino Uncle Paulo as a rapist in Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging* gained nationwide attention with protests resulting in the Association of Asian American Studies rescinding its fiction award in 1998, local objections to Yamanaka's portrayal of Filipinos began in response to this poem in *Saturday Night* years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Candace Fujikane explains how such portrayals "attest[] to continuing local Filipino subordination within a system of local Japanese and white structural power" and evade the reality of local Japanese racism

---

<sup>5</sup> Fujikane provides an excellent timeline of events charting the controversy in "Sweeping Racism Under the Rug of Censorship."

and political dominance (159-160).<sup>6</sup> While the working class characters and their families in *Saturday Night* are not powerful and are instead positioned as oppressed by white/Western racism and power, by the time the collection was published, if not in the 1970's when it was set, local Japanese power was solidified. Nonetheless, the novellas elide the racial structure in which local Japanese enjoy the highest standing among local Asian settlers to focus on the story of local Japanese struggles to overcome oppression, which are most pertinent to my focus on gendered oppression descending from foundational European philosophies of body and mind. In discussing the controversy over Yamanaka's stereotypical portrayals of Filipino men as a sexual threat, Fujikane writes, "The stereotypes [originating on the plantations] redirect attention away from other ethnic communities' [i.e. Japanese, Chinese] anxieties over women's agency and conditions of exploitation" (176). These anxieties and exploitation regarding gender are very much the concern of *Pahala Theatre*, yet in repeating and ill-using this harmful caricature of local Filipinos, Yamanaka deflects onto this group and therefore obscures the degree to which the sexist and abusive attitudes impacting her characters as integral to the local Japanese community to which they belong. The vague implication is that the threat to girls is ubiquitous and, indeed, though Kala's fate indicates the contrary, more dangerous from the local Filipino, who lack the conditions from which to represent alternatives to this representation with the same social reach as the local Japanese. Thus while I want to return the focus to Kala's awareness of the sexually maturing female body as vulnerable, I must emphasize the need for attunement to the racial privilege she also enjoys to objectify local Filipino men, who for different reasons, lack power and voice.

Coming back to the passage quoted above, Kala's warning to her friend also establishes the imagery of girls as prey (their bodies as meat to be devoured) that reviewer Lorna Hershinow insightfully identifies as pervading Part I of the collection (241). Kala lacks the sexual knowledge to actually know what a man would do to a girl. She imagines a form of cannibalism, primitive and brutal. She knows enough to intuit that the male desire to consume the female body is directed at the "bi-lot" or the genitalia. For it is not the child's body that will draw the old man's desire, but her femaleness, the parts of her body that mark her as woman and as sexual object. Interestingly it is not the breasts – "the daily visible and tangible signifier of her womanliness" as feminist theorist Iris Young has described them (190) -- but the vagina – the ultimate site of female power and violability, of male desire and repulsion, barrier and wound – that Kala identifies as the sought after morsel from the female body.

This profound consequence of puberty and perplexing nature of the vagina is reinforced in the next poem, "Sitting on our Bikes by the Catholic Church," in which Kala teases her friend about the inevitability of menstruation, or "your rags" as she calls it. She declares her friend "almost ripe" and jeers "pray to the Lord above/ that you *neva* get yours/ 'cause I gonna tell/ the old man/ that dinner/ is almost ready to be served" (Yamanaka 17). With the onset of menstruation, one "becomes a woman," and hunting season is open. Kala's taunts are disturbing in her lack of solidarity and compassion for her friend's imminent role as foodstuff. Indeed, Kala deflects her own vulnerability onto her friend and aligns herself with men, in her promise to call the old man to supper. She attempts, thus, to deny or circumvent her similar position as prey.

---

<sup>6</sup> Fujikane also reminds us of the importance of acknowledging that local Japanese and local Filipinos are "racialized as distinct groups in Hawai'i" and cannot be grouped as Asian American.

