

“Capturing the Spirit”: Teaching Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel*

by *Lai Ying Yu*

Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* is a powerful fictional retelling of the 1960s-1970s Asian American movement in the San Francisco Bay Area. Recipient of the American Book Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Award, Yamashita is author of five other books, including *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* and *Tropic of Orange*.¹ *I Hotel*, however, may be Yamashita’s most innovative work to date. With exceptional insight, humor, and vivid story-telling, she explores the complexities of social change during one of America’s most politically radical and tumultuous decades. *I Hotel* was a finalist for a 2010 National Book Award and has received a number of honors, including a California Book Award, an American Book Award (Yamashita’s second), and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature.

This novel is an exuberant reflection of the Asian American social change movement, and part of the thrill of reading *I Hotel* is Yamashita’s visually arresting experiments with narration. The novel includes comics, illustrations, analect-inspired narrative, theater script, a film screenplay, and dance choreography alongside more conventional story-telling structures such as the short story. Inspired by the range of visual and literary discourses that circulated during this movement, Yamashita has woven them into the structure and content of *I Hotel*. As a result, *I Hotel* leaves readers with the vivid impression that it has captured the spirit of the time.² Yet the very same factors that make *I Hotel* a rich and provocative read can also make the book seem challenging. Its length at 605 pages, the mixed media, and the historical references may be intimidating at first glance. The aim of this essay is to offer teachers and general readers a base for beginning the novel. For teachers, this article may be easily adapted for use in their syllabus.

This essay is divided into two parts. Part I offers historical background and context and Part II offers eight thematic prompts for classroom discussion; each of these prompts are based on an interview with Yamashita. The article ends with suggestions for additional teaching aids and readings. This essay may be read as a single article, but it has been organized to allow instructors to skim and excerpt sections of interest for use as classroom reading supplements. Part I covers three topics:

- the historical context of the International Hotel, which is the inspiration for the novel;
- an overview and a reading of the *I Hotel*; and
- an analysis of the role arts activism played in the Asian American movement in San Francisco.

The historical context explains why the hotel became a central geographical and cultural site within the Asian American movement; the overview of the novel explores the use of mixed visual and literary styles in *I Hotel* and includes a brief reading of one of the most visually experimental novellas, “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel”; and the analysis of arts activism explores how the visual styles in *I Hotel* reflect and riff on the art Asian American youth activists created as part of the movement.

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In March 2011, Karen Tei Yamashita visited Tufts University as the American Studies Knaster Artist-in-Residence. During her residency, I had the opportunity to interview the author about her writing process for *I Hotel*. In Part II of this essay, I have excerpted highlights from that interview to create prompts for classroom discussions. In these excerpts, Yamashita describes her writing process for *I Hotel*, the use of different literary and visual media, and the Asian American movement as a whole. Excerpts are paired with questions and class exercise suggestions. With this article, I hope to make clear that *I Hotel* is not only highly teachable, but also enjoyable and illuminating for students on multiple levels.³

This article is a companion piece to Grace Talusan's "Teaching with Collaborative Writing Projects: Creating an Online Reader's Guide to Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*," which is also published in this volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*. It presents a teaching model that develops analytic and writing skills with online social media. With assistance from the instructor, the class designs its own online reader's guide to a book like *I Hotel*. One of the benefits of this teaching model is the strong personal investment the students show in both the learning process and the creation of a reader's guide. Talusan taught *I Hotel* in an Asian-American themed composition class in the first-year writing program using this methodology, and her students responded enthusiastically to the assignment, creating an [online reader's guide](#) to *I Hotel*.

I Hotel may be best taught in high school and college-level classes. Its themes, use of form, and characters would be most rewardingly explored at these upper level classes. *I Hotel* covers a range of issues with impressive historical detail and depth. For that reason the book would be appropriate in classes across a number of academic disciplines, including: American literature, American studies, women's studies, ethnic studies, political science, creative writing, urban development, theories of cultural formation, philosophy, art history, and economics. These are all subjects *I Hotel* explores through its main storyline and overarching themes.

Part I

History and Significance of the International Hotel

One of the most defining features of *I Hotel* is Yamashita's use of the various artistic and political media circulating during the Asian American movement. In *I Hotel*, these forms appear not only as homage to the Asian American movement, but also as uncannily apt frames that sharpen and intensify the major themes explored in the book. These include crime and punishment, the power of language and storytelling, ideas about authenticity and artifice, the relationship between art and activism, and the nature of social change itself. Divided into ten sections, or novellas,⁴ *I Hotel* follows a cast of Asian American student activists from the San Francisco Bay Area as they test out their ideologies and cut their teeth organizing in the formative years of the movement, from the late sixties into the mid-seventies. One of the longest and most compelling campaigns to emerge during that period was the fight to save the International Hotel. The International Hotel, or I-Hotel as it was popularly known, is also the inspiration for Yamashita's book.

The International Hotel was home to low-income residents and was threatened with demolition in the fall of 1968. Located in downtown San Francisco, between Chinatown and the financial district, the hotel faced significant urban redevelopment pressures, pressures not unlike those the Bay Area faces at present. The owners of the

International Hotel planned to commercialize the space by creating a parking lot or by extending the neighboring financial district into the heart of Manilatown on Kearny Street.⁵ The International Hotel, with its Filipino-owned small businesses and majority Filipino tenants, was one of the last cultural anchors of Manilatown in the 1960s.⁶ An inexpensive, somewhat rundown building, the hotel rented modest single rooms on a short-term basis. Such housing was critical for low-income and migrant workers.⁷ Over the first half of the twentieth century, the hotel had become a vital home base for many Filipino farmworkers.

Most of the residents of the International Hotel were Filipino bachelors and, in smaller numbers, Chinese bachelors. Many of these men had spent their adult lives traveling up and down the West Coast to work in the farms of California, Oregon, and Washington, as well as the salmon canneries of Alaska (Habal 12).⁸ They stayed at the International Hotel in part for its affordable rent and convenient access to groceries and familiar ethnic foods. Being close to these food options was significant because the hotel had limited kitchen and storage facilities. Just as important for these men was the strong community bond that had developed at the hotel. Tenants cooked for each other, shared food, and enjoyed a familial atmosphere promoted by its long-term residents (Habal 42-45). In addition, the Filipino-owned small businesses on the ground floor of the hotel, which included an eatery, a pool hall, and a barbershop, helped establish the International Hotel as a community anchor for San Francisco's Manilatown. Tino's Barber Shop was an especially popular gathering place for migrant workers to share stories and catch up on the latest news about friends and family. This cultural space was particularly important for Asian residents because they routinely faced discrimination in their jobs and when they left the ethnic enclave (Habal 21).⁹

The campaign to save the I-Hotel galvanized significant support from different quarters of the city and across the country. The sheriff, local politicians, residents of San Francisco, and neighborhood organizations were among its early supporters. The struggle also garnered national news coverage and a powerful Washington D.C.-based organization, Center for Community Change, donated \$50,000 to the campaign to save the International Hotel. Many people were moved by the story of elderly men rendered homeless for urban redevelopment interests. Many also supported maintaining affordable housing for the low-income, working-class, and elderly (Habal 88-90, 99-104).

At its height, the struggle brought out 5,000-7,000 supporters on the street, and over the almost decade-long fight the effort included several times that number in volunteers (Habal 5, 140).¹⁰ At the helm of the resistance were the residents and Asian American youth activists. Just a month after the struggle began, Asian students at San Francisco State College were leading campus-wide strikes to demand more faculty of color, more classes about people of color, and a new school for race and ethnicity studies.¹¹ When they learned about the tenants' eviction struggle, they and students from surrounding universities joined immediately. Young Filipino activists across the state also traveled to San Francisco to support the residents. A number of these younger Filipino activists helped create the hotel's first tenants association, the International Hotel Tenants Association, which advocated for tenant rights and interests before the city and with the building's owners (Habal 60).

