

# **Liminal Spaces: US Military Base Towns in Tōmatsu Shōmei's Japan\***

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses photographs by Japanese photographer Tōmatsu Shōmei taken in American military base towns in Japan during the postwar era. For Tōmatsu, these spaces embodied the postwar intersection of American and Japanese culture, signifying what he felt was the creeping “Americanization” of Japan. For this reason, he spent much of his career making photographs of military base towns and their environs, in an ongoing attempt to document what he saw as the erosion of Japanese cultural identity in the face of increasing postwar American presence. Many of his images depict America as a threat both in terms of physical violence and the dilution of Japanese racial and spiritual purity. Ultimately, however, Tōmatsu’s base town photography is most revealing in the way that it reflects the encounter between the photographer and his subjects. As this paper will demonstrate, when viewed in this way Tōmatsu’s photographic work exposes the complexity of relations between Japanese and Americans in postwar Japan; in particular the power dynamics that operated in both American and Japanese society related to gender, race and identity. Three key motifs are apparent in these photographs: the female body representing the feminized body that Japan has become in the wake of its wartime defeat; the African-American servicemen presenting both a physical threat and a threat to racial purity; and the comparative ambiguity surrounding depictions of white American servicemen.

## **Keywords**

Japanese identity, America, occupation of Japan, Japanese photography, representation, Okinawa

## **1. Introduction**

In an era of digital manipulation in which the truth-value of photographic representation has never been more questionable, photography is still more intimately linked to putative reality than any other medium. The camera’s ability to segment moments in time inevitably engenders an association with primordial “truths” in a way that the moving image does not.<sup>1</sup> This association with truth-value makes the task of interrogating photographic works intended to represent identity and social relations particularly important. On this basis, the following essay will discuss

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 36-43., and Elaine P. Miller, "Primal Phenomena and Photography," *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 2 (2010).

several images made by Tōmatsu Shōmei (1930-2012), a photographer who over several decades produced a series of photographs that sought to depict the American presence in Japan. These images were produced in the towns near US military bases, and are intended to reveal certain “truths” about the complex web of social relations that emerged during the Occupation and which became entrenched in the decades that followed official US withdrawal. For Tōmatsu, base towns embodied the postwar intersection of America and Japan, and all the negative effects that arose as a result of the American presence in his country. In particular his photographs represent the base town as a symbolic locus for America’s gradual erosion of Japanese culture and society. Yet, as I will demonstrate, the liminal nature of the base town undermined a simple dichotomy of a unified and evil America versus a unified and pure Japan. Instead, Tōmatsu’s images reflect the complexity of relations between the Japanese and Americans in Japan, while also signifying the power dynamics that were present in both societies. My interest in Tōmatsu’s base town photographs is not related to the information that they contain, nor do I seek to confirm or deny their intended message. Rather, my analysis will focus on the encounter between photographer and subject in the creation of these images, and draw out the various meanings that these interactions reveal about the broader social milieu in which they were created. Through this approach, I intend to demonstrate how the liminal nature of the American base towns in postwar Japan destabilised the representation of simplified identities and relations.

## 2. Tōmatsu and the Americans

Tōmatsu was born in Nagoya in 1930; he grew up in the war years and was a teenager when the Occupation forces arrived after the war’s end in August 1945. He achieved a degree in Economics from Aichi University in 1954 but abandoned the discipline to pursue his interest in photography, a discipline in which he was largely self-taught; he then went on to have an illustrious career as a photographer in the social-documentary style.<sup>2</sup> However, as Tōmatsu’s once famously iterated in response to criticism that he was not sufficiently objective in his approach by eminent fellow photographer Natori Yōnosuke (c.1910-1962), Tōmatsu’s intention was never to simply document.<sup>3</sup> Rather than trying to capture objective reality, Tōmatsu was part of a vanguard of Japanese photographers who emphasized subjective expression. This new generation chose to ‘throw themselves into the dynamic push and pull between concreteness and abstraction, interior and exterior, subjectivity and objectivity, and thereby go beyond...straightforward realism.’<sup>4</sup>

