

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA

A *Boom* Interview

In conversation with Jonathan Crisman and Jason S. Sexton

Editor's note: Karen Tei Yamashita is an American author and professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is affiliated with the Literature Department, the Creative Writing Program, and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. Her novels and plays are difficult to define by genre: they have been called science fiction, speculative fiction, postmodern, postcolonial, magic realist, and most certainly experimental.

Between her transnational history, her role as a maker, and the strong spatiality of her writing, Yamashita's insights have shaped the way urban humanities are practiced. Her landmark 1997 novel, *Tropic of Orange*, has become a key text and model for creative practice for urban humanists based in Los Angeles.

This interview was conducted by *Boom* editor Jason Sexton and Jonathan Crisman, one of this issue's guest editors, over email amid summer travel in Yellowstone National Park, London, Paris, and California.

Jonathan Crisman: Your early book *Tropic of Orange* was the book that sparked our thinking on an alternative form of urban engagement—partly because it was set in Los Angeles, but also because its structure allowed for a “thickness.” Time and space get interwoven in a new way, various voices—sometimes conflicting—coexist in a single narrative, and it created a kind of fissure in what we knew about LA—it opened our imagination to an LA, or multiple LAs, that could unfold in the future, or in the present, or maybe these already coexist. The book was published in 1997—almost twenty years ago. Could you characterize the LA you knew up to that time, sharing what led to *Tropic of Orange*, and what the book would look like if written today.

Karen Tei Yamashita: My parents were San Francisco Bay Area nisei who came to LA in the 1950s. My father was a pastor assigned to the Centenary Methodist Church near

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Photograph of Karen Tei Yamashita by Mary Uyematsu Kao.

Jefferson Blvd. and Normandie Ave. in the middle of an old Japanese American neighborhood. That church I understood to be the largest Japanese American congregation on the US mainland. I point this out because, in the postwar, Japanese American institutions such as temples and churches became centers of community and hostels to receive Japanese Americans returning from wartime incarceration. My father ran such a hostel/church in Oakland, then came to continue his work in LA, largely to minister to a community of young nisei families trying to get a jumpstart on new lives. With the wartime evacuation of Japanese Americans out of LA arrived the influx of African Americans who came to work in wartime industries and occupied our abandoned neighborhoods. In the postwar 1950s and 1960s when I grew up in LA, our neighborhood around the

church and along Jefferson reflected a cultural mix of working class folks of color, confined to circumscribed areas of the city through housing covenants. I didn't really know any of this as a kid, but my family moved from the Jefferson neighborhood to the Crenshaw and then to Gardena, and the differences in the houses, gardens, streets, and schools, and the idea of upward mobility were apparent to me. I lost friends who moved to go to "better" schools. Growing up in LA, you couldn't/can't not know the color lines that divide and spread through the city's geography.

In 1975, I began research in Brazil and was mostly away from the US for the next nine years. In 1984, I immigrated back to LA with my Brazilian family, and it was evident that LA had become what theorists had predicted: a majority "hispanic" city. It was that city, created by migrating

populations of people, their cultures and history, that fascinated me. However, this city seemed nowhere really written about in canonized LA literature, which featured white detectives noired by their undercover presence on colored streets. *Tropic* was perhaps a question and an experiment. What if the colored characters/caricatures spoke?

I don't think much about how the book would be different if written today. The technology would be updated, cellphones ubiquitous, and terrorism and religious fundamentalism intrinsic to the plot. Someone else needs to write the update. It surprises me that the book continues to have reach and readership, but it is satisfying to know that, even with all the pop culture references stuck in time and the changes in LA's landscape, new readers get it and find it possible to navigate. For example, your conversation about "thickness" and time and space help me to see why and how constructing the book works. Writing it was an organic process, the meaning of which I could not at the time articulate outside of the creative work itself. And believe me, twenty years ago no one wanted or understood that book. Prospective editors and agents turned it upside down to try to shake out meaning. One editor asked me to turn it into a love story; another said she could not represent a book with an agenda. I'm indebted to Coffee House Press who took the risk.

One writer I've felt close to these many years and whose work for me defines LA is Sesshu Foster. I first read his poetry in the journal *High Performance*, edited I think by Wanda Coleman, as a response to the LA riots in 1992. I have long admired Sesshu's work, especially *Atomik Aztex*. While I grew up in African American/Japanese American neighborhoods in Central LA and the Westside, Sesshu grew up on the Eastside with the Mexican and Latino folks pressing up against the tracks and the LA River.

Jason Sexton: Do you think of yourself as a California writer?

