



PROJECT MUSE®

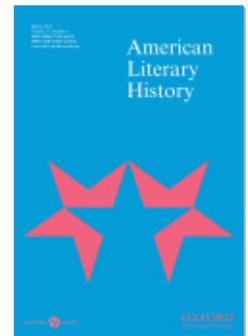
---

## **Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World**

Kandice Chuh

American Literary History, Volume 18, Number 3, Fall 2006, pp. 618-637  
(Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alh/summary/v018/18.3chuh.html>

# Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World

*Kandice Chuh*

*Always a stranger, you move through these places,  
and you find the things that are recognizable  
from the places that you've already been.*

**Karen Tei Yamashita**

Although Asian American literary studies have in recent decades taken the “transnational turn” that Shelley Fisher Fishkin has described of contemporary American studies (17), the particular rubric of “hemispheric studies” has not found as much traction in the field as, for example, “diasporic” or “Pacific Rim studies.” Aside from a smattering of works that attend to Canada in a substantial way, most transnationally inclined criticism in Asian American studies has been more involved in mining understudied or otherwise occluded east-west connections than in looking critically north or south. This turn toward the transnational has also been accompanied by a certain amount of anxiety over the consequences of losing focus on the historic and continuing power of the US nation-state in racializing and regulating Asianness within its borders.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, because of the distinctive ways in which Asianness has been racialized as immutably foreign despite nativity, citizenship, or acculturation within the US frame, a critical wariness attaches to any semblance of a presumed commonality of experience or identity across specific sites. In the absence of racial essentialism, in other words, there exists no *prima facie* case for connecting the expressive cultures of Asian Americans with Asians elsewhere.

I open this essay with this brief rehearsal of some of the conditions and concerns that attend debates about the spatial logics animating Asian American literary studies to provide a point of departure for understanding how they might participate in and perhaps advance

hemispheric studies. Understood in its broadest sense, hemispheric studies prompts a collaborative and dynamic link among studies of the Americas writ large. While critically mindful of and geared toward negotiating substantial unevenness in political and economic power, hemispheric studies as proposed by such scholars as Claudia Sadowski-Smith and Claire Fox complements “other emergent national, regional, and global perspectives in American, Canadian, and Latin American studies” (7). Such a model attempts to decenter the US nation and critical approaches based on or derived from US-centered studies even as it acknowledges the influential material power of the US.

My broad aim in this essay is to explore that complementary space between Asian American studies, conceived as a “national perspective” that seeks to understand the link between the national and the global, and hemispheric studies, understood as paradigmatically concerned with the relationship of the Americas to the local or national. Asian American studies offers a national perspective insofar as its primary objectives have been geared toward illuminating US culture and politics from the particular vantage of a domestic racial minority. It is, in other words, the specific site of the US nation and the processes of racialization that have shaped the various practices and structures of the US nation-state that have been the grounds upon which Asian Americanist critics have sought to interrogate the US’s relation to the world. Because the histories of Asian racialization in the US have been so closely tied to its relations with Asian nations, it makes sense that transnationalism in Asian American studies has focused attention on what Gary Okihiro has described as the “East-West filaments” of Asian American history (25). Hemispheric studies poses a different kind of challenge, a different set of critical questions for Asian Americanists: In what way(s) can hemispheric studies enhance the study of racialization in the US? How might such a perspective advance Asian Americanist efforts to critique the US nation’s reliance on and creation of racial difference? Through this exploration, I arrive at the suggestion that hemispheric studies articulated through Asian American literary studies underscores the need to look within and among but also *beyond* the Americas and specifically to Asia in critical efforts to challenge the discursive centrality of the US.

This study, then, underscores the complexity that Sadowski-Smith and Fox identify as characterizing “attempts to rethink the field [of American studies] outside and beyond national boundaries” (6), for it points to the ways that hemispheric approaches derived through the minority discourse- and ethnic studies-based institutional history of Asian American studies might look quite different from those bearing the legacy of institutionalized American studies.

*My broad aim . . . is to explore that complementary space between Asian American studies, conceived as a “national perspective” that seeks to understand the link between the national and the global, and hemispheric studies, understood as paradigmatically concerned with the relationship of the Americas to the local or national.*

Ascribed to an indelible foreignness, Asian Americans have long argued for recognition as US Americans. Relatedly, Asian American studies has had to disarticulate itself from Asian studies as part of its efforts to show the centrality of Asian Americanness to the formation and sustenance of the US nation. Where American studies arguably has moved from a secure place of unquestioned belonging to and representing the US nation in reaching toward extranational perspectives, Asian American studies has been actively working to move “inward,” to claim such standing as commensurate with American studies. Asian Americanists continue to argue the importance of seeing Asian Americanness as a distinctly national formation, and even as we negotiate the insights of transnational and other extranational critical approaches, we continue to place primacy on the importance of recognizing the ways that Asian Americanness is both historically and contemporarily dis-identified from the US. The blunt instrument that is the construct of “American studies” cannot thoroughly attend to these differences between “American studies” and “Asian American studies.” And in alignment with the work of the other essays constituting this volume, this recognition implicitly suggests that a US-derived hemispheric studies must take as a critical point of departure the radical diversity of the US. Doing so can also, importantly, remind us of the falsity of the homogeneity implied by any national or other category of identity.