Tōmatsu’s hometown of Nagoya was subject to heavy bombing by the US in the latter part of the Pacific War.<sup>5</sup> The bombing was conducted by US-made B-29 bombers that were capable of unleashing their destructive power from an altitude beyond the range of Japanese anti-aircraft weapons. Near the end of the war, as former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1916-2009) recounted in 2003, in order to maximize ‘efficiency’ the B-29s began flying at low altitude

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<sup>2</sup> Luisa Orto, "Tōmatsu Shōmei," in *The History of Japanese Photography*, ed. John Junkerman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Kōtarō Iizawa, "The Evolution of Postwar Photography," in *The History of Japanese Photography*, ed. John Junkerman (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 215.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas W. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2004), 150-1.

when dropping incendiary bombs upon Japanese cities; as a result up to fifty percent of Nagoya was destroyed.<sup>6</sup> For Tōmatsu these bombing raids were an early encounter with American power in its most brutal form. However, rather than take cover in the shelters, he lay in bed with a mirror positioned to watch the spectacle, which he described as a ‘pageant of light,’ and a ‘feast of metallic beauty.’<sup>7</sup> Given this early fascination with American military force, it is unsurprising that the Americans who later came to occupy Japan became central to Tōmatsu’s photography. Like most Japanese teenagers during the war he had been trained to hate the enemy; he was required to participate in regular drills in which Japanese children charged a straw effigy representing American and British soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Yet Tōmatsu’s ambivalence regarding the Americans was clear even at this stage – he often failed to demonstrate sufficient ardor for this task, and the consequent punishment was being forced to crawl along the freezing ground on his belly.

In the postwar period, the military base came to symbolize Japanese ambivalence towards the American occupiers, and Tōmatsu began to grasp the significance of these sites directly after defeat. As he observed:

The shortage of food was especially painful for rapidly growing children. However, supplies were abundant on the other side of the metal fences and barbed wire that surrounded the U.S. base. The U.S. side looked bright, like heaven, while on this side, there was hell as we struggled with starvation and poverty. When a child with an empty stomach held out his hand, a GI gave chewing gum and chocolate. This fostered distrust for the adults who once called these men brutal American/British bastards.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the generosity of the Americans, distrust of the wartime patriotism of Japanese adults also drew Tōmatsu towards the occupiers. Although he disliked the interlopers, Tōmatsu resented the ‘self-glorifying martinets of the war years’ even more, so it was inevitable that at some level he would remain grateful to the Americans for abolishing the wartime regime.<sup>10</sup> This gratitude is one reason that Tōmatsu would later pronounce that ‘love and hate of the liberators were...like the two sides of a single sheet of paper.’<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Japan as a Feminized Body

Tōmatsu’s ambiguous feelings towards the occupiers fuelled his photographic work well after Occupation. In the decades following SCAP’s withdrawal in 1952, he continued to photograph the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert McNamara, in Errol Morris, "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara," (America: Sony Pictures Classics, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Leo Rubinfien, "Shōmei Tōmatsu: The Skin of the Nation," in *Shōmei Tōmatsu: The Skin of the Nation* (San Francisco: Yale University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Shōmei Tōmatsu, "Toward a Chaotic Sea," in *Setting Sun: Writings by Japanese Photographers*, ed. Akihiro Hatanaka Ivan Vartanian, Yutaka Kambayashi (New York: Goliga Books 2006), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Rubinfien, 23.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Dower, "Contested Ground: Shōmei Tōmatsu and the Search for Identity in Postwar Japan," in *Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation* (San Francisco: Yale University Press, 2004), 63.