Kala's emphasis on the vagina as focal point and on menstruation as turning point conjures Kristeva's abject, the human reaction to the threat of breached boundaries (e.g. between self and object necessary for establishing identity) and therefore of the breakdown of meaning. Kala, who has already begun menstruation, seems to understand the female body as porous – leaking, with unreliable boundaries. When teaching her friend about what happens to the body after death (interestingly, the corpse is Kristeva's ultimate example of the abject), Kala once more focuses on the holes of the female body, in particular, those that must be sewn up: "your eyes, your nose, your mouth, / your belly button, your okole hole / and yeah, even your bi-lot" (16). The corpse and the female body, here conflated, both have to do with abjection – the corpse repulses us by bringing death into our reality; the female body is vile in its flow of bodily fluids that disrupt our sense of propriety. Both, according to Kristeva, must be cast off from our cultural world in order for us to live in it. The abject "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4) and brings us to "the border of [our] condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3).

Kala achieves full knowledge of the abjection related to the female body when forced to confront the violability of her own body through the occurrences recounted in consecutive poems that culminate in her rape. For if the holes of the female body, her own, allow bodily fluids and waste to flow out, they also constitute precarious openings through which intrusion of harm may occur, disturbing the integrity of the body and distinction between the self as subject and object. Surprisingly, the rape, the most extreme form of violation of the body, is unsurprising and anticlimactic. For both Kala and the reader have been prepared for such an event by the metaphoric rapes to which she has already submitted.

In the first poem, "Captain of the Volleyball Team," flattered by the attention of a popular high school athlete, Jimmy boy, and encouraged by her friends to engage him, Kala nonetheless feels objectified and coerced in their interactions. When he calls to her outside school, she notes, "he neva call me by my name" (Yamanaka 18), and she is discomfited by his hands freely grabbing at her. Jimmy boy demands kisses but, when she demurs, seeking delays, he forces her to recognize his claim on her body, superseding her own. Sucking at her neck, he gives her a hickey "so all the boys know you mines" (19). Her body is not only marked as his property but also as food – animal or confection, i.e. object – for him to feast on. His avid vampiric sucking also pulls her blood to the surface, calling forth the abject of the messy sexual body.

Kala's traumatic transition to womanhood continues in the next poem, the title poem of the collection, when she is taken to view a pornographic movie by Jimmy boy and his friend Mugs. The film, entitled "Cheerleaders Growing Up," reinforces the violent, sexual model of "growing up" for girls, in this case white blonde girls – those various characters in the poems aspire to be more like.<sup>7</sup> In many ways the film echoes the collection, with multiple girls telling their stories and layers yet one more narrative of female coming-of-age on top of Kala's. Unable to watch all the way through, Kala reports on only the first of the stories featuring a girl sent to the principal's office for smoking in the bathroom. The principal offers to make a secretive deal – comply with his desires and he won't tell her father of her transgression. Joined by a male teacher, they tie the girl to a chair and gag her mouth, then take turns sucking at her breasts.

---

<sup>7</sup> The aspiration toward whiteness and white standards of beauty is a powerful theme most developed through the Tita poems in section one of the collection. Tita tries to lighten her hair to look hapa, uses glue to make double eyelids, desires plastic surgery to make that effect permanent, and is disturbed by her weight.

Again the metaphor of eating is used to call attention to the female body as food/object and to deny the girl as subject. She is not the eater; her mouth is gagged. Perhaps the mouth, as an orifice, is too often an instrument of agency, as in the telling of these stories in their own voices, through which Yamanaka breaks their silence and imbues each of these characters with a voice and control over the account.

The eyes, unlike the mouth, are orifices that need not be barred to disempower the girl. All that can pass from them are impotent tears, signs of pain and weakness. The girl, Kala tells us, “she crying. Her eyes all black underneath/ from her eyeliner” (Yamanaka 23). She is the abject – messy, leaking – forcing Kala to confront the violability of her own body and connect with many of the themes of Kala’s experience with Jimmy boy, both at the school and to come in “Grad Party.” Sexual use of the girl’s body is taken by men, against her wishes and causing great distress. She is silenced and her apparent fear and tears are not a deterrent; her bondage, clearly a turn-on.