Despite the prodigious efforts of activists and residents invested over a long period of time, the residents were evicted in the middle of the night on August 4, 1977. The campaign continued for another twenty-plus years, however. The hotel was demolished in 1978 and the composition of organizers changed over time, but the demands remained the same: save the site for affordable and low-income housing for

the elderly. Through sustained community organizing, no structure was built in the empty space for the next two decades. In 2005, a new International Hotel and International Hotel Manilatown Center was erected with 104 studio and one-bedroom apartments for low-income seniors (Habal 171). The victory was bittersweet, however, for none of the originally displaced residents lived to see it. Many of those who led the multi-year resistance died not long after the violent eviction they suffered (Habal 171-175).

Overview of *I Hotel*

I Hotel tells the story of how radical youth organizers and elders in the Asian communities of the San Francisco Bay Area came together to create one of the strongest and most enduring centers of activism within the 1960s-1970s Asian American movement. In the middle of the many activities that made up the Yellow Power movement is the struggle to save the International Hotel. Each of the ten novellas of *I Hotel* alludes to a corresponding year during the nearly ten-year campaign to save the International Hotel. Within each novella, however, the story moves back and forth in time to follow the main characters from their entry into the movement to the struggles, choices, unexpected alliances, and local victories that ensue. Most of the novellas are organized around two youth activists and a mentor, and the reader follows their development through the course of the movement.

Even as *I Hotel* is about the struggle to save the cultural center and residential building, the book is not a chronicle of the campaign. Instead, the campaign threads through *I Hotel* as a background presence to the many projects, activities, and social expressions represented in the book. In the early years of the campaign, a wave of Asian American community organizations moved into the empty storefront spaces of the International Hotel.¹² Led by different groups and individuals within the movement, these organizations came together to support the International Hotel, but they also diverged significantly in their approaches to social change and their perspectives on what it meant to be “Asian American.”

This heterogeneous activity became a crucial part of what turned the hotel into a center of extraordinary production and collaboration within the Asian American movement. For the organizations that took root in these spaces represented the different expressions and efforts that comprised the movement as a whole. Organizations ran community centers, an arts collective, grassroots organizing groups, and an Asian American bookstore. Organizers came from different cultural, generational, and immigrant backgrounds and each of the groups represented different political ideologies and perspectives of the movement. The shared physical space in the hotel, however, and the solidarity of working across these differences in the campaign created a dynamic nexus of social, artistic, and political production.

The complex forms of discourse that were produced in the Asian American movement, as well as their related activities, create the basis for the complex use of genres in *I Hotel*. In what is perhaps the most visually experimental novella of the book, “1971: Aiiiiiiii! Hotel,” Yamashita explores the multiplicity at the heart of the Asian American movement by weaving together different styles of narration, including drama, short story, mythology, comics, and martial arts (Figure 1 and Figure 2).¹³

6: Chiquita Banana



Figure 1: First page of the comics chapter "Chiquita Banana" in the novella "1971: Aiiieeee! Hotel." Reprinted by permission from Coffee House Press, 2010. Copyright © 2010 Karen Tei Yamashita and Sina Grace.



PRAYING MANTIS

WHITE EYEBROW

Hand moves:

mantis claw

gou

lau

tsai

qua

soft hand

Phoenix eye fist

Ferocious self-defense

5 external forms:

eyes

mind

hands

waist

stance

block punch

pull in

Figure 2: From the chapter “Doppelgangsters” in “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel.” Yamashita integrates both visual and textual examples of martial arts within the short story format to illustrate its influence among Asian American artist-activists during the movement. Reprinted by permission from Coffee House Press, 2010. Copyright © 2010 Karen Tei Yamashita and Leland Wong.

Each style is presented as a distinct aesthetic expression that took place during this movement. At the same time, each of these styles can complement or work in productive tension with each other in ways both illuminating and humorous. Yamashita has described “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel” as “my narrative experiment in pastiche,” in which she wanted to “impart a sense of the variety of media and artistic production spawned in this period, not to simply describe it, but to attempt to recreate it, within the limitations of the book as text.”¹⁴ One of the main storylines in “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel” is about Gerald K. Li and his road trip south on Highway 99. Gerald is a talented jazz saxophonist and student activist who has recently been incarcerated for his participation in Third World strikes at his university, San Francisco State. Just released and wanting to reform his “wayward life” to ease the growing concerns of his mother, Gerald embarks on a road trip to visit her and assure her of his changed lifestyle: he “was giving up women,” drugs, and “booze” (*I Hotel* 265). On the way, Gerald encounters a series of “doppelgangsters” or doubles of himself that lead to disorienting moments that challenge both his sense of self and his activist ideals.

Reading Novella “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel”: Doubles and “Doppelgangsters”

In “Doppelgangsters,” which is the seventh chapter of the novella “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel,” Gerald meets a series of unexpected “doubles” on his drive down to see his mother. Each represents an aspect of Gerald and his interests. By the end of his trip, these encounters lead Gerald to question not only his own identity, but also his politics in the Asian American movement. The chapter begins with a foreshadowing of the events to come with a question from the narrator, “Honey, you might be an orphaned brother, but what happens when you meet your orphaned double? In the case of the doppelganger, who is who? Who is real and who is fake?” (265). Riffing on the theme of self-invention and self-determination that characterized this period of political activism, the narrator frames Gerald as one of the many “orphaned [activist] brothers” exploring his ideals by claiming what appealed to him and discarding the ideas and materials that didn’t. In the process of defining an “Asian American” identity and movement, Gerald encounters heady questions regarding his sensibility as an Asian American and as an activist in the Asian American movement.

When the narrator asks: “who is real and who is fake?” the question highlights a central internal controversy that emerges from the Asian American movement: was there a single and ineffable identity that could be defined as Asian American? And if so, what was it? This debate came to the fore in one of the most well-known artistic productions of the Asian American movement, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), which is also the inspiration for the title of this novella. In the introduction to the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology, the editors set out a number of tenets for what constitutes Asian American literary production and representation and, as part of the outline, they attempt to make a clear distinction between an “authentic” Asian American sensibility and stereotypes pandering to white mainstream media.¹⁵

In “Aiiieeeee! Hotel,” Yamashita pays homage to this work not just by adopting the title, but also in the variety of media she incorporates throughout the novella, including the conventional short story, play script, illustrations, comics, and dance choreography. Through these forms, Yamashita represents this debate about authenticity and artifice as an important staging ground for fleshing out related tensions that artist-activists confronted in their attempt to define an Asian American identity and movement.¹⁶ At the same time, Yamashita resists endorsing the bifurcation

between real and fake. Instead, the novella introduces a second tacit question to the debate – are there “real” and “fake” representations of Asian America?

During Gerald’s road trip to see his mother, he meets a white man impersonating him in club venues as Gerald K. Li, the “great Chinese saxophonist.” A little later, he meets an Asian American saxophonist sheepishly admitting to being called the “Gerald K. Li of Stockton,” and, towards the end of his journey, Gerald encounters an Asian male bartender who appears to be Gerald’s physical twin, but who, unlike in the other encounters, does not identify himself as Gerald—nor does he recognize Gerald as Gerald. Instead, the bartender mistakes him for another Asian man, the bartender’s twin, Jack.

Each of these encounters disturbs Gerald’s conception of himself and his politics. For each man questions Gerald explicitly or implicitly about his identity or his activist involvement in the Yellow Power movement. The bartender, Joe Sung, challenges Gerald’s sense of politics and self the most because he insists that Gerald is Jack Sung, Joe’s twin and Gerald’s close friend and activist “brother.” Joe asserts that poet-activist Jack Sung is “always trying to be a rebel but ultimately, you and your kind are a bunch of bourgeois intellectuals patronized by the capitalists” (273). Despite this belief, Joe goes on to suggest that they are alike in “one thing” only and that is “[w]e both believe in the passionate pursuit of our ideals” (274). While Gerald does not appear to accept Joe’s deprecation of his political activism, he is forced to consider what this second assertion means. The only thing Gerald could “see”—in the most literal sense—sharing with Joe is their appearance. He tells Joe, “You do look like me” (274).