Americans in Japan with, in Tōmatsu's own words, 'complex emotions that combined hatred and reverence and a form of nostalgia.'<sup>12</sup> The towns near American military bases were a principal location for this work because they represented the frontline for US/Japanese relations. As John Dower points out, Tōmatsu saw the areas around the military bases as 'places of licentious indulgence' where 'Japan itself had become an eroticized commodity, a feminized object for the Americans to act upon.'<sup>13</sup> Tōmatsu's interest in these spaces was shared by other Japanese photographers of the time who were both attracted to and repulsed by what they saw there. The base towns embodied the 'symbolic rape' of Japan and the spread of 'miscegenation' that some Japanese feared would overcome their country.<sup>14</sup> America's "symbolic rape" of Japan is powerfully evoked in the following image (figure 1) taken by the woman photographer Tokiwa Toyoko (b. 1930). Here the Japanese woman represents a Japan that has been weakened and coerced by the Americans.



Figure 1: Tokiwa Toyoko, *Prostitute, Yokohama*, ca. 1955, taken from Leo Rubinfien, Shōmei Tōmatsu, Sandra S. Phillips, John W. Dower, *Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation*, figure 35.

Although seemingly more innocuous than Tokiwa's image, Tōmatsu's 1969 photograph below (figure 2) conveys a similar message – although more subtly expressed – about America's symbolic domination over the feminized body that Japan has become in the postwar period:

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<sup>12</sup> Tōmatsu, quoted in Iizawa, 219.

<sup>13</sup> Dower, 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.



Figure 2: “Untitled” [Koza, Okinawa], from the series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate*, 1969, from *Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation*, plate 28.

The seemingly jovial nature of this image adds to the power of its message in that it implies the insidious nature of American power that operates in seemingly playful encounters. As in the Tokiwa image (figure 1), America’s supremacy is symbolized by the woman’s evasive action and in the relative largeness of the men who appear to loom above and stare directly down upon her; they appear to be in complete control. On the surface this photograph – again similar to the Tokiwa image – is clearly an allegory for the Japanese woman as an object for the pleasure, or use, of the American male. Moreover, in a broader sense the woman embodies a Japan that is a feminized object in the postwar era that exists for consumption by America. However, while this image does emphasize the African-American men as a threat, it is also possible that the woman is fleeing the Japanese male photographer’s disapproving gaze. In other words, while at first glance the picture represents an interaction between Japan and America symbolized by the woman and the two men respectively, this photograph might also be read in context of the power dynamic between Japanese men and Japanese women. Despite the fact that Japanese women had gained some legal equality through the ratification of the postwar constitution, this dynamic was largely characterized by female subjugation to male interests.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. Okinawans as Sacrificial Victims**

Another way to interpret Tōmatsu’s 1965 photograph is as an expression of the unequal dynamic between mainland Japanese people and Okinawans. As Miyume Tanji states, in the modern era Okinawa’s relationship with the mainland was characterized by having ‘constantly been the victims of oppression, domination, dispossession, discrimination, and episodic violence.’<sup>16</sup> The unequal relationship between mainland Japan and Okinawa was underpinned by an assumption

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<sup>15</sup> John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 368.

<sup>16</sup> Mayumi Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

that Okinawans were a separate and inferior race in comparison to the rest of Japan.<sup>17</sup> This prejudice was reflected in much discourse that tended to emphasize the Okinawans as indelibly animalistic beings. Davinder Bhowmik outlines a telling example of this in the work of Hirotsu Kazuo, a prominent Tokyo-born critic and writer in the 1920s. Hirotsu's story, *The Wandering Ryukyuan*, depicts the relationship between Mikaeru, an Okinawan man, and a mainland writer known only as H who is presumed to represent the author himself. Mikaeru is portrayed as an untrustworthy trickster and described in bestial terms; for instance 'his bear-like laugh, his dark, hairy body and prowling nature [that] turn[s] him into a menacing presence.'<sup>18</sup> Generally, the relationship between H and Mikaeru is presented as the mainlander's paternalistic efforts to civilize his willing Okinawan pupil; however the story implies that this endeavor is ultimately futile given the indelible fact of Mikaeru's Okinawan blood.<sup>19</sup> In the postwar era Okinawans were doubly oppressed: their land had been extensively occupied by the US military, and Okinawa already had a long history of being subjugated to mainland Japanese interests. Layered upon the mainland's subjugation of the Okinawans was the effective colonization of their land by the Americans, which began with the US invasion of Okinawa. In addition to being mortally threatened by American attacks during the battle of Okinawa, residents were also 'abused and murdered by the Japanese military and died of starvation and mass suicides.'<sup>20</sup> Following the battle, under direct US authority many were dispossessed of their land so that American forces could build the multifarious military bases that cover Okinawa to this day.<sup>21</sup> In the postwar era Okinawa has been caught between Japanese and US interests as much as it was during the war. This dynamic is encapsulated in the previous image (figure 2) and is symbolized by the Okinawan woman's body.

