

Feminist Practices in Julie Shigekuni's *Invisible Gardens*: A Japanese American Woman in the Twenty-First Century

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Ina C. Seethaler holds a Ph.D. in English with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies from Saint Louis University. Her main research interests include gender and migration, Asian American literature, and feminist pedagogy. She is currently working on a book manuscript on immigrant women's life writing as a human rights tool. Dr. Seethaler is Assistant Professor and Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Coastal Carolina University.
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Abstract

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This article analyzes how Julie Shigekuni's (2004) novel *Invisible Gardens* offers a Japanese American feminist perspective on women's lives. The feminist themes explored include patriarchal familial relationships, the significance of mental spaces of refuge—like a garden and other 'beyond' spaces—and the explicit celebration of the (sexual) body as a site of women's empowerment.
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Résumé

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Cet article analyse comment le roman *Invisible Gardens* (2004) de Julie Shigekuni offre une perspective nippo-américaine féministe sur la vie des femmes. Les thèmes féministes explorés comprennent les relations familiales patriarcales, l'importance des espaces de refuge mental—comme un jardin et autres espaces imaginaires—et la célébration explicite du corps (sexuel) comme lieu d'autonomisation des femmes.
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Pamela Thoma (2001) has remarked that “[i]n contrast to other women of color feminisms in the United States, Asian American feminisms, whether locally, nationally, or internationally organized, have often gone unrecognized and have been undertheorized by activists and scholars in the fields of Asian American studies and feminist studies alike” (101). Thoma asserts that hegemonic feminism has a history of overlooking Asian American feminist discussions and that many Asian American women refuse to identify with such a privileged approach to social justice. Even after twelve years, Thoma's assessment about the lack of (academic) visibility of Asian American feminism holds true.¹ And yet, analyzing Asian American women's feminism is of utmost importance as it offers “significant messages about alternative communities” and speaks to “internal pressures to choose between ethnic and feminist alliances in Asian American discourse” (Thoma 2001, 104-105). Asian American feminism captures the forces of oppression that women of Asian descent negotiate in the US and globally and renders their experiences visible and central.

In this article, I draw on Karin Aguilar-San Juan's (1997) conceptualization of Asian American feminism as a “feminist paradigm with its own cultural and political reference points” (x). According to Aguilar-San Juan, Asian American feminism adopts an intersectional approach to analyzing “social and historical processes of hierarchy and injustice” (x). While activists in the Asian American movement have primarily discussed discrimination in terms of race, Asian American feminism focuses on an analysis of the whole matrix of oppressions that includes gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, ability, and other identity markers. For Sonia Shah (1997), too, “it makes political sense to talk about...how the forces of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism specifically affect Asian American women” and how they resist “those forces” (xiii). The combination of racism, sexism, and colonialism constructs an image of Asian American women as submissive, passive, and

hypersexual. Through their gender justice movement, Asian American women have exposed the social construction of stereotypes that affect them and identified the social, political, and cultural structures that maintain their oppression.

I see this kind of feminism operating powerfully in the writings of Japanese American author Julie Shigekuni.² While her texts cannot be said to speak for all Asian American women's experiences, Shigekuni's novel *Invisible Gardens* (2003) is important because it explores systematic and intersectional forces of control and domination that affect many women of Asian descent. Shigekuni challenges the assumption that women of Asian descent are "the über-template for Orientalist imagining and gender projection" and are necessarily pre-feminist and "lack critical gender and race consciousness" (Bow 2013, 1, 13). Countering representations of Asian/American women as one-dimensional and homogeneous, the author portrays her main character, Lily de Soto, as a multifaceted figure who negotiates complex values, beliefs, and attitudes. In analyzing this novel, I examine three main feminist themes: patriarchal familial relationships, the significance of mental spaces of refuge—like a garden and other 'beyond' spaces—and embracing the (sexual) body. Formerly taboo themes in Asian American women's writing, especially pleasure and sexuality, figure prominently in Shigekuni's work.³ In the fight for the recognition of Japanese American women's humanity, *Invisible Gardens* adds the experiences of Asian American women to ongoing feminist discussions about "the home, the family, the body" (Thoma 2001, xi). It criticizes the commodification of women of Asian descent as submissive and hypersexual beings and reclaims Asian American women's bodies.