At the end of the chapter, Gerald’s former girlfriend, Sandy Hu, the other main character in the novella, returns to take the keys to her car, which Gerald took for his roadtrip without asking or letting her know. Sandy suggests that both one’s sense of self and the political “revolution” they have been a part of are what each person makes of them. For her, this means countering Gerald’s overtly masculinist approach to politics and embracing her political art-activism as a personal expression: “this is my revolution, and don’t you forget it” (277). To underscore that the revolution is what they make of it, Sandy choreographs a collaborative dance and music performance with Gerald. The dance weaves together her personal story with his and includes the different inspirations that have informed both their art and their political philosophies. For Sandy, this includes Peking Opera; Jorge Luis Borges; Li K’wei, a Chinese classic literary hero; and versions of the “Chinese minstrel” (278). For Gerald, his inspiration is found in the music of Archie Shepp, a contemporary African American avant-garde jazz musician known for his political and aesthetic identification with the 1960s-1970s Black Power movement.

What this dance collaboration and its unexpected allusions suggest is that the identity of Asian America and the Asian American movement was a highly improvised, diversely-informed, and continuously changing expression of political and aesthetic philosophies. While the movement may have had at its core a desire for social revolution with a particular focus on empowering the underserved and socially marginalized, there still existed a vast expanse for experimenting with social and self-expressions about “Asian America.” The question of what defined their bodies and stories as “Asian American” became a crucial part of their social and artistic expressions.¹⁷ Part of what Yamashita demonstrates in “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel” is the numerous ways in which that identity was explored. Thus, the doubling Gerald experiences highlights stereotypes of Asian Americans, but also some of the oppositions that Asian Americans experienced as activists in the movement, including questions

regarding the roles of art and activism and the differences between racial stereotype and purportedly “authentic” racial representation.¹⁸

Interspersed through Gerald’s and Sandy’s stories are classic Chinese mythology, play script, comics, illustrations, and dance choreography translated into print. These different forms allude to the contemporary influences that shape each character’s approach to art and politics. At the same time, the visual mediums highlight the multiple ways in which Asian Americans represented themselves and were represented by the mainstream. Yamashita organizes these representations into “doubles,” or oppositions between popular stereotypes of Asian bodies and representations developed by contemporary Asian American artist-activists. The doubling that recurs reflects, in particular, themes of gender, sexuality, and ideas of “real” and “fake” Asian American representation. These “doubles” include images of the sexually lascivious Asian woman juxtaposed with the meek A-student Asian woman, allusions to the sexually effeminate Asian male belying images of the defiant martial arts practitioner, and the “yellow-face” performance of a white Gerald K. Li juxtaposed with jazz steeped in Black American influences played by a Chinese Yellow Power activist.

The theme of doubling is translated into the various visual media of the novella, and they, cumulatively, undermine the binary logic usually associated between these representations as “real” and “fake.”¹⁹ Indeed, while Yamashita does not suggest that the doubles are equivalent—that a “white Gerald K. Li” is the same as the Chinese Gerald K. Li—she does revel in a sort of play with the idea that each of these characters and visual representations express some aspect of what comprises the present-day understanding of Asian Americans.

Thus, when the white Gerald K. Li describes his performances as an “oriental chinkified sound” that the crowd loves, this sound is as much a part of Asian America as the Chinese Gerald K. Li and his jazz creations (266). This is not simply because the white imposter represents the obverse of what the Asian American movement attempted to define itself as, but also because this form of “corruption” shapes the response of the resistance and, in that way, the identity of the movement itself. Moreover, even though the white Gerald describes his sound as “chinkified,” his presence raises the question: who gets to characterize what is authentic and what is not? For if white Gerald is not Asian American because he plays “orientalist” music and is racially white, is Chinese Gerald an “imposter” in the movement if he identifies with and plays jazz by Archie Shepp? In the end, what *I Hotel* suggests to readers is that there is no one political idea or sensibility that comprised the Asian American movement as a whole. Instead, it was made up of the multiple expressions and cultural improvisations that could be as distinct as the number of people in the movement.

What, then, unifies the movement as Asian American in *I Hotel* if not an authentic expression or definable sensibility? The struggle itself, the willingness to identify however loosely and in however many complex and unexpected ways as a group working toward an idea of sociality forms a significant part of the answer. Artistic expressions were, thus, both assertions of race consciousness and experimentations with the idea of being “Asian American.” At the heart of what drove the Asian American movement was this dual desire to establish an Asian American political identity while also weaving the movement into broader struggles fighting institutionalized inequality. While the two are not contradictory, the question of what “Asian American” signified or could signify was a persistent presence. As Asian Americanist scholar Daryl J. Maeda argues, the Asian American movement was “fundamentally committed to the ideologies of interracialism and internationalism” in

its struggles (*Rethinking* 1). A logical and crucial question remained, however: if the movement foregrounded the importance of interracial and international solidarities in a broad struggle against inequality and racial oppression, why was it also significant to claim an “Asian American” identity?

It is this question that *I Hotel* interrogates through its extraordinary breadth and depth. The many activities, the large cast of characters, deep history, and use of mixed genres is, in large part, an investigation into how the discrete groups and individuals working in the Asian American movement came to embrace and wrestle with that identity marker. In *Chains of Babylon*, Maeda notes that the term “Asian American” has “taken on a primarily demographic meaning as a descriptor of race, ethnicity, or national descent,” but during the Asian American movement the identity was coined to claim a political identity (155).²⁰ It was meant to convey both a race consciousness about the history of Asians in the United States and a solidarity with struggles against racism, capitalist exploitation, and anti-imperialism. What *I Hotel* offers in its breadth and depth are the multiple aesthetic forms in which “Asian America” was interpreted. What it shows is the irreducible differences that comprise the movement and the points of convergence and unity. It also shows how productive the term “Asian American” was in helping lay the foundations for the many differences expressed and claimed within the movement.

To better understand the relationship between self-determination and artistic self-expression, I turn now to the origins that shaped the Asian American movement. The Asian American movement was broad in its vision and reach, eclectic in its sources of inspiration, and deeply invested in expressing alternative histories. The movement was also a continuation of longer and broader histories of immigrant, labor, and housing rights activism. Understanding the movement’s origins will help contextualize the spatial scale and deep history that *I Hotel* relates.

The Asian American Movement: Building Race-Consciousness and Artist-Activists

The San Francisco Bay Area was one of the first cities in which the Asian American movement took root.²¹ Yet the movement was not limited to Northern California. Yellow Power activists from San Francisco traveled up and down the West Coast and across the nation to support other emerging centers of Asian American activism. They also worked with and were inspired by sister liberation movements such as the Black Panther Party and the Puerto Rican Young Lords. Asian American activists participated in Third World liberation strikes and conferences, traveled abroad to learn about non-capitalist forms of government, and participated in anti-imperialist struggles outside of the U.S.²²

Activists in the Asian American movement were united by a radical democratic vision that promoted affordable housing, workers’ rights, and community health resources. They focused their energies on underserved Asian ethnic enclaves. To these ends, they founded a new generation of community-based organizations, formed a garment cooperative, organized labor unions, joined residents in anti-eviction protests in Japantown and Manilatown, and published community newspapers. Based on a grassroots model of organizing, these activities were all meant to create the foundations for a more politically empowered citizenry.²³ One of the overarching goals within the movement was to create a new social order in which low-wage workers and the socially marginalized share in the decision-making power over their communities and livelihoods. Inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, activists adopted Mao Tse

Tung's popular phrase "Serve the People" as a rallying cry within the Asian American movement (Liu, Geron, and Lai 78).

