BOOK REVIEWS

Desert Run--Poems and Stories
by Mitsuye Yamada.
Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1988, 97 pages.
Paper, $7.95; cloth, $17.95

, Desert Run, like the power and beauty of desert winds, presents Mitsuye Yamada at her best. As an activist, she writes about critical global issues of today-- peace, women and violence, and pollution-- in her poems, "My Home Town This Earth," "The Club," and "Enough." The poems and stories are thematically sequenced, focusing on universal questions as well as personal experiences. The entire volume is artfully designed and accessible to the reader. Many of her poems are autobiographical, I sense. Although much of the poetry is serious, Yamada intersperses these poems with lighter verse. I would like to highlight two poems. First, "Guilty on Both Counts" shows the cultural dilemma of a Japanese-American visiting Kyushu during August. This is the dilemma when in Japan: collective blame is projected on her for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; when in the United States, blame is projected on her for the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Yamada describes a difficult moment, when as honored guest, she brings a gift from the United States to her cousin in Kyushu in August, only to have her cousin spend one or two minutes with her and then leave.

'Yurushite yatte?'
Will you forgive her?
This is August.
She is from Hiroshima
'Tondemo nai koto dakedo...'
This is outrageous but
you see...
her whole family...'
I stop her with a wave of my hand.

'I understand I say
'America demo...'
In America too
many people blame
me, you
for Pearl Harbor

Second, "I Learned to Sew" is a narrative poem and a tribute to a woman of courage and fortitude. A young Japanese woman tells her story, for the first time in sixty years, about going to Hawaii at age 17 as a picture

bride only to be rejected by the man who placed the order. Through inner strength, she used her ability of sewing to make a living and turn her life around. She claims,

I am nothing
know nothing
I only know how to sew

My child
Write this
There take your pen
There write it
Say that I am not going back
I am staying here

Yamada, by recording her story, has affirmed this woman's gambaru to relocate in a new country, to endure, to raise a family.

Yamada's finely crafted short stories illuminate a retracing of one's roots and cross-cultural insights. In the first story, "Returning,• a secret is shared by a mother with her daughter, Emiko, who forty years later returns to Japan to find some lost fragments of her life. "Returning• reflects the ambiguity and subtlety of Japanese-American culture and Japanese culture. Not only did Emiko travel from the U.S. to Japan, her first solo trip, but she discovered her voyage to be a spiritual journey within her own life as well.

"Mrs. Higashi Is Dead," the second short story in this collection of poems and stories, shows with humor and poignancy a working out of intergenerational and multicultural differences between mother, daughter, and granddaughter after the father has died:

I listen to June's footsteps as she races through her grandmother's room to pay respects to grandpa, into her own room to change, and to the kitchen for a snack. Bang! She has already gone outdoors to play. A few minutes later I hear her shouting at the front door.

'Gramma, is it okay for Mrs. Clark to give me a lollipop?'

Mrs. Clark from across the street is my children's Mrs. Stack. Instead of fresh-baked bread on her kitchen table, Mrs. Clark keeps a supply of colorful lollipops in a glass jar.

'Shame on you, Junko, ' my mother scolds. 'Grandma make you nice fruit snacf Why you "jama" the white lady? Grandma tell you don't "baza" the white lady.' She translates "jama" into her own brand of English for greater emphasis. 'Shame on you' doesn't sound quite as belittling as "hajj shirazu." My daughter, instead of withering under my mother's words as I would have done at her age, replies, 'But, Gramma, she wants me to bother her. She likes to give me things. She enjovs me.' Bang!

Thfs child and my mother are a comedy team.

Working through being

independent, moving out, and the ability to accept help is a growth experience learned from Mrs. Higashi's death by grandmother and mother:

> *'Doyou remember my good friend Mrs. Hagashi? ' It is now my mother's turn to bring up an old long forgotten memory.*
>
> *I was twelve years old. I must havejust returned from school with an armful of school books. I found my mother weeping by the telephone, both fists pounding on the triangular telephone table nestled in the comer of the hallway. I was about to sneak up ·the stairs because this behavior, coming from my mother who was always coolly composed , embarrassed me. I had never seen her display such violent emotions before. When she saw me, shr; did not try to hide her tears; she simply said, 'Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta.'*
>
> *I suck in my breath, 'How did she,d{e?'*

Yamada, in an insightful story, shows us that Mrs. Hagashi died because she didn't feel she could ask for help. She didn't want to bother anyone. Learning from this experience, Grandma, after living with her daughter's family for five years, came to realize that she could move out and be independent with a little help.

