



Karen Tei Yamashita

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My back aches. It is longer than it should be, expanded geographically. It is shorter than it should be, compressed and digitized. It is a great abstraction, a vertebrae of pidgin utterances in which I connect to the message maybe twenty-five percent of the time. It is multiple and reversible, disconnected yet utterly connected, timeless and long-suffering and infinitely sensitive. It is border and frontier. It is both vehicle and passenger. Conveyance and traveler. It is a bridge and a beast of burden. It is my back.

— Circle K Cycles

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1951
- * Asian-American short story writer, novelist, and playwright
- * Her first published work is *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*

Biography

Karen Tei Yamashita was born January 8, 1951, in Oakland, California. She spent most of her childhood in Los Angeles but attended Carleton College in Minnesota. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa with degrees in English and Japanese literature and spent her junior year in Japan as an exchange student at Waseda University in Tokyo.

Yamashita received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship in 1974 to study Japanese immigration to Brazil. She lived in the city of Sao Paulo for nine years, and it was in Brazil that she met Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, a Brazilian architect. They married and had two children, Jane and Jon.

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During her residence in Brazil, Yamashita began to experiment with creative writing. Her stories and plays won several awards. Among other awards, Yamashita received a Rockefeller Playwright-in-Residence Fellowship at East West Players in Los Angeles, CA for her play *Omen: An American Kabuki*. In 1979 her story “Asaka-no-Miya” won first place in the James Clavell American-Japanese Short Story Contest.

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1984. Yamashita continued to write, producing many translations, plays, screenplays, poetry, and prose. In 1990, she authored her first book, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, which was published by Coffee House Press, a small publishing company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The book received the prestigious American Book Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Award.

Through the Arc of the Rainforest begins with an epigram:

I have heard Brazilian children say that whatever passes through the arc of a rainbow becomes its opposite. But what is the opposite of a bird? Or for that matter, a human being? And what then, in the great rain forest, where, in its season, the rain never ceases and the rainbows are myriad?

The novel tells about the full-circle destruction and restoration of Brazil’s tropical rainforest. The story is narrated by a little ball that hovers around the forehead of the main character, Kazumasa Ishimaru. Other characters in this funny but bizarre novel include an American CEO with three arms and an invalid who has a gift for pilgrimages. The discovery of the Matacao, a strange plastic landmass, drastically influences the lives of all characters, taking them on a dizzying journey from poverty to wealth and back again. In a strangely apropos parallel to the corporate fragility of today’s society, the immense corporation that arises due to the Matacao destroys the rainforest, but just as quickly crumbles when it is discovered that the Matacao can be destroyed by a simple form of bacteria. Eventually, long after the collapse of the corporation, the rainforest thrives again. The ending paragraph of the novel reflects on this new regrowth:

The old forest has returned once again, secreting its digestive juices, slowly breaking everything into edible absorbent components, pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same. But it will never be the same again (212).



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Yamashita's second novel *Brazil-Marú*, also published by Coffee House Press, reflects the research she completed during her nine years in South America on Japanese immigration in Brazil. The novel follows the origin, duration, and eventual decline of a Japanese colony called Esperanza, whose colonists "came to create a new civilization based on the ideas of Christianity and freedom of religion" (97).

Four separate characters in four separate sections narrate the novel. The first section is told by a youngster named Ichiro Terada, who watches the growth of the colony between 1925 to the late 1930s. With his narration, the colony is seen through young, optimistic eyes. This optimism can be seen in a metaphor of new life as represented by a birth. Ichiro recounts his father's jubilation upon the birth of a son shortly after the family's arrival at the colony: "Through the wall I heard my mother's low groan, and then I saw my new brother - Koichi, my father would name him - emerging from my mother in a thin film of blood. My father said, 'Ah, it's a boy. It's a boy. Born in Brazil! Born in Brazil!'" (16)

Haru, the wife of colony leader Kantaro Uno, portrays a more pessimistic view of life in Esperanza. Her story begins in the late 1930's and ends circa 1945. She tells of backbreaking work that the lower-class colonists were forced to endure while the upper-class, like herself and her husband, lived in relative luxury; disease that affected not only chickens, one of the main sources of income for the colony, but also humans; and the crippling dissention among colonists that was caused by the outbreak of World War II and Japan's eventual defeat. According to Haru, this divided loyalty between Japan's Emperor and Western culture caused the colony's eventual demise: "No one really knows why it was, but it was at that moment when the war ended that it began for the Japanese in Brazil. It seems impossible that so many of us could believe that the war did not end, that Japan was still fighting, that Japan was winning the war, or that Japan won the war. How could such a country have been defeated?" (107).