Yet participants in the Asian American movement were not operating on simple enthusiasm or unexamined ideals. They also created small, intensive study groups to analyze theories of revolution, capitalist production, and liberalism. They read about past and present international revolutions.²⁴ And, as the movement unfolded and activists spent more time in their communities, many reevaluated their initial beliefs and ideological positions.²⁵ They learned from the political challenges specific to each struggle and from the community elders they organized with, many of whom had also been active in their younger years in labor and immigrant rights struggles. The movement in San Francisco began with student strikes at San Francisco State College and, later, the University of California, Berkeley. They protested for the right to an education that included, among other things, the different histories of people of color in America and critical analyses of United States imperialism and colonialism.

Threading the energy and dedication of the movement together was a strong impulse to express their political experiences through creative means. Dance, theater, and documentary productions were among the mediums that activists used to tell their personal and collective stories. They watched revolutionary films from the People's Republic of China; discovered and republished out-of-print stories written by an earlier generation of Asian Americans; wrote plays, poetry, and performance pieces; and recorded their protests and organizing work with the latest video technology. These mediums were all tools for learning about and experimenting with questions of identity and identity creation.²⁶ They were also platforms for asserting an Asian American identity as a way of affirming the work of building race-consciousness within the movement.

One of the most influential arts organizations to emerge from the campaign to save the International Hotel was the Kearny Street Workshop, or KSW. Founded in 1972 and still in operation today, KSW was an "intergenerational and multicultural effort" that fostered a "symbiotic relationship" among artist-activists, community members, and elderly tenants of the International Hotel (Hom). The Kearny Street Workshop began with start-up funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and aimed "to support, cultivate, and create community arts that could aid in social understanding and community development from a self-determined, ethnic-specific approach" (Gavino). As part of this, the KSW focused on art production that would engender forms of spatial and political engagement across generations and ethnic differences. Asian American artists worked with local residents, tenants, and teens to create art pieces that not only encouraged community interaction among Asians, but also expressed different images and ideas about contemporary Asian America, images different from the "oriental" stereotypes of popular media.²⁷

Leland Wong, an early participant of KSW, describes the importance of creating images to reflect Asian American life: "in the world I grew up in there were hardly any images of ourselves . . . if you're [part of] a community [like] Chinatown, or [another] Asian immigrant community, your art should reflect it" (qtd. in Gavino). Fittingly, Wong has also contributed artwork to Yamashita's *I Hotel*. Another artist-activist of the period, Norman Yee, recalls a similar absence of realistic visual portraits of Asian Americans in popular culture: "[Y]ou didn't really see . . . an Asian American image [active in] mainstream things, like camping"; being a part of KSW was "about challenging media, challenging society, saying we're Americans and you need to

include us. If you're not going to include us, we're going to include ourselves" (qtd. in Gavino).

KSW participants created theater pieces and music, choreographed dance performances, drew, wrote, sang, recorded documentaries, taped oral histories, and encouraged a form of talk-story in which elders, especially the Filipino tenants of the International Hotel, passed their life stories onto the younger generation. It was part of a larger process that Nancy Hom, an early participant and later executive director of KSW, recalls, "foster[ed] positive affirmation—of our individual and collective identities, histories, neighborhoods, sexuality, pride" (qtd. in Gavino). It brought together elders from the International Hotel, youth in the Asian American movement, local residents, and activists of different social causes, racial backgrounds, and geographic areas.²⁸ Among the most visible works of art that the KSW participants produced were murals and silk-screen posters advertising political ideas and community activities such as camping trips, art workshops, and upcoming events. Most of these posters represented "significant aspects of the surrounding environment [of San Francisco's Asian immigrant neighborhoods] melded with ancestral notions of history, symbolism, and language" (Gavino).²⁹ More than 170 KSW posters are now accessible through the public online database [Calisphere](#).

This melding of Asian American identity with art from classical Asian texts was a critical part of the visual aesthetics of the Asian American movement and is one of the major themes in *I Hotel*, especially in the novella "1971: Aiiiiieee! Hotel." Yamashita combines *The Water Margin*, a Chinese literary classic about a band of outlaws who challenge and resist the bourgeoisie, with contemporary stories and visual images of Asian American youth activists turning to art for self-expression and radical organizing. In this literary and visual mashup, Yamashita not only gives expression to the kind of artistic and political self-expressions taking place then, but she also experiments with and heightens the questions surrounding ideas of Asian American visual and literary form. For all these productions were tools for public engagement, activist exploration, and individual expression.³⁰ Tying them together was an exploration into what constituted the idea of an "Asian American" movement. Art historian Julianne Gavino asserts that the 1960s-1970s artistic explorations of the San Francisco Asian American movement were framed as "recurring acts that brought people together in action across race, ethnicity, class, gender, age and other interest groups. In producing and facilitating community arts experiences, artist-activists were continually moving beyond their own social boundaries in both location and cultural arenas."

Thus, when activists in the Asian American movement expressed themselves through performance, visual and literary art, or documentary recordings, they were redressing, in part, a gap in their education about who and what constitutes Asians and Asian history in the United States. They were limning a portrait of what being "Asian American" is and means. Expressive mediums proved critical, then, to shaping and sustaining the Asian American movement. They expressed the political underpinnings driving it as well as the varied forms through which it was pursued. Different media were what helped unify the heterogeneous aspects of the movement within the idea of "Asian America."

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe writes that the "grouping 'Asian American' is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific position, assumed for political reasons" (82).³¹ The Asian American movement was from its inception defined by its diversity, comprising differences that included class, ethnic, generational, and national backgrounds. What brought it together was a shared moral

urgency for social change. At the same time, some of the differences within the movement, from political ideology to views on gender roles and sexuality, created internal dissension about the political identity of “Asian America.” Questions about what it meant to be part of the movement and, thus, what it meant to be “Asian American” were inseparable from the race-consciousness they were building. Activists consistently reevaluated the meaning of “Asian American” in light of what they were learning about themselves and their communities, even challenging each other over its meaning and representation. As they tested different ideological positions and expressed opposing perspectives, they did so while self-identifying as Asian American. This political identity became a powerful force that was both productive of the differences within the movement, as students attempted to express and define what being Asian American meant, and unifying as a title that, somehow, encompassed all these forms. The expressive forms became, thus, powerful outlets for communicating these differences at the same time that they affirmed the significance of “Asian American” as a political identity and movement. It is this twinned, seemingly contradictory, process of both defining the politics for the movement and leaving it open to differences and shifts in time and space that sustained the collectivity of their work and created its sensibility as Asian American.

Few if any fictional treatments about the Asian American movement approach this productive tension with the scale of vision and philosophical depth that Karen Tei Yamashita presents in *I Hotel*. For the spirit that Yamashita captures with imagination and force in this novel is the complexity of a movement in the process of affirming its history and present, while also always self-consciously shifting and redeveloping. Yamashita translates this period’s vibrant creativity and the complexity of its social change into the very texture of *I Hotel*.

Part II

I Hotel Thematic Prompts

The following prompts may be useful for beginning class discussions or for crafting assignments related to major themes in *I Hotel*. In 2011, Karen Tei Yamashita was the Tufts University American Studies Knaster Artist-in-Residence. As part of this residency, Yamashita participated in an interview with me about the process of writing *I Hotel* and about concepts of social change. The prompts are based on excerpts from this interview.³²

Prompt #1: On the Social Atmosphere of the 1960s

“I think that during the sixties there was an enormous amount of enthusiasm for youth culture and change. I think we all thought that we could always get a job and we would always have a place to live. In other words, rent was cheap! And food was cheap. And we always thought there were a lot of jobs out there and we thought we could take any of them. You know, if worse comes to worst, become a taxi driver or just hobo across the country and try. We thought that way.”

One of the things Yamashita describes trying to investigate in *I Hotel* was “what we [as youth during this period] were feeling at the time and why, why would you put yourself, your life on the line. Why would you give up your education for that, to work in the community, which some people did. A friend of mine, one of the people I talked to, said that his mother went to see him at the International Hotel where he was running the bookstore on the ground level, and she cried. She said, I want you to go

back to school. What's going to happen to you? How could you have given this up? . . . She really felt it was the end. Many students gave up things because they felt this [community work] was more important and . . . that the revolution was coming!"

