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Twenty Years After *Through the Arc of the Rainforest:* An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita

By Noelle Brada-Williams

In this brief interview Yamashita discusses her work which has spanned twenty years and three continents. The interview closes with her description of her newest novel, *I Hotel*, which brings readers back to the roots of Asian American Studies and Asian American Literature and is set during a pivotal ten-year period in Northern California.

AALDP: In your visit with us you said that in the case of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, you began with the characters and then built them into the novel. How have your other books been composed?

KTY: *Brazil-Marú* had in its first draft dozens of characters; it was most unwieldy, but I was a young writer and didn't know any better. In each revision, I consolidated and merged characters, but still there are a lot of them. Finally, I decided to create narrative points of view through single "I" characters, and that helped to focus their stories and contain only what they could possibly know. The book is chronological in time, constructed by historic periods pertinent to the history of Japanese Brazilian immigration, and I chose characters from each time period to be the spokesperson or the eye for that time period.

Tropic of Orange was first conceived as that spreadsheet or hypercontexts at the beginning of the book. Literally, I decided on 7 days and 7 characters and the narrative arc of the orange traveling toward L.A.

AALDP: How did you choose the extremely eclectic form of *Circle K Cycles*? Do you intend to do any more work with mixtures of fiction and nonfiction? Or the mixing of images and text or different languages?

KTY: *Circle K Cycles* began as a monthly internet article on a Japanese website: CafeCreole.net, edited by my then-host in Japan, Ryuta Imafuku. You can still go to the site and see the original monthly entries. Ryuta asked me to write personal articles about my time in Japan over a six-month period from February to August, 1997. What I learned from writing these pieces was the

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immediacy and substance of my sense of being present in Japan at the time, that there is a kind of writing that can only be produced at the moment and on site. Differently, the “fiction” for *Circle K* was all written later after returning home, using my notes from my research in Japan. For this book, it seemed to me that the insertion of myself and my family as an understanding or self-critique of the sort of ethnographic work being attempted might be more honest than fiction only.

As for future work mixing genres or image, text, and language, maybe. I’m working with a family archive of letters written during the years around WWII and their internment in Japanese American concentration camps. I’m not sure yet what form this will take.

AALDP: You mentioned that *Rain Forest* began with these distinct characters and their stories and then was shaped by your desire to get them all together structurally in the form of a novel (and the characters literally together on the Matacao). *Tropic of Orange* has a very similar structure of diverse characters coming together in various ways in or near Los Angeles. Was it a conscious choice to further explore the narrative techniques you used in your first novel?

KTY: I think so; I’ve been perhaps obsessed with how narrative voices work and drive any story. In every new book or project, I’ve been trying to understand how voice and point of view works, how far I can push or utilize these experiments. Maybe with this last novel, I’ve finally gotten it out of my system.

AALDP: My students and I have really enjoyed the humor in your work. Several students in my classes on ethnic American literature have expressed surprise that they have found so much humor in your novel *Tropic of Orange* or in our class readings in general. Their surprise always makes me think of the question Jessica Hagedorn asks in her essay “Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck”: “Must ethnicity only be equated with suffering?” Have you come across any stereotypes of certain kinds of writing being unfunny or stoically earnest?

KTY: Ethnic writing about immigrant, refugee, exile stories can’t help but be about suffering and sacrifice, but it can’t be just about abuse and victimization. Even if the author started with such a purpose, the very writing and remembering reveal depth or hide secrets; writing is a discovery in itself. That said, while the nature of the story may dictate the narrative, someone is always telling the story. While a writer like Kao Kalia Yang tells her stories of a Hmong childhood with a tight poetic knot in her throat, another writer, Linh Dinh, casts an ironically dark humor over the events of the same war, albeit from different experiences.

As for my own sense of humor or satire, it probably has to do with a political point of view or purpose, that in order to extend this purpose, humor seems to be the easiest path. And besides, I’m not a war refugee but really a pretty privileged and blessed person. If it’s possible to plummet sadness, in its complexity, humor has a way of holding in hilarity the ache of a sob.

AALDP: Now that I am teaching *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* in a world literature context, I find my students are similarly surprised that they can find so much humor in a story of environmental catastrophe. At your suggestion we watched the film *Bye, Bye Brazil* and in discussing it we noted that it managed to bring up political issues (even with Brazilian government funding) while playing itself off as a light, irreverent comedy. Does humor just come naturally, perhaps inevitably, to your work or are you consciously trying to pull people in or give some comedic relief to what otherwise would be some very dark and serious issues?

KTY: Irreverent comedy and what I think is a kind of subversive innocence is part of the trickster in Brazilian storytelling, literature, and cultural life. Every day in Brazil, someone will come up to you and tell you a joke. I've said this before, but nothing is sacred; all subjects in Brazil come into the light and critique of laughter. The *Arc*, while my own rendition of this world, would not be truthful without humor.

AALDP: In both *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* and *Tropic of Orange*, there is an odd sense of time, what Ursula Heise calls a kind of "Future anterior." In *Rain Forest* we are told that even the narrator is just a memory and yet the narrative describes fantastic events that haven't happened yet. It's like we are reading a recent history of the future. What draws you to this time setting?