Invisible Gardens tells the story of Lily de Soto, a Sansei (third-generation Japanese American) in her mid-thirties, and her anxieties about her life as a woman married to a successful Caucasian doctor, Joseph, and as the mother of two small children. With the arrival of her Alzheimer-sick father, Yas, Lily starts drifting from the certainties in her life. Her father's presence also brings back painful memories about her mother's death in a car accident during Lily's last year in college. Lily works as a professor of history. When her sense of self becomes destabilized as she seeks to foster her identity as a Japanese American scholar—one that goes beyond

her roles as wife and mother—she begins a passionate affair with a Japanese American colleague, Perish, and temporarily leaves her husband and children. It is Lily's sense of dissatisfaction with her life and career that generates an identity crisis and prompts her desire to find her own voice and to embrace her sexuality.

Invisible Gardens

"I don't mean to sound boastful, but at this minute I think I have the perfect life" (Shigekuni 2003, 12). Early in the novel, the reader realizes that Lily's statement does not hold true. Her idea of perfection is precarious: "Her job at the university, her husband, her father, her children, her lover. They inhabit her, each filling her as urgently as her own desires . . . and she can no longer contain the whole" (192). Lily senses that she is losing command of her identity as others' demands and her need to fulfill socially-prescribed roles overwhelm her. Her emotional numbness manifests itself in images of bodily fragmentation that permeate Shigekuni's lines. At multiple moments in the narrative, Lily feels "like dust, fragmented and free-floating through the air" (36). Nothing anchors Lily in her life. When she lets her daughter take pictures of her, they, too, show Lily's split self: "Her body appears in fragments: her chin, the top of her head, a forearm with hand and fingers, a breast, a foot. Lily gives them to Jessie with a bottle of Elmer's glue, construction papers and scissors, and Jessie spends the afternoon making refrigerator art" (56). Lily feels split in her day-to-day life because of the incoherence between her inner self and the gendered expectations and pressures she experiences as a woman of Asian descent.

Traise Yamamoto (1999) fittingly states that "writing by Asian American women suggests that feelings of invisibility compete with feelings of being all too visible, resulting in images of fragmentation, splitting and corrosion" (74). Many women of Asian descent in the US are torn between forces that declare them assimilated "honorable whites" and stereotypes that label them as hypersexual seductresses that need to be mistrusted. Lily perceives her life as a garden that is superficially, *visibly* gorgeous, but that does not prove satisfying for her since it does not fulfill her yearning for something different than the perfect beauty she has had the privilege to experience. Social pressure for perfection is heightened for women of Asian descent in North

America. As a “model minority” member, Lily is supposed to keep quiet about her experiences of discontent and oppression to keep up the façade of a racialized group that has fully “assimilated” and “made it.” This “racist love” forces Asian Americans to become complicit in the racism and sexism against other minority groups, especially immigrants, who are not deemed as “good.” Simultaneously, persistent orientalist prejudices about Asian people as childlike, heathen, submissive, feminine, and weak position Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. For Lily, to critique her social and familial status takes courage.

The hypersexualization that Lily and other Asian American women experience in addition to racism and xenophobia is based in commonly-held perceptions of early Chinese immigrant women as prostitutes, US involvement in wars in Asia and soldiers’ portrayal and treatment of Asian women as cheap and exotic sex workers, cultural practices such as the Japanese “picture brides” system, which stigmatize women of Asian descent as perfect wives, and a contemporary billion dollar Asian mail-order-bride and pornography business (Chow 1996, 255). In all her roles in life, Lily is the “Other” in both gendered and racial terms. When asked to speak about their experiences, Japanese American poet and activist Mitsuye Yamada (1983b) asserted that Asian American women are still only “expected to move, charm or entertain, but not to educate in ways that are threatening to our audiences” (71). They are reduced to their exoticized bodies and feared for their intellect and life experiences that could shatter the status quo. Lily feels constant pressure to prove herself, to be taken seriously for her accomplishments and feelings and not to have her body be reduced to a male-serving vessel. In other words, she yearns to break out of the systematic gendered and racialized expectations that shape many Asian American women’s lives.