Questions: How is the energy and sense of freedom Yamashita describes explored in the first novella, "1968: Eye Hotel"? Think particularly of the students, Edmund and Paul. In what ways is the atmosphere of the sixties that Yamashita describes different from or similar to the sense of possibility for young adults today?

For more historical information about this period, see Karen Umemoto's essay, "'On Strike!'" and Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu's *Asian Americans*.

Questions: In the last sentence, Yamashita alludes to the overpowering sense that this was an age of social revolution. What are some of the revolutions and movements that inspire the youth activists in this book?

Suggested Exercise: Ask students to identify two revolutionary movements from the third novella, "1970: 'I' Hotel," research the geography and major issues in these movements and trace the connections between those movements and what in them inspired the Asian American youth activists. Students could offer brief class presentations of their findings.

Prompt #2: On the Origins of the Asian American movement in the San Francisco Bay Area

In the interview, Yamashita comments that "I think we felt powerful" in terms of the risks she and other college-age young adults were willing to take during this period. At the same time, Yamashita also recalls feeling intellectually "impotent" in terms of understanding the social and institutional hierarchies of race and class. "Civil rights in those days was black and all these different communities began to [express] potent concerns as well." Asian Americans "were the model minority sandwiched between usually the black and brown communities and so there was always a question about what our position was in that. There was also class hierarchy. I didn't know what true privilege was. All that was hidden because when you are in a university, students hide that from each other. They're all wearing jeans and this was a period where people all wore jeans, so everybody looked like they were—they were all trying to look working class—and, then, it was sort of the style.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, where the Chinese and Japanese American communities were large, the university students had active spaces to practice what they were learning or thinking about. And, they could relate their learning to these actual spaces, which were their homes. When I was [a college student] in Minnesota, it was all far away. In Minnesota, there was a radical idealism going on, but I had to learn about it or think about it in a different way."

Questions: How is space and place important in *I Hotel*? Yamashita suggests that the ability to learn through direct practice is a critical part of what helped the movement take root in San Francisco. How do we see this demonstrated in Ria Ishii's work in the creation of the Chinatown women's garment cooperative in "1973: Int'l Hotel"? How is this theme developed in the relationship between Felix Allos, an elder Filipino tenant and activist, and the two youth activists, Macario Amado and Abra Balcena in "1974: I-Migrant Hotel"?

Questions: Travel can also be a critical part of expanding the horizons and understanding of the student activists and of what it means to be "Asian American." In

“1971: Aiiiiiiii! Hotel,” when Gerald Li travels Highway 99 to visit his mother, who does he meet along the way? What do the doubles show him about being Asian American and about the Asian American movement? How does the novella as a whole explore the identity “Asian American” through the use of doubles?

Prompt #3: On Creating the Structure for *I Hotel*

Yamashita notes how the folding boxes that lay out each novella are a kind of “map for the reader to figure out” where he or she is in the book. Yamashita was inspired by the architectural blueprints that her husband, an architect, was working on while she was writing *I Hotel*. She thought of constructing the novel in a similar fashion, but wondered “how do you translate that into text? Well, it’s kind of impossible, and if I had a smaller project I could have done something which was more blatantly architectural.” Still, Yamashita was intrigued by how there seemed to be parallels between writing a novel and building design. The blueprints she observed from her husband’s work outlined “all the floors, including the views from the side. They included electrical plans, plumbing plans, and these plans were all mapped, and he had to think about the whole thing as layers of construction. I knew that what he was doing was that he was visualizing this in three-dimension and going down to every blueprint to mark changes. If he changed anything, then the whole building had to change. So, I thought, a novel is like that. If you change any piece of it you have to make sure that there is consistency through the entire novel. And, finally, the simplest thing for me turned out to be these boxes.

For instance, in the International Hotel, there is a kitchen and there’s a separate bathroom and, then, there was an entryway. So, I started to parse this out as symbolic parts of any novella. I knew that there were ten hotels and that each hotel would be the hotel, but would not be the hotel. So, I began to think about the relationship between a particular hotel and the time period, of course 1968, and geographical concern, which was in the city. And the geographical concern might be in Japantown, it might be U.C. Berkeley, or it could be a community. And then there was also something international that was tied to it and there was something also historical. It could be the internment; it could be the Cultural Revolution. All of those things started to build the parts of the hotel, the layers of this architecture for the work.

And, in this sense, the boxes are very simplistic. Similar to the Hypercontexts in *Tropic of Orange*, where you could use the Hypercontexts as a sort of map to figure out where you are in the book, you could use the boxes in *I Hotel* in that way. It was my transparency to show you where I was in the book when I wrote it and to offer the readers a kind of hook, as in: it’s 1972, this is the thematic for the hotel, this is the narrative voice, and these are the characters. And then move through it and know that that was the constraint for that particular hotel. . . . But it was also a conceit and a kind of joke because there was actually more in each box: there was the inside of the box and the outside of the box and the nutty thing is I had inside and outside boxes. I had more.”

Suggested Exercise: Yamashita likens writing to a layering process, such as architectural blueprints, in which she considers themes of place, narrative voice, and time as separate entities that she consciously layers together in each novella. Trace the different layers of these aspects within one of the novellas. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a theme (place, space, narrative voice) within a novella to investigate, asking them to describe its significance to or relationship in the Asian American movement overall.

Prompt #4: On the Idea of Social Change During this Period and the Line Between Fiction and Reality

“If someone were to say thirty years later that this [struggle to save the International Hotel] was a campaign for social justice that was not a vocabulary that was used at the time. For us, looking back, the term social justice, that idea about what might have been going on or what we hoped to aspire to was different. Really, it was a revolution. In *I Hotel*, I’m trying to figure out what people did and how to sort of make it relevant to another period of time. . . . So here it is, this book that has already travelled through time because it’s through my interpretations of it and also the interpretations of all this material. It’s also the reader’s job or duty to figure that out.

The ‘1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel’ novella probably is the most fictional, even though it touches on actual events. Of course there were no doppelgangers or doppelgangsters [as there are in the novella]. It was my playing around with a couple of things: the fascination that people had with martial arts and the sort of masculinization of the Asian male through that form and the way in which both the mainstream media, but also Asians themselves, used it to gain some kind of power. But, then, there was also the joke that goes through the whole novel, who is your double? The idea of the Siamese twin, the doppelgangster, that we all kind of look alike—the sort of yellowfacing of this character and then the dichotomies that run through the poet and the revolutionary. I was also playing with the hyphenation or schizophrenia of being Asian—the good student or dragon-lady type. I wanted to think about the double, the bifurcation.”

Questions: How is the hyphenated Asian American identity played out through Gerald Li’s travel adventures? How is it also demonstrated in “Theater of the Double Ax,” the second chapter of “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel”? For more information about Asian American identities and the significance of the hyphen, see David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*.

Questions: One of the things Yamashita emphasizes is that *I Hotel* is not a direct documentary of the struggle to save the International Hotel; it includes her interpretation of the movement. And part of that interpretation involves her use of narrative voice and form to develop the story she tells. The first two chapters in “1971” are narrated in the voice of a woman who is Asian American and appears to have roots in Chinatown and outside of it. Who is she? How is she described? Why does Yamashita choose her as the narrator for the first chapters? What does she add to the theme of doubles and ideas about being “Asian American”?

Prompt #5: On the “Dance” chapter in “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel”

“I think people find it [the “Dance” chapter] impossible to read, but, originally, the choreography was in different colors. I also wanted to show it more spread out on the page. When I wrote it, the page was long [with the book seam horizontal]. Ideally, the page would have folded out and it could have more space. In the current layout, it needs more space (Figures 3 and 4). I wanted it to look like a stage, where the words are the people moving across the stage.

