

Karen Tei Yamashita: A Twist on the Mix

"I have heard Brazilian children say that whatever passes through the arc of the rainbow becomes its opposite. But what is the opposite of a bird? Or for that matter, a human being?" So begins Karen Tei Yamashita's first novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, a magic-realist take on the follies of capitalism and the destruction of the Amazon rain forest. Yamashita's mind works on her material like such a rainbow arc, or perhaps like a kaleidoscope, casting ordinary objects into a colorful myriad of previously unimagined configurations that challenge and delight. *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* received the American Book Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Award. It was followed by *Brazil-Marú*, a story spanning half a century in the lives of idealistic Japanese immigrants in Brazil who form a rural commune, and *Tropic of Orange*, another magic-realist adventure set in a media-saturated Los Angeles replete with supernatural oranges and archangels stuck in gridlock. Most recently she published *Circle K Cycles*, a compilation of essays, journal entries, short stories, and found items that ruminate on the particularities of identity, culture, and life in a Japanese Brazilian community in Japan. Yamashita is currently an associate professor of literature and creative writing at UC Santa Cruz. -[Wendy Cheng](#)

Loggerhead Reading Series: Three seems to be an important number in your books. In *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, one of the protagonists, J.B. Tweep, is a three-armed entrepreneur who revolutionizes the business world through "trialectics," and meets his love-match in the three-breasted Michelle Mabelle. Scholars have written about how you bust up East-West, U.S.-Asia binaries by introducing a third locale, Brazil—introducing a North-South orientation, as well as pointing to the ways in which global capitalism collapses national identities in time and space. Were any of these outcomes conscious intentions on your part?

Karen Tei Yamashita: Hard to say what a conscious intention on the part of any writer might be. That my work would introduce a third location on the South American continent I guess I always knew. When I began my research in Brazil, I was very aware of a kind of triangulation of experiences, comparing Japanese communities in the North and South, and I was

immediately captivated by the Brazilian Japanese rendition of "Japanese-ness."

LRS: What did you have in mind when you wrote about "trialectics"? Poking fun at academics? Updating **Hegel** and Marx? Is there something special, analytically or creatively, about thinking in threes?

Yamashita: I don't and didn't know enough about Hegel or Marx to presume to update them in any way. I was simply futzing around with J.B. Tweep's condition and wondered how the limitations of our physical beings also limits our thinking. Creative thinking often requires non-linear, non-oppositional, layered, parallel, holistic, 360-degree, dimensional and/or spatial thinking. Tweep, however, isn't deep about this; he just "chooses" the middle possibility, whatever that is.

LRS: What about the Brazilian version of "Japanese-ness" so captivated you?

Yamashita: Maybe Japanese-ness is not the right way to say it because what I think I encountered was a twist on the mix. You get your community culture, the sense of an extended family, the potluck, the shared experience (that being the war years, prejudice, immigration, second-class citizenship), but then in Brazil, among Japanese Brazilians, I sensed a louder gregariousness, a generosity without hesitation, a more comfortable engagement with intimacy and touching. It would seem to be a stereotype of the Brazilian or Latin American, but it was palpable and real to me, a more reticent American and a **sansei** who had been recently in Japan and trying to perfectly mimic the myriad social rules.

LRS: What first led you to Brazil? And then, what kept you there?

Yamashita: I got to Brazil on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. The Watson funded a year of traveling to research the anthropology and history of Japanese Brazilian immigration. Actually I was able to pursue this project for three years since the funding was so generous. I started the Watson in 1974,

traveling first to Japan and then to Brazil. In 1977, I married Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, a Brazilian, and we started a family in São Paulo.

LRS: So what were some of the differences you noticed between Japanese communities in North and South America?

Yamashita: Japanese immigration to the US took place a generation earlier than to Brazil. My grandparents came to the US at the turn of the century (around 1900) while Japanese to Brazil arrived generally in the 1920s and after. There was a historic jump in the Japan these **issei** were leaving, and that changed the way they saw the "new world" they had come to settle or immigrate into. My grandparents left as **Meiji** Japanese, from a country that was purposefully opening its doors to the West. The next generation was **Taisho** and **Showa**, and the Japan they left was becoming an industrial power, won a war against Russia, and was turning nationalistic.