This use of the Okinawan woman's body is a well-established trope in dominant Japanese discourses about Okinawa. An example was the widespread interest in the story of the *Himeyuri* ('Maiden Lily') Student Nurse Corps. The *Himeyuri* consisted of 219 girl students who were coerced into nursing duties by the Japanese military. They were forced to accompany Japanese infantry into combat, resulting in the death of most of the girls by the end of the battle. In the Japanese popular imagination this story has come to symbolize the violation of Japanese purity. The young Okinawan women embody Japanese innocence sacrificed to the senseless barbarism of war, a victim of both the Japanese state and the American military.<sup>22</sup> For Okinawans, on the other hand, this case symbolizes how Okinawa has historically been used as a sacrificial lamb in the pursuit of mainland Japanese interests. This sentiment has been cogently articulated by Okinawan feminist Takazato Suzuyo through the analogy of an Okinawa sold into prostitution by the Japanese state:

Okinawa is the prostituted daughter of Japan. Japan used her daughter as a breakwater to keep the battlefields from spreading over the mainland until the end

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<sup>17</sup> Koji Taira, "Troubled National Identity: The Ryukyuan/Okinawans," in *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, ed. Michael Weiner (New York: Routledge, 2009), 141-4.

<sup>18</sup> Davinder L. Bhowmik, *Writing Okinawa: Narrative Acts of Identity and Resistance*, ed. Mark Selden, *Asia's Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, 59-60.

<sup>20</sup> Tanji, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Linda Isako Angst, "The Sacrifice of a Schoolgirl: The 1995 Rape Case, Discourses of Power, and Women's Lives in Okinawa," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001): 250.

of World War II. After the war, she enjoyed economic prosperity by selling the daughter to the United States.<sup>23</sup>

However, as Linda Angst has pointed out, the ‘metaphorization of rape as the violation of the Okinawan body’ does little to recognize the often-difficult subjective experiences of women in Okinawa.<sup>24</sup> Further, the voices of the ‘very women who have experienced the life of the prostituted daughter’ are absent in popular discourse, and thus are excluded from the ‘protective embrace of the collective family’ of the Japanese nation.<sup>25</sup> This silence is apparent in the photograph discussed above (figure 2): the Okinawan woman is faceless, diminutive and overshadowed by American power. She is a locus for the contestation of wills between the Japanese photographer and the two American servicemen. The small Okinawan woman effectively embodies what Bhowmik has described as ‘the characteristic silence of Okinawan women’ in Japanese discourse.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Representing the African-American Serviceman

Aside from the sacrificial body of the Japanese (often Okinawan) woman, another important motif in Tōmatsu’s depiction of Americanization is the threat posed by African-American servicemen to the national body, in particular the potential for physical violence and the diffusion of racial purity. The following image (figure 3) is a strong example of physical menace; the black serviceman appears as an intimidating, hostile, and dangerous force:



**Figure 3:** “Untitled” [Yokosuka], from the series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate*, 1966, from *Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation*, plate 30.

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<sup>23</sup> Takazato quoted in *ibid.*, 251.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>26</sup> Bhowmik, 62.

This photograph, taken in 1966, suggests to the viewer that despite the official end of Occupation several years earlier the Americans were still undoubtedly the occupiers. A sense of menace is evoked through a low vantage point that distorts the main subject's features and constructs him as a physical threat. Similarly, the man's close proximity evokes discomfort; he is dangerously close and therefore an imminent danger. The message was clear for Japanese viewers at the time: the (black) US serviceman is a figure that should be regarded with fear and suspicion.

