

Story of an *Issei* Father, but Really the Story of a Human Being

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— Reading “Las Vegas Charley” beyond the racial perspective —

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Introduction

Nisei writer Hisaye Yamamoto (1921–2011) published “Las Vegas Charley” in 1961. The protagonist of the story is an *issei* man, Kazuyuki Matsumoto, called “Charley” by friends in Las Vegas, whose life story is the main plot. This story focusing on an *issei* man may seem exceptional among Yamamoto’s works because many of her works have *nisei* female protagonists or narrators. Robert T. Rolf, who has commented on several of her works, summarizes “Las Vegas Charley” as “her attempt at a mini-epic of Japanese American life” (92), and criticizes the generalized figure of the protagonist and the story’s discordance between theme and style. Although it is true that this short story is informative about the history of Japanese Americans—Kazuyuki’s life mirrors several typical events for Japanese Americans, such as a marriage with a picture bride,⁽¹⁾ seasonal labor in California,⁽²⁾ and internment during WWII—what makes this short story attractive would be overlooked if it is mainly read for its historical subtext in relating the life of a typical *issei* man. Certainly, the protagonist is formed not as a generalized *issei* man but as an irreplaceable person, Kazuyuki Matsumoto, through some gripping episodes—for example, his encounter with a soldier who insisted that he had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the depiction of the New Year celebration in Japanese community with his wife.⁽³⁾ To reread “Las Vegas Charley” as the story of a unique man, Kazuyuki Matsumoto, or, in other words, to uncover his uniqueness hidden under the veil of the “Charley” stereotype, I will highlight these distinctive episodes in this paper and examine their rhetoric.⁽⁴⁾

In particular, I will focus on how the narrator changes its distance from Kazuyuki while narrating these episodes. Although a narrator is one of the key concepts used to discuss Yamamoto’s early works like “Seventeen Syllables,” few studies have paid attention to the narrator of “Las Vegas Charley.”⁽⁵⁾ As Charles L. Crow pointed out, “Las Vegas Charley” is the story of conciliation between an *issei* father and his *nisei* child: “The struggling, growing female artist

shown in the early stories ['Seventeen Syllables,' 'Yoneko's Earthquake,' and 'The Legend of Miss Sasagawara'], who distanced her emotion with cold irony in 'The Brown House,' has reached a nearly serene understanding with Charley" (127). This process of conciliation with one's father as seen in the corpus of Yamamoto is reenacted in this one work in the form of the change undergone in the narrator. In the opening and ending scenes of the story, *nisei* appear as a narrator and as a son of Kazuyuki, but their attitudes are contrasting: the narrator in the opening scene is apathetic toward Japanese Americans, while the son at the end shows "compassion" toward his *issei* father, Charley. This difference indicates that the relationship between *issei* father and *nisei* child is unstable but turns into a process of mutual understanding toward the end of the story. To verify this, I will first examine the change of the narrator's attitude in the first part of the story. The narrator, at the beginning, sees Japanese Americans, including Kazuyuki, from a detached viewpoint, with its object of concern being the problematic relationship between American society and Japanese Americans. However, facing the agitating situation of racial categorization, the narrator turns its eyes to the inner thoughts of Kazuyuki, and then begins to describe his life via sympathizing with him. Second, I investigate how the narrator identifies itself with Charley in the latter part of the story, especially in the light of "provisioning," a term defined by Marjorie L. DeVault as the series of acts done to provide meals to one's family, introduced to the study of Yamamoto by Gayle K. Sato. Reading Kazuyuki's biography closely from the perspective of food and eating clarifies a positive meaning of Kazuyuki's gambling in the evening of his life, in addition to elucidating the narrator's sympathy with Kazuyuki. Grounded on these examinations, this article aims to verify that "Las Vegas Charley" reflected Yamamoto's belief about racial problems at that time. Understanding their parents was an urgent matter for her when her *nisei* generation was taking over *issei* culture and writing this story was her attempt to assume her responsibility.

1.