Of course, the US is different from Brazil, and you can see this particularly in the social/racial/ethnic relationship that Japanese have with their receiving countries. While the US has a history of racial and ethnic prejudice, and immigration laws expressly denying Asian immigration and any possibility for citizenship or land ownership, Brazil was vast and needed to be settled and farmed. I can't go into a long history here about race in Brazil, but Japanese take their place in the color scheme of dark to light, displaying their own prejudices against the "gaijin" while in a funny way literally capitalizing on what they sell as a better version of being Brazilian. Jeffrey Lesser, friend and historian, writes about this in a pretty convincing way.

One other important thing: the population of Japanese and their descendents in Brazil (1.8 million maybe) is much larger than in the US. Numbers make a difference. Finally, while Japanese Brazilians experienced restrictions in travel and business and dispersal and imprisonment of leadership during WWII, Japanese Americans were incarcerated in camps. These differing histories mixed with the social, political and cultural backdrops of Brazil and the US make their indelible marks on both communities.

LRS: What drew you to study the rural communes?

Yamashita: Japanese rural communities in Brazil interested me because many of them were settlements pioneered by the Japanese in the 1920s—that is to say they cut down virgin forests, dug wells, built houses, and planted new fields. The communities that I studied in particular were started by Christian socialists who had ideas of communal and cooperative support systems, following the philosophy of Leon Tolstoy and a Japanese philosopher named **Mushanokoji**. I was told by the founding issei that they had hoped to create a "new civilization." Pretty heady stuff for a student wandering around searching for something.

LRS: What has being in Brazil, Japan, and the U.S. made you understand about the construction of cultural and racial identities? Has your understanding of these things evolved over the years?

Yamashita: This is a complicated question. I would say briefly that I've become personally more relaxed, accommodating of myself and others. If the US and Japan (more so) are incredibly uptight spaces for racial difference, Brazil is much more easy-going, with a good dose of humor always. At the same time, I am ever aware of the political presence of cultural and racial identities, and I'm readied for that fight if necessary. I don't think of these problems or questions as hard and fast; more like a dance—muscular, powerful, playful, fleeting.

Those who are Japanese (myself oftentimes included), in whatever way they define that, must think there is something "Japanese" about themselves. The Japanese nation says it's in your blood ancestry. Maybe it's a DNA thing, or maybe it's the food—**shoyu**, miso and **sashimi**. It's probably true, as your question suggests, that my understanding about all this has evolved. For Japanese Americans, we return to these spaces for community and political centers. I think that as long as differences provoke injustice, whether we believe in Japanese-ness or any other -ness or not, we will be forced again and again

to knock at the door of identity to find common ground and allies in that continual struggle for social justice, equality, and human dignity.

LRS: In one of the funniest scenes in *Tropic of Orange*, the bold and blunt Emi, a Japanese American woman who works as a TV anchor, offers a "sacrilegious" denunciation of multiculturalism. My favorite part of that scene is when she calls out the white woman who's wearing chopsticks in her hair, but my favorite line is when she's asked, "Do you know what cultural diversity really is?" and she responds, "It's a white guy wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and dreds." After the book came out were you challenged about the sentiments Emi expresses?

Yamashita: I guess I haven't heard any challenges about Emi's badmouthing of multiculturalism, but maybe someone has critiqued it. I don't know. I was all for multiculturalism until it became appropriated by Coca Cola and United Colors of Benetton.

LRS: Where did the image of "the white guy wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and dreds" come from?

Yamashita: I think I stole that image from somewhere, possibly an article about the music scene in Seattle, my apologies to the author. Well, technically, Emi steals it. As you know, her purpose in the book is to get away with everything.

LRS: You were initially in Brazil to record women's oral histories as a scholar. Why the turn to fiction? What did you feel could be expressed through fiction that could not be in scholarly work?

Yamashita: I could hardly be called a scholar. I had studied with Paul Riesman, an anthropologist at **Carleton**, and he was very influential in my thinking, but I did not know the first thing about researching anthropology. When I arrived in São Paulo, I consulted with Takashi Maeyama, a professor in sociology who was at the Estudos de Nipo-Brasileiros. It was he who got me started on oral histories of early Japanese women immigrants. I did this for about 2 months, and then traveled into the rural

interior of Brazil, visiting the communes about which I eventually based my writing.