KTY: I suppose I could lie to you and say that I invented a postmodern time, but I think this was simply a condition of living in Brazil, a place where the technologically futuristic lives alongside of pre-industrial peasantry.

AALDP: Do you see yourself as a writer of utopian or dystopian narratives?

KTY: I don't know. Do you think of *Brazil-Marú* as utopian and *Tropic* as dystopian? I wouldn't know how to categorize either or what it would mean to know this. We'd have to discuss this a bit more I guess.

AALDP: I guess I was thinking about both *Tropic* and *Rain Forest* in the way that they seem to simultaneously show us the horrific ramifications of what we are doing right now and seem to provide some small glimmer of hope at the same time. When I think of Bobby at the end of *Tropic of Orange*, literally holding the world together, he seems about to be torn apart by the sheer stress of it all and his arms are splayed out like an angel or someone who has been crucified, yet I feel happy that he has his family together again and he seems to have learned from his experiences, learned to reconnect to them as more than just a material provider. I guess I am just wondering if I am reading the hopefulness into it or if that was part of the intention from the beginning. This brings up my next question: How do you want the reader to leave your books? Hopeful or shaken by the seriousness of the problem?

KTY: I haven't thought about this. If I think about the reader, I guess I want it to have been a good read, to have been worth the journey and the time, to feel

that we both learned something and were entertained along the way. I think that any book can be read on several levels, at least superficially or with greater depth and knowledge. Like anything, you get what you put into it.

AALDP: What do you think the role of the imaginative writer is within the context of environmental or economic crisis, for example? What do the arts have to offer to the collective/society as a whole? Is this a role that all artists should or can take up?

KTY: For one thing, I don't think the President of the University of California can be given emergency powers in the case of an economic crisis, which is not the same thing as an environmental disaster or an act of God. As for writers, we should never be given powers in any sort of crisis, but beware of writers who imagine anything and contribute to the collective imagination. The artist may conjure possibility or another way to see or hear, but shouldn't this be the creative role of every thinking citizen? Here's a little plug for the arts and humanities without which the social and hard sciences cannot be fed, enriched, or interpreted.

AALDP: Yes, perhaps imagining a different world than what we have now is the role of every citizen and encouraging them to think beyond where they are now is the role of creators and teachers in the arts and humanities. Getting every citizen to be a reader, an interpreter, of literature, the arts, the world around them, is another role. It has been twenty years since your first published novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. How have your interests as a writer changed over the course of twenty years?

KTY: Change has come because of traveling and living in different places. This can be seen with the location or setting of each book over that trajectory called my career. But if each book is a series of questions and a product of complex answers, it's a long learning process. But likely the concerns are the same. A friend of mine said that I seemed to be a lonely boat traveling in the opposite direction of every other boat on the literary sea now moving in concert toward what she is maybe calling transnationalism. As if I'd already been there to see the transnational and done my time, and now I'm moving back in time to historic moments like the Asian American movement out of which sprouts, well, Asian American literature. Maybe it's been a function of where I've been privileged to be or maybe it's just a need to learn the landscape and history of where I've landed, or at least to participate as a kind of citizen and not just some floating irresponsible transient. Even if my current projects seem historic and location specific, my own epiphany while researching has been to acknowledge the implicit international and global reach of these subjects. So maybe everything has changed and nothing has changed.

AALDP: Can you tell us about your next book? How did you become interested in the topic?

KTY: The new book is *I Hotel*, to be published in May 2010 by Coffee House Press. As I mentioned previously, it's about the Asian American movement, and it's situated in the San Francisco bay area from 1968 to 1977. The International or I-Hotel was a single-residency hotel built near the turn of the last century 1900 on the corner of Kearny and Jackson Streets, between Chinatown and North Beach and housed over the years migrant laborers who worked the farms and the fisheries up and down the Pacific Coast from the Imperial Valley to Alaska. In 1968, concurrent with protests at both San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley for schools of ethnic studies, the I-Hotel was considered a site of blight, threatened by plans for redevelopment, with the required eviction of the tenants, now mostly aging bachelors living out their last years on social security. Students and activists made the I-Hotel a site of protest and political activity for a decade until 1977 when several thousand people occupied and surrounded the hotel with their bodies to resist the San Francisco sheriffs and fire departments in a dramatic but final confrontation. That is the backdrop of a very large book of ten novellas, parallel stories or what I call "hotels" that describe perhaps multiple levels of activism across the bay area landscape.

I became interested in the topic while living in Los Angeles, and had I remained in L.A., perhaps the stories would have been centered there instead. But I moved to Santa Cruz, and so the stories moved north. I spent many years researching archives and interviewing dozens of participants. I could have kept researching forever, but I generally believe in keeping my promises, even if those I'd spoken with were and may still be skeptical or even disagree with the final product, promised or not. I guess I'll take my medicine in May.

AALDP: What shaped the structure of your new book? How do you see it fitting in or rounding out your work as a whole?

KTY: Once again, I've had to create a structure for my work in order to contain and control it. Similar to other projects, there is the experiment of narrative voices. *I Hotel* contains ten novellas and ten narrative voices. I think I'm about done with this narrative voice thing. Enough is enough.