"Las Vegas Charley" does not begin with the Kazuyuki Matsumoto's biography, though it is the story's main plot. The first few pages consist of descriptions of old Charley's hand-to-mouth life, his addiction to gambling, and his encounters with a soldier, an African American man, and a Mexican man. After these episodes, suddenly the scene shifts to Kazuyuki's birthplace to open his life story. In these first scenes, the narrator regards Charley as one of the Japanese Americans, or a Japanese living in America but ineligible for U. S. citizenship, with the leading theme being the hardship of being Japanese in American society. However, this

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objective and distant attitude of the narrator changes in the course of narrating itself. The narrator gradually gets closer to Charley by way of imagining his inner thoughts. I will first look at the narrator's point of view in "Las Vegas Charley" to examine its change of attitude toward the protagonist.

The narrator of "Las Vegas Charley" appears as "I" only once in the first paragraph; the persona is so obscure that the story seems to have an omniscient narrator.

There are very few Japanese residing in Las Vegas proper, that glittering city which represents, probably, the ultimate rebellion against the Puritan origins of this singular country. A few Japanese families farm on the outskirts, but *I can't imagine what they grow there in that arid land* where, as far as the eye can see from a Greyhound bus (and a Scenicruiser it was, at that), there are only sand, bare mountains, sagebrush, and more sand. Sometimes the families come into town for shopping; sometimes they come for a feast of Chinese food, because the Japanese regard Chinese cuisine as the height of gourmandism, to be partaken of on special occasions, as after a wedding or a funeral. (70, emphasis added)

Looking out of the window from the bus that runs in the outskirts of Las Vegas, the narrator reports the "arid" picture of this area. However, the sterility of the land does not seem to bother the narrator who is riding on the long-distance bus. Having certain knowledge and understanding about Japanese immigrants' lives and values, the narrator uses "they"—a pronoun for the third person plural—to refer to Japanese Americans, which indicates that the point of view of the narrator is that of an objective and disinterested observer. Moreover, the narrator describes Las Vegas and America with ironical expressions. The detached attitudes for both the Japanese American community and the American mainstream society indicate that the narrator is the one who cannot identify itself as a member of either of the communities, such as *nisei*—a second-generation Japanese American—who left the Japanese American community after returning from concentration camps where they had been interned as "enemy aliens." Moreover, *nisei* are the most likely to describe the life of an *issei* man in English. This description introduces the readers to the story of Charley through the lens of a *nisei* narrator.

Before Charley's life story, the narrator relates several episodes that raise questions about racial discrimination and stereotyping then rampant in American society. Following the first two paragraphs, which depict Japanese American residents in the outskirts as well as in the city of Las Vegas, the narrator introduces a Japanese man living in the city, Kazuyuki Matsmoto, known as "Charley" among his friends. The name "Charley" is evocative of the problematic representation of Asians in American novels and films, which Yamamoto may

have intended, and Charley's nonchalant attitude accents its irony. According to Yumiko Murakami, "Charley" is the name adopted for a minor Asian role in popular entertainment such as Hollywood movies, which originated in the well-known character "Charlie Chan," so it evokes the image of stereotyped Asian men.⁽⁶⁾ The transition from "Kazuyuki Matsumoto" to "Charley" means that he was reduced to a stereotyped, faceless Asian, one devoid of individual sentiments or memories. The protagonist's name points out his racial background which brings on prejudice and discrimination in his daily life.