To illustrate the particularity of what an Asian Americanist hemispheric literary criticism might look like, I focus here on the prose writings of Karen Tei Yamashita, a Japanese American writer who lived in Brazil for nearly a decade, during which time she married a Brazilian architect and had two children. She later lived in Japan for six months with that family, a trip that resonated with her earlier longer stay in Japan as a student. Before Brazil and after, and before Japan and after, she lived (and lives) in her native California. Yamashita bears a biography that reflects the consistent interest in her writings in movement, migration, and transformation. Although she identifies herself specifically as an Asian American writer, and while her work appears in anthologies of Asian American literature and has been repeatedly critically praised for its extraordinary imagination and literary crafting, Asian Americanist literary discourse has only loosely become a home for Yamashita’s work, primarily because of the geography of her writings. Apart from her most recent novel, *Tropic of Orange* (1997), which is set partially in Los Angeles, Yamashita has used Brazil as the setting for most of her creative prose. The centrality of Brazil to Yamashita’s creative work immediately marks its eccentricity to the usual regimes of US American literature. As a writer for whom nation and, to some extent, hemisphere are categories utterly inadequate for the task of capturing the

geographies of her imagination, Yamashita proves an ideal subject through which we might consider the impact of hemispheric approaches on Asian American literary discourse and the impact of Asian American literatures on hemispheric studies.

Yamashita's work encourages an opening out of US boundaries in different registers (the political, the imaginative, and the critical) and multiple directions (south and west, especially). Her writings are coherent wholes without insisting upon or privileging unity, and the energy and narrative pleasures of the work issue from the plotlines and characters that manage to be at once surprising and deliberate. Commitment to a thematic and generic eccentricity and a formal elasticity, whereby protagonists transform into minor characters and the latter enlarge into central actors, characterizes Yamashita's work. Likewise, her settings regenerate repeatedly under pressures of forces both local and global, mounted at the hands of both human agents and nonhuman (and sometimes inhumane) ideologies. Together, these representational strategies enable her work to resist delimitation by specific geography even as it attends with intimacy to a sense of particular place.

As Asian Americanist discourses have critically acknowledged the inadequacy of the frame of nation to account for the complexities of Asian American histories, subjectivities, and cultures, such pressures on the boundaries of Asian America and of Asian American studies have, as Rachel Lee notes in her incisive assessment of these critical directions, resulted in part in efforts to embrace the spatial reorganization represented by such terms as "the Pacific Rim" and "the Asia-Pacific," which are effectively representations of "a displacement of the [US] American optic" (107). One of the problems Lee rightly marks with respect to these efforts is that, "[t]hough partly motivated by a desire to enable Asian-Americanists a wider area of study" than had been possible by the dominance of such paradigms as cultural nationalism, which insisted on the belongingness of Asians in the US, "paradoxically, [they] establish new boundaries around their subjects by evoking reformulated regions that might be substituted as the proper domain of Asian-American Studies" (108).

Distinctly informed by Latin American literary traditions, which she identifies as her most formative influences as a writer, Yamashita's work falls neither neatly nor completely into the territorial logics that have historically shaped and that currently underlie Asian American studies. In that way, her work helps us avoid the reterritorialization of discourse—the establishment of new boundaries—that Lee highlights. At the same time, though, it clearly engages Asian American literary traditions by, for example, employing and revising such familiar Asian American tropes as railroad labor

and immigration and the challenges of acculturation.<sup>2</sup> Yamashita's interest in the epistemological effects of shifting paradigms,<sup>3</sup> especially those like nation and hemisphere that are spatially organized, registers in the space between what is familiar and foreign to Asian American literary studies.

For present purposes, I focus in this essay on two characteristics of Yamashita's prose writings. I begin by showing how Yamashita initiates a hemispheric perspective through her rendering of Brazil, especially in her novel *Brazil-Marú* (1992), which anticipates the contemporary concerns of hemispheric studies to find ways of grappling with the irregular emergence of modernities across the Americas. I then move on to emphasizing how, across her writings, Yamashita provides occasion for triangulating the processes of national identity formation unfolding in the US, Brazil, and Japan in the early and toward the end of the twentieth century. In so doing, she insists upon the integration of an east-west aspect to hemispheric American studies. In addition to prompting US Americanists southward, Yamashita thus implicitly calls for greater critical attention on the part of Brazilianists to the distinctive histories of Japanese immigrants and their Brazilian descendants.<sup>4</sup> Her work compels coordination of efforts among scholars working in specific sites to produce collaborative knowledge.

That discussion is followed by an effort to delineate Yamashita's method of moving beyond a nation-based frame of analysis. Working primarily with *Circle K Cycles* (2001), I show how Yamashita's writings guide us toward a comparative imagination through their explorations of the motivating desires, complex historic negotiations, and variegated costs to self and other of making home. Her creative visions reject the progression-orientation of a world mapped in two dimensions (the flat world of modernity that bifurcates neatly into north and south, east and west, modern and not). Instead, they demarcate a circum-oceanic spatial logic characterized by cyclicity and infinite connectivity.<sup>5</sup> Cultural hybridization, intersectionality, and most of all, change—in place, identity, and worldview—dominate in Yamashita's literary world. These characteristics mark the fluid terrain of the circum-oceanic space she articulates.