An alternate interpretation, however, is to consider this photograph in terms of the encounter between Tōmatsu and his subject. Taken in this sense, the main subject's intimidating countenance might be explained by the fact that Tōmatsu has invaded the personal space of these two men with his camera in order to elicit a hostile reaction. This reading overturns the photograph's central message of US domination because it raises the question of who actually controlled this photographic encounter. Was it the American subject who dominated through the suggestion of violence, or the Japanese photographer who manipulated the exchange towards his own ends? We may never know the answer to this question, but I want to bring attention here to the way in which the two men are objectified in a similar manner to the Okinawan woman in the previous image (figure 2). Whereas the woman represents the objectified body of the Japanese nation, the two African-American subjects are made emblematic of the dangerous nature of American power.

It is worth thinking about the African-American serviceman's own liminal position within the military when these photographs were taken; the civil rights movement in America was still fighting for equality in 1966 when this image was created. In the military, the black servicemen's marginalized position was evident from the start of Occupation in 1945. Koshiro summarizes the experience of African-American soldiers who were part of the Occupation force as follows:

The reality for Americans in occupied Japan...was the policy of racial segregation between white and nonwhite soldiers. The black units serving in the Occupation forces in Japan rose rapidly due to high recruitment and low discharge rates among black soldiers. In these units, inequities in assignments and promotions, frequent discrimination in housing and recreational facilities, and problems of crime and punishment were evident.<sup>27</sup>

At that time the US military was still officially segregated, a situation that continued unofficially through to the Vietnam War, at which time recreational areas for American servicemen in Okinawa were still segregated. African-American soldiers who transgressed these boundaries risked being physically assaulted by their white compatriots.<sup>28</sup> If we consider this in relation to the two subjects who appear in the photograph above (figure 3), the generalized sense of America as a hostile and intimidating force conveyed by the image is to a certain extent undermined, and instead an awareness of the subjective experience of the two men emerges.

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<sup>27</sup> Yukiko Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan*, ed. Michael Hunt Carol Gluck, *The United States and Pacific Asia: Studies in Social, Economic, and Political Interaction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>28</sup> Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*, ed. Mark Selden, *Routledge Studies in Asia's Transformations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 55.

While segregation in the US Military was the result of deeply entrenched racism towards African-Americans in American society, many Japanese also held similar denigratory opinions of black people. Morikawa argues that racist attitudes towards black people were not evident in Japanese society before contact with the Americans. Instead, he contends that discriminatory attitudes began with American-Japanese contact, as evidenced by Japanese amusement at a 'Black-face minstrel show' put on by Commodore Perry in 1854.<sup>29</sup> While interactions such as this may have had a formative influence upon perceptions of African-Americans, it is perhaps more useful to understand Japanese attitudes towards black Americans as part of a complex web of race relations involving the Japanese, Europeans, and African-Americans.

## 6. The threat of Miscegenation

This complexity was evident in discourses surrounding Japanese-American sexual relations, an issue that aroused significant panic during the Occupation. Lipsitz discusses the hierarchical nature of contact between Americans and Japanese as 'a grid of sexual relations in which White males have general access to all women, White women are prohibited from sex with non-White men, non-White men have access to non-White women only, and non-White women submit to both non-White and White men.'<sup>30</sup> Underlying this discriminatory hierarchy was a concern for racial purity on the part of both the Japanese and the Americans. The Japanese feared the mingling of African-American and Japanese blood as a threat to racial purity; the Americans, on the other hand, were more concerned about white American and Japanese unions.<sup>31</sup> Thus, from the outset American authorities opposed any fraternization between American servicemen and Japanese women that extended beyond anonymous and transitory sexual encounters with prostitutes. This attitude was evidenced by their reluctance to allow Nisei (naturalized Americans of Japanese descent) servicemen to take Japanese wives back to America.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, discussion of miscegenation was made a taboo topic, as demonstrated by SCAP's censoring of public discourse about mixed-blood children. A notable instance of this censorship was the firing of a Japanese radio announcer who enthusiastically announced on-air the birth of a Japanese-American baby, praising the birth as a symbol of the harmony between the occupiers and the occupied.<sup>33</sup> A more disturbing example was SCAP's expulsion of an American journalist for reporting on the deliberate starvation of 'more than one hundred babies, many of them "Occupation babies" at two Japanese orphanages.'<sup>34</sup>