Yamashita: I'm California-born, in Oakland, and raised in LA, and the history of my family begins in San Francisco turn of the century 1900. I've also lived and studied in Minnesota, Japan, and Brazil, but we raised our family here. My dad was a romantic idealist, liked to talk about "world citizenship" long before the transnational was a trend. While I may have set my sights beyond California, when I came back to LA and the San Francisco Bay Area, I thought that in order to really belong, I needed to study these

geographies, not just to claim a birthplace but to understand a history during my own growing up. You can be born and grow up in a place and have no idea of the meaning of being there. I wanted to see and sense the arrival and labor of my folks and my generation, to know why and who we've become. I hope I've done the work to claim a place in California, but like so many of us come to hang our hats at home, I think it's best to think I'm just passing through.

Crisman: You mentioned Sesshu's work, which is fantastic—definitely in the spirit of *Tropic*, it seems. When you mention your book as an experiment in which people of color speak, I am reminded of the young artist, Ramiro Gomez, who has repurposed canonized (white) visions of LA, like Hockney's *A Bigger Splash*, painting in the maids and gardeners that actually make such an LA possible. It seems that while race, nationality, and politics play an important role in your earlier work, these issues are presented in even more direct ways in your recent work. I'm thinking of the political struggles narrated through the fictional nonfiction of *I Hotel*, but also through the embodied performances in *Anime Wong*. Are there political realities today that drive you toward these more unequivocal narratives? Or is it part of your creative development as you grow older? Or perhaps something else?

Yamashita: Ramiro Gomez, yes. I heard a story on NPR about Lawrence Weschler, who's written about Hockney, taking Gomez up into the Hollywood Hills to meet Hockney. My memory of the report is that the visit was cordial and generous, but I wondered what that would be like to encounter another artist whose work you satirize. Weschler, whose writing and thinking I so admire, must have known what he was doing. The erasure that Gomez's work points to in Hockney's paintings has always irked me, too.

By "unequivocal narratives," perhaps you mean narratives tied to history or real events? I don't think anything I write is not researched as history or cultural anthropology. I'm rather picky about getting this right even though it's employed for fiction. But I do understand your query if it is about why the projects seem over the years to move from what's been defined as transnational to more personal subjects of local community and home. Maybe I've been circling these issues and honing in. My next book is based on a family archive of correspondence between seven siblings,



John and Asako Yamashita (and Karen), Santa Monica pier. Photograph provided by Karen Tei Yamashita.

the core of which dates from 1938 to 1948, those war years when my family was incarcerated in the Utah desert at Topaz and dispersed across the country. You ask about growing older, and it must be that too, because I couldn't really read or think about this project until everyone was dead. I didn't want the sadness of this loss, but maybe it was necessary, having all those ghosts in the room.

You asked about politics, and yes, writing about the Japanese American wartime internment and about the Asian

American movement has been a political gesture, to make evident an injustice related to current issues of undocumented immigration, anti-Muslim policies, race-based policing and incarceration, to ask how movements succeed and fail from the grassroots, and to tell a longer history of the ongoing struggle for fair housing and employment. With *Anime Wong*, I've been curious about the relationship between technology and race, how the imagination of the future retains the same old representations of gender and race.

Crisman: I wonder if you could elaborate a bit about your view on fiction, its nature, its role in the world. I always liked the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s description of his work as a fiction, where he goes on to describe that it isn’t fiction as in “false,” but rather like the Latin, *fictio*, something fashioned, something made. I would like to think that the same is true for your work: though you write fiction, your work involves “getting it right.” The importance of the reality held inside any one of your books is clear because of the care with which you construct it. When the current issues you list are at stake, what is the importance of writing fiction?

Yamashita: I teeter between thinking with urgency that fiction is the most critically significant creative work we do and, then, totter back to its utter uselessness, a foolish waste of time. Your reference to Geertz’s idea of *fictio*, especially coming from an anthropologist, makes me hopeful. Long ago, I thought I would go into anthropology, but then while in Brazil researching the Japanese Brazilian community, I felt I could not properly attend to the research required as I can’t read Japanese. So I opted to tell the story (in English) in what I thought was historic fiction, like fiction was some kind of protective vapor and came with a license to kill. What did I know? Writing fiction is harder than telling the facts because really you have to tell the truth. Sounds like nonsense I guess, but getting it wrong means you lose your reader. Italo Calvino in one of his essays talks about meaning that hovers above the narrative text, idea and thought captured by the reader in a manner that fiction and poetry can achieve. Maybe the reader gets zapped with understanding and change happens, and maybe that’s a reason for doing it.