[sax]	by day [painfully] to see my son		[sax]	dancer Yuriko [turn head] I know his gait	so many years gone [listen] part of our lives
[sax]	mother ran shop [slow] but she is blind		[sax]	I can be her [concentrate] she rhythm	you may find [soften face] took for granted
[sax]	by day [fingers] weeping weeping		[sax]	married [every sound] the step	an empty house [close eyes] not romantic vision
[sax]	father gardener [crooked] so many years	<i>body of dance [dance] body of dancer</i>	[sax]	h.s. sweetheart [fingers bristle] upon the earth	a cold grave [tilt head] beauty of it
[sax]	by night [arms inching out] dried her eyes	<i>bold [back] father Filipino</i>	[sax]	Peace & Freedom [tingle] playful	see? no smoke [seem to dream] always worked
[sax]	father repaired shoes [hunched] to sightless stones	<i>brash [stage right] mother Irish German</i>	[sax]	union work [to touch] bowlegged steps	no hearth within [lower axes] worked with dad
[sax]	good business [back hunched] my son left	<i>middle-aged [sudden] Watsonville</i>	[sax]	1963 UCB [skin breathes in] memory of steps	too poor [lift feet] kitchen, fourteen years old
[sax]	until [neck strained] a young boy	<i>muscular [bombastic] she sitting on porch</i>	[sax]	from Oriental [light] door creaks	to light a fire [lightly] helped at banquets
[sax]	tennis shoe [chin forward] will he return	<i>Li K'wei [appearance] he migrant worker</i>	[sax]	to Asian American [heat/cold] pushes open	cross the threshold [jig] overheard
[sax]	mother bilingual [head tilted left] an old man?	<i>Black [pose] came by everyday</i>	[sax]	Political Alliance [air] who is there?	who is there? [pause] wouldn't pay dad
[sax]	tough [strain] how will she know	<i>Whirlwind [grimace] one day church</i>	[sax]	Oakland Courthouse [nose] a figure waiting [squint] told him: don't work	
[sax]	piano [legs crouched] her son?	<i>feared [heroic] asked her out</i>	[sax]	Free Huey! [follows] waiting in the dark [tilt head] not going to pay you	
[sax]	lessons with [right foot inching] I will live	<i>outlaw [stance] family said</i>	[sax]	move to [scents] who is there? [slightly left] dad said: shut up	
[sax]	Huey Newton [heels and toes] 100 years	<i>but his mother's [expansive] you can't see</i>	[sax]	LA/USC [body] I know the voice [and up] walked home upset	
[sax]	who wore a [rocking forward] but I will know	<i>Iron Ox [movements] that man</i>	[sax]	UCLA/LAUSD [follows] deeper though [slightly right] you don't know	
[sax]	bowtie [transfer weight] my son	<i>wield 2 [fill space] sent her away</i>	[sax]	teaching credentials [sensations] a voice from the past [and up] kind of shit	
[sax]	Grove [left foot inching] old woman	<i>huge axes [heavy footfalls] live with aunt</i>	[sax]	Westside Trucking [follows ears] is that you? [bring chin in] had to take	
[sax]	Elementary [heels and toes] you may be fooled	<i>Chinese gladiator [struts forward] found out</i>	[sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax] [sax]	sensitivity training [follows nose] do you remember [stoop] to raise you	[sax]
[sax]	Westlake HS [rocking forward] any man might	<i>painted mask [lifts axes] eloped</i>		Gidra [follows skin] me? [fall to knees] married	[sax]
[sax]	Free Methodist [arms inching forward] fake your son	<i>bearded face [circling axes] SF</i>		moved to [arthritic] do you know [press hands] h.s. girlfriend	[sax]
[sax]	Wesley Methodist [hands searching] a fake son	<i>big black brows [circle out] family came after</i>		Ann Arbor [groping] who I am? [to ground] three kids	[sax]
[sax]	United Methodist [eyes fixed] might be	<i>broad bare chest [circle forward] mother 16</i>		women's studies [curiosity] come closer [crawl forward] separated	[sax]
[sax]	no friends [eyes] better than none	<i>wild top knot [hold above] miscegenation</i>		rice dance pieces [innocent] let me touch your face [face extended] she two kids	[sax]
[sax]	wanted [always] what imposter	<i>powerful giant [heroic V] laws</i>		raw [childlike] let me smell your hair [eyes closing] we another one	[sax]
[sax]	ballet lessons [fixed] would want	<i>but also a son [pose] arrested dad</i>		cooked [caress] this is the curve of your ear [head turning] love those kids, my own	[sax]
[sax]	too expensive [blank] a poor old hag?	<i>many battles fought [muscular] leave him</i>		clothing/props [twitch] this is the curve of your brow [right] working warehouse	[sax]
[sax]	traded [stare] I will know my son	<i>many lawless deeds [stomp feet] said no</i>		landscapes [right hand] this is the scar where you fell [left] shipping goods	[sax]
[sax]	house cleaning [as blind] foolish woman	<i>yet memories [twist side] disowned her family</i>		1967 San José State [swirl right] this is the dimple in your elbow [elbow] YMCA dance show	[sax]
[sax]	for [every] a huge and ugly man	<i>loving mother [to side] hard life</i>		MA dance [swirl left] this is the smell of your hair [extended] blown away	[sax]
[sax]	dance lessons [movement] is at your door	<i>playful boyhood [crook elbows] raised family</i>		Afro-Haitian dance [left hand] this is the beating [chest] wanted to dance	[sax]
[sax]	mother discovered [expresses] he will take	<i>mischievous [slice air] father</i>		racism in dance [swirl left] of your heart [puffed] black leotards	[sax]
[sax]	angry [heightened] your last bit of food	<i>how will my mother [pull blades] couldn't get jobs</i>		Food Fantasy [swirl right] this is you [forward] hung to dry	[sax]
[sax]	yelled at teacher [sense] he will kill you	<i>receive me? [before face] support 5 kids</i>		sushi [shaking hands] you are home/I am home [arms] in warehouse	[sax]
[sax]	Oakland Tech HS [of hearing] on a whim	<i>a prodigal son [open blades] Fillmore</i>		sweet-and-sour chicken wings [groping] do you forgive me? [extended] on purpose	[sax]
[sax]	Miss Versatility [of touching] he is the infamous	<i>foolish son [scowl] vibrant place</i>		tempura [knees fold] what is there to forgive? [fall] guys looked, what's that?	[sax]
[sax]	dance teacher [of smelling] Black Whirlwind	<i>certainly [between blades] black culture</i>		tomato beef chow fun [beneath] but you are blind [to knees] my tights & leotards	[sax]
[sax]	film of [ears poised] his footfall is heavy	<i>your mother [growl] jazz at Bebob City</i>		yokan [crumbling] it is my fault [close fists] think about it	[sax]
[sax]	Martha Graham [react] but familiar	<i>is dead [pause] music everywhere</i>			

Figures 3 and 4: Pages 280-281 from the “Dance” chapter in the novella “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel.” The words represent two dancers and a saxophone player moving across a stage. In its ideal version, Yamashita describes having the words set in landscape format to allow more blank space between the characters on stage. Reprinted by permission from Coffee House Press, 2010. Copyright © 2010 Karen Tei Yamashita.]

There are two bodies moving across the stage, plus the saxophone player. They move and dance separately on two sides of the stage, and they are not aware of each other. Then, as they dance, they meet. Soon, they're dancing together and the saxophone player is playing and moving, zig-zagging across the stage, but he is part of the backdrop. And what I wanted to do was show that one side of the structure is the story of the dancer herself, her personal story. And on this side is the story of her character. And, then, there are the movements of her body. Similarly for the male dancer: there are his new movements and this is his personal story. It's all done in shorthand and I wanted to tell at least three or four things—such as their stories—without talking about it. They move through it because it's the reason for why they dance. I meant for it to be transparent. I'm not interested in language poetry.”