### 1. New Civilizations, Emerging Modernities

Yamashita's Brazil emerges as a result of empirical knowledge combined with the fantastic world of imagination. Yamashita first went to Brazil in 1975 under the aegis of a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. She had lived for a year and a half in Japan as a student

who, inspired by the identity movements unfolding in the US at that time, sought to research her family's history. During that time, she explains retrospectively in *Circle K Cycles*, she learned to perform Japaneseness well enough that she effectively "passed" as a native, "[b]ut every now and again, I would be questioned in a roundabout way about my ancestry, about my parents and their parents until my story ended in Gifu, Tokyo, and Nagano. The questioner would then exclaim with surprise: *Ah, then you are a pure Japanese!*" (12). The desire to understand "what being a pure Japanese might be" partly inspires Yamashita's journey to Brazil. As a third context (additional to the US and Japan) for investigating and experiencing Japaneseness, Brazil was to bring into relief the qualities of "pure Japaneseness" that are occluded for her in her native US and that are seemingly inaccessible even in Japan. Accordingly, while in Brazil, she conducted extensive interviews at several Nikkei (of Japanese descent) farming communes in addition to other Japanese-Brazilian communities. She would later fictively recreate what she learned in *Brazil-Marú*.

The novel is the result of multiple wholesale revisions of "the larger story of an entire immigration" she intends to tell, according to Yamashita (Murashige 332). Explicitly, a rendering of the historical migration of Japanese to Brazil in the early twentieth century, *Brazil-Marú* may be seen to register Yamashita's understanding that the legacy of her journey to Brazil was not, finally, the revelation of Japaneseness but rather the insight she was afforded into the nature of home. "It is a work of fiction," writes Yamashita as part of her prefatory opening to the novel, "and the characters are also works of fiction. Certainly it cannot be construed to be representative of that enormous and diverse community of which it is but a part. And yet, perhaps, here is a story that belongs to all of us who travel distances to find something that is, after all, home." Initially drafted before though completed and published only after she and her family had relocated to California and after she had published *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), *Brazil-Marú* narrativizes the history of early-twentieth-century Japanese emigration to Brazil from a perspective that is simultaneously internal and external to Brazil.

Such a doubled, hybridized perspective is perhaps especially appropriate with respect to Brazil. A postcolonial and radically diverse nation that has long identified as a "racial democracy"—a functional racial paradise—despite the fact that its social demographics belie such an idealized self-portrait, Brazil bears an extended history of miscegenation that complicates the discrete categorization of races. The historic context immediate to the Japanese immigration with which *Brazil-Marú* is concerned includes the emergence of Brazilian and Japanese modernities in the mid-to-late

nineteenth century. The entry of Japan into the modern world system in 1868, with the installation of the Meiji government, conditioned massive emigration, as, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was a call for the establishment of Japanese settlements overseas especially to broaden Japan's market bases. Japanese emigrants settled in Brazil as early as 1908, and by the end of World War II, about 250,000 Japanese emigrants had moved to Latin America, some 189,000 of them to Brazil, mostly as labor on coffee plantations.

The relatively newly established Federal Republic of Brazil (dating to 1889) welcomed Japanese immigrants as a way of bolstering its own needs to create external markets for export. According to Jeffrey Lesser, Japan was valorized by members of the newer republic as an ideal model of the modern nation-state: "Imagining Brazil's future via Japan was a convenient way for intellectuals and policy makers to extract day-to-day pressures from ideological disputes about national identity" (148). Brazilian travelers to Japan likewise produced representations that "tended toward emulation," even as, at the height of Japanese immigration in the 1920s and continuing to 1945, sociopolitical conflict erupted regarding the place and belongingness of these immigrants (148).

Partly a consequence of major shifts in the political leadership of the nation during that time, and of Brazil's alignment with the allied forces and corollary severing of ties with Japan during World War II intensified anti-Japanese sentiment. Paralleling the fissures within Japanese American communities wrought by the US's relationship to Japan during the war, Nikkei communities in Brazil fragmented under the pressures of this anti-Japanese sentiment. Japanese language newspapers were shut down by the government, and because many Nikkei could not read or speak Portuguese, they were largely isolated from the progress of the war, leading some to reject altogether the idea of Japan's defeat. Cut off from connection to their former homeland and unsettled by the anti-Japanese tensions in their present home, Nikkei formed a group in transition in this era, figuratively if not literally dislodged from their moorings.<sup>6</sup> Yamashita's novel animates this history of movement into and residence in Brazil, and it does so in such a way as to link the experiences of Nikkei in the US with those in Brazil.

*Brazil-Marú* begins with a prefatory brief rehearsal of the arrival of Japanese to Brazil, one that emphasizes the impact of US exclusionary immigration policies on that migration. Yamashita, in other words, frames the novel for US audiences for whom the story of Japanese migration to Brazil may be seen as foreign. The novel's opening chapter emphasizes this interconnectivity as Ichiro Terada, Part I's narrator, recalls the arrival of his family to Brazil in 1925, having journeyed aboard the ship, the *Brazil-Marú*. Visited by a

Christian evangelist, Momose-sensei, while living in the mountains of central Japan, Ichiro's parents, he explains, saw destiny in the evangelist's vision of Brazil as holding the future for Japanese: "Momose-sensei has lived in America, but he was very clear in his meaning. He said our future is in Brazil. . . . Anyway, we've missed our chance to go to America now. The Americans signed an Exclusion Act that won't allow us in" (6). Brazil is immediately cast in contrast to the US as bearing the potential for "a new civilization." Yamashita pursues the imaginative possibilities lying in that construction and reverses the historic-legal exclusion of Japanese from the US literarily, by bringing that narrative to a US readership. Within the context of the cultural nationalist-driven identity movements in the US of the 1980s and 1990s, Yamashita found she was unable to publish work that focused on Japanese in Brazil. Thus, prompted to make the connections that would facilitate US interest in these non-US-based histories and stories, Yamashita establishes these grounds for comparison early on in the novel.