Kala is not only shocked and disturbed by the scene on the screen but more so by Jimmy boy’s hand on her leg and whisper in her ear that “*I like do that to you/[...]Me and Mugs, maybe*” (Yamanaka 24). He insists that Kala see herself in the position of the cheerleader. She, too, is expected to willingly submit, without the power to resist, as the hickey demonstrated. She tries to escape, to get up from her seat, but is restrained. “Jimmy boy grab my wrist/ and hold me down to the seat./ *You sit there, he tell./ So you can learn*” (24). Like the cheerleader, tied to her seat to endure the sexual violations associated with “growing up,” Kala is made to not only witness a rape scene but to identify with the victim, constituting a form of vicarious rape.

“I shut my eyes” Kala declares (24).<sup>8</sup> To block out the accumulation of stories from the remaining cheerleaders is her only modicum of defense. She must close herself off from seeing, must separate from the adolescent female bodies on the screen and from her own, confined to the movie theater seat with the threat of having to enact the movie scene hanging over her. With the closing of Kala’s eyes, Yamanaka signals the girl’s attempt to seal her inner self off from physical reality, to reassert the boundaries that have been breached. She exits her body.

Kala’s last poem “Grad Story” presents the inevitable fulfillment of previous threats that result in Kala’s more definitive dissociation from her body in order to escape the reality of vaginal rape. At his graduation party, Jimmy boy intends to collect with interest on the deferred promise of a kiss from Kala. With the consent of her uncle, who, drunk from repeated toasts to Jimmy boy’s success, sends her off alone with Jimmy boy despite her insistent shaking of her head to signal no, Jimmy boy drives her to a remote spot and rapes her. “*You no give me nothing yet./ I no say nothing./ If you no give me nothing,/ I going take something from you/ and what I take,/ you neva going give nobody else/ ever again*” (Yamanaka 27). His sense of entitlement and Kala’s acceptance of bodily subjection are solidified. She is violated not by the Filipino boogeyman she had been socialized to fear<sup>9</sup> or by a white authority figure, like the principal and teacher of

<sup>8</sup> Rosalee Shim traces the motif of eyes throughout *Saturday Night* in her article “Power in the Eye of the Beholder” (1995). Her argument is that the eyes of others subjugate the adolescent girls of Pahala by shaping their notions of self, and they can only be freed by “wield[ing] ‘ocular power’ themselves (85).

<sup>9</sup> This fact of the plot does little to nothing to undermine the established defamation of local Filipinos earlier in the Kala poems and later in *Blu’s Hanging*. Jimmy boy, a local Japanese as rapist, doesn’t contradict the accusation of Felix in “Kala Give Me Anykind Advice” as rapist. The implication instead is that most men, including whites when one factors in the porn film, are potential rapists. Local Filipinos as the most perverse and dangerous is not reified in *Saturday Night*. Yamanaka doubles down on this racial stereotype in *Blu’s Hanging* but we need not read the later book back into this one. Moreover, as Fujikane documents in “Sweeping Racism Under the Rug,” that the local

the porn film, but by a local Japanese peer assisted by her local Japanese uncle. The real danger is in her own community and their attitudes toward girls' bodies and power over those bodies, which intersect with those of white mainland society also. Kala's body has clearly been a site of struggle for power, and Jimmy boy, with the support of adult authority, prevails. Kala's "nothing," her inability to voice resistance, first to her uncle and then to Jimmy boy, testify to the cumulative effect of prior incidents to silence her voice, too often ignored or refuted, and condition her to the domination of her body. Her only response is to abandon it altogether: "I close my eyes tight / and turn my head. / It hit against the window / hard" (27). Shutting her eyes, as she had done at the movie theater, she blocks out the experience of her body, from which she retreats, for it cannot be a vehicle of self-realization if subject to the control and penetration of others.

