

Preface

This book presents a study of the entire body of Karen Tei Yamashita's works of fiction, not as an attempt to establish interpretation for its own sake, but as a way of assessing the significance of Yamashita's literary output as a form of the Asian American literary avant-garde, as well as the theoretical ramifications of her literary intervention for current Asian American creative and critical practices. The critical attention I give Yamashita's works in this study perhaps needs little justification in view of the fact that, more than any other contemporary Asian American writer, she has contributed to the reshaping of the Asian American literary imagination during the past two decades. Such a transformation in the field, already under way in tentative forms prior to Yamashita's entry into the world of Asian American letters, is symptomatic of a larger shift in the humanities and social sciences generally. I refer here to the transnational turn, in response to at least two concerns arising from the mid-1980s: the impact of globalization as a socioeconomic phenomenon and, correspondingly, the denationalization of literary studies, reflecting changes wrought in the globalization process. As part of this turn, Asian American literature was no longer seen as being rooted in the United States, since a growing number of writers addressed both the home and settlement countries, while continued global migration enabled Asian American literature to be perceived as simultaneously local and transnational, rather than only as a subordinate category of American literature. I see Yamashita's novelistic practice, beginning with the publication of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and continuing to the present, as constituting a

series of defining moves in this transnational shift. These moves have gone the furthest of any writer's in opening up horizons for Asian American creative and critical work, and yet they have also remained the most qualified—that is, concrete and circumspect—in making their claims. With the former observation, I refer to Yamashita's unprecedented mapping of the trajectories of Asians' globality beyond the familiar conceptual and operational categories; with the latter, I emphasize her insistence on envisioning Asians' spatial and geographical mobility through material praxis that registers the crisscrossing forces of history, circumstance, and activism.

In assessing the nature of Yamashita's contributions to Asian American literary practice in these ways, I use the relationship between “history” and “figuration” as a general way of organizing my discussion throughout. The importance I attach to the notion of history derives from my view that transnationalism, as a formation produced largely by forces of capital accumulation, often manifests itself as a spatial problematic, with reductive consequences for literary representation in general and peripheral literary articulations in particular. Within this context, I use history specifically to suggest the need for reclaiming an Asian American self-representational space that is antithetical to the logic of reification. By figuration, I refer to formal embodiments of attempts to reclaim history in Yamashita's novels. I see such figural representations of history—be they generic, structural, or linguistic—as fraught with the tensions arising from Yamashita's negotiation with competing imperatives across shifting sites, and from social conditions that mark these efforts as sensuous—and politically ambivalent—projections. In working through the simultaneously historical and figurative commitments of Yamashita's writing, I hope to arrive at a clear understanding of the dialectical nature of her artistry as a form of temporally conscious and socially grounded discourse.

My examination of Yamashita's literary corpus includes not only her more celebrated works, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and *Tropic of Orange* (1997), but also her less often discussed novels, *Brazil-Marú* (1992), *Circle K Cycles* (2001), and *I Hotel* (2010). In analyzing these texts, I have a dual purpose in mind. On the one hand, I wish to use my analyses to engage with and articulate Yamashita's political and aesthetic agendas; on the other, I regard them as a way of participating in dialogues that mark the reception of Yamashita's works as a process of dynamic ideological transcoding constitutive of larger debates. The reading strategy I adopt involves extension,

revision, or recoding of Yamashita's politics through my own critical methods, which I see as spatial-materialist and neohistoricist in orientation, methods that may in themselves be problematic and therefore in need of constant examination.

In this study, I take seriously the unevenness of the reception of Yamashita's novels, and view it as a symptom of how the novels challenge readers through their deployment of different regimes of knowledge or formal strategies, and as a reflection of the extent to which readers are differently situated in a global process marked by disjunction and conflict. I believe that an adequate grasp of the range and historicity of Yamashita's artistry cannot be achieved through a partial reading of her works. Conversely, a fuller understanding of the nature of Yamashita's politics and aesthetics makes available previously uninvestigated factors or contexts for meaning in her novels, which tend to be reduced, especially when analyzed in isolation, to interpretations based on contingent needs, individual preferences, or even sweeping generalizations. Accordingly, my study identifies in her oeuvre a sharable "structure of feeling," to use a concept from Raymond Williams (1977, 132–134), that not only connects the five novels under examination but also finds in them a consistent point of view, tenor, and affective force that are at once provocatively unconventional and irreducibly Asian American.

In considering Yamashita's five novels, I do not follow the order of their publishing sequence, since the array of topics they cover fluctuates and the spatiotemporal range they register shifts, breaks, and reconnects. However, these novels do fall into two basic groups in their approach to representation within a general framework of postnationality: those adopting extraterritorial perspectives and dealing with events outside the United States, and those adopting partial or complete U.S. points of view or fictional settings. I use these two interrelated narrative perspectives to divide my examination of the body of Yamashita's works into two clusters: *Brazil-Marú*, *Circle K Cycles*, and *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* in one group, and *Tropic of Orange* and *I Hotel* in the other. At the same time, I hope that the interpretive order I have established can be viewed holistically as a reflection of my own politics of reading. That is, Yamashita's extraterritorial critique of the nation-state does not aim, as some suggest, simply to let go of territorial logics so that Asian American studies can embark on a deconstructive journey of centrifugal dispersion. Rather, her critique is an effort to reengage the material force fields of the nation-state with an enhanced denationalizing

