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Life Among the Oil Magnates; Individuals and Suffering Pre-Depression in Yamamoto's "Life Among the Oil Fields"

At first glance, Hisaye Yamamoto's autobiographical story, "Life Among the Oil Fields; A Memoir," may appear to tell the story of a family victimized by their situation as lower class minorities in America, but, upon closer inspection, we see that they are in fact victimized by specific individuals who seemingly profit off of their despair. While the Roaring Twenties is often presented as a glorious industrious boom for Americans and the Great Depression, a horrible effect of a faceless and unexpected market crash, Yamamoto's story points to specific humans creating the true misery that haunted the poor. This distinction is important because it demonstrates how Yamamoto believes not only that the lower classes had been suffering long before the Depression but that they suffered at the ends of specific people who perhaps should have been held accountable though they were not.

Immediately, Yamamoto distances the market crash from any human fault by referencing the "depression [that] overtook this country in the autumn of 1929," treating it as some disastrous monster that on its own volition attacked America, the somewhat conventional view of the Depression (Yamamoto, 86). Even the title of the work, "Life Among the Oil Fields," presents "the Oil Fields" as some situational problem, as opposed to the land of a specific oil magnate. Though we know, of course, that one captain of industry or another is in charge of these fields and thus the derricks that rhythmically pumped oil throughout the day (and occasionally caught on fire) and the "reservoir of rich dark goop," all of which posed annoyances if not danger for

the family, these disturbances to their home still are referenced as only unfortunate circumstances--indeed, ones they even accepted since they chose to move there (88). In this way, Yamamoto may appear to only point to blameless entities, results of an almost helpless situation, as the cause of any misfortune.

However, the majority of the anecdotes Yamamoto recounts while on these dangerous oil fields are between people, usually with one causing the suffering of another. She starts small; on the very first page of the story, she describes how, in her youth, one of her friends had run off with the sweets meant for her brother, but "It does not occur to me to forego eating my share of the candy, to take to my little brother," introducing us on a very small scale to a common and perhaps somewhat cynical view of capitalism (which was booming during the 1920s in America)--looking out for oneself before even considering charity to others (87). Despite the fact that this anecdote is places our protagonist against her peers, rather than the Yamamotos and other lower class and minority families against the rich and powerful, this small vignette reveals much about the tone and meaning of the greater story. Self-interested individuals plague all of Yamamoto's memories of this time.

This is not to say, however, that Yamamoto does not directly showcase the (white) upper class directly negatively affecting the less fortunate families. In a dramatic turn of events in the last pages, Yamamoto recalls the time her younger brother Jemo was hit by a passing car whose owners (whom she calls Scott and Zelda, after the famous Fitzgeralds, icons of the Roaring Twenties) failed to take responsibility for the accident both at the time of the accident and later when the Yamamotos' white neighbor supposedly tried to negotiate some settlement for them. Consistent both with the theme of faceless oppression but also the theme of specific people at fault, Yamamoto craftily never allows us to see the couple in the car that hit Jemo, having the

family's only interaction with them happen through the neighbor and a lawyer, but we know that these affluent people in their fast (and thus presumably expensive) car are directly to blame for sending Jemo to the hospital. On face value, this particular anecdote may not appear to have a mildly anti-Roaring Twenties or anti-capitalist root since it was presumably just an accident and the couple didn't seem to benefit from it, but the fact that it was a fast car containing a relatively affluent white couple hitting a defenseless minority child without any repercussions surely hints at an extended metaphor about the unbalanced advantages different classes and races endured at this time.

As Yamamoto makes clear in her first paragraph, the Great Depression was as devastating as we think of it today, but for the disadvantaged, who had been suffering at the hands of the Scotts and Zeldas of America for far too long, not too much changed since they "did not have that far to fall" (86). Stripping away the anonymous identity that the pain of poverty usually carries by recounting her own life stories, Yamamoto evinces how lower class suffering had been perpetuated by more than just mysterious economic happenstances but rather by individuals utilizing their privilege and taking advantage of those who had none even when America was supposedly in a period of economic success.

Works Cited

Yamamoto, Hisaye. “Life Among the Oil Fields; A Memoir,” in *Seventeen Syllables*. Handout. American Literature after 1865 (Professor Yang), UMass Amherst. Accessed 28 February 2018.