## Part II: "PARTS"

Underlying Kala's story is a fragmentation of her body with a focus on the eyes and genitals as sites of abjection. Part II of *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*, entitled "Parts," more explicitly highlights this destructive disintegration of the body in the very structure of the poem sequence. This section is subdivided into four parts: "Pain in Parts," "Blame in Parts," "Girl in Parts," and "What the Hands do with All of these Parts." These subsections, respectively, chronicle the threat of physical pain, verbal shaming of the children as dirty and selfish, shaming and accusation specific to an unnamed daughter's sexual awakening, and finally, the daughter's devastating response to all this pain. Each subsection then contains further division as every poem is titled for a part of the female body. The girl is systematically reduced to pieces, and each body part is in turn degraded, with the sexualized body parts emphatically deemed most dangerous and offensive. "Parts" emphasizes girls' double-powerlessness, in relation not only to men but to all adults including their mothers.

Yamanaka highlights how the girl's contestation over her body and sexuality is not a result of male dominance and violence alone but also of the pervasive workings of power in general, as theorized by Foucault, in which daily activities and practices create and enforce norms through surveillance and self-correction. Women, especially mothers, play a role in enforcing the norms of gender that serve the prevailing systems of dominance and subordination by accepting and inculcating in their daughters a sense of their bodies as dirty, untrustworthy, and in need of constant vigilance.

Written in a mother's voice, many of the poems in "Parts" are reminiscent of Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" in *Annie John*. In both works, the mother ferociously polices her daughter's sexuality to enforce social sexual mores and to induct her daughter into the world of female sexuality by which she will be judged. Yamanaka intimates the cycle of women's oppression that the mother is implicated in and victim of. The short, staccato lines of the poems, as the mother spits out accusations, recriminations and threats, reveal her anger and frustration. Similar to Kincaid's "girl" herself, Yamanaka's girl remains silent, absorbing her mother's words. In her eventual response, depicted in "What the Hands Do...," she remains voiceless and turns to self-mutilation as the only way to deal with the pain.

The sequence begins with a tired, overworked mother's threatening complaints about her children's general dirtiness (e.g. toe jam in "The Foot" and nose-picking in "The Nose"), laziness (demanding they attend to chores in "The Face" and "The

---

Filipino rapist remains a myth did not mitigate the effect of the perpetuation of that myth in the poetry on the lives of local Filipinos in Hawai'i when *Saturday Night* was published.

Brain”), and greediness (specifically in eating more than a fair share of the too-little meat in the stew in “The Mouth”). They build to discipline and condemnation of her daughter’s body and sexuality in “The Ass” and “The Crack.”

Women with no power over their own lives have power over their children, especially over their daughters, and are sometimes cruel as a result of their own frustrations; however, at the same time the mother Yamanaka depicts also seems intent on her duty as a mother to prepare her daughter for the world she is entering. For instance, in “The Ass,” with seemingly no provocation, the mother assumes her daughter’s sexual desire and juxtaposes this with the imperative to avoid such shame. In the subsequent poem “The Crack-One,” after spying her daughter sitting with an older boy in a dark corner, the mother’s condemnation is direct and her message about the dangerous game of sexuality clearly articulated: “you goddamn/ 12-year old slut [...] / Why you put/ the deck of cards/ between your legs/ when you know he wanted um?/ You wanted him/ for touch your crack?” (Yamanaka 72). Again the mother seems to be both attempting to correct her daughter’s dangerous exploration of desire and blaming the daughter for the very danger that she faces.

The combination of blame and preparation for the future reaches a dispiriting climax in “The Crack Two,” when what we can only infer is the daughter’s report of rape gives rise to a tirade of blame and denigration. The mother silences the girl, demanding she not tell anybody nor mention it again and puts full responsibility on her daughter: “What you expected?/ You little cock teaser./ This is what you get” (Yamanaka 73). This response exemplifies Susan Bordo’s assertion in *Unbearable Weight* of our cultural expectation that “women’s appetites require containment and control whereas male indulgence is legitimated and encouraged” (14). The boy is in no way deemed wrong, just as Jimmy boy could rape Kala with either her uncle’s blessing or without his suspicion that Jimmy boy could ever do anything wrong. In “Parts,” the mother goes on to enforce the idea that her daughter is now a nobody, unlovable, defined by her now sullied sexual status: “Now you a ho-a/ You not a virgin./ Nobody/ going love you/ No body going marry you” (73). She’s a “Dirty girl/ Dirty / Girl” (74), according to her mother. Dirty not only in her deflowered body, but in her presumably unleashed and shameful desire. “Once you know what it feels like,/ you going want it/ everytime” (74). Not only the body but the experience of the body – and its potential for pleasure – is conferred as a curse, an inescapable, shameful trap she has willingly wandered into and now must suffer because she had failed to properly discipline her body and desires as society demands. Having breached a barrier, the girl has stumbled into another model of “transition into womanhood” – a damning one. The mother offers no comfort, guidance or protection but rather ushers her daughter with extreme hostility into a world hostile to women.