Despite the enthusiasm for interracial unions demonstrated by the radio announcer in the anecdote above, miscegenation remained a central concern for many in Japanese society during the decades that followed SCAP's withdrawal. A particular source of anxiety, and at times

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<sup>29</sup> Suzuko Morikawa, "The Significance of Afrocentricity for Non-Africans: Examination of the Relationship between African Americans and the Japanese," *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 4 (2001): 425.

<sup>30</sup> George Lipsitz, "'Frantic to Join...the Japanese Army": Black Soldiers and Civilians Confront the Asia-Pacific War," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(S)*, ed. Geoffrey M. White T. Fujitani, Lisa Yoneyama (London: Duke University Press, 2001), 371.

<sup>31</sup> Tomoko Tsuchiya, "Interracial Marriages between American Soldiers and Japanese Women at the Beginning of the Cold War," *Journal of American and Canadian Studies* 29, (2011): 62-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-70.

<sup>33</sup> Koshiro, 159.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

revulsion, was the coupling of African-American servicemen with Japanese women, and the mixed-blood children that resulted.<sup>35</sup> One example of the negative repercussions of this was the discovery of the abandoned corpse of a half-black and half-Japanese baby on a train by Sawada Miki, a noted Japanese philanthropist. Sawada was so moved by this experience that she formed the first orphanage for mixed-blood children in Japan, the Elizabeth Sanders Home.<sup>36</sup> This incident indicated a mother's desperation in the face of strong hostility towards children of African-American and Japanese parentage.<sup>37</sup>

One of Tōmatsu's first projects entailed photographing the Americans in his hometown of Nagoya, and it is clear that even at this early stage in his career, miscegenation concerned him. This is reflected in his description of Nagoya as 'a town where American soldiers and mixed-race children were living together *as if it were normal to coexist in that way* [emphasis added].<sup>38</sup> Perhaps understandably, race was an issue for many photographers of Tōmatsu's generation who had been schooled during the war years to embody the purity of the "Yamato spirit." John Dower has observed that the figure that most endangered this "spirit" was the black American serviceman. Dower argues that the majority of Americans who featured in photographs with Japanese women were African-American and, like the two images discussed thus far (figures 1 and 2), often 'carried a particularly discomfoting sexual charge.'<sup>39</sup> We might note that although Tōmatsu clearly worried about threats to Japanese purity, this appears to have been tempered by genuine tenderness towards, or perhaps worry for, the welfare of mixed-race children, as evidenced in the image below (figure 5):



Figure 5: *Untitled* [Okinawa], 1977, from *Nihon rettō no kuronikuru: Tōmatsu Shōmei no 50 sen (Traces: Fifty Years of Tōmatsu's Works)* Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1999.

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<sup>35</sup> As Tsuchiya has argued, African-American/Japanese relations were less a concern for SCAP, who were more concerned about white/Japanese relations, and specifically the possibility of an influx of Japanese women migrating to the US. Tsuchiya: 62-5, 70-2.

<sup>36</sup> Koshiro, 163.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Tōmatsu, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Dower, "Contested Ground: Shōmei Tōmatsu and the Search for Identity in Postwar Japan," 67.

Of course, white Americans were also considered a threat to Japanese society. However, Michael Molasky argues that in Japanese literature, discourse often distinguished between black and white Americans in favor of white people. African-Americans, like Okinawans, were conceived of as closer to nature, while white people were primarily ‘cultural beings.’<sup>40</sup> The association of African-Americans with nature was apparent in their frequent association to sexual relations with Japanese women in the photography of the era.