Through the depiction of the encounter with an American soldier in the early part of the story, the narrator also protests against the racial problems in the American society. One day in Las Vegas, Charley is spoken to by a soldier who confesses that he dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima; the episode originally appeared in the short story "The Streaming Tears." Facing Charley, the soldier shows his regret: "the soldier had grabbed Charley by the shoulders and apologized for the heinous thing he had done to Charley's people. Then he had turned back to his drink, pounded the counter with one tight fist, and muttered, 'But it was them or us, you understand, it was them or us!'" (72). Except for the sentence written in direct speech, it is not clear what the soldier says. However, the words "Charley's people" used by the narrator indicate that the soldier did not make any distinction between Japanese immigrants living in America and people living in Japan. This arbitrary classification is seen again in the soldier's words "them or us," through which he justifies his sin of killing millions of innocent citizens in a do-or-die situation. Since the phrase "them or us" is written in direct speech, it obscures to whom "they" or "us" refers. Here the question is where is Charley's position in this ambiguous "them" or "us" dichotomy. Considering the history of WWII, "us" means American citizens in general and "them" Japanese citizens. Nevertheless, this definition does not help when deciding the position of *issei*, who have lived in the United States for much longer than in Japan but are not recognized as U.S. citizens. Charley might be categorized as "them" because the narrator uses the expression "Charley's people" and the soldier says "them or us" after averting his eyes from Charley. Yet, if the soldier had regarded Charley as one of "them," he could have used a personal pronoun for the second person plural, "you." His words are unclear as to whether Charley is one of "them" or one of "us," or even outside of that dichotomy. Depicting the soldier's monologue-like confession, the narrator accuses his self-deception for which he set arbitrary boundaries between "them" and "us," neglecting the historical background of immigrants.

When the soldier draws a line between "them" and "us" in the conversation with Charley,

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the narrator is made also uneasy about its own identity. The separation of “them” and “us”—in other words, between “American” and “Japanese”—is more threatening for *nisei* than for *issei*. *Nisei*, who made up two thirds of people detained in internment camps, were regarded as enemy aliens, though they were born U.S. citizens and brought up in America. They reacted to internment in various ways: some tried to improve their social status by showing their loyalty enthusiastically, while others idealized Japan and its culture due to the despair over American democracy. They all vacillated between two nationalities and were forced to choose one of them. They could not have dual nationality, they could not be both Japanese and American; they were told to accept one country as their homeland and to abandon the other completely.⁽⁷⁾ Most *nisei*, except for *kibei*⁽⁸⁾ like Noriyuki, Charley’s second son, wished to be considered American, like a *nisei* man in “Las Vegas Charley” who served the U.S. Army by recruiting volunteers while wearing a military uniform. If we consider the historical background of *nisei*, the direct speech the narrator uses to write the soldier’s words is a way to evade clarifying what “them” and “us” signify. While setting Charley up as a protagonist and focusing on him, from the opening of the story the narrator calls him “Charley” in order to point out the problem of racial minorities, in effect disregarding the individuality of Kazuyuki Matsumoto. This distant attitude results from fear of being considered one of “Charley’s people,” a fear that surfaces when the narrator’s identity was unsettled by the soldier’s “them or us” distinction. The narrator struggles to get over this distinction, but this scene proves the impossibility of escaping from the line dividing Japanese and American, even after the war.

Facing the difficulty of depicting Kazuyuki from the perspective of racial problems in America, the narrator steps into another possible way of telling the story of an *issei* man, that is, to imagine what Kazuyuki himself is thinking, and relate it from his point of view. After the soldier says “them or us,” the narrator switches its attention from the soldier to Charley:

Charley had not said a word then. What was there to say? He could have said he was not from Hiroshima but from Kumamoto . . . He could have said that the people of Kumamoto-*ken* had always regarded the people of Hiroshima-*ken* as being rather too parsimonious. But his English was not up to imparting such small talk and he doubted, too, that information of this kind would have been of much interest to such a deeply troubled man. (72, italics in original)

Unlike the soldier’s words—“Charley’s people” or “them or us”—that set the dichotomy according to race, an idea shared by the narrator, who calls Japanese American families “they” from the bus, Charley proposes the smaller category of prefectures in Japan. This alternative fram-

ing by prefectures discloses that the racial dichotomy underlying the remarks of the soldier is only an arbitrary judgment. The narrator's imagination toward the interior of Charley undermines the racialized nationalistic dichotomy, which helps the narrator to transcend the point of view that regards Charley as only Japanese.