I turned to fiction in the form of a novel of historical fiction because I could not see my way to focusing the material into something narrow or specific that an academic work might require. (In any case, I was not attached to any graduate program or course of study.) Also, I did not believe that I could engage in scholarly work about Japanese immigration without reading in the Japanese language archival material (diaries, newspapers, documents) and without being more precisely fluent in the language. I felt that I could capture the truth of this history more honestly and cohesively in a novel.

LRS: Your work, especially *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* and *Tropic of Orange*, contains pretty blistering critiques of **capitalism** and uneven development. In your opinion, what is the relationship between creativity and politics?

Yamashita: I can't help it. I think I'm supposed to be writing for a reason. I'm sure I've been criticized for my political bent. Because of it, one agent refused to represent me. I can't think of any work that interests me that can be engaged with as purely an aesthetic experience. You or I can step into a Zen rock garden or stare into field of irises, but the stepping in or staring away is an act of repudiation or leave-taking. The world encumbers me/us. What's a vacation? Even when we were children traveling to **Yellowstone**, my parents were trying to show us the world we didn't yet know.

LRS: And this was a political act on their part?

Yamashita: That's stretching it perhaps, but yes, my parents were always teachers. They believed that traveling was an opportunity that expanded our vistas.

LRS: Also, doesn't politics sell? What was that agent afraid of?

Yamashita: Probably not politics embedded so boldly in fiction. The reading public separates nonfiction and fiction, strictly

separating fact from fabricated. The agent wasn't afraid, just unable to promote or represent my kind of work.

LRS: How has teaching influenced your writing, and vice versa?

Yamashita: Teaching has made me more aware of my process as a writer. It's also placed me inside the academy with scholars and their thinking, writing, and libraries. I have enjoyed learning from my colleagues, reading their work, thinking about their research. In the beginning, I didn't understand why I was invited to teach; I just thought it was a very fortunate opportunity. Over the years since I arrived, I have learned to see why my writing and interests intersect with others'. In teaching Asian American literature I've been forced to really read the work of my fellow writers, to think about their work in the broader vision of Asian American literature and as a project and field of study.

LRS: Was teaching a course on Asian American literature the university's idea or your own? How do your personal and artistic identities as Asian American (if you have these) figure into it all?

Yamashita: The Asian Am lit was their and my idea. For years, I've been the only one teaching it at **UCSC**, so I guess I feel responsible. This isn't to say I haven't made the courses my own. I teach it like a writer, I guess, and I teach what I'm interested in. I imagine that I was teaching a "diasporic" Asian Am lit class before anyone else, and I did this to try to understand what it was I felt was missing from the curriculum, trying to figure out what I, as a writer, had to do with this area of study. Now, everyone must have a diasporic take on the literature.

I don't have a problem with identifying as an Asian American writer, if that is what you are asking. It's a political designation that remains necessary.

LRS: Necessary for what, do you think? Can you imagine a point in the future in which such an identification would no longer be needed?

Yamashita: I guess my concern as a writer is about history and voice, about leaving a record and finding and giving voice. The designation Asian American for me carries a history of solidarity, struggle, and advocacy. The work that this particular American history does is to teach, remind, and to cause change. For example, it's possible through a history of wars, imperialism and colonialism, to trace immigration patterns into the United States. Furthermore, it's possible to extend that history to that of detention, internment, imprisonment, and incarceration. Currently, we are again at war, and another American and international citizenship finds itself under surveillance, threat of or in actual incarceration.

LRS: I've read that you were planning a novel about the Asian American political movement, and then a "bigger" project involving **China**. If this is still what you are working on (and you don't mind saying), where will the novel about the Asian American movement be set? Will transnational and global geographies figure into it, or will it be something of a departure from your first three books? And, I'm burning with curiosity: what's leading you to China?

Yamashita: The Asian American movement novel is set in the Bay Area: San Francisco/Oakland/Berkeley. And yes, the transnational and global figure in very importantly since that was the nature of the movement, even though it's been sometimes dismissed as participating in a period of factional and segregated movements. The China thing is really about museums, but that may have to wait. I have another project that involves my father's family archives that that includes extensive correspondence between all the family members during the war years. Maybe these are the same projects, but I haven't gone there yet.