If in this way Yamashita has opened a border between the US and Brazil, she extends the scope of this work even further to serve as a broader comment on modernity's emergence and ideals. Each of the four major parts and the epilogue of *Brazil-Marú* open with an epigraphic quotation from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Even more pointedly, Part I is titled "Emile" in explicit reference to Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education*, published in 1762. Ichiro is figured as the eponymous Emile, so much so that he is referred to as "Emiru" by other characters. Their familiarity with Rousseau is Yamashita's nod to their historic counterparts' expressed enthusiasm for the philosopher's writings, uncovered by Yamashita through her interviews. As we follow these migrants in their efforts to create Esperança, a farming commune, in part because of these invocations of Enlightenment philosophy, we are led to recognize the allegorical function of the immigrant stories Yamashita offers.

Such communes as represented in *Brazil-Marú* were historically a manifestation of one strategy for negotiating the question of assimilability that arose as Brazil attempted to cohere a national identity during the first half of the twentieth century. Communes allowed for a continuing valorization of Japaneseness as emblematic of modern industriousness without requiring social or spatial integration of Nikkei residents. They thus functioned as a way in which what was foreign could be made Brazilian, which describes a strong philosophical thread structuring Brazilian national identity formation in this era. The *brasildade* movement took hold in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s, as Brazilian cultural nationalists attempted to distinguish Brazil from Europe to move beyond the close identification to European culture that resulted from its colonial past. Even as,

following the lead of sociologist Gilberto Freyre, Brazil embraced hybridity as its defining characteristic, Nikkei in residence in Brazil found assimilation to be an extremely uneven process.<sup>7</sup> Yamashita's representation of the communes and the experiences of her characters in variously acculturating and assimilating or not may, against this backdrop, be seen to comment on precisely that unevenness. In that respect, her representations as the novel progresses seem increasingly oriented more toward illuminating Brazilian identity formation than on Nikkei experiences per se.

This illustration of unevenness is made especially apparent by Yamashita's strict regulation of narrative control in *Brazil-Maru*. The narrators of each of the novel's five parts (including an epilogue) wax and wane in prominence, as they more or less become minor characters in the sections narrated by others. For example, while Ichiro remains part of this novel to its end, he effectively becomes a minor character bearing the function of illuminating the central figures of the remaining parts of the book—those who were secondary to Ichiro in Part I. Ichiro's narrative closure—his enlightenment—is conveyed in a section narrated by a different character (Part III), a displacement of narrative control that is one of the strategies by which Yamashita shifts focus from individual characters to their relation to each other as well as to the overarching story unfolding.

Yamashita's characters, in other words, might better be understood as *character-spaces*. Character-space, as articulated by Alex Woloch in his study of the function of minor characters in nineteenth-century realist novels, refers to the "particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (14). Woloch offers this term as part of his argument that characters may best be seen not as individuals interacting within a fictional world, but rather as "*intersecting* character-spaces, each of which encompasses an *embedded* interaction between the discretely implied person and the dynamically elaborated narrative form" (17–18). The conceptualization of characters as character-spaces displaces the assessment of individual importance and motivation in favor of assessing how their dynamic interrelations together constitute the narrative. Yamashita's comparative imagination formally manifests in her thematic and structural emphasis on this narratological negotiation.

By the end of Part II, Brazil clearly functions as the narrative frame that animates the relations between Yamashita's characters. This is punctuated by the fact that the Nikkei of her world find in a character called the Bahiano an enormous generosity that becomes the defining feature of Yamashita's Brazil. The leader of the town closest to the commune and a man reputed to be both dangerous and powerful, the Bahiano entered into business dealings with the

commune and refused anti-Japanese sentiment and activity even during the war. Instead, he embraced the colonists immediately as “people [who] came here to settle. We’ve got no argument with them. We’re all in this together. What’s it to us if those others want to fight thousands of miles across the sea?” (94). Because wartime law made it impossible for one of the commune to serve as its official leader, the Bahiano took up that role for Esperança. During that time, the Bahiano learned the communal business and life practices of Esperança and was transformed by that knowledge. In that sense, the Bahiano personifies the “Brazilianization” of foreignness of the era—the process through which what had been foreign had been adopted and embraced as an element central to Brazilian identity. The vastly differing relationships that the Nikkei characters have with the Bahiano serve to mark the irregularity characterizing this process of Brazilianization.

If in this way Yamashita guides her US readers to and into Brazil, thus familiarizing the US reader with both Nikkei and Brazilian identities, it is by marking the border between the narrative and the act of narration that she prompts literary critics to make the analogous move to accept responsibility for making what feels foreign familiar. As Kantaro, the commune’s leader and narrator of Part III, asks, “Who can look back on the passage of their lives and tell such stories, speak of such struggles, remember that they were the participants in a great dream, remember that they pursued a life of ideals, lived their lives as a cup brimming over?,” it becomes clear that the only possible answer to this question is Yamashita, who bears ultimate responsibility for creating the networks of relation and affiliation among characters and their defining spaces, who in that way creates order through emplotment. Authorship and interpretation are invoked in a way that recalls Yamashita’s prefatory enjoinder to consider this novel as simultaneously historic and universal, ethnographic and distinctly fictional.

Yamashita has explained that she was moved to write fictively upon reflecting on the research she had conducted in Brazil, for she found the idea of offering a primarily empirical account of the immigration history with which she was concerned inadequate for the task of capturing the complex emotions and ideas she found emergent from the stories she had gathered. In that decision and the novel that resulted from it, Yamashita exemplifies an Asian Americanist hemispheric practice characterized by a heightened awareness of the contingent nature of knowledge itself. Even as she moves us beyond the US by means of representations that she creates based on both experience and education, Yamashita cautions against the idealization of representations of any kind. Thus, by the end of *Brazil-Marú*, she has unsettled her own narrativization of this particular history.