As the narrator transfers the point of view from race to individual, there is a change in the understanding of Charley. This transition is even more obvious when we contrast "Las Vegas Charley" with "The Streaming Tears," a short story published in the Japanese American newspaper, *Rafu Shimpo*, in 1951. Many episodes in "The Streaming Tears" are similar to "Las Vegas Charley," including the encounter with a soldier who says he dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The *nisei* daughter, the narrator of "The Streaming Tears," is most attracted by the soldier's streaming tears when she hears about the incident from her father: "The story fascinated me. Especially those tears fascinated me. I examined those tears from every angle I could think of" (24). She wonders why the soldier was crying, if he really dropped the atomic bomb, and whether there were other reasons for his tears; and then she closes the story by mentioning news of the invention of automated planes for dropping atomic bombs. The main object of the narrator's interest is the suffering of people who played a part in the war, and she does not care about her father telling her that story. Her attitude toward the father is summarized in the following conversation: "And what did you say to him, Papa?" I asked, although I knew the answer. "Nothing. It's best not to say much to people like that" (24). The narrator takes his words literally, dismissing it as soon as he finished speaking.

However, after more than ten years had passed, Yamamoto took up the same incident again in "Las Vegas Charley," this time with a focus on the inner thoughts of the father who answered "Nothing." Charley's thoughts follow the sentence that conveys his silence. He understands what the soldier is talking about and he deliberates over the adequate response. Yet the only thing crossing his mind is the defect of people in Hiroshima from the viewpoint of Kumamoto. Charley's silence toward the soldier is his choice, a choice made after consideration. Referring to one of the most historic events during the Pacific War, the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Yamamoto now focuses on the silent father rather than on the sobbing soldier, as she did in "The Streaming Tears," which was enabled by the adoption of the first-person but omniscient narrator. This transition of the focus brings the feeling of the *issei* father to light, enabling Yamamoto to reinterpret the father's words—"It's best not to say much to people like that"—as not mere silence but as insight emanating from his courtesy and gentleness.

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As Yamamoto shifted her focus from a soldier to an *issei* man, the narrator of “Las Vegas Charley” changes its position from outside the Japanese American community to the inside it, with sympathy toward Charley coming in the first few pages. The *issei* story cannot be narrated through the relationship between America and Japan or via the anti-Japanese movement. It is necessary for the *issei* narrative to look to individuality and understand each *issei* as a unique existence. The narrator who begins to take part with Charley in the conversation with a soldier launches into a biographical life story of Charley in the middle of the story.

2.

Shifting the viewpoint from the Asian man “Charley” to the unique person “Kazuyuki Matsumoto,” the narrator begins to relate his story from his birth with specific information of years and places. First, there are brief explanations of Kazuyuki’s immigration, marriage, and the birth of the first son; then, the narrator tells of the pleasure and gratification in the Japanese community as well as the frequent losses and loneliness, in which the narrator identifies itself with Kazuyuki. This identification is conspicuous, especially in the depiction of foods and meals. The memory of eating is the core of Charley’s individual experience that cannot be comprehended through the stereotypical “Charley” image. There have been few detailed examinations of the description of Charley’s diet in previous studies, even though Crow pointed out that “[t]he decline in Charley’s life may be traced through the story’s many descriptions of food and eating” (156). The correlation between Charley’s diet and his life unveils the significance of the role of interpersonal connections in the Japanese community as well as another aspect of the “decline” in Charley’s later years.

In Yamamoto’s works with strong autobiographical elements, rice and *mochi* (sticky rice cake) represent innocent childhood or, in other words, a time without any uncertainty about her *nisei* identity, a time under the protection of her parents. In “Life Among the Oil Fields, A Memoir,” a recollection about her early days, the key to her happiness is *mochi*, for it warms the days of winter:

But winter there must have been, because there was the benison of hot *mochi* toasted on an asbestos pad atop the wood-burning tin stove, the hard white cake softening, bursting, oozing out dark globs of sweet Indian bean filling. Or Mama would take out from the water in the huge clay vat a few pieces of plain *mochi* which she would boil. The steaming, molten mass, dusted with sugared golden bean flour, would stretch from plate to mouth, and the connection would have to be gently broken with chopsticks. (89, italics in

original)

Yamamoto's family was living in the oil fields around 1929, the year the Great Depression gripped the whole world, and their life was not rich or attractive. What is worse, they were always surrounded by noise and irritating odor, for their house was near the derrick that pumped black oil from underground. For all that, Yamamoto's childhood in memory is so brimming with beautiful light that she says, "the skies of our years there come back to me blue and limpid and filled with sunlight" (89). Furthermore, as Sato notes, the "golden" *mochi* with bean flour symbolizes the richness in the subjective view of a little child at the table neatly set by her mother (13). It was her mother and her mother's meals that kept the brightness of her childhood, even in harsh winters.