Yamada (1983a) has also written that, due to internalized racism and sexism, she did not realize that her “passive resistance...rendered her invisible” because “it was so much [her] expected role” (36). She appears to perceive this state of invisibility as negative: “The seemingly apolitical middle-class woman and the apolitical Asian woman constitute a double invisibility. I had created an underground culture of survival for myself and had become in the eyes of others the person I was trying not to be” (37). Her refusal to confront

oppression loudly was read as consent due to pervasive stereotypes about Asian American women as submissive. Lily, too, is trained—much like many other Asian American women—to consider voicing her own needs as selfish. For her, this culminates in the resolve that her “*unhappiness doesn’t matter*” (Shigekuni 2003, 83; emphasis in original). While self-sacrifice is demanded of all women, and especially mothers, many Asian traditions create an environment in which women are expected to think of their own bodily and mental needs last. Initially, Lily finds release for her emotions, desires, and abilities in a collection of *invisible* gardens. Lily’s ideal garden, a world without oppressive forces, is inside her and *invisible* to others.

Invisible Gardens goes beyond Yamada’s theory on hiddenness. Lily’s character development implies that invisibility is not necessarily negative, but, like silence, can be used as a means of empowerment, as a safe haven that protects Asian American women from the need to perform certain scripts and as a shield against a world that hypersexualizes them as “foreign...so remote, so beautiful” (Shigekuni 2003, 27). The overt use of silence and invisibility can serve as an anti-racist and anti-sexist strategy to challenge the suppression of Asian voices and bodies in US society. When read as a form of discourse and “unsaying,” these mechanisms can “produce counternarratives of resistance” and support the refusal to be dominated (Duncan 2004, 217). Invisibility can relieve women of Asian descent of the responsibility to perform the oppressive role of fragile, exotic dolls for the (white) male gaze, which turns it into a tool for necessary self-care. It shows strength on Lily’s part that she eventually resists the enticement that this perfect garden offers and begins a journey in search of personal fulfillment: “There is always something more that can be done. A mother’s story. A wife’s story” (Shigekuni 2003, 186). Lily suggests that these stories certainly need to be told, but that other voices, like that of a woman with sexual needs and desires and those of women operating outside of their patriarchally-prescribed roles, must not be silenced.

Eventually, the novel lays out the feminist practices through which Lily is able to move beyond this stage of quiet desperation, which offers a glimpse at the forms that Asian American feminisms can take. While some readers might judge Lily as egotistical and selfish, my feminist analysis sees her as breaking out of a state

of isolation and despair and as combating the collapse of her life by questioning the oppressive roles she was trained and expected to perform. She is encumbered especially by those stereotypes that stigmatize her as a docile wife and unconditionally devoted mother. One day, she gets “the odd feeling that she’s spoken about someone else’s life, not hers” (Shigekuni 2003, 27). At this moment, she decides to revolt against her dependence and the sense of isolation she feels in her marriage.

Gardening as Feminist Practice

For Lily, invisible gardens constitute a place of refuge, creativity, and intimacy to which only she can lay claim. They offer the potential to facilitate a realization that her experiences are systemic and not simply individual so that she can stop blaming herself. Only by acknowledging her invisibility does she realize the power it offers to understand the necessary conditions for the creation of healthy visibility. Lily’s invisible gardens offer her privacy and normalcy, a space where she can cultivate her suppressed emotions and feel complete. The invisibility of Lily’s refuge, importantly, does not connote passivity on her part, but rather signifies a complex emotional strength and symbolizes resistance to a social world that devalues her experiences.

The garden, as a vital element in the novel, is connected with ideas of beauty, agency, nurturing, and survival. In “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” Alice Walker (1974) writes about her mother’s devotion to her garden in terms that could be applied to Lily. According to Walker, her mother’s garden was “magnificent with life and creativity.” She was able to alleviate the intersectional effects of sexism, racism, and poverty with “ambitious gardens...with over fifty different varieties of plants” (241). Lily longs for such a space of creativity as she knows that “there is for each person a particular landscape that feels right” (Shigekuni 2003, 204). In her protective garden, she finds a sense of accomplishment and pride. Walker (1974) also notices that “it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator” (241). Invisibility, in Lily and Walker’s mother’s case, does not signal weakness; it connotes love for what they are doing, which replenishes them with energy and agency to fight oppression beyond the boundaries of the garden. Walker further writes that

“[g]uided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own” (243). Inspired by her mother’s creative space, Walker discovered her own desires. In a society that suppresses the lives, desires, and skills of racialized people, possessing a safe space can be life-affirming. Interestingly, in Lily’s case, it is her father’s work with plants as a botanist that inspires her.