The end of the novel reminds us of the violence that has attended the emergence of modernity. This closing contextualizes the ideals and desires that have motivated the immigrant imaginations articulated in the novel within a sense of the irretrievably complicated ironies that describe and inscribe the circum-oceanic space underwriting the subjectivities represented. We learn at the novel's end that a character named Genji Befu, Part IV's narrator, has died. Genji is an artist who found Esperança stifling, who thus attempts to kill himself to escape that life, and who becomes lost in Mato Grasso, a region of Brazilian forest, following a plane crash that kills the commune's leader. Outside of Esperança and deep in the Brazilian forest, Genji disappears except to leave iconic markers in the form of sketches for others to find. The epilogue ends with a quotation from a news article, which serves as the final words of the novel:

Three days ago, the so-called Indian of the Lost Tribe was found dead, killed probably while helping himself to someone else's food or store of hidden goods. He was described as a very slight, bowlegged, unkempt man with long black hair, thin strands falling in a tangled beard from his face. He was found shot through the head and clutching a rusty old carbine, empty except for the red earth pushed into the tip of its disintegrating barrel. (248)

That Yamashita further displaces narrative authority with these closing words, having created a disembodied voice that comes out of Mato Grasso, acknowledges the limited explanatory ability of the trope of immigration to account for the histories of displaced indigeneity associated with the emergence of Brazilian and Japanese modernities. The novel's conclusion thwarts expectations that narrative closure will be found in the success or failure of the immigrants. Instead, Yamashita's narrative is hybridized as it unfolds and becomes a history of the red earth—of the claims to land and the attendant and often violent movements of people that ensued. Yamashita's awareness of the infinite other stories existing beyond the bounds of this novel and beyond the trope of immigration, which are as yet unrepresented and perhaps unrepresentable within the economy of visibility marked by national, transnational, or global epistemic frames, registers in this figuration. The novel turns away from the tradition of the *bildungsroman* in this conclusion, firmly declining the inner life perspective in favor of looking outward.

The communes fictionalized in Yamashita's novel have survived, as is accurately recounted in the epilogue, though they are now much less isolated from the rest of Brazilian society. And as is also correctly recounted, in the later twentieth century, which has been

characterized by enormous joblessness in Brazil, Japanese Brazilians have found themselves migrating to Japan in search of work. The journalistic sense of the novel's epilogue suggests Yamashita's desire to draw a tangible link between the earlier and later migrations to and from Brazil and allows a sense of history's ironic, disjunctive movements to close the novel.

As the novel follows this course, we see that Yamashita has staged a series of overlapping and interdependent narratives, each of which sends us in search of the next story. Each part of the novel is narrated by a different character, and none of the sections tells a complete story. Rather, it is in their interaction that the textures of communal life emerge. Yamashita's interest, in other words, is not in detailing the individual stories that constitute the history of Japanese immigration to Brazil but is rather in articulating the variegated sets of relations among persons and places that animate the individual narrative. This emphasis on relationality as leading to a sense of the incompleteness of narrative—there is always another story waiting to be told—refuses and refutes claims to definitive, discrete knowledge. Understanding emerges from precisely the sites of intersection of individual stories, which are those spaces in which individual authority erodes in favor of collaborative storytelling.

By highlighting the limitations of singular authorship, Yamashita conceptualizes what I think of as interdiscursive or interdisciplinary practices as those that respect specialization even as they incisively demarcate its limitations. Analogously, her work then helps us understand that moving analytically beyond the frame of nation does not entail a displacement or disavowal of the continuing importance and effect of national identities and national identity formation. Rather, as Yamashita does by means of articulating a relation between the histories of Nikkei immigration to Brazil and the US in *Brazil-Marui*, it may productively lead toward the identification of the broad schemas within which such relations are emplotted. Thus, a hemispheric Asian American studies serves at once as a technology for reflecting critically on US culture and politics and as a vehicle for analyzing the irregular emergence and kinds of modernities across the Americas. Against the concerns that transnational paradigms will detract from specific emphasis on the US, this model apprehends that specific knowledge as but one element in a story that requires both myriad narrators and a commitment to ceaseless interrogation.

## 2. Navigating Differences

Yamashita's prose corpus reflects what I am describing as an interdisciplinary sensibility across as well as within texts. In a

thoroughly intertextual way, Yamashita's most recently published long work, *Circle K Cycles*, picks up where *Brazil-Marú* leaves off. *Circle K Cycles* collects the pieces that Yamashita wrote for an Internet travel journal while she and her family lived in Japan in 1997 and puts them alongside short fiction, collages, photographs, and maps "in an effort to paint as varied and textured a portrait as possible of the life I saw and experienced during that time" (11). Rather than being strictly focused on her direct and immediate experiences, however, *Circle K Cycles* uses the occasion of those experiences to contemplate on and compare facets of life in Brazil, the US, and Japan. Echoing her initial travel to Brazil, Yamashita moved to Japan for this period "to meet and understand the Brazilian community living in Japan" (11).