consciousness, one to be gained only through a genuinely critical and comparative perspective. Such reengagement does not assume a continuing legitimacy of the classificatory categories of the nation-state; instead, it recognizes the nation-state's inherent contradictions, which must be seized upon through narrative interventions, as well as its potential for being opened up from both inside and outside through situated struggles and activism. More specifically, in my examination of Yamashita's texts, I use *Brazil-Marú*—a novel that chronicles significant Japanese immigration to Brazil in the pre-World War II period—to give context to my analysis of *Circle K Cycles*, which brings to light the exploitation of and discrimination against Brazilian-born Japanese manual laborers in contemporary Japan. This ironic cycle of Nikkei migration across temporal breaks and changed circumstances then becomes a necessary background for my discussion of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, in which a young, unemployed Japanese railroad technician travels to Brazil in the early 1990s in search of happiness, only to witness destruction of the Amazon rain forest, an imagined disaster caused by the relentless reach of global capital, traceable to its U.S. origins. My analysis of these three novels anticipates the next two works in the study, *Tropic of Orange* and *I Hotel*, both involving the West Coast of the United States. This topographically inflected interpretive scheme reflects my own assessment of how geography should relate to politics in a reflexive, transnational way, a relationship I hope to provoke the reader of Yamashita's novels into seriously considering.

Overall, I identify three primary contributions Yamashita has made to transnational Asian American literary practice. First is her reconstitution of knowledge about Asian American experiences by incorporating in the existing East-West paradigm a South-North perspective as an intersecting and asynchronous view open to further narrative and ideological arrangements. The significance of such a spatiotemporal realignment of the field lies not so much in its alternative geographical designations as in the prominence it gives to issues of economic disparity, class privilege, and neocolonial dependence, which tend to be obscured by an exclusive emphasis on the discursive procedures of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism that have strongly informed Asian American cultural studies since the mid-1980s. Second is her intervention in an increasingly commercialized American culture by practicing a kind of innovative fictional art that I describe as Asian American literary avant-garde. I see Yamashita's literary innovation as a cultural campaign waged on two fronts: to wrest aesthetic modalities from the culture

industry by reappropriating hegemonic cultural forms, hence setting limits to the function of those cultural forms in society; and, through such reconstituted cultural-aesthetic forms, to revitalize Asian American literature as a mode of politically engaged art, one that is no less subject to the reductionism of America's late capitalist culture. These textual efforts of Yamashita, I suggest, interact dynamically with her spatial campaigns to remap the field's epistemic configuration. Third is her fashioning of a micropolitical strategy for building interethnic and interdisciplinary alliances through literary representation, both beyond ethnocentrism and within a self-consciously maintained Asian American historicity. I see Yamashita's approach as countering popular trends in recent Asian American cultural studies that construct multiethnic textual coalitions through critical projects, in which Asian American literary expression participates only in a token fashion. Such trends have the effect of reproducing liberal scenarios of postnationality based on perceptions of interracial and interethnic voluntarism, while they implicitly delegitimize collective oppositional programs proposed by Asian American literary scholars as a "unity in difference."

Chapter 1 of this book offers a theoretical discussion of the contributions made by Yamashita in relation to debates over postmodern space and location, literary avant-garde and commercial and mass cultural forms, and the question of referent in Asian American cultural studies. Chapter 2 analyzes *Brazil-Marú* by situating its portrayal of the government-sponsored Japanese emigration to Brazil during the interwar years in three interrelated contexts: the worldwide expansion of the Japanese Empire, anti-Japanese legislation in the United States, and the reproduction of modernity in Japanese farming colonies in Brazil under the leadership of emigrant elites. I focus on several aspects of the novel as fraught with ideological tension: utopia as an imperial imaginary ideal, the primitive as a racially inflected signifier, and Creole self-fashioning as a way for Japanese immigrants to differentiate themselves from the imperial discourse into which they are unknowingly interpellated. Chapter 3 focuses on the representational politics and, to a lesser extent, formal properties in *Circle K Cycles*, a patchwork of unrelated written and visual entries that simulate the hybrid presence as well as the existential dilemmas of *dekasegi*, the descendants of early Japanese immigrants to Brazil, who work in contemporary Japan as socially marginalized manual laborers. One aspect I discuss is Yamashita's experiment with the postmodern technique of collage, as well as her provocative mixing of sociological reportage with

fictional representation at various junctures of the book. Chapter 4 analyzes *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* in terms of its critique of the logic of reification. A significant portion of my discussion is devoted to exploring Yamashita's spatial politics, especially her articulation of a future-oriented consciousness through apocalyptic visions, and her engagement with the sub-literary genre of science fiction and the popular cultural form of soap opera. Chapter 5 discusses *Tropic of Orange* as a narrative that simulates a process of decolonization on geographical, cultural, linguistic, and psychological levels. My examination emphasizes both the importance and the difficulty of acquiring historical consciousness as a precondition for disrupting the territorial assumptions and logics of colonialism. Issues discussed include Yamashita's employment of magical realism as a historical form, her use of visual, aural, and carnivalesque figurations to create a temporal space of intervention, her commentary on the limitations of cybernetic freedom, and her articulation of historicist commitments through apocalyptic imaginations. Chapter 6 analyzes *I Hotel* as Yamashita's re-visioning of the Asian American social movement of the 1960s and 1970s through the lens of critical internationalism, as well as her attempt to negotiate the temporal gap between movement politics and current discourses on transnationality in Asian American cultural studies, which typically treat the former as an instance of nationalist entrapment. My discussion revolves around the novel's formal structure, its dramatization of the tensions between revolution and desire, its exploration of movement-related gender and sexual politics, and its performative reenactment of the spirit of the movement in the face of its decline. This study concludes with perspectives on the problem of interpretively establishing Yamashita as a global novelist, and on the need to listen to the specificity of her voice as an ethics of interpreting the meaning and significance of her novels.