Chapter 9

Scorn
(Bubetsu 侮蔑)

“Scorn” appeared in December 1938 in the journal Bungei shunjū 文芸春秋 (Literary times).¹ This was the last story Tamura wrote before she left Japan for China, where she worked as a special reporter for Chūō kōron. Tamura would never return to Japan again. Interestingly, the focus of Tamura’s final story is Nisei. Thus her first and final fictional voice during her brief return to Japan in the 1930s is intertwined with the voices of her Nisei characters, whom she chooses to depict as never really having a true place to call home. This story almost seems like an essay on Tamura’s final thoughts on race and class before she left Japan. In this story, the sense of alienation that her Nisei characters experience could very well be a metaphor for Tamura’s own sense of feeling lost, betwixt and between two countries, neither of which felt fully comfortable to her and neither of which she made her permanent home.

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Scorn
(Bungei shunjū, December 1938)

Chapter One

Jimmy was a Nisei born in the United States in the 1920s, at the height of racism toward Japanese. He spent his youth filled with shame about who he was. His parents knew only how to endure. They worked in silence in the fields owned by Americans, who grinned with pride, displaying the racist oppression of the so-called civilized people, and his parents put up with this as well as with the exaggerated stereotypes of them created in the English-language papers, where endless photos of Japanese women working the fields with babies tied to their backs would appear, implying to the civilized people of America that Japanese were an inferior race, more inferior than the Negro race.²

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² In this powerful sentence, in which Tamura argues that the Japanese race 日本人種 (Nihonjinshu) is treated worse than the Negro race 黒人種 (Kokujinshu), she repeatedly uses the word “civilized people” 文明人 (bunmeijin). The Chinese characters for 黒人種
In such an environment, Nisei were raised with no confidence. They were trained to be obedient, and as a result their spirits were crushed. They had lost the strength and desire to try to enter white society. Although their minds were cultivated by America’s lofty educational ideals, Nisei understood the paradox of their own lives, but they did not have the power to push their way into America’s liberal society.

Even though they were American citizens, they could not work in white society, and although they had received an American education, they were not treated the same as American citizens; this was because their parents had no understanding of American ways. Of all the hurdles Nisei had to face as they tried to get accepted into American society, their parents were their worst enemies. More than anything else, it was their parents who threatened their acceptance into American society and sowed the seeds for their ostracism. Nisei did not receive even a basic foundation of support from Issei. All Issei did from morning until night was work. They had time for nothing else. Because they sent the money they earned back to their home country, there was no economic base for the future of Nisei in America. As a result, Nisei slowly grew to hate their parents. Yet because of the inequality they experienced in white American society, Nisei confined themselves to their parents’ way of life. Some Nisei who did not get jobs in white society were employed by Issei businesses. Although Issei worked as laborers, they did not receive the same benefits as their American co-workers. Nisei, who knew the rules of American civilization, were aware of this inequality. When the Nisei shouted “Unfair,” the Issei looked at them with contempt.

The Issei had fought with all their blood to develop the foundation for Japanese people who lived in America amidst a storm of anti-Japanese sentiment. Nisei did not understand that they had been raised in a protected way, sheltered in the bosoms of their parents as they worked hard, and that they were able to get a high level education in which they experienced no oppression through the hard-earned money their parents made with their blood and sweat.

(Kokujinshu) literally mean “black person race,” but to reflect 1930s colloquial English, I use the phrase “Negro race.” In an article that appears in the Japan Review, I discuss Tamura’s use of bunmei 文明 (civilized) and bubetsu 傾蔑 (scorn) in this story. The word bunmei appears five times in the first three pages of the eighteen-page story; the word bubetsu appears seven times in the story. I suggest that Tamura’s emphasis on “civilization” at the beginning and her continued mention of “scorn” throughout the story might be for rhetorical emphasis as she deconstructs the idea of “civilization” by revealing its underlying racism. See Anne Sokolsky, “No Place to Call Home: Negotiating the ‘Third Space’ for Returned Japanese Americans in Tamura Toshiko’s ‘Bubetsu’ (Scorn),” Nichibunken Japan Review: Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, no. 17 (2005): 121–48.