Yamashita's interest in *Circle K Cycles* in the ever increasing difficulty of correlating identities and homes with singular locations continues not only the story begun in *Brazil-Marú* but also the formal conventions she uses to explore that issue in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. Written amid the extended drafting and revision required of *Brazil-Marú*, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* offers a fantastical tale set in Brazil. Like *Brazil-Marú*, this novel is also partly an immigrant narrative, and despite the radical stylistic differences between them, it uses narrative strategies that resemble those appearing in *Brazil-Marú*. This is not unexpected given the contemporaneousness of their drafting, but it is significant in indicating what Yamashita finds to be important. Namely, their similarity speaks to Yamashita's deep affection for Brazil both as a real place and as an imagined space where such characters as Kazumasa Ishimaru, who has a whirling sphere invisibly attached to his forehead; a three-armed US American transnational capitalist, J. B. Tweep; and, a three-breasted French ornithologist, Michelle Mabelle, would find acceptance and the possibility of realizing home.

I highlight this commonality across novels to suggest that *Brazil-Marú*'s invitation to US readers to enter Brazil as a way of expanding our horizons of knowledge is made more substantial by Yamashita's work in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, which deftly illustrates the multilateral and often unpredictable impact of various forms of globalization. As Ursula K. Heise has suggested, of central concern to *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is the question of how attachments to place occur and manifest under conditions of globalization. If the flows of culture, people, and capital characteristic of globalization have prompted a reconsideration of the importance of the local in the context of the global, as the academic discourses heralding globalization would suggest, what remains is the need to assess the importance of place—of the significance of the here and now.

Heise invites us to recognize the ways that Yamashita derives some of her narrative strategies from Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928) in investigating these issues. Reading these earlier works as classics of Latin American literature, Heise suggests that Yamashita revises their narratives such that the stories of, respectively, a small town (Márquez's Macondo) and a lonesome figure (Andrade's Macunaíma) that are transformed by contact with the worlds beyond their localities function more generally as an interrogation "of local identity in an age when lasting attachments to a specific environment have become difficult to sustain" (139). Where Márquez's and Andrade's novels were specifically addressed to the formation of national and regional Latin American identities, Yamashita's work concerns itself with the irrelevance of such boundaries to some forms of globalization. What will be expressly articulated later in *Circle K Cycles* as a curiosity about the transformations effected in the contact between Japanese Brazilians and Japan finds implicit expression in this novelistic form.

While the syntax of magical realism and the revising of Latin American literary tropes allow Yamashita in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* to emphasize the possibility of otherworldliness, in *Circle K Cycles*, generic hybridity structurally enables her to place variegated worldviews side by side. In this way, Yamashita specifically triangulates the US, Brazil, and Japan, making each significant, though differently so. That is, the interpretive flexibility required by the nonequivalence of *Circle K Cycles*'s constitutive pieces is a textual iteration of traveling through difference. Comparisons are drawn not toward synthesis of differences or in an easy celebration; rather they are left open to signification. This space of comparison is the space between the ability to read and the ability to understand a language; it marks the differential knowledge necessary to move into the realm of fluency, of access to worldview.<sup>8</sup>

Yamashita's structuring of *Circle K Cycles*, in other words, both prompts and models the movement into difference that hemispheric studies in one sense represents. "You piece your recognition together like reading abstract art," Yamashita writes of viewing written Japanese: "That looks like a cow. That looks like a violin. Hey, this is the gas bill!" (17). The epiphany about the writing's communicative function performs a movement through difference into some level of understanding. Importantly, though, that initial critical transformation is insufficient to guarantee future knowledge, as Yamashita suggests in an essay titled "Circling Katakana," because languages are themselves living entities. Thus, it is that native speakers of Japanese find themselves referring to katakana dictionaries of Japanese. Yamashita explains that there are three

character systems used in writing: kanji, adopted from China; hiragana, native to Japan; and katakana, which contemporarily serves to transcribe phonetically foreign words. (Thus, for example, “pasokon” [personal computer] and “borantia” [volunteer] find their way into the Japanese lexicon through katakana.)

Contextualized by this description, Yamashita’s explanation that seeing her name written always in katakana in the translated editions of her work becomes legible as a commentary on the erasures of mutability suggested by the written word. The hybridity she sees in her name—“Yamashita” and “Tei” transcribable in kanji and hiragana, respectively, while “Karen” seems appropriately to require katakana—evaporates in these printed translations. While regretting the loss of that hybridity, Yamashita reflects, “Since I cannot read the translation of my work, I don’t know how much of it, other than my name, is apportioned to katakana, but it’s a curious thought; maybe I am writing in katakana” (54). This thought with which she closes the essay immediately recoordinates the association of a language with a stable identity. Foreignness and nativity are irretrievably enmeshed in the katakana system, a system in which identity is positioned precisely at the site of their incorporation. Katakana in this way serves as a useful metaphor for understanding the work of moving beyond the US without losing sight of particularity—or, to put it differently, of recognizing the contingent nature of foreignness.

Yamashita’s work thus suggests that the kind of comparative work integral to hemispheric studies requires a nonassimilative approach to foreignness—to attending to difference. She makes this particularly clear by following “Circling Katakana” immediately with one of two sets of pieces in *Circle K Cycles* that appear in two different languages. First is “Zero Zero Hum . . . aravilha,” written in Portuguese, which is paired with “Zero Zero One-derful,” written in English. This set uses the conceit of the telephone conversation organized into three conversational tracks to weave together the experience of *dekasegi*—Nikkei migrant workers in Japan—in terms of sexualized economics.<sup>9</sup>

Almost entirely presented as one-sided conversations being conducted simultaneously on separate phone lines by Maria Maravilha, the only external perspective afforded is a narrative that unfolds through a series of short reports offered in italicized print and marked off by lines above and below the entries. These reports initially describe what seems to be a series of different but similar characters—Maria Madelena Oliveira Shinbashi of São Paulo, Maria Madelena Yoshiwara Shinbashi of Curitiba, Madelena Shinbashi of Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo, and Maria Maravilha Shinbashi—to settle finally on Maria Madelena Shinbashi. Respectively described as a dancer, a sex worker, a performer and hostess, and an embezzler,

they read as multiple names and identities for one person by its ultimate focus on Maria Madelena Shinbashi. This figure continues to be unstable, though, as she is reported to have been seen in various places, everywhere from Bahia to Singapore. Rumor becomes definitional and image replaces person by the story's end in this track of the narrative: images of her have been published in *Playboy* and a video as well as "her holographic image on a keychain" are available for purchase (80).

