CHAPTER 10

“Ashamed of Certain Japanese”
*The Politics of Affect in Japanese Women’s Immigration Exclusion, 1919–1924*

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Abstract

This chapter traces three interrelated affective economies developed around the role of Japanese immigrant women during the immigration and land debates between 1919 and 1924. First, anti-Japanese crusades developed an affective economy around the yellow peril, which bound whites with a common racialized fear around the productive and reproductive labor of Japanese immigrant women. In response, a pro-Japanese white liberal collective attempted to carve out an affective project of U.S.-Japan friendliness, in which they envisioned benevolently assimilating Japanese immigrant women. Between these two projects, Japanese immigrant elites attempted to uplift Japanese immigrant women through an economy of respectability. These affective projects reveal the central role of gender and family in the immigration and land debates, intra-ethnic class conflict, and the early formation of the model minority in the 1920s.

Keywords


Susie Yamamoto grew up as the only Japanese girl in San Bernardino during the 1910s and 1920s. She became popular in her hometown, the mayor frequently stopped by to say Hi to her and the judge often called her in for assistance in translation. In fact, because Yamamoto “mingled freely” among white townspeople, she felt these relationships often separated her from other

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Japanese women. She explained, “I have been with the Americans so much that I have many times felt ashamed of certain Japanese.” She specified, “I have often taken rides through the country with American friends, when I have felt humiliated because we saw Japanese women working in the fields. I think they shouldn’t work in the fields on Sunday, at any rate I don’t blame the Americans for saying things about them.”

Yamamoto recalled, “One day when I was driving in San Bernardino with some of my American friends, as we passed a Japanese vegetable stand, the woman in charge called to me. I was greatly embarrassed because her voice seemed so loud and then her child was so very dirty.” In this moment when the Japanese immigrant woman at the vegetable stand called to her, Yamamoto retreated because she did not want her white friends to lump her, a well-educated, American girl at heart, racially with the Japanese peddler who had been working unceremoniously on a Sunday afternoon. Yamamoto felt insecure, however, of her own understanding of women’s work. Having grown up on a Japanese immigrant farm, Yamamoto was unsure she could learn from her own Japanese mother about proper domesticity.¹ When she moved to Los Angeles to attend the University of Southern California, she began to work in an American home against her mother’s wishes.² Despite her pride in the ability to “mingle freely” with white friends in public places, she was insecure about her own racial and class difference: “I do not feel perfectly at ease at times and to get rid of any awkwardness I am at present working in an


² Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). Nakano Glenn cites that it was common for Issei women to serve as live-in domestic care and for young Nisei women to serve as schoolgirls – a term where the young girl would go to school and pay her bills by doing housework on the side. This helped many of them learn the workings of an American home. In this case, Yamamoto’s mother did not want her daughter to work in an American home, perhaps because Yamamoto was one of the eldest children and their farm (like many other immigrant family businesses) relied upon unpaid family labor. In African American women’s history, Victoria Wolcott argues that Black women took up domestic work to learn the respectability etiquette of the proper role of women’s work in the home. Victoria Wolcott, Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).