The last poem of this part of the collection demonstrates the effect of her mother’s words – a severe, painful dissociation from and attempt to punish the offensive body. In “What the Hands Do About All These Parts” the girl follows advice received from a friend to self-lacerate. Cutting is employed as a way to simultaneously feel and go numb, to experience and dismiss the body and to “forget all the shit that was happening” (Yamanaka 75). Steven Levenkron, psychotherapist and author of *Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation*, explains that self-mutilators use the pain of cutting to replace another pain. He writes, “It seems paradoxical to utilize a greater pain for relief from pain, paradoxical to use the sight of one’s own blood for relief. Yet that is precisely the mechanism of relief for those whose world is one of choices between one kind of pain or another” (32). The pain of the mother’s verbal and

psychological physical abuse in “Parts” constitutes an inescapably painful environment, so the girl turns to physical pain to drown out the emotional pain with a pain that she can control. Self-harm becomes a coping method to enable the regulation of feelings – allowing oneself to control one’s feelings of pain or lack thereof. Such control would reasonably be especially precious for an adolescent girl negotiating what is certainly a complex, contradictory sexual maturation and struggle to negotiate an adult identity – i.e. a sense of autonomy and independence -- from the borderlands of adolescence. More recent scholarship on cutting takes a non-pathologizing approach and considers self-injury as related to the developmental challenges and potential inner turmoil of teenagers’ lives. Lori G. Plante suggests in *Bleeding to Ease the Pain* (2007) that habits of self-harm, like the cutting illustrated in Yamanaka’s poetry, may be related not to a pathology or suicidal tendencies as previously believed but more naturally to teenagers’ “emerging sense of self.” She writes, “self-injury is the wrong way to cope with all the right strivings related to independence, intimacy and identity formation” (4). Such a context allows us to see Yamanaka’s characters in this poem not as disturbed or suicidal; rather, we are enabled to recognize their misguided but fervent determination to survive and take control, to some extent, of their bodies and emotions.

The cutting in “What the Hands Do...” can also be read as a blood-letting, an attempt to cleanse the polluted body of the contamination so offensive to her mother. The girl cannot reassemble her body, fragmented, lacking integrity, wrong in each of its parts, but she can release her “self” from this dirty, unreliable body – the flowing blood described as “me coming out of myself” – in an act of mortification to atone for herself to her mother. The persistent onslaught of the message of the wrongness and dirtiness of her body has been internalized and the body forsaken, potentially contributing to the willingness to inflict self-harm. The urge to cut is often seen as emerging from a “psychological chasm between the body and the self” resulting from a trauma or intensely distressing environment (Favazza 51). Similar to Kala’s closing of her eyes during rape, this girl’s cutting might metaphorically represent a disembodiment.

More than anything else perhaps, the cutting is, for this girl, an attempt to prove her existence to and gain the affection of her mother: “Let the blood / drip on the sidewalk” she is instructed, “Then we write her name / with the blood / and when dry / she going know / you was here / and she going know / how much you love her” (Yamanaka 76). In her article on *Pahala Theatre*, Rosalee Shim interprets the “she” of this passage as a girl the speaker, a boy, attempts to win over with his pain and suffering (Shim 90). However, in the context of the poems in the mother’s voice leading up to this, I find the only convincing interpretation to be that the “she” who needs to be convinced of love is the girl’s mother. The cutting is portrayed not as an act of attempted ownership *over* a girl, as Shim reads it, but rather a crying out for her mother’s recognition of her love and existence *from* a girl, who lacks language and a voice to articulate her internal chaos and her utmost desire, to be validated. Yamanaka presents this girl as unseen and unheard, therefore unable to see herself as a person worthy of selfhood.