An aversion to black people in some areas of Japanese society was not only symptomatic of a concern for racial purity but also part of a broader discourse about Japanese identity in the wake of humiliating defeat at the hands of the Americans. Sherick Hughes has argued that African-Americans became a foil against which the Japanese state rallied the peoples’ spirits towards rebuilding. In the postwar era, it was difficult to laud the racial superiority of the Japanese in regards to the West. As Hughes puts it: ‘In the shadow of defeat, the Japanese could not look upon White Westerners and call them unintelligent.’<sup>41</sup> Although the Japanese might grant the superiority of white Americans in the postwar, African-Americans, on the other hand, made an easy target.<sup>42</sup> A tendency to scapegoat is evident in Tōmatsu’s images in which black servicemen are associated with hostility or predatory sexual relations with Japanese women, such as in figures 2 and 3.

## 7. White Servicemen and Ambiguous Representation

Unlike their African-American counterparts, white servicemen are rarely depicted in the context of sexual relations with Japanese women in Tōmatsu’s photographs. Rather, they are generally characterized in an ambiguous manner: in some instances there is a sense of curiosity on the part of the photographer, yet at other times the white servicemen is an embodiment of a generalized American menace. The photograph below (figure 6) is an example of the former; in this image a sense of reassuring ordinariness is evoked as the young soldiers compare funds.



**Figure 6:** “Untitled” [Sasebo], from the series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate*, 1966, taken from *Shōmei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation*.

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<sup>40</sup> Molasky, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Sherick A. Hughes, "The Convenient Scapegoating of Blacks in Postwar Japan: Shaping the Black Experience Abroad," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 340.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

One interpretation of this photograph might be as a sinister depiction of two young sailors counting funds in order to procure Japanese prostitutes; however, I would contend that Tōmatsu's characterization of the Americans in this image is more benign than in figure 3, as these young men are captured in a relatively everyday scene.<sup>43</sup> Unlike his confrontation with the two African-American servicemen in figure 3, there is no direct encounter between photographer and subject – the young men are engrossed in the act of counting money, and thus presumably unaware they are being photographed. There is a sense in this image that the Americans are human after all, not always a threat and not unlike Japanese people.

In marked contrast, the intimidating and brutalizing nature of the American presence in Japan is powerfully expressed in the following depiction of white servicemen (figure 7):



Figure 7: “Untitled” [Iwakuni], from the series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate*, 1960, taken from *Shomei Tōmatsu: Skin of the Nation*.

Similar to the earlier photograph of the two African-American men (figure 3), this picture clearly communicates to the viewer that Americans are dangerous brutes. This message is conveyed through several compositional devices: first, by the large GI boot poised above the camera; second, by the power lines that seem to emanate from the shoulders of the man at the right - a metaphor for American technological power; third, through the placement of the men in a surrounding position; and lastly, by a sense of claustrophobia engendered by the men's close proximity to the camera. However, if considered in the context of an encounter between photographer and subjects, it is clear that this image is highly constructed. In order for Tōmatsu to create this image, he must surely have secured his subjects' collusion. This is confirmed by the harmonious balance of elements within the frame and perfect focus – both too difficult to achieve were Tōmatsu actually being physically assaulted by the men – and by the amused expression on

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<sup>43</sup> I would like to acknowledge that the former, intriguing, interpretation of this image was suggested to me by Dr. Emerald King following my presentation (on which this essay is based) at the 2013 Japanese Studies Association of Australia (JSAA) Conference.

the subject's faces. An understanding of the constructed nature of this image undermines the sense of generalized American threat that it initially conveys; the sense of binary opposition between American subject and Japanese photographer/viewer, and generalized American power, is diffused by an impression of almost convivial interaction between Tōmatsu and his subjects.