Questions: How did the class understand the “Dance” chapter? Does reading Yamashita’s explanation change anything? Why or why not?

Prompt #6: On Form and Content—Screenplay, Analects, Dance, and Comics

On the different visual and performative genres of the screenplay, analects, dance, and comics, Yamashita states, “I think those are all vehicles to tell story. They are all narrative vehicles and structures that have the same necessities for story-telling; they are vehicles to further the story. There were multiple ways to tell the story in ‘Aiiieeeee! Hotel,’ for instance. That novella referred to the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology, which was not actually the first, but the first and most popular anthology of Asian American work. The entire novella was a representation of the different art forms that were used and manipulated during the period. So whether it was dance or comics, I used all that in the novella. For instance, there is a short story in which the narrative is a classic Asian American short story. It’s the classic short story and it’s the short story that could be published in *Harper’s*, or *Time*, or *Atlantic*. It was a way of saying that this existed and that there was a group of people who were interested in this genre of representation and another group interested in dance and another in music and jazz and so forth. At the same time, it’s a satire—all those forms.”

Questions: In the excerpt prior to this one, Yamashita discusses her use of martial arts in the novella “1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel.” Is her use of martial arts in this novella satire? In what ways does it both poke fun and add to the story being told? What is being poked fun at?

Suggested Exercise: Read the preface and two introductions in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) and compare Yamashita’s treatment of this period with the arguments made in the anthology. For a very helpful contextualization of art and politics in the Asian American movement that includes an analysis of the gendered arguments made in the *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, see Daryl J. Maeda’s *Chains of Babylon*, especially chapters three and four.

Prompt #7: On the International Hotel as a Center of Social Change in the Asian American Movement

“I privilege the International Hotel by naming it and also by talking about it, putting it front and center. But . . . there were things that happened in New York Chinatown such as the Confucius Center controversy that could be the center of a different book. The destruction and recuperation of the International District in Seattle is another movement. And, then, there were all sorts of things going on in Little Tokyo Los Angeles that another group of people might describe as being the center for them. So, it’s not that the International Hotel is the only center of struggle, though it has its weight. There are also other, smaller parts within the International Hotel struggle—the work of Alma and Estelle and Mrs. Lee, for example. They were small revolutions.

I always wanted to make sure that all the other kinds of mentorship that were a part of this period was part of this book, the things that were talked about and actually possible, the smaller steps, but which were also large steps, that almost get erased from this story or the larger picture story of the movement and the International Hotel struggle.”

Questions: What did Alma, Estelle, and Mrs. Lee do that created the small revolutions? How did their different work dovetail or emerge out of the International Hotel struggle?

Questions: There are a number of important characters in the book that provide different perspectives to the youth activists. Who are some of these mentors? How do they mentor the students? Do they also have limitations? What are those? For instance, in “1969: I Spy Hotel,” what is Professor Takabayashi’s story? Why does he teach criminology and what is his role in the movement? How does his experience as a youth during internment shape his approach to the idea of justice and criminology studies? The first chapter of this novella resembles a redacted FBI-dossier. How does this form highlight the connection between Tom Takabayashi’s early experiences with the U.S. government and the contemporary experiences of youth in the Asian American movement? What are the connections being drawn between the novella’s use of such a form and the story being told?

For additional information about the Japanese American internment and questions of crime and justice, see Sucheng Chan’s chapter, “Changing Fortunes,” in *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* and the film documentaries, *Conscience and the Constitution* and *A Personal Matter: Gordon Hirabayashi versus the United States*.

Prompt #8: On Reading Analects in the 1970s and Present-Day Social Media

“I wanted to record all this stuff people were reading during this period. But I don’t think that it’s necessary to read it all, you know? Because we didn’t read it all either. But they [analects] were just up there. They were on posters. They were on all sorts of places and I was saying to a class [that Yamashita visited during her residency] that this is a kind of reading that I think today’s generation does anyway, that they are used to doing—information going through in multiple places at multiple times. Today, we’re much less linear than the generation that lived this. They [the 1960s-1970s generation] were very linear about what was happening.”

Questions: The novella “1972: Inter-national Hotel” is written in analect-inspired form. How does this form add another dimension to the story being told? Recall Yamashita describing each form as a vehicle for furthering the story being told. When she describes the 1960s-1970s generation as being more linear—what might she mean? Think specifically of the two main characters in “1972,” Ben and Olivia. How might they demonstrate a form of linear thinking? Are they understandable characters for students of today? In what ways and why?

Suggestions for Teaching Aids

- *The Fall of the I-Hotel* Dir. Curtis Choy. *The Fall* is a 1983 documentary film about the campaign, including personal stories from the Filipino tenants and footage of the dramatic eviction of the International Hotel.
- *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* Eds. Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu. *Asian Americans* is a 2001 collection of documentary photographs, comics, posters, song lyrics, and short essays from participants in the movement.
- *Chan Is Missing* (1982) Dir. Wayne Wang is a short narrative film about the search for a character named Chan through San Francisco Chinatown and the remnants of San Francisco’s Manilatown in the late seventies or early eighties, with allusions to the International Hotel. The film offers a fun and witty supplement

for thinking about the differences within Asian America, in particular within the Chinese American community and the geography of Chinatown.

- *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* Eds. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong. *Aiiieeee!* inspired the “1971” novella in *I Hotel*. The introduction for this 1974 anthology offers a vivid example of one contemporary definition of Asian American arts-activism. To place that introduction in context, I recommend reading James Kyung-Jin Lee’s “Asian Americans” and Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s “Complications of Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature.”
- [Calisphere Kearny Street Workshop Poster Collection](#). See the University of California online database for archived images of the posters created by participants in the Kearny Street Workshop.
- *Conscience and the Constitution* Dir. Frank Abe. A 2000 documentary that might help students think about a related period of crisis regarding ideas of crime and justice in the generation before the Asian American movement. This documentary also ties in with the novella “1969: I Spy Hotel.”

Suggestions for Further Reading

- *San Francisco’s International Hotel* (2007), Estella Habal. For background information about both the movement and the campaign to save the International Hotel.
- *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism* (2008), Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai; *Chains of Babylon* (2009), Daryl Joji Maeda; and *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (2012), Daryl Joji Maeda. These three works offer insightful overviews of the Asian American movement.
- *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1998), Ronald Takaki and *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991), Sucheng Chan. Two classic histories of Asians in the United States.
- *Visions and Voices of the I-Hotel*, Julianne Gavino, Nancy Hom, and Johanna Poethig and “Art and Social Consciousness,” Margo Machida. *Visions and Voices* is an online article that offers more historical information about Kearny Street Workshop and Asian American arts activism in San Francisco. Machida’s article provides an illuminating overview of arts and activism in the San Francisco Asian American movement, with photos and artwork from this period.
- *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994), Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Classic work for studying United States race history and theory.
- *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Lisa Lowe and *Asian/American* (1999), David Palumbo-Liu. Two classic critical race studies texts about Asian America.
- “Traveling the Distances of Karen Tei Yamashita’s Fiction” (2010), Pamela Thoma. A helpful essay outlining critical scholarship about Karen Tei Yamashita’s fiction.
- *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (1994) Paul Groth. Helpful information for contextualizing the significance of the low-income single-residence occupancy building of the International Hotel. *Living* offers a fascinating overview of the modern history of alternative housing in the United States.

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¹ Yamashita is also author of *Brazil-Marú*, *Circle K Cycles*, and *Anime Wong*.

² Director of *The Fall of the I-Hotel* and an activist in the San Francisco Asian American movement, Curtis Choy described *I Hotel* as "capturing the spirit of the moment" (Yamashita interview 2011). Nancy Hom, another early artist-activist within the Asian American movement, writes that *I Hotel* "evokes the feelings of the period" ("Keeping the Story Alive").