The lack of a name for this particular protagonist has the significant effect of rendering her anybody or an Everygirl. In doing so, Yamanaka expands the implications of the character’s self-injury from the pathology of an individual to a larger indictment of social attitudes toward women’s bodies. It serves as a powerful metaphor: “[s]elf-mutilation can be seen,” Mary Pipher asserts in *Reviving Ophelia*, and I believe is presented by Yamanaka in *Pahala Theatre*, “as a concrete interpretation of our culture’s injunction to young women to carve themselves into acceptable pieces” (159). The

metaphor echoes the title of the section, “Parts,” and the titles of the poem that dissect the female body.

It is important to note also that the speaker of “What the Hands Do About all of these Parts” is an older friend who habitually cuts to deal with her own pain. (Admittedly, the friend could be male, but I see no evidence to support this supposition in the text.) In this instance, the friend is trying to help, unlike Kala who was more interested in taunting her friends, but such help is misguided. The lesson taught is a negative one about how to ameliorate pain through more pain and speak to one’s mother through the spilling of blood. The lack of choices or possibility of escape affects all these girls, so they can be of little help to one another and too often have nowhere else to turn.

### Part III: Lucy

I’ve recounted two of the bleakest coming-of-age stories that Yamanaka presents in the poetry. However, the outlook becomes more positive over the course of the collection, reaching the most hope in the character of Lucy in the final section. Situationally Lucy is similar to Kala, the unnamed girl in “Parts,” and all the other girls Yamanaka presents in Pahala, but Lucy is different because she ultimately finds a relationship based on mutual love and respect that enables a model of transition into womanhood that is nurturing and empowering. Through Lucy, Yamanaka presents the possibility that with different meanings attributed to the body, one can achieve embodied, autonomous subjectivity, though this achievement is neither simple nor assured. Employing the same tropes of eyes, eating, penetration, fragmentation, mutilation, and naming/markings, Yamanaka allows for changed significance and outcomes.

Lucy’s story is in dialogue with the earlier stories of Kala and the girl in “Parts.” At first Lucy’s story seems to parallel Kala’s when her Uncle Reggie arranges for her to be escorted home from a basketball game by Willy Joe. Willy Joe drives away with Lucy and parks in a deserted spot, like Jimmy boy with Kala, but rather than force himself upon her, Willy Joe sings to Lucy The Four Seasons’ song of innocent love, “My Eyes Adored You.” He looks into Lucy’s eyes and identifies with her sadness and loneliness. He claims to know her through her eyes and Lucy experiences a sensation of mutual recognition, for which she had long waited:

*Need somebody to read um right for once  
 ‘cause they brown and chilly, scare  
 sometimes, just like his, he say  
 [...]  
 My eyes.  
 My eyes. Fill. (Yamanaka 115)*

Unlike Kala, who repeatedly closes her eyes, Lucy’s eyes are open, seen, and responsive. Eyes are no longer sites of violation and abjection, but, because Lucy sees and is seen, of connection and interdependence.

The experience of mutuality and recognition is extended to her initiation into sexuality. The experience of her body as her own and as a site of sexual pleasure is enabled by the tenderness and respect with which Willy Joe approaches her.

He touch my forehead with his long fingers, crawl them

across my face like little feet.  
 [...]
   
 down my neck, and fingers light around each tit-ty.  
 Spotlight left. He smile, weak-like.  
 Spotlight right, his breathing rapid.  
 His finger in my belly button, swirl it

around and around, eyes rolling, slow,  
 [...]
   
 I know where else he want to touch. (Yamanaka 124-5)

Here Yamanaka presents a metaphor of sexuality without penetration – finger not penis, belly button not vagina – that involves intimacy and pleasure without blood or pain. Willy Joe’s tentative, gentle exploration creates intimacy and trust. Lucy is not threatened or pressured. He uses his fingers, tracing paths on her body, to illuminate the wholeness of her body, all her “pieces” connected. Willy Joe’s touch is a way to learn Lucy’s body, not possess it. In fact, Willy Joe recognizes Lucy’s authority over her own body. She tells us, “WillyJoe, the Big Scarecrow, scared/ scared of a lot of things/ scared of me. / Scared of my body. / Maybe one day I no let him touch me anymore” (129). Such an admission acknowledges Lucy’s right to say no, an option foreclosed to Kala in Part One.