In addition, Yamada pierces our conscience with the poem 'Lethe,• on being silent, and writes moving tributes, 'For Priscilla,• and 'A Mother's Touch." In her poem 'For Laura Who Still Hears The Geese,• Yamada remembers Laura's words about the Nazi Holocaust:

> *Your words came in slow, measured tones*
> *I could.n't hear the children*
> *I couldn't hear their cries*
> *because of the geese.*
> *and I jumped*
> *Geese*
> *What geese?*
> *You said*
> *All those geese the guards brought in*
> *to the square to beat*
> *while ·they marched the children*
> *into the QVens."*

Innovative in her form, Yamada writes 'Masks of Women• utilizing Noh masks. This volume complements her first book of verse Camp Notes and Other Poems, on the eoternment experience.

Desert Run is truly a gift to read.

Joan Loveridge-anbonmatsu is Poetry Editor of Lake Effect, a literary publication, and teaches in 'the Communication Studies Department and Women's Studies Program at· SUNY-Cortland.

SEVENTEEN SYLLABLES and Other Stories by Hisaye Yamamoto. Latham, NY: Kitchen.Table: Women of Color Press. $9.95 paper, $19.95'cloth.

Hisaye Yamamoto was the winner of the 1986 American Book Award for lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation. Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories brings together works that span forty years of the author's career. All of the stories have appeared in at least one other book or periodical, and several have been anthologized. While seemingly obvious, it bears emphasis: they are excellent literature and well worth reading.

I am always looking for interesting and well written material, depicting characters with enough substance, that I might recommend to my counseling and/or psychology of women students. Biographies, novels and short stories are excellent sources of discussion material for clinical analyses, as well as from which to learn about people from different cultures. They are accessible to everyone on an equal basis, and the possibility for variety is limitless. Yamamoto's Seventeen Syllables offers an excellent vehicle to help students better understand women and men of other backgrounds and cultures. The b!JOk is especially fine because she represents cross-cultural and inter-ethnic encounters in her stories, sharing with the reader excellent insights about the cultures in which her characters exist. Yamamoto has lived among both whites and non-whites, and she seems able to capture the reality of the tension, as well as the rapport, that arises when diverse people interact closely. Her representations of the interpersonal interactions between and among her characters, provide several levels of learning for the reader. We are struck by common threads in human relationships, irrespective of gender, ethnicity or culture; while at the same time we learn about generational distinctions among Japanese-Ameri cans as well as specific mother-daughter dynamics.

Hisaye Yamamoto has not only given us a wonderful collection of short stories, but also a very powerfully written resource for use in widening students' perspectives and their appreciation of others.

Barbara W. Gerber, Women's Studies Program, SUNY-Oswego

A BURST OF LIGHT by Audre Lorde. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988. $7.95 paper.

One of the students in my Feminist Literary Theory course pointed out, on the occasion of reading Sister Outsider (1984), that while Audre Lorde's poetry is usually published by mainstream publishers like Norton, hH autobiography and essays '(her more explicitly "dissident speech") are available through women's presses. It is

therefore significant that A Burst of Light is published by Firebrand Books, a press designed to produce work by lesbian/feminist women. Feminist theorist, Bell Hooks, has recently pointed out in "Giving Ourselves Words: Dissident Black Woman Speech" (Zeta Magazine, December, 1988) that although fictional works by black women writers are gaining a certain prominence, dissident black women thinkers and writers and their critical writing are unheard in the larger arena of public discourse, the press being central in this process.

Audre Lorde is one of those "critical thinkers" who has resisted silencing. A previous essay on tl:Je "Transformation of Silence into LangtJage and 'Action" (Sister Outsider.pp. 40-44) testifies to this need to shatter silences. A Burst of Light continues in the tradition of The Cancer Journals (1980). Its focal piece, which gives the collection its title, is a series of journal entries from January 15, 1984 to December 15, 1986. With the subtitle "Living With Cancer", A Burst of Light begins in New York City. We journey with her through East Lansing, Michigan, for the Black Woman and Diaspora conferences, to Arlsheim, Switzerland, where she not only underwent some therapeutic. exercises, but also understood more deeply the international character of racism, to the Caribbean with its warmth, for more specific healing, to Bonnieux, .France, for a retreat with the Zamani Soweto Sisters and some organizational work for SISA, Sisterhood in Support for Sisters in South Africa, and back to New York City again. While there, she discovers that her cancer seems to be in retreat; more importantly, she finds further confirmation that struggles, both private and public, are all political. An epilogue, dated August, 1987, and signed Carriacou, Grenada, Anguilla, British West Indies, St. Croix, Virgin Islands, ends the collection.