In these passages depicting richness through the lens of a girl's eyes, there is no "I" as the subject of the sentence. The narrator of "Life Among the Oil Field, A Memoir" has little distance from the author, which is clear from the fact that Yamamoto put "a memoir" in the title. Yamamoto here describes only what she herself had seen as a child, for instance, the soft texture, color, and oral sensation of *mochi* as well as her mother cooking it. This scene indicates two things about Yamamoto when she was writing it. First, in her memory, Yamamoto was the passive receiver of foods. She just needed to stay there and wait for her mother's cooking in order to be offered tasty *mochi*. Second, Yamamoto identified with her younger self at that time as she recalled her childhood and narrated it. If she had written the phrase "I remember" or if she were conscious of the subject taking any actions, there would have been some distance between the "I" as the narrating subject (present) and the "I" as the object of the narration (past). In the quotation's last sentence—"[t]he steaming, molten mass . . . would stretch from plate to mouth, and the connection would have to be gently broken with chopsticks"—there should be a person who holds chopsticks and crams one's mouth with *mochi*. Yamamoto, who did not use "I" or "my" in that sentence, identifies with the little Yamamoto enjoying soft *mochi*, and hence experiences the happiness from that past again. What is more, this ellipsis has an effect of revealing her past more vividly as it makes readers imagine the richness of that scene through the lens of the little Yamamoto.

Considering these characteristics of Yamamoto's writing, the absence of Kazuyuki's name and his anonymity in the scene of *mochi* preparation in "Las Vegas Charley" suggests the sympathetic attitude of the narrator. The first sentence of the scene "What New Year celebrations they had held in this new land!" also indicates that the narrator experienced the joy of *issei* vicariously via telling the energy of *mochi* preparation. No particular names appear in this

scene; the people just called “the men” and “the women” vigorously work, while many anonymous youth revel in the jubilant time for the coming New Year. The anonymity of Kazuyuki does not mean his absence or his lack of subjectivity. Rather, it is evident that, by means of the act of narrating, the narrator gets so close to the inner thoughts of Kazuyuki that it tries to experience the same joy that Kazuyuki felt in and for his Japanese American community.

As a result of the narrator’s attitude, it becomes clear that Kazuyuki has his own role in the Japanese community and that connections with people in the community are essential to his identity and life. The depiction of the cultural dishes served during the New Year celebration is the most significant part in his family story. In particular, the account of *mochi* making is so detailed that it even explains how to use tools for making *mochi*, what types of *mochi* they make, and how to preserve them. The explanation of *mochi* pounding begins as follows: “Preparations had begun about Christmastime with relatives and friends gathering for the day-long making of rice cakes. Pounds and pounds of a special glutinous rice, soaked overnight in earthen vats, would be steamed in square wooden boxes, two or three piled one atop the other, over an outside fire” (74). The point of *mochi* making is the importance of the community in that custom. The preparation of *mochi* is conducted on a large scale, so people need to gather, to cooperate, and to spend a lot of time together to do it. Seen in this passage, *mochi* is a food that cannot be made in each household; rather, it requires a tight community, one willing to put in a lot of time and effort.

The smallest but core community to which Kazuyuki belongs is his family and wife Haru, who invests her time and effort to keep it. The explanation of the special dishes for the New Year suggests that her contribution was essential for the Matsumoto family. The list of New Year special dishes begins with the sentence, “What a mountain of food Haru prepared on New Year’s Eve, cooking till almost morning” (76), and it reaches to more than ten lines in which more than twenty types of dishes are named. Although the preparation for these New Year dishes is mentioned only as “cooking,” each detail of the dishes indicates that what Haru has done is not just cooking in the kitchen. For example, one dish is “purchased ready-made from the Japanese market” (76), while another is arranged on “the largest and best platter in the house” (76), as it is one of the main dishes. It is impossible to set the gorgeous dinner table enough to make the narrator admire it, if one merely knows how to cook each ingredient. There are many more things to grasp in the process of cooking, such as where to shop, how much to use the ready-made foods, or what to choose for the ornaments for the table. The long list of New Year dishes reveals the time and effort Haru dedicates to her family, both in the

time of New Year and in daily life.