Lucy’s narrative also seems to write back to the motif of girls as prey to be devoured by men. Lucy is not fed upon but fed, metaphorically and actually, by Willy Joe. We see this when he comes to visit Lucy at school. “Willy Joe pass me cut persimmons so I can think in school/ But I can only eat um if, only if, I let him feed me” (125-6). Though separated by a fence to signify society’s refusal to condone the relationship between Lucy and the older, developmentally delayed Willy Joe, Willy Joe cares for Lucy as no one else, particularly her mother, does. He kisses her fingers in affection and desire. He feeds her food so she can think, thus recognizing an integrity of body and mind. Lucy is not just a body for Willy Joe to plunder; she is a person for him to nourish. Of course the orality of this scene is also erotic. Lucy can only eat the fruit if Willy Joe feeds her. She willingly takes the fruit he offers because his touch is also nurturing.

Significantly the fruit Willy Joe feeds Lucy is the persimmon, which in Buddhism, represents transformation. Lucy is transformed by her relationship with Willy Joe. She asserts that with him she learns “to be myself.” Before the development of their relationship, Lucy’s inability to claim a sense of self is reflected in the rejection of her name. Instead she would use alternate names, such as “Empty Heart” and “Dor-ty” (from the Wizard of Oz) that connote her feelings of being empty, lost, and unloved. In the final poem “Name Me Is,” Lucy ultimately claims her name and body, though the act required reinforces the difficulty involved in such an attainment.

Yamanaka sets the poem at midnight of New Year’s Eve, signaling a new beginning for Lucy. Lucy and Willy Joe use sparklers, connoting independence and celebration, to burn their loves’ names into his/her back. Lucy goes first, burning “Willy Joe” into his back. Then it is her turn. She narrates:

...I feel him burn me long,  
 and my body squeeze first  
 then release the color gray,

that fall into slow motion,  
 gray waves out my eyes,  
 in and out with the sweet smell of skin burning.[...]  
 Burning the main con-so-nans  
 Of my name hard  
 Into my back meat[...]  
 I feel all thaw out  
 In my bones, all melting from what he done ,  
 So he light a sparkler  
 And tell me write my name in the black night. (Yamanaka 139)

Yamanaka's imagery of gray seeping out of the body conveys a release of numbness and emptiness. The imagery she uses to describe the sensation evokes sexual climax. The coldness of a trapped self as object or piece of meat dissolves. Her body is marked, not with the brand of another, like Jimmy's hickey, but as her own. As is the world when, prompted by Willy Joe, Lucy writes her name across the night sky. Through cultivating the embodiment of her desire, Willy Joe has enabled a "re-embodiment" as described by Boudreau. Lucy's body, now embraced by her, has become a site of great pleasure with a place in the world.

This act is an importantly simple assertion of her existence, of a self worthy of being and recognition; "*proof for-eva and eva*" that they were there, as Willy Joe says. However, unlike the numerous other writings of her name (or rather names) alongside Willy Joe's, this time is different. It is a moment of awakening for Lucy as an individual subject, separate from Willy Joe, which she makes explicit when she whispers:

I IS too,  
 I say soft.  
 I no like WillyJoe hear me.  
 I feel the thick, clear liquid  
 move slow out of my name  
 on my back, touch it  
 with my own fingers, feel  
 my name on my back all the way inside.  
 I IS  
 Ain't nobody  
 tell me  
 otherwise. (140)

This self-affirmation affects a sense of personhood through the experience of her body. Lucy explores her own body – her fingers feeling her back, her blood emerging in the form of her name, her name embedded "way inside" her body. This scene revises the cutting scene in "Parts" when the girl uses her blood to write her mother's name on the sidewalk. Lucy is not trying to prove her existence to others but is confirming it for herself. She does not seek the love of another, but a love of herself.