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The fourth and final segment of this story is narrated by Genji Befu, the son of another Esperanza founder and the nephew of Kantaro. His story spans 1959 to 1976, a time during which the colony deteriorates from a near-paradise into a severe dystopia with inadequate food and shelter, a transition that happened under Kantaro's leadership. This segment, shorter than the rest, and the novel itself ends with Kantaro's death in a plane crash while surveying land for a new colony.

Yamashita's third novel entitled *Tropic of Orange* and published in 1997, fast forwards in time to modern-day Los Angeles. The book starts with a series of seemingly unrelated subplots describing the lives of seven different characters, all of whom live in or move to Los Angeles. The subplots blend into one cohesive plot line as all the characters become involved in a new market of commerce - the traffic-gridlocked Los Angeles freeway. The cause of the gridlock, oddly enough, is an orange. This orange, brought to L.A. from Central America, has also brought along the Tropic of Cancer. This bizarre situation eventually brings about "an apocalypse of race, class, and culture, fanned by the media under the harsh L.A. sun" (Coffeehouse Press). *Tropic of Orange* is a fascinating examination of the effects of technology on human interaction and emotion. The book contains a good deal of provocative symbolism - such as the gridlocked L.A. freeway standing in for America's system of commerce - as well as being extremely cynical about modern American culture. Yamashita's book can be seen as one of the ultimate worst-case scenarios for the future of America, but a very humorous one nonetheless. *Circle K Cycles*, published in 2001 and Yamashita's fifth book, is an extraordinary collection of journal entries and personal essays interspersed with short stories, a format radically different from the traditional novel. Like *Brazil-Marú*, the conception of this novel resulted from research and travel in a different country. In the prologue to *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita herself relates the history of her latest and by far her most unique book:

In 1997, for six months from March to August, my family and I lived in Seto, just outside of Nagoya in the prefecture of Aichi. Funded by a Japan Foundation Fellowship and sponsored by Ryuta Imafuku, then Professor of International Studies at Chubu University, I was there to meet and understand the Brazilian community living in Japan. During that time, I wrote a monthly travel journal for the Internet website CafeCreole. In this book, those journal pieces are merged with works of fiction, in an effort to paint as varied and textured a portrait as possible of the life I saw and experienced during that time (11).



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Yamashita's original journal entries can be found at CafeCreole's website. These journal entries tell of Yamashita's daily life in Japan, noting the differences, similarities, and oddities of a Japan slowly and also reluctantly merging with Brazilian culture while attempting to hold onto customs and traditions that are purely Japanese. Yamashita thoroughly incorporates Japanese and Brazilian language in this book, providing a glossary of terms at the beginning of the book and going so far as to provide one chapter entirely in Portuguese (the Brazilian language) and Japanese. She also uses Brazilian-Japanese terms and discusses the idiosyncrasies about the combined cultures. Also scattered throughout the book are thumbnail pictures of street signs, maps, newspapers, postcards, snapshots, and other tidbits of Japanese-Brazilian life.

Yamashita's most effective method with which to illustrate the differences in Japanese, Brazilian, and American cultures appears in the chapter of *Circle K Cycles* entitled "July: Circle K Rules." She provides a list of basic rules for each culture - for example, the first and last rules on the Japanese list are "Remove your shoes when entering houses and buildings" and "His opinion is her opinion is my opinion is your opinion. I agree" (107). The first two rules on the Brazilian list are: "There are no rules" and "All rules may be broken or avoided" (110). Among the American rules are: "When in doubt, consult your attorney" and "We are the happiest place on Earth" (112). Yamashita deftly and humorously explains these rules in greater detail as well as relating anecdotes about people of one culture who inadvertently - or sometimes purposely - break the rules of another culture. At the end of the chapter, she provides another list of rules, called "Circle K Rules": "1. Immigrate into your own country. 2. Learn to cook your favorite meals. 3. Ask the next question" (114).

Currently, Yamashita is an assistant professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of California in Santa Cruz. About her own work and the joy of writing fiction, she says: "I think that for fiction writers, there is this latitude that is special - you don't have to follow any narrow line of thought. You don't have to prove something that is already often obvious. The presentation in fiction is very free, and you can play with or examine different ideas that you might not be able to if you have to focus or narrow your investigation" (Imafuku and Yamashita 15).



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