³ When Grace Talusan, a lecturer of composition at Tufts University, taught *I Hotel*, one of the responses she received from her students was that *I Hotel* illustrated the political, social, and economic connections of the 1960s and 1970s so succinctly and vibrantly that it rivaled an entire semester-long class in American Studies.

⁴ Yamashita describes *I Hotel* as comprising ten novellas; see Afterword in *I Hotel*.

⁵ Milton Meyer and Company owned the International Hotel during this period and started the eviction proceedings against the tenants in 1968. With the widespread political support of the tenants and the bad press it was receiving, Milton Meyer and Company—a company owned by a local, wealthy businessman with strong political ties—decided to sell the hotel. The Four Seas Investment Corporation, a powerful corporation based in Thailand, became the new owners in 1973. For more information, see Habal 77-79.

⁶ Prior to the 1960s, Manilatown was known as Filipino Town or Kearny Street (Habal 10). For more information on the downtown urban redevelopment pressures, see Habal 46-49, 79-81. The first developer made plans for redeveloping the site into a parking lot. But, when the ownership changed in 1973, it was not entirely clear if the new developer was interested in building a seamless addition to the financial district or creating an expensive condominium development marketed toward affluent Chinese consumers. But, as Habal notes, whatever the plan, it was clear that the new owner, like the previous owner, was interested in capitalizing on the real estate value of the International Hotel by turning it into a high-profit development (80-81).

⁷ A single-residence occupancy (SRO) building rents single rooms for nightly and short-term rates. Because of their affordability and short-term arrangements, SRO buildings have been critical sources of housing for migrant workers and those with low-income. These buildings have shared bathrooms and, sometimes, a shared kitchen facility. For more information on SRO buildings and hotel living, see Paul Groth's *Living Downtown*. Historian Estella Habal also notes that there were no comparably priced and safe housing options for the tenants of the International Hotel. For these residents, leaving the hotel meant leaving the city and losing the community that had developed around the hotel (50).

⁸ As a result of anti-immigrant laws and virulent anti-Asian discrimination during the first half of the twentieth century, job opportunities and housing options were severely limited. These conditions, in addition to anti-miscegenation laws, prevented many of the immigrant men from participating in more traditional forms of domestic and work-life stability. For more information about how the gender imbalance and lifestyles of the tenants in the International Hotel reflect these social restrictions, see Habal 17-20 and Ngai 96-126.

⁹ For the racial violence Filipinos faced, see Habal 18-19. Asians also faced brutality within their own communities; see Warren Mar's personal account in Louie and Omatsu's *Asian Americans: The Movement and The Moment* 33-36.

¹⁰ The campaign to save the International Hotel from demolition was a few months short of ten years. It began October 1968 and ended August 4, 1977.

¹¹ Even before the tenants received their first eviction notice in October 1968, there was already significant student activity in San Francisco State College that supported closer ties between public universities and neighboring underserved ethnic communities. For more information, see Karen Umemoto's "'On Strike!'" and Daryl J. Maeda's *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*.

¹² Most of the original small businesses could not afford to participate in the fight and vacated soon after the first eviction notice; see Habal 52-3.

¹³ In suggesting that there exists a "multiplicity at the heart of the Asian American movement," I mean that the multiple differences that have characterized Asian American political and social formation in the United States have also influenced the shape and direction of the Asian American movement. For more information about these differences, see Chan's *Asian Americans* and Lowe's chapter, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" in *Immigrant Acts*.

¹⁴ See Yamashita's interview by Bret Anthony Johnston

¹⁵ Edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* was one of the first Asian American literary anthologies published and has become an influential artifact of the Asian American movement and of Asian American literary history. The introduction, in particular, reflects the pressures that Asian Americans experienced in identifying their social and political bodies within a nationalist framework, and it also reflects the masculinist approach a number of male artist-activists assumed in the movement. For analyses of this anthology, see James Kyung-Jin Lee's "Asian Americans" and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Complications of Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature."

¹⁶ For more information about visual arts and the San Francisco Asian American movement, see Machida and Gavino et al.

¹⁷ See Machida 270-77.

¹⁸ In the 2011 interview, Yamashita describes the doubling in “1971: Aiiieeee! Hotel” as “a sort of yellow-facing of [Asians], that Asians all look alike.” At the same time, it is clear that this yellow-facing also informs the activists’ own experiments with representing Asian American identity and art, as it is in Sandy Hu’s dance with her incorporation of the “Chinese minstrel” image.

¹⁹ This theme of doubling also includes references to undercover informants hired by the FBI to infiltrate contemporary radical urban social uprisings, such as the Asian American movement. Some of the “imposters” in this novella and in the “1969: I Spy Hotel” novella include individuals who might be considered activist “fakes,” individuals posing as activists, but working as FBI informants. At the same time, even this distinction between an “authentic” or “inauthentic” activist in the Asian American movement is put into question, both in *I Hotel* and in real life. Famous for being the man “who armed the Black Panthers,” Richard Aoki was one of the most well-known and well-respected Asian American activists during the movement, and many Asian Americans and former Black Panther members have, since that period, remembered him with great fondness and respect. It was revealed in 2012, however, that Aoki worked with the FBI during these same years. His story turns out to be far more complicated than a clear-cut betrayal of the people with whom he organized. For insightful articles about Richard Aoki and the significance of his involvement in the FBI, see Momo Chang and R. J. Lozada’s “Who was Richard Aoki?” and Jamilah King’s “Richard Aoki, the FBI, and the Long (Ongoing) Saga of State Spying.”

²⁰ The argument that the current popular use of “Asian American” does not reflect its political origins is widely held. For instance, see Glenn Omatsu’s essay “The ‘Four Prisons’” and Louie and Omatsu 2-15.

²¹ Northern California was one center for the emergence of the Asian American movement, but other centers included Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York City. For more information, see Liu, Geron, and Lai’s *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism* and Maeda’s *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*.

²² The Black Panther Party and Puerto Rican Young Lords were organizations that promoted militant self-determinism and direct self-help programs within their communities. Both the militancy, self-determinism, and apparent success of services like the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast Program were an inspiration to Asian Americans who wanted to become more directly involved in their urban ethnic communities. Many of these urban Asian communities were impoverished and lacked sufficient health care and support services. The anti-Vietnam War protests as well as the decolonization and anti-imperialist movements abroad were additional sources of inspiration and activities with which Asian Americans aligned themselves politically. For more information on the beginnings of the Asian American movement and its inspirations, see Umamoto, Omatsu’s “The ‘Four Prisons,’” Maeda, and Liu et al.

²³ For more information about grassroots organizations in the Asian American movement, see Liu et al. xvi and Louie and Omatsu.

²⁴ See Louie and Omatsu, especially 80-89, 206-219.

²⁵ See Habal 178-183 and Louie and Omatsu.

²⁶ See Maeda’s *Chains of Babylon* and Louie and Omatsu.

²⁷ For more information about orientalist stereotypes of Asians in the United States, see Robert G. Lee’s *Orientalists*.

²⁸ Art historian Julianne Gavino writes that one of the first exhibitions held at KSW's Jackson Street Gallery featured Chicago artists Rupert Garcia and Juan Fuentes of the nearby Mission neighborhood.

²⁹ Organized by Nancy Hom, a Kearny Street Workshop archive of historical documents, print ephemera, and posters are housed within the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California Santa Barbara Libraries. The archive is part of a larger Asian/Pacific American Collection.

³⁰ See Machida 270-77.

³¹ Lowe goes on to state that her assertion is not meant to “do away with the notion of Asian American identity,” but the identity marker does have within it “the contradictions and ‘slippages’” that were present in its inception. To understand the diversity that helped define the movement, see Lowe's chapter in *Immigrant Acts*, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences.” See also Louie and Omatsu.

³² For the most part, the excerpts are direct transcriptions of Yamashita's responses, but there are places where, for brevity, portions of text have been omitted. Redactions or significant changes to the original structure of the comment are presented in brackets or placed outside of the quotation marks.