



AAP Interview: Karen Tei Yamashita

Karen Tei Yamashita is a Japanese American writer from California. She lived for nine years in Brazil, the setting for her first two novels, Through the Arc of the Rain Forest (1990), and Brazil-Marú (1992), both of which received critical acclaim. Her third novel, set in Los Angeles, Tropic of Orange (1997), and was a finalist for the Paterson Fiction Prize.

In the Spring of 2001, local Minnesota publisher Coffee House Press printed her fourth book, a collection of mixed genres in fiction and nonfiction, Circle K Cycles, based on her research of the Brazilian community in Japan. She is Associate Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Asian American Press caught up with her recently to ask about her story that was recently featured in the recently released Asian American anthology, Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home In The World, edited by Jessica Hagedorn.

AAP: So, which story of yours appears in Charlie Chan Is Dead 2?

KTY: The story is titled "What if Miss Nikkei were God(dess)?" and it's a story in my book *Circle K Cycles*, published by Coffee House Press in 2001.

AAP: How would you describe your story to people thinking about reading it?

KTY: This story was written based on research of the Brazilian community living in Japan. Although these numbers are probably in flux, there were in the late 1990s when I was in Japan about 200,000 Brazilians, mostly migrant labor working in factories. Miss Nikkei represents a facet of the Brazilian community come to find its future across this transnational bridge that sends about \$2 billion home to Brazil each year. Of course the story is not so dry and historic. Miss Nikkei is gorgeous and sexy however commodified.

Interview by:
Bryan Thao Worra
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AAP: What are some of the other projects you're currently working on?

KTY: I'm currently doing research on the Asian American Movement in the sixties and seventies.

AAP: How long have you been writing?

KTY: I guess I would say since 1975 when Amerasia Journal awarded and published my first story, "The Bath."

AAP: What got you started in writing?

KTY: I traveled to Brazil in 1975 on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to research the history and anthropology of the Japanese Brazilian community. During my travels, I found a story that I felt encompassed my project in a broad but deep way, and I began to research and interview dozens of people whose lives touched that story. The book that resulted is *Brazil-Marú*, published by Coffee House Press in 1992.

AAP: What are some of your favorite themes to work with?

KTY: Oh, it depends on what I'm working on. The questions come out of the work. Lately I'm thinking about memory and storytelling, about how each person accomplishes this and what it means for how and why they live their lives.

AAP: What has been your biggest challenge as a writer?

KTY: Learning how to do it well and with integrity. Also working at "real" jobs, raising a family and making sure that each person in that family also realizes their own potential.

AAP: How has your community responded to your work?

KTY: Asian Americans have been very supportive, although I don't know if they actually read what I write. I think they respect and promote the work of AA writers knowing that we are underrepresented as published writers and as the subjects in history. Since my work is largely about an extended community outside of the US – the Japanese Brazilians – it may seem distant or exotic to US readers.



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AAP: Has your family been supportive of your writing?

KTY: Yes, but they complain anyway to tease me. They say that when I'm really writing, they eat better and the house is cleaner. This is because my way of working through the writing is to cook and clean. At other times, they think I'm manic, and that caffeine writes my books.

AAP: What do you look for most in your own writing?

KTY: I'm not sure I understand this question. Writing seems to be this process during which you make some discoveries and lose your way most of the time. You start out looking for something and then one thing leads to the next. The difficulty is that you have to get lost inside the labyrinth and still see the whole thing from above. It's an intellectual and creative endeavor. Mostly I look for a good time by myself inside my mind. It's very selfish really.

AAP: Who are some of your favorite writers?

KTY: My favorite writers are my good friends: R. Zamora Linmark, Sesshu Foster, Jessica Hagedorn, Garrett Hongo.

AAP: Do you have any advice for younger writers?

KTY: Good grief, not really. Since I teach creative writing, I'm always surprised by those who read extensively and those who read very little at all despite the sometimes obvious body of work that precedes their own interest in writing.