The gift Charley receives from his life with Haru, which ends when she dies during second childbirth, is mentioned also in his recollection after he moves to Las Vegas and becomes “Charley.” The recollection clarifies that connubiality was the most important relationship for Kazuyuki’s identity. Haru’s daily attentiveness to Charley is depicted as she was “eager to attend his [Charley’s] least want” (74). He could hang on to his harsh life as a Japanese immigrant in America because there was the big support of Haru. The material and physical support she offered to Charley was not only the foundation of family life but also a mental support for him. So, when he thinks back to the days spent with Haru, he thinks “it seemed as though it had been another man and not himself, who had once had a farm in Santa Maria, California, and a young wife to share his work and his bed” (71). The support from Haru, who shared any hardship or happiness with Charley, was crucial to his identity as Kazuyuki Matsumoto, a unique existence.

However, it is not just after Haru’s death that Kazuyuki loses his hope to maintain the family, in other words, the smallest community to share in daily life. He tries to support his family by covering up the loss of his wife through food and eating, but no attempts work. With no one who cares about Kazuyuki’s life, he cannot build supportive relationships. When Kazuyuki begins to live with his sons again after a few years of separation, the government introduces a system that allocates the amount of farm products, and as a result, the Matsumoto family is forced to live on the vegetables they cannot sell on the market, mainly a lot of tomatoes and Italian squashes.⁽⁹⁾

They lived on tomato soup and sliced Italian squash fried in batter—this was quite tasty, with soy sauce—and, of course, boiled rice, although the cost of a hundred-pound sack of Blue Rose had become amazing. During the winter the fare was usually the thick yellow soup made by adding water to soy bean paste, and pickled vegetables. (78)

While the dishes Kazuyuki makes with residual tomatoes and Italian squashes are “quite tasty,” they are so simple and poor in comparison with Haru’s dinners. Sato says that the table set by Haru during the New Year is “the imagery of surplus and excess . . . [which] suggests that the physical labor of provisioning is secondary, that provisioning only comes into existence through a desire to provide, to give others the pleasure of eating and experiencing family life” (19). Kazuyuki endeavors to be a “provisioner” for his sons, but there is no one who wants to give something to Kazuyuki or to make him happier. The difference between the table set by Haru and that by Kazuyuki suggests that the loss of his wife was also the loss of the relationship of

supporting each other.

The circumstance is aggravated by the war breaking out after that; it deprives him of the chance and ability to be a provisioner for his family. Narrated in the passage quoted above, while it is inferior to Haru's, Kazuyuki makes dinner for his sons after the reunion. This attempt is slowly bearing fruit as a compromise with his sons, but then his role is taken away by internment. As Elaine Kim points out, *issei* men were the people who probably suffered the most because of the internment (135). They had to relinquish all the property they had acquired in America and they were no longer the head of the family, for the family was then fed by the U.S. government managing the concentration camps. It means that Kazuyuki, one of these *issei* men, is robbed of his role as a provider of food. Besides that, he loses the sons for whom he wants to do the work of provisioning. The first son is killed in war and the second son marries a *nisei* woman, and leaves the concentration camp where Kazuyuki still lives. There is no one who needs Kazuyuki's support, even if he regains his provisioning ability after leaving the camp. In short, Kazuyuki is divested of any possibility of being a provisioner or of enjoying the blessing of provisioning by others, which is crucial to the community sustained through the activities related to food and eating and also indispensable for him to keep his dignity.