Lily’s sense of self was very much shaped by her father with whom she bonded as a child when he taught her the names of plants. While Yas’ reentry into Lily’s life initially makes her uncomfortable, she eventually takes care of him as of a “third child” (Shigekuni 2003, 96). Given her father’s return to a child-like state due to advanced dementia, she must adopt a different kind of mother role. When Lily starts to renegotiate her numbed relationship with her father, “who studies flowers and trees and plants, believing that they contain within their powerful beauty the miracle of life” (18), she realizes that she learned valuable lessons about plants and life from him: “*When potting, make sure you don’t destroy the root system...Prune by clipping away the dead growth*” (Shigekuni 130; emphasis in original). The connections Shigekuni makes between plants and life decisions—deciding what is important, what grounds a person, and what to abandon—has important implications for feminist activism against systemic oppression.

In her essay, “Getting to the Roots; or, Everything I Need to Know about Radical Social Change I Learned in My Garden,” Penny Weiss (2013) identifies fascinating parallels between gardening and activism. She analyzes how oppressive networks, like plant roots, “are complex systems, reaching out in multiple directions,” negatively affecting others in their vicinity. She also suggests how natural roots and oppressive hierarchies often work underground and are not easily accessible (132). As Weiss further proposes, social justice activists can learn valuable techniques from natural roots, including the skills of “growing over and around, and claiming space and resources,” being flexible, and forming coalitions (133). While eradicating plant root systems often constitutes the most effective approach, this is not always a feasible tactic with regard to pervasive cultural, social, and political organisms. Instead, “[s]ometimes, the best way to eliminate one thing is to plant something else that will eventually strangle it” (148). Violence need not necessarily be the only meth-

od, but nurturing powerful resistance that suffocates oppression can prove to be just as effective in the fight for social justice. While Lily's invisible gardens are spaces of personal refuge and revitalization, they also afford her critical wisdom about systemic oppression as well as lessons about social change.

Despite the gardening knowledge that Yas has taught Lily, the rekindling process between the two is painful. One episode in her childhood, for example, still rouses her anger: she killed a cactus by watering it too much, for which her father reprimanded her strongly (Shigekuni 2003, 131). Lily's childish ignorance about plants and Yas' overzealous protection of flora clashed, which rendered any form of effective communication between the two difficult. Lily's use of childhood memories about plants to negotiate her adult experiences does not seem accidental. Much like to her father, the everyday life in a garden appears rational and sensible to Lily, which is why her invisible garden can be such a stabilizing support to her. But even those kinds of memories are open to questioning in times when her world is overturned: "[M]aybe her recollection of the past is not what happened at all. What if the cactus was only a plant, and what if there was no sense to be made, or what if the sense she has made no longer served her" (133). All these years, Lily interpreted her father's reaction as a sign of his lack of love for her; now, while resetting the clock on her relationships with the men (her father, husband, lover) in her life, she begins to mistrust what she has been taking for granted—a very feminist act.

Jennifer Yee (2009) emphasizes that, in the development of Asian American and Pacific Islander feminist epistemologies, it is important to acknowledge that relationships with family members are based in an ideal, and mostly unachievable, model of womanhood. This norm determines social expectations and functions as a tool of "social control" (53). Through conscious feminist effort, these relationships, however, can morph into "sites of resistance" (54). It is, of course, extremely difficult, especially for people of color, to leave their families who often serve as safe havens in a racist society. That said, it might have been the realization that her home could be a site of change—if misogynistic elements were eliminated—that makes Lily return to her husband and children at the end of the novel after having run away with her lover for a short period of time.