At this point it is important to acknowledge that although, as has been argued thus far, Tōmatsu's photographs of African-Americans more often depicted them in a negative light in comparison to their white counterparts, not all of Tōmatsu's photographs of black servicemen were lacking in personal connection or a sense that the subjects were regular people. This next image (figure 7), taken in 1977, utilizes a similar aesthetic to figure 3, but instead of evoking a sense of hostility the subject appears curious, perhaps friendly, and in contrast to the main subject in figure 3, seems content to be photographed:

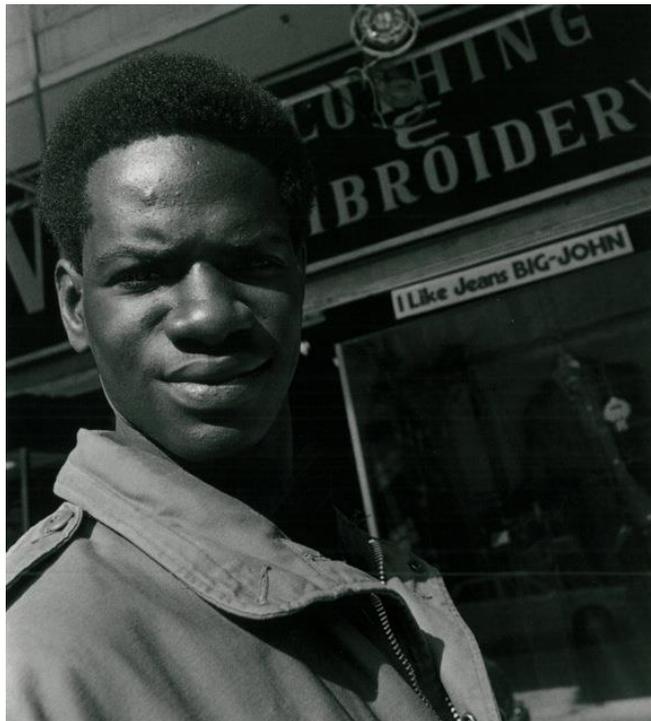


Figure 8: *Untitled* [Okinawa City], 1977, from *Nihon rettō no kuronikuru: Tōmatsu Shōmei no 50 sen* (*Traces: Fifty Years of Tōmatsu's Works*)

We can see, therefore, that like in his portrayals of white servicemen, there is some ambiguity to Tōmatsu's depictions of African-American servicemen. Yet it is still the case that African-American servicemen are much more likely to feature as a threat to Japanese purity in Tōmatsu's images than their white counterparts. Interesting to note, however, is that African-Americans are represented in a less negative manner in Tōmatsu's later base town photographs; this is clear when one compares two of the images referenced above. Figure 3, which depicts the African American servicemen as hostile and threatening, was taken in 1966, whereas figure 7 (above), which is a significantly more benign portrait of a young African-American man, was taken 11 years later in 1977.

## 8. Conclusion

It is clear that, at least at the onset of his long project of photographing base towns in Japan, Tōmatsu sought to present these spaces as both physical and symbolic manifestations of an inequitable relationship between America and Japan. In many of his images, the American presence appears as an ominous and, at times, faceless danger of sexual or physical assault to the Japanese national body. A more insidious and pervasive threat was the corruption of Japanese racial identity through sexual unions between Japanese women and American men. For Tōmatsu Japanese society itself was under threat, an imagined ahistorical Japanese identity and culture that he feared was slipping away. He expressed this fear by commenting that 'it was as if America seeped through the gaps in the wire fences surrounding the bases and, in time, soaked the entire country.'<sup>44</sup> As his photographs demonstrate, the liminal spaces that surrounded the various US military bases in Japan was where this supposedly ahistorical Japanese culture intersected with a modern American culture. What is revealed in these images, however, is how the complexity of social interaction destabilizes simple dichotomies of dominated and oppressed. In looking at Tōmatsu's images, this essay has sought to consider interactions between photographer and subject as pointing to deeper social issues in both Japanese and American society. These deeper social issues include the actual marginalized position of African-Americans which undercuts the impression of brutality conveyed in Tōmatsu's images; the tendency of the Okinawan female body to be objectified as a sacrificial Japanese national body; and Japanese discourses surrounding racial purity. As represented in his photographs, Tōmatsu's encounters in the base town reflect the unstable nature of identities, and how simplified dichotomies of cultural difference could not be sustained in these liminal spaces.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Dower, "Contested Ground: Shōmei Tōmatsu and the Search for Identity in Postwar Japan," 74.

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### **About the Author**

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