If we take into account the analysis above, which suggests that the origin of Kazuyuki's change to Charley is the severance from the community formed by food culture, Charley's addiction to gambling in his later years cannot be interpreted only as a part of the "decline" in his life. The narrator calls the people fascinated by gambling "victims of Las Vegas fever" and explains them as follows:

[W]hile they usually make their living as waiters or dishwashers, their principal occupation, day after hopeful day, is to try their luck at *feeding those insatiable mechanical monsters which swallow up large coins* as though they were mere Necco wafers, or at blotting out on those small rectangular slips of paper imprinted with Chinese characters the few black words which may justify their whole existence. (70, emphasis added)

The gambling in Las Vegas is expressed in the metaphorical vocabulary of food and eating. People who contracted "Las Vegas fever" could not stop "feeding" money to the greedy machines. However, as a matter of course, the machines were never satisfied by their feeding and "swallow up" coins more and more. Since provisioning is the act aiming for someone's satisfaction, these victims of Las Vegas fever strived to achieve an unattainable goal with the machines. Kazuyuki, who is called Charley there, has nothing but scarce cash earned by his

daily labor, and there is nobody to receive that meager gift of coins and notes from him but the merciless machines. It is true that there is the chance of making a fortune, in other words, the chance that the machines will be satisfied and give something back to Charley. Yet the probability is very low and Charley himself understands that it is an unrealistic hope. Still, he needs to keep providing something, so he holds on to the possibility because it is the only way for him to verify his own value at that time.

The last affliction he suffers is to lose the ability to enjoy the dishes provided by others. Without any ways to take part in the community built through food and eating, what is left for Charley is only death. At the beginning of that final process, old Charley first loses his teeth, which are indispensable to enjoy food. He cannot receive good treatment because Alice, the wife of Charley's second son Noriyuki, does not treat him in a welcoming way while he stays at Noriyuki's house in order to go to the dentist in Los Angeles. Charley cannot chew properly with his false teeth, which do not fit well due to insufficient treatment, so he comes to suffer hepatitis and hepatic cirrhosis. Finally, Charley is unable to enjoy food or liquor, and there are so few things he can eat that it troubles a dietitian: "a salt-free diet for a man who could not eat solids; there was very little she could plan for him, hardly any variety" (84). It not only makes Charley frail physically but also cuts off the connection with any community like the one to which he used to belong. The man who sustains his identity in the community built through food and eating dies when he fails every attempt to rebuild it.

3.

The narrator, who at first regarded Charley as an anonymous Japanese, turns its eyes to his individual uniqueness and, by relating his life from the viewpoint of food and eating, consequently gives a new significance to Charley's life. His racial background has surely affected his life greatly, but it was just one aspect of his life, and it is impossible to fully understand him only through the filter of race or nationality. As the narrator depicts his own experience and feeling that cannot be stereotyped, his life, which is otherwise despised as the story of "decline," is reassessed as the survival story of a man who never gives up his search for the relationship of provisioning, not until he dies.

This change of recognition about Kazuyuki's life surfaces at the end of the story via the inner thoughts of Noriyuki. The doctor who attends Kazuyuki's death says to Noriyuki, "at least your father had a good time—he drank, he gambled, he smoked. I don't do any of those things; all I do is work, work, work. At least he enjoyed himself while he was alive" (85). But

what Noriyuki thinks about his father is different.

And Noriyuki—who, without one sour word, had lived through a succession of conflicting emotions about his father—hate for rejecting him as a child; disgust and exasperation over that weak moral fiber; embarrassment when people asked what his father did for a living; and finally, something akin to compassion, when he came to understand that his father was not an evil man, but only an inadequate one with the most shining intentions, only one man among so many who lived from day to day as best as they could, limited, restricted, by the meager gifts Fate or God had doled out to them—could not quite agree. (85)

Unlike the doctor who envies Charley's life as an easy one, Noriyuki values his father's strain to survive in America. Since Charley was his father, Noriyuki was ashamed of his father and was irritated by his behavior while he was alive. For *nisei*, interned during WWII because they had "Japanese ancestors" despite being American citizens, the relationship with their parents was closely tied to the racial problems. Closeness with *issei* parents entailed the risk of being regarded as Japanese, one who can be discriminated against because of one's race. So, it was not easy for Noriyuki to sympathize or compromise with his father, similar to the way that the narrator could not relate the conversation between Charley and the soldier without being disturbed. However, after Charley's death, finally Noriyuki has "something akin to compassion" when he realizes that his father was "only an inadequate one" "among so many." It was the first time for him to see Charley not as his own father, nor as an *issei*, but as one of so many human beings who strive to survive everyday life in any predicament. At this point, Noriyuki understands "the most shining intentions" that Charley had throughout his life.