As the novel progresses, Lily learns to appreciate the kind of gardener her father is as he proclaims that "[w]ithout good soil, everything will die" (Shigekuni 2003, 101). It is this kind of practical, yet philosophical, advice that Lily takes seriously while attempting to transform her life. Yas' words speak a truth that reaches beyond his garden: a society that does not provide solid support for all its citizens' needs is not conducive to a healthy and balanced existence. When her husband and father get into an argument about cutting down a tree in the garden, Lily ultimately sides with her father's point of view: "[a] dead tree needs to be cut down... There are many good reasons to cut down a tree" (135). Her father's matter-of-fact practicality pushes Lily to adopt a new approach to her life that she symbolically celebrates as she "gathers the dry brown remains of the garden into a pile and strikes a match" at the end of the novel (240). Understanding the necessity for clearing her garden of expired elements and the cathartic and fertilizing (in a quite literal sense) power such an act can have, instills in her—through an awakened sense of self-worth—the desire to rid herself of the obstructing and oppressive powers in her life.

Gardening as a feminist practice specific to Japanese American women operates in the novel to reshape familial and patriarchal relationships. Gardening constitutes resistance that demands renegotiating social systems, traditions, and relationships with others. In the Japanese American context, the garden has very specific historical and cultural meanings. The traditional Japanese art of gardening values the preservation of pure nature and avoids artificiality: "The Japanese ideal of garden form is a space in which the art itself is so artless as to be totally unapparent... One of [the] fundamental intentions is to inspire the emotion of rejoicing with [the] creations of nature and of figuratively blooming when they bloom" (Hayakawa 1973, 10). This freedom from artificial, socially-constructed, oppressive forces and this emphasis on the embodiment of unconstrained, natural essence promises to provide an atmosphere conducive to women's self-development as they negotiate sexist cultural elements on a daily basis. Lily guards and cultivates her secrets—her affair, her discontent, her anxiety—like a garden, and the garden symbolizes a place of quiet refuge for her. These elements mirror the Japanese garden's role in ensuring privacy as well as offering bodily and mental repose (161), which

is very different from American cultural understandings of gardens as more public spaces.

Gardens have also served as important sites of resistance within Japanese American culture. In his study of three generations of Japanese American gardeners on the Central Coast of California, Brett Esaki (2013) explains that, during and immediately after World War II with its intense xenophobia against people of Japanese descent, gardening constituted a form of self-preservation and survival in the internment camps and, after the war, was one of the very few job opportunities open to Japanese Americans. The many gardens that beautified Manzanar Detention Center where Japanese Americans were interned are evidence of this culturally important practice (283). According to Esaki, “[i]n order to exercise agency within contexts of racism, some immerse themselves in an internal silence that allows them to focus on crafting the art” (235). He further notes that taking up the profession of gardener after release from internment “was a strategy to mute the noisy impositions of land seizure and economic marginalization and to find the silences...of self-determination under oppression” (245). Much like for the Japanese American gardeners who Esaki (2013) interviewed, gardens for Lily are spaces of “dignity and respect, where life is given space to exist and to speak on its own terms and at its own pace.” Within an oppressive environment, gardens constitute oases of agency and autonomy. Comparable to trees that bear scars from techniques of pruning designed by “Japanese Americans trying to succeed under oppression” (257), Lily embodies a tree with scars created in her fight against sexist and cultural expectations. To heal these scars, Lily longs for Japanese gardens’ “ancient connection with nature and tranquility and...harmony” (258).

Shigekuni constructs the garden’s interiority as a mental space of silence and introspection. Lily’s garden nurtures her longings for “another life” and does not judge her for her actions. These characteristics are in tune with the fact that the Japanese art of gardening appreciates the power of difference rather than uniformity as the “Japanese ideal of beauty is most often expressed in asymmetry” (Hayakawa 1973, 166). This embracing of diversity clashes with the social and cultural forces that shape Lily’s life: “I want another life’ ...I’m not sure I can pull it off anymore—any of it” (Shigekuni 2003, 129). In her imaginary garden, Lily is free to break out

of established and expected patterns. She longs to transplant this audaciousness into the real world where she fights the norms and roles that mold her life as a Japanese American woman.