Nonetheless, the nature of this self-realization – self-mutilation - is problematic, as if physical suffering is a necessary price to extricate herself from the cultural meanings and attitudes attached to her body. This ending, while affirmative and – particularly after all that has come before it – promising, still represents the adolescent

girl's harrowing process of achieving embodied subjectivity when doing so entails the challenge of loving and claiming that which the world around her deems unlovable.

\*\*\*\*\*

Though little studied and taught, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre* is an important work in Yamanaka's oeuvre not simply because it is her first nor because it voices silenced coming-of-age stories, but because it explores a complicated interweaving of possibilities via multiple overlapping and contradicting narratives of initiation into womanhood. Her later novels treat various trajectories singularly, often either at the expense of hope or alternately of the equally bleak potential for fully realized selfhood. In *Saturday Night*, these fates coexist, emphasizing through their connections and divergence, the importance of nurturance and mutual recognition as essential elements to a positive transition to a woman's life and body. For one can only love her body, Yamanaka suggests, if it is her own and a site of comfort and pleasure, rather than pain and shame. Further, one must claim and love one's body in order to claim a voice and a name/self.

This potential to achieve female subjectivity and unify the self in one's body rejects Western philosophies of body and mind in relation specifically to gender. It is an indictment of sexism, violence, and a lack of care for girls and women that Yamanaka writes against in *Pahala Theatre*. The collection ends on the note of full embodiment and selfhood, yet most of the girls have failed, overpowered by the conditions of their environment and society that grant men power over female bodies. They all struggle to resist their objectification in some way, but Lucy is the only one who succeeds. There is a self, a body united with mind, to be recovered, Yamanaka asserts through Lucy. One must wonder, however, if this assertion of female subjectivity, this determination to struggle and survive without objectification, violation, and fragmentation with which Yamanaka imbues her young characters, regardless of their individual fates, can be separated from their identity as local Japanese? Would the same potential be available to local Filipinos, whom Yamanaka is content to trap in their own raced bodies, disempowered and voiceless themselves?<sup>10</sup>

### Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Tenth Anniversary Edition. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995, 2003. Print.
- Boudreau, Brenda. "The Battleground of the Adolescent Girl's Body." *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*. Ed. Ruth O. Saxton. NY: St. Martin's P, 1998. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. NY: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Favazza, Armando R. *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture*

---

<sup>10</sup> *Saturday Night* begs for a thorough analysis of the racial politics in the text, one that not only addresses the positioning of the local Japanese protagonists in relation to whites but also to local Filipino, and critical attention to Yamanaka's work should expand beyond *Blu's Hanging*, which dominates the scholarly attention to her oeuvre, likely due in good part to the controversy surrounding the novel. I hope this essay introduces readers to *Saturday Night* and invites others to engage these projects.

- and Psychiatry* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- Fujikane, Candace. "Sweeping Racism under the Rug of 'Censorship': The Controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*." *Amerasia Journal* 26.2 (2000): 158-94. Print.
- Fujikane, Candace and Jonathon Y. Okamura. *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to Habits of Everyday Life in Hawaii*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2008. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.
- Hershinow, Lorna. Review of *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*. *Mānoa, a Pacific Journal of International Writing*. 6.2 (Winter 1994): 240-244. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- Levenkron, Steven. *Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation*. New York: Norton, 1998. Print.
- Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, 1994. NY: Ballantine, 1994. Print.
- Plante, Lori G. *Bleeding to Ease the Pain: Cutting, Self-Injury and the Adolescent Search for Self*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. Print.
- Price, Janet and Margrit Shildrick. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. NY: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Rodrigues, Darlene. "Imagining Ourselves: Reflections on the Controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*." *Amerasia Journal* 26.2 (2000): 195-207. Print.
- Shim, Rosalee. "Power in the Eye of the Beholder: A Close Reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*." *Hitting Critical Mass*. 3.1 (Winter 1995): 85-91. Print.
- Yamanaka, Lois-Ann. *Saturday Night at Pahala Theatre*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1993. Print.
- Young, Iris. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.