In her essay "Pleasure of Plain Rice," which was written near the same time as "Las Vegas Charley," Yamamoto mentions her view about race: "I do not *feel* any particular Japaneseness. I feel, most of the time, like a human being, and look upon other people, most of the time, as fellow human beings" (9).⁽¹⁰⁾ She covers the *issei* voice under the surface of the text by writing with a lot of ellipses and intimations in "Seventeen Syllables" (1949) and "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951), her most well known works. It suggests that *issei* had been the exception of "most of the time" for her. However, Yamamoto stepped into writing "Las Vegas Charley" in 1961, the time many *issei* passed away and *nisei* faced the matter of how to inherit their legacies. Using the first-person but omniscient narrator, Yamamoto depicts the narrator's realization of an *issei* man's intention, which is hidden when focusing on only racial matters. Furthermore, the narrator deeply sympathizes with Charley when it relates his life, and at last, expresses compassion on the *issei* father in the voice of Noriyuki. It was Yamamoto's exploration of how to get out of

racial framing when she faced *issei* parents. She offered her resistance against racism that judges minorities with stereotypes by showing how deeply one can understand others when one respects them as a unique existence. Through the writing of an *issei* man's story with deep compassion, she honors the culture and will created in the *issei* community, which would be lost in a few decades without successors.

Notes

- (1) As a result of The Gentlemen's Agreement in 1908, the practice of the so-called picture bride spread among Japanese communities. According to Yuji Ichioka, the number of married Japanese women in 1900 was only 410 but it leaped to 22,193 by 1920, with the majority of them entering the United States as picture brides (Ichioka 164-65).
- (2) In California, an alien labor force had been used since the 1870s, when most of these workers consisted of Chinese immigrants, but the number of Japanese began to increase in the 1890s and they became the dominant labor force by 1908 (Ichioka 80).
- (3) In an interview conducted by Charles L. Crow, Yamamoto acknowledged that the model of Charley was her father (Crow and Yamamoto 76).
- (4) For a discussion of father figures in Yamamoto's works (including Charley), see Crow. See also Hiraishi (Inaki) for an analysis of the migration motif in "Las Vegas Charley."
- (5) The gap of understanding the situation between the narrator and the protagonist weaves the suggestive texts of "The Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake," which was named "buried plot" by Stan Yogi or called "double-telling" by King-Kok Cheung.
- (6) For a detailed discussion of the Charlie Chan image, see Jones, Isaacs, Chin, and Xing.
- (7) The event that represented that situation of *nisei* was the "loyalty questionnaire" conducted by the camp authorities in 1944, whose target was all the internees. According to Elaine Kim, "[t]he two most controversial questions asked were whether or not the internee would be willing to serve in the American armed forces and whether or not he or she would forswear his allegiance to Japan and pledge his loyalty to the United States" (136). Japanese internees didn't know how this questionnaire would be used, but most of them, both *issei* and *nisei*, answered "yes" to these questions.
- (8) "Kibei" (帰米) refers to *nisei* who "came back to America" after spending a certain time in Japan for various reasons. Many of them were educated in militarist Japan, so they could not adapt themselves to American culture or speak fluent English. Because of that, the government kept an eye on them (especially in camps) and other *nisei* despised them.
- (9) It refers to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), a major program in the New Deal by President Franklin Roosevelt, which can be guessed from the explanation that the system was enacted by "the man called Rusuberuto" (78). The written expression "Rusuberuto" also indicates the narrator is relating Charley's story from his point of view in this part.
- (10) In "Writing," Yamamoto says that she had suffered from neurosis around 1960 and had written three works as "a form of therapy" (67). On the basis of the information of the year and the name of the magazine mentioned in that essay, it is presumed that these three works are "Las Vegas Charley," "Epithalamium," and "Pleasure of Plain Rice."

Story of an *Issei* Father, but Really the Story of a Human Being

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