The Body as a Tool for Self-Empowerment

Discussions about Asian American women’s bodies must necessarily take into consideration colonial constructions of “Oriental” women. The demand for Asian women in the global sex and marriage market strengthens stereotypes about them as submissive and unmarked by feminism, a characteristic that makes them more desirable for many men. According to Yamamoto (1999), Asian American women have historically refrained from explicitly referencing the body and sexuality as they have served as sites of otherness, humiliation, and repudiation (74). In that same vein, Lily’s body initially only functions as a messenger for her outsider status and dissatisfaction: “She sees her body reduced to a mass of tissues and organs and knows that in some irreparable way, her marriage is fading, her life as it was is ruined” (Shigekuni 2003, 64).

In her marriage to Joseph, a white medical doctor, Lily cannot escape the dutiful and subservient role as a lotus blossom or geisha and as the perfect mother. Her husband’s professional status and success also generate a great deal of self-doubt: “Can’t she be, for one night, the loving wife of the good doctor? It shouldn’t be so hard on this occasion, when Joseph is clearly the king of the world” (Shigekuni 2003, 65). Lily feels frustrated about her academic career. She questions her accomplishments and her own worth in academia and wonders if her hiring was because “the department need[ed] one more Japanese-American to fill some secret quota” (Shigekuni 2003, 14).

One day, Lily powerfully fights against these forces of unacknowledged male privilege when she seduces her Japanese American colleague, Perish, in his office. When she asks him a question in his position as an academic expert on the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, he makes it very clear that he is only interested in sex and not in any kind of intellectual exchange. As a result, she determines “to make the rules for what will happen in his office this afternoon.” She physically takes control of his workplace by creating chaos, throwing books at him, and stuffing a ripped-out page of a valuable book into his mouth. In a

sense, Lily appropriates the space of oppression where men normally dominate and becomes the “master of this interlude” (127). This rupture of patriarchal space and power assumes a highly emblematic and destructive form when Lily damages her lover’s books with his own semen (128). In this white and male-dominant environment, Lily asserts her presence and identity and symbolically stands up against sexist forces in the Asian American community that suggest that racial issues are more important than gender oppression.

Critics might argue that the overt celebration of sexual pleasure in *Invisible Gardens* works to reproduce the hurtful hypersexualization of women of Asian descent. Misogynist, racist, and orientalist images have long depicted Asian women as a “dragon lady, lotus blossom, the prostitute with a heart of gold, the little brown fucking machine powered by rice, the dominatrix, and the whore” (Shimizu 2007, 4).⁴ They are portrayed as demure and passive (sexual) servants of white men or aggressive sexual predators and traitors. Celine Shimizu (2007) argues that women of Asian descent are associated with a “perverse sexuality,” which usually stands in stark contrast to a white woman’s ‘normal’ sexuality and which can be interpreted as “strength, diversity, or [as] pathology” (4). For many women and especially women of color, the fear of being marked as sexually perverse hinders them from expressing their sexual desires and experiences. While hypersexuality as a stereotype is damaging to Asian American women, it can be reclaimed in the form of “feminist, anti-racist, and sex-positive critique” against moralistic judgments and policing (6). I contend that Shigekuni challenges perceptions of the Asian woman’s body by depicting Lily as an increasingly empowered sexual subject instead of a passive sex object or “other.”

For Lily, this process includes experiencing the joy and pleasure of sexuality. *Invisible Gardens* presents an abundance of positive images of the sensual female body, including Lily’s efforts to regain control over her body: “She has always lived inside her body. Spent the last years bearing children and feeding them milk produced by her body, and before that – before that she can barely remember. She was young then, living in a body that gave her pleasure, and that pleasure is no longer linked to her husband” (Shigekuni 2003, 63). The use of sexually explicit description in the novel is consistent with a recent trend toward unconcealed expressions

of sexuality in Asian American women’s writing: “She can feel her hips spreading apart, her womb opening to take him in, and a warmth emanates out of her center as her jaw trembles, then soundlessly releases” (Shigekuni 2003, 62). Lily’s open embrace of sexual pleasure during her affair with Perish might be read as “politically productive perversity” (Shimizu 2007, 23) as the author seeks to confront Asian American women’s sexual commodification. Gayatri Spivak (1987) explains: “[i]f to identify woman with her copulative or reproductive body can be seen as minimalizing and reductive, woman’s orgasmic pleasure...can be seen as a way out of such reductive identifications” (258). By marshalling the power of sexually-explicit writing in *Invisible Gardens*, Shigekuni effectively challenges orientalist misogynic imaginings and presents pleasure as a form of feminist resistance.