The staging of this piece allows Yamashita to play with visibility and its association with knowledge. In lieu of a physical person, the personality on the phone maps into a preexisting image, while in the other direction, the pornographic and holographic images are insufficient to articulate complexity. The *dekasegi* community, too, is simultaneously visible and unseen, according to this work: "Now you see me, now you don't," concludes Maria Maravilha (80). The end of this piece refers back to the recognition that a Portuguese and an English version of it appear side to side. The likely monolingual US readers for whom Yamashita is writing can acknowledge the presence of the Portuguese but cannot render it intelligible: now you see me, now you don't.

The other twinset is titled, in its English version, "July: Circle K Rules" (the journal entries in the collection are indicated by such titles that identify months prior to more thematic subtitle). Its companion is written in Japanese. This doubled iteration structurally performs not only the difference that different languages make to representation but also the possibility of the incorporation of radical difference without its eradication. The interpretation of the polyglot reader fluent in English, Portuguese, and Japanese is not prioritized in this scheme. Rather, it evokes conversation; it requires the forming of relations across differences to produce greater collective knowledge. Here, again, the relevance of Yamashita's work to conceptualizing hemispheric studies emerges: the internal structures of the text reproduce this representation of a unified field of differences in a way that approximates the idea of a nonassimilative hemispheric studies.

The importance of allowing for difference within such a practice is underscored by "July: Circle K Rules," which articulates cultural differences in terms of rules and rituals. Shadow boxes set off "Japanese Rules," "Brazilian Rules," "American Rules," and, finally, "Circle K Rules." Between these boxes, discussions unfold regarding such matters as the different ways in which residential lifestyles characterize and physical space is inhabited by Japanese, Brazilian, and US American people. In loosely ethnographic style, Yamashita proffers these sets of rules as a way of demarcating differences only to suggest finally that individual experience and interpretation make them meaningful. She concludes with "Circle K Rules":

1. Immigrate into your own country.
2. Learn to cook your favorite meals.
3. Ask the next question. (114)

Denaturalizing the relationship between self and nation, between identity and culture, by means of the first two rules, Yamashita identifies common process rather than origins or arrivals as the cohering principle of migration. The cryptic final rule opens the idea of migration out rather than serving as a definitive conclusion, implying endlessness to the process of immigration: “you” might by this third rule be either the asker or the one asked, effectively unsettling the idea of finite arrival. For Yamashita, immigrants are always ethnographers, not so much of others, but of their own relationship to place.

Yamashita’s structuring of *Circle K Cycles* and the ways in which she thematizes cultural differences in its constitutive pieces compellingly and simultaneously illuminate the value of multilingual facility and insist that being monolingual need not be a definitive barrier to cross-cultural knowledge. She echoes in this way Gayatri Spivak’s reminder that comprehension of difference does not require complete fluency. Rather, what is important is the effort to become fluent—to move into another’s (or an other’s) worldview by moving into another language. The crucial element here is a commitment of time and energy, an understanding that even when the cow becomes recognizable as a gas bill, the work of apprehension is never complete. Here, again, collaboration and conversation are prioritized as key words in a critical practice that operates heterotopically.

*Circle K Cycles* closes by returning to the questions that prompted Yamashita’s travels, now with a heightened attention to location: “The food, the culture, okay, but, geographically speaking, what exactly makes a Nikkei? For example, if you are born in Japan, go to the Americas and live, maybe even forget your Japanese language, then come back, are you Nikkei? . . . Or if you get an eye job and a fake passport? . . . I thought the literal translation of Nikkei is ‘of the Japanese tribe,’ but ‘real’ Japanese never refer to themselves as Nikkei. So who’s Nikkei?” (145). These questions lead to others—on the determination of beauty, on what counts as home—to end finally with the idea of “Nikkei on the move” (147). Nikkei has transformed from a designation of ethnicity to an unpredictable route through identity and difference. Yamashita invites us to see it as a marker of transformation rather than stable identity, one that can illuminate temporally specific connections between persons and places. Functioning in this way as a term that recognizes the radical instability of identity, the term “Nikkei” and its critical consideration allow for appreciation of even the ironies inhering in those

chronotopic links—of, that is, the unpredictable ways that movement and place shape our understanding of identity and difference.