LRS: What interests you about the Asian American movement?

Yamashita: That's a huge answer, maybe the book. I feel that I lived on the periphery of the movement, and yet its influences on the trajectory of my life and work are very important. Many of the central participants and activists are of my generation, grew

up in my community. Our lives crisscrossed and ran parallel to each other. Since I started this project, I've listened to the stories of some 140 different people, immersed myself in the large and particular histories of the time through archival research and reading. At the intersection of two decades, 1960s and 1970s, a kind of exuberant storm happened in the context of some very special political and social conditions that include movements of free speech, civil rights, the new left, anti-war, environment, gay and feminist, people of color. I want to know and write about what happened.

LRS: What are you reading these days? Do you have some recommendations for our readers?

Yamashita: Mostly I'm reading my students' work. In between, my reading is primarily attached to the research for the current book project: Lu Xun, Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, William Hinton's *Turning Point in China*, S.I. Hayakawa's *Language in Action*, Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Kai-yu Hsu's *Chinese Literary Scene*, Mao's *On Literature and Art*, Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air*, Yuri Kochiyama's *Passing It On*, **Huey Newton's** UCSC dissertation, *War Against the Panthers*, Estella Habal's dissertation, *"We Won't Move": The International Hotel Anti-Eviction Movement*, to name a few. The poet Sesshu Foster sent me *Men and Not Men* by **Elio Vittorini** which I'm enjoying, but meanwhile looking forward to Sesshu's new book to be published by City Lights in the fall, *Atomik Aztek*. And how about: R. Zamora Linmark's new book of poetry, *Prime Time Apparitions*, and **Linh Dinh's** *Blood and Soap*.

LRS: I haven't asked you anything specifically about *Circle K Cycles* yet, which in many ways is my favorite of your books (multi-layered, provocative, wonderfully playful both in form and content). I think the "rules" you lay out in *CKC* are a great example of the possibilities for creative work to convey social truths-performing a naming of "cultural essences" that is precarious but at the same time can ring true to people on an intuitive and deeply familiar level. About "Rule one: immigrate into your own country": I read that this rule was inspired by your family's move to Los Angeles after having been in Brazil and

Japan. I'd love to hear about something you've learned living this Japanese-Brazilian-American cultural triangle as a family.

Yamashita: I returned to the US permanently in 1984, and my husband and our two children immigrated at that time. The first thing I think of about that time is how my kids lost their Portuguese language, how they knew intuitively that they were not to use a language other than English to make their way in this country. This was even true in LA where Spanish is pervasive. Still, I returned to a city that was largely Latin American, and there was a certain comfort in this. We gravitated toward a Latino/Brazilian community; this seemed necessary to keep something of a sense of an extended home alive.

LRS: About "Rule two: Learn to cook your favorite meals." You've said elsewhere that food is "the thread that binds Japanese, Brazilian and American cultures." Do you follow this rule?

Yamashita: I love to cook, to learn about new foods, to experience new tastes and combinations. I don't know why. I think it's an escape (from writing at times). I like that it can be creative but useful; you can feed people but attach food to a social event that binds friendship, introduces new friends, breaks barriers. I like the history that food carries with it, and I like breaking all the traditions and rules about food in those fusion kind of dishes.

LRS: What are you cooking these days?

Yamashita: The Coalition for Asian American Studies at UCSC met at my house tonight, and for this occasion, I made a Moroccan chicken dish using preserved salted lemons from our garden. Folks know I'll BBQ at a moment's notice (even in the rain). A great stand-by is beer-butt chicken; you stand a whole chicken upright on an open can of beer. Let's see, and a few nights ago, for my sister-in-law visiting from Brazil, I tried a mixed Chinese/French method for roasting duck, finished it off in the barbecue and served it with reduced Zinfandel and cherry sauce. My sister-in-law brought me a new batch of Brazilian coffee beans, but I also really enjoy Vietnamese coffee with a

good dollop of sweetened condensed milk. My son Jon is a chef, so that's an incentive to cook, but lately I think my personal challenge is to create impressive food simply and in short order. If only you could write a book like that. ❖