Lily’s sexual relationship with her lover allows her body, through its erotic desires, to become a medium to restore her holistic self. Audre Lorde (1984) writes that “the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority” (53), and Asian American women’s constructed racialized hypersexuality—as is the case for other women of color—has been used as a tool to oppress them. Yet, Lorde argues that great power lies in women embracing their sexual powers: “[W]hen we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense” (58).

Shimizu (2007) maintains that Asian American feminist cultural producers are challenging the systemic appropriation of Asian American women’s sexuality as they “re-identify sexuality as crucial to their social legibility and self-recognition in terms of forging their freedoms from the bonds of racial, gendered, sexual, and classed classifications” (10). Shigekuni, too, suggests that Lily’s re-encounter with ecstatic sexual pleasure changes how she perceives herself, offering her the self-knowledge, confidence, and courage to resist oppression. Lorde (1984) succinctly describes this process as follows: “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness...resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (58). Not unlike Lorde’s experiences, Lily’s recognition of her body’s sexual and liberating forces sparks her desire to ques-

tion the oppressive and paralyzing elements—like the commodification of female bodies—that shape many Asian American women’s lives due to intersectional networks of domination.

A Mental Space of One’s Own

While *Invisible Gardens* engages with various feminist themes, Lily’s public fainting spell at a gas station after one of her illicit sexual meetings with her lover might, as an age-old device in fictional writing, work to undermine the portrayal of Lily as an empowered agent. I argue, however, that, when interpreted from a Japanese American perspective, the fainting episode does not have that effect. For Lily, it is vital to maintain an inner place for herself where she can find solitude: “The noise the children make, even Joseph’s voice, cannot reach her in this place she inhabits alone” (Shigekuni 2003, 5). This remote, inner space offers protection from external forces beyond Lily’s control. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (1985) clarifies that some Japanese women have the ability to create “a void that encircles her and cannot be silenced... This ability to create a psychological privacy, inherited from a people who for centuries have had to create their own internal ‘space’ in an overpopulated island, gave her the freedom, of which she was so deprived in her role as Japanese wife and mother. This was her way to survive...and to succeed” (74). The capacity for quiet and healing introspection becomes a quality essential to women’s survival.

Lily’s fainting spell, then, does not necessarily have to symbolize weakness, but can signify mental and physical liberation from oppression: “The body fighting the mind, vying for what is real” (Shigekuni 2003, 175). In Lily’s case, the mind wins, forcing her to disregard mere bodily demands and to focus instead on her inner self to gain psychological strength. It seems that, for Shigekuni, a balance between female sexual *and* mental powers can be the most empowering for women.

This positive reading of Lily’s fainting spell is supported when one considers other instances in the novel when something similar to losing consciousness is described: “It is while she is reading that her world falls away from her... She imagines her heart as a closed fist opening... as some part of her is lifted from her body, freed” (Shigekuni 2003, 81). In this scene, Lily’s inner self is able to separate from its physical shell to embrace the strength and clarity within her. This mental wander-

ing occurs again when Lily is having sex with Perish and finds herself transplanted to her family’s garden. Here she witnesses a fight between her husband and her father, but remains an unnoticed observer. This provides her with an opportunity, very much in accordance with the Japanese concept of a garden, to contemplate privately and calmly her relationship with her father.

On a larger scale, *Invisible Gardens* proposes that effective communication is essential when trying to survive in oppressive social and cultural environments. Lily believes in the Japanese concept of ‘stomach talking’ (Kato 1977, 96), which allows people who are extremely close to communicate without the use of words: “I want to be understood without having to ask for understanding’... Joseph swears beyond all hope that such a state of intimacy cannot exist, even calls it blackmail” (Shigekuni 2003, 137). She not only seeks a mental space for herself, but is convinced that her relationship with her husband needs a completely private location, which no one else, not even their children, can enter. Because of the different levels of privilege in their relationship, bodies alone cannot procure the closeness which Lily deems vital to a fulfilled marriage.