### **3. Toward—and Beyond—an Asian Americanist Hemispheric Practice**

I have been suggesting throughout these analyses that Yamashita's work possesses a heightened awareness of narrativity, that it promotes the drawing of an analogy between travel and interpretation, between narrative space and discursive field. She explodes paradigmatic confinement by the heterotopic imagination articulated in her writings and privileges difference as a key facet of comparative practices. By opening Asian Americanist literary critique into the space of the Americas, and by opening the Americas to Asia, Yamashita creatively and effectively cautions against critical parochialism of any kind. She takes delight in finding commonalities, in associating familiarity to new places, but her work—in exemplary literary fashion—also relishes the estrangement of familiar grounds. This interplay between the familiar and the foreign is arguably the defining quality of Yamashita's work, and it is precisely for that reason that her works might productively serve as a base upon which we might formulate an Asian Americanist hemispheric studies. By providing us with literary models through which concepts key to the idea of hemispheric studies—the significance of spatial location, the negotiation of linguistic differences, and the impact of variegated histories, for example—are explored, Yamashita articulates a relationship between the US and the other communities and nations constituting the Americas as equally unknown entities. Each site must be studied anew in light of the particular relation being drawn in a given iteration of hemispheric studies, and none can be conceived as an unchanging or homogeneous entity.

Perhaps it is the strong attention that Asian Americanist discourse has paid to arguing the irresolvable heterogeneity of (Asian) Americans that implicitly influences Yamashita's rendering of this version of thinking beyond the nation that emphasizes change and diversity. Or perhaps it is the awareness that Asian American studies brings to understanding the pitfalls of extranational paradigms in relation to US histories of Asian racialization that percolates through Yamashita's insistence on deep recognition of differential histories and cultures across locations. But the value of reading Yamashita in this context is not, I think, in drawing these connections of influence to Asian American studies. Rather, it is in showing us that however far Asian Americanist discourse has taken us, an imagination unbounded by territorial constraints can take us infinitely further.

## Notes

1. Erika Lee's recent essay, "Orientalisms in the Americas: A Hemispheric Approach to Asian-American History," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.3 (Oct 2005): 235–56, is a notable exception; see also, Evelyn Hu-DeHart's "Concluding Commentary: On Migration, Diasporas, and Transnationalism in Asian American History," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.3 (Oct 2005): 309–12; and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's oft-cited essay cautioning against "denationalization" exemplifies the kinds of concerns provoked by extranational approaches to Asian American studies. See Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." *Amerasia Journal* 21.1–2 (1995): 1–27.
2. See Rachel C. Lee's *The Americas of Asian-American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation* (1999) for extended discussion of "what is Asian-American" about Yamashita's writings (ch. 4).
3. As Caroline Rody has suggested of *Tropic of Orange* (1997), the work itself allegorizes "imaginative 'paradigm shift' " in its literalization of the idea of globalization (132). In the novel, the Tropic of Cancer has become embedded in an orange, which is then moved by various characters to Los Angeles in a way that both reflects the already diversified scene of the US–Mexico borderlands and dramatically refashions space and identity. Yamashita's "unusually expansive vistas" that "strain the capacity of received forms" have led critics such as Rody and Rachel Lee to argue that the "eccentricity" of Yamashita's novels prompts an interrogation of the geographic protocols organizing Asian Americanist literary criticism (Rody 131). See also Molly Wallace's "Tropics of Globalization: Reading the New North America." *Symploke* 9.1–2 (2001): 145–60, for excellent discussions of Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. I thank Shaundra Thomas for the term *geographic protocol*.
4. Jeffrey Lesser's *Negotiating National Identity* identifies the absence of scholarship on Asians in Brazil and Latin America more broadly and offers studies that begin to address that lack.
5. I mean the term *circum-oceanic* to recall Joseph Roach's conception of a "circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) [which] insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity" (4). The emphasis in this concept is in the circulating flows and effects that are the infrastructure of the emergence of multiple modernities that take shape and become legible through cultural practices in specific geohistorical locales.
6. See Jeffrey Lesser, "Japanese, Brazilians, Nikkei: A Short History of Identity Building and Homemaking," *Searching for Home Abroad: Japanese Brazilians and Transnationalism* (2003) for fuller and further discussion.
7. David Cleary provides a helpful overview of the significance of Freyre to the formation of Brazilian national identity in the early twentieth century. See "Race, Nationalism, and Social Theory in Brazil: Rethinking Gilberto Freyre." Working Paper 99-09, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University. <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%2520papers/cleary.pdf>. Accessed 5 Jan 2006.

8. See Rody's discussion of *Tropic of Orange* as a "border novel" in the tradition of Chicano literatures.
9. An estimated 200,000 *dekasegi* currently live in Japan, mostly in Japanese Brazilian communities, which are the communities that are of particular interest to Yamashita. Daniel Touro Linger's *No One Home: Brazilian Selves Remade in Japan* (2001) offers an illuminating study of the *dekasegi* phenomenon and experience.

## Works Cited

- Fisher, Fishkin, Shelley. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies. Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005): 17–57.
- Heise, Ursula K. "Local Rock and Global Plastic: World Ecology and the Experience of Place." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004): 126–52.
- Lee, Rachel C. *The Americas of Asian-American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Lesser, Jeffrey. *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Murashige, Michael S. "Karen Tei Yamashita: Interview." *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian-American Writers*, ed. King-kok Cheung. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2000. 320–42.
- Okiihiro, Gary. "Turning Japanese Americans." *Encyclopedia of Japanese Descendants in the Americas: An Illustrated History of the Nikkei*, ed. Akemi Kiumura-Yano. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Rody, Caroline. "The Transnational Imagination: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*." *Asian North American Identities*, eds. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004. 130–48.
- Sadowski-Smith, Claudia, and Claire Fox. "Theorizing the Hemisphere: Inter-Americas Work at the Intersections of American, Canadian, and Latin American Studies." *Comparative American Studies* 2.1(2004): 5–38.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Yamashita, Karen Tei. *Brazil-Marú*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1992.
- . *Circle K Cycles*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2001.