An interview titled "Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation" begins 8 Burst of Light. This interview is an analysis of the values of dominance and subordination implicit in S/M, which parallel the larger dominant/subordinate or superior/inferior power moves of American imperialistic social and political culture:

> *The linkage of passion to dominance/subordination is the prototype of the heterosexual image of male-female relationships, one which justifies pornography. Women are supposed to love being brutalized. This is also the prototypical justification of all relationships of oppression--thu the subordinate one who is 'different' enjoys the inferior position. (p.17)*

"I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities" is available separately in the Kitchen Taole: Women of Color Press-Pamphlet Series. This essay is a text of a speech given at Medger Evers College which challenges homophobia in the black

community and puts on record her history of involvement in civil rights, along with a longer history of black gay contributions to African-Ameri can creative and political life. A shorter essay, "Apartheid U.S.A.," links South African apartheid and American racism. One other essay, "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986," which precedes the journal entries was published first by Firebrand Books in Politics of the Heart, a lesbian parenting anthology.

"A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer" is a movement from despair to hope and triumph. Perhaps the most symbolic experience of despair and simultaneous triumph is her spiritual encounter at the end of 1985, in a clinic in Switzerland when she felt, in her sleep:

> *a strange physical presence lying beside me on the left side. I couldn't see it because it was dark, but I felt this body start to touch me on my left side, and I knew that this meant great danger...So I screamed and roared in my sleep, and finally after what seemed like a very long time, I woke myself up calling out, and of course, there was nothing in my bed at al but it still felt as if death had been really trying.(p.82)*

Voicing or •calling out,• even in sleep, is necessarily linked to survival and triumph. She is sustained not only by a strong will which lets her climb a mountain on New Year's Eve but also by her mother's injunction that whatever one does on New Year's Day influences what one does the rest ot the year. The central supportive system includes the persistent love of her companion Frances, the music of Bob Marley, and a host of sisters who make their time, their words, their love, themselves available.

I am impressed by the book's detailing of resistance and struggle against all odds, against imposed restrictions of all sorts, and a sense of being a •woman warrior" in the face of the most oppressive personal attacks. Roger Mais, a Caribbean writer,. called cancer a fascist disease, in the sense in which it took such control and dominance of his body. Larde has a similar response:

> *Racism. Cancer. In both cases, to win the aggressor must conquer, but the resisters need only survive. How do I define that survival and on whose terms? So I feel a sense of triumph as I pick up my pen and say yes. I am going o write again... (p.111)*

The ability to bring voice to an experience which threatens to silence is a critical feature of the writing of black women. It is the same here. For Audre Larde, as well, the movement is not only from despair to triumph, but from a primary African-American identity to a grounding and location in Caribbean space, an experience inwhich her body rejects cold and its correlatives and demands warmth and its correlatives:

The sun and seq here are helping

> *me save my life...I suppose that is a legacy of my mother (p.95) and ..I am so proud to be part of it (Caribbean women's conference: The Ties That Bind) and to speak and read my work as a Caribbean woman(p.97).*

The political and the personal have consistently come together for Audre Larde. In this particular instance, it does so as well. In the epilogue she says:

> *Jnien I speak out against the cynical U.S. interventions in Central America, I am working to save my life in every sense. Government research grants to the National Cancer Institute were cut in 1986, by the exact amount illegally turned over to the contras in Nicaragua. One hundred and five million dollars. It gives yet -another meaning to the personal as the political (p.133)*

A Burst of Light is another excellenr contribution from one of our foremost writer-activists. It is necessary reading for readers from a range of progressive ideological and personal agendas. It is unified, however, in its attack on the politics of dominance. It is a text which affirms as it transforms.

Carole Boyce Davies, Departments of English and Afro-American & African Studies, SUNY-Binghamton