Beyond *Invisible Gardens*

Shigekuni further explores the idea of a mental space of refuge in her 2008 novel *Unending Nora*. The work focuses on twenty-nine year-old Nora Yano’s disappearance and follows the intertwined stories of four young Japanese American women whose parents are marked by the effects of internment: “[H]aving found no place for herself in the world of appearances, Nora was the natural ruler of the world that existed beneath the surface” (8). After losing all feeling in her hands and suffering from depression, Nora seeks refuge in her imagination and engages in a passionate sexual relationship with a stranger. These sexual encounters, as in Lily’s case, make Nora feel alive, and she regains control over her body. Gardens, too, emerge as symbols for “beauty,” “warmth,” a “retreat,” and “peace” (141) and as spaces of reconnection and negotiating memories.

As with the women depicted in *Unending Nora*, Lily’s life reflects major changes that have swept through the Japanese American community and that have supported the emergence of Asian American feminism. In both cases, the women’s social interactions are less influenced by the “dense web of intimate ethnic friendships,

extensive family ties, and other quasi-kin relationships” so characteristic of earlier Japanese American generations (Fugita and Fernandez 2004, 209). These shifts are also manifested by the many Japanese Americans who marry “outsiders” and by the loss of the Japanese language and culture as a pervasive influence. The fact that fathers, like Yas, are depicted as fragile figures further points to the weakening of patriarchal structures in Asian American communities (Xu 2002, 57). In their efforts to heighten their own visibility, women writers of Asian descent do not render men completely absent, but limit their capacity to exert patriarchal dominance.

While Shigekuni certainly explores the racial complexities of Lily’s social location as a Japanese American woman in *Invisible Gardens*, she appears most interested in examining women’s struggle against archaic gender roles. This is also the case in Shigekuni’s (1995) first novel, *A Bridge between Us*, in which she explores women’s experiences of various kinds of oppression such as sexism, racism, and sexual harassment. One of the characters, Tomoe, questions gendered expectations, describing how she “was raised to believe that doing something for myself means caring for others and Goro [her husband] grew up believing that caring for himself was enough” (76). Most of the characters in Shigekuni’s first novel at some point admit that “I did not believe in myself” (98). A key focus of Shigekuni’s feminist critique is Asian American women’s socialization as submissive caregivers at the expense of their own needs. With her depiction of Japanese American feminism in her novels, Shigekuni steers away from the stereotypical portrayal of Japanese American women in order to claim, “I am not exotic,” which echoes the message of *The Forbidden Stitch*, the first anthology of Asian American women’s literature (Lim 1989, 12).

Asian American women writers, like Julie Shigekuni, have made significant contributions, especially given that Asian women in America emerged “not as individuals but as nameless and faceless members of an alien community. Their identity has been formed by the lore of the majority community, not by their own history, their own stories” (Asian Women United of California 1989, 1). Through her portrayal of Lily and other female characters, Shigekuni has given a face to contemporary Japanese American women that is independent of widespread and detrimental stereotypes. She takes risks in her depiction of lives lived under the sur-

face and shows little judgment or moralizing. According to Elaine Kim (1990), “claiming America for Asian Americans is inseparable from the claim on female self and subjectivity” (81). Shigekuni confronts the hypersexualization of Asian women by showing that sexuality is an essential part in every woman. She portrays Japanese American women not as abstract others or as flat caricatures, but as real women and subjects. While *Invisible Gardens* is certainly not a perfect or neat feminist story, it successfully opens up discussions about Asian American women and their relationship to sexuality, family, and empowerment.

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Endnotes

¹ Asian American women began to organize in larger numbers in the 1960s. Despite public perceptions, the Asian American women’s movement has a lively history. See Esther Ngan-Ling Chow’s (1996) “The Development of Feminist Consciousness among Asian American Women” for a discussion of this feminist history and the challenges that women encountered.

² Julie Shigekuni received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and is currently the Creative Writing Program Director and Development Director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of New Mexico. She has published three novels: *A Bridge Between Us* (1995), *Invisible Gardens* (2003), and *Unending Nora* (2008).

³ *Invisible Gardens* might not only incidentally be similar in its title to Nancy Friday’s (1973) *My Secret Garden*, a non-fiction compilation of women’s sexual fantasies.

⁴ One example of this typology is actress Lucy Liu as a dominatrix in *Payback* (1999) and *Charlie’s Angels* (2000).

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