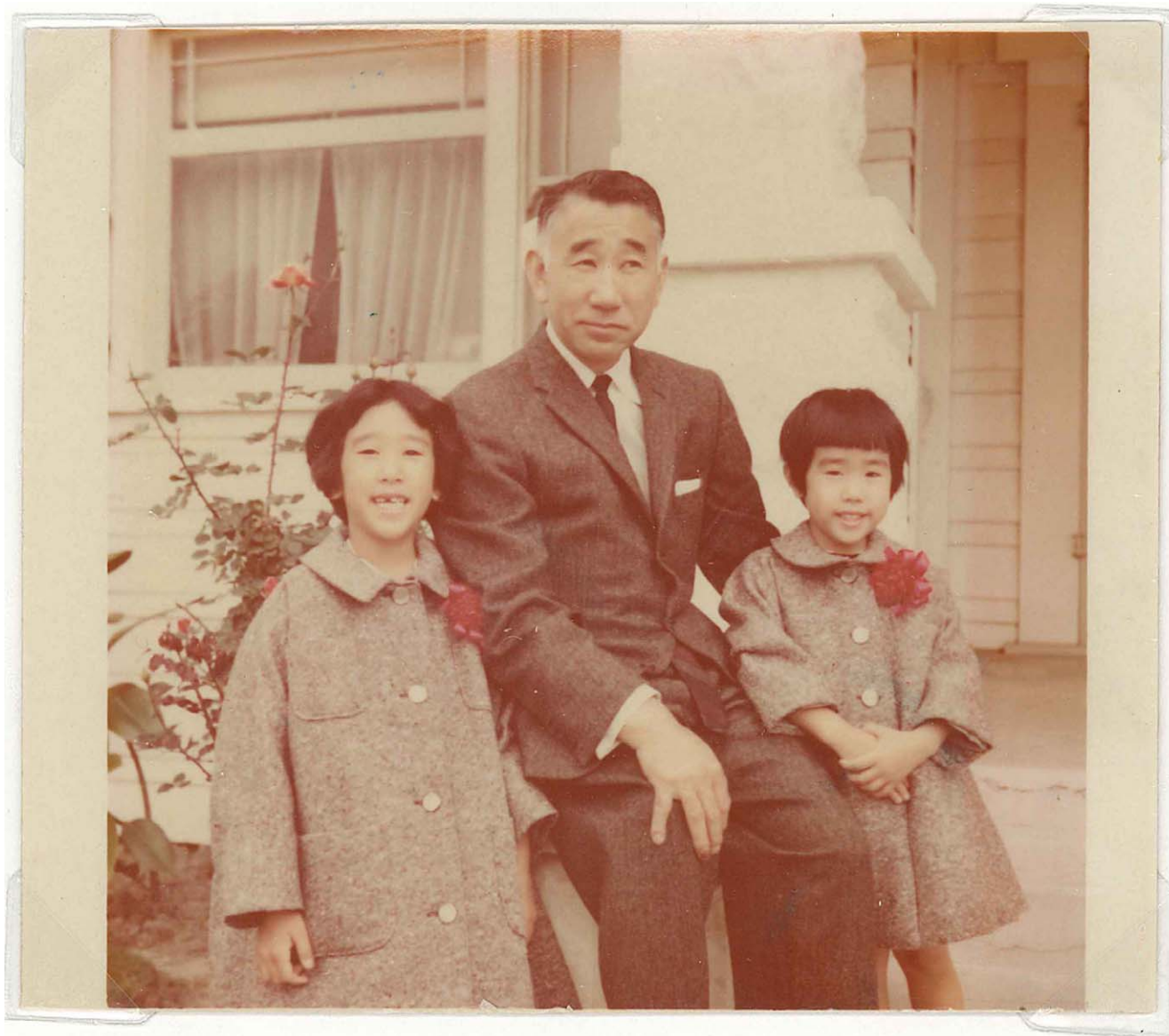
Sexton: On this notion of helping readers reckon with truth, getting zapped, etc., I’m reminded at one point in *Tropic* where Buzzworm refers to metaphor as straight-talk, which seems to be what you believed about fiction in the sense mentioned above. Elsewhere in the book Arcangel tells Rafaela that some things, again what I reckon as *truth*, “cannot be translated.” But if with your other work you’re connecting the past to present issues, aiming to provoke and move readers to action, you’re addressing enormous themes: homelessness, temporality, contingency, justice, love, victimization, and humanness. Your writing style leaves readers on edge with little place to stand—like the shifting world in *Tropic*—but so do the themes you explore. What is the process for how you lay

out these themes in your writing? And are there any themes you have not yet explored but hope to later, like say the next book based on the 1938–1948 family archive? Do you plan to bring back characters from your early writing to do this?

Yamashita: I know this is an “interview,” so I’m doing my best to answer questions, but with my work, I’m usually the one asking to know. That said, I so appreciate your thoughtful reading and the feeling of reading together—ha!—rereading that old book. I can’t speak for other writers, but I don’t think writers necessarily choose themes; themes seem to choose the writer. I think about writers like Salman Rushdie or Claudia Rankine, whose work became or has become so involved with and tuned to the political current, and I imagine the exhaustion and stress that comes with having to become a public personage, even though the writing may have begun with an image, a sentence, a story, or a scene and a question about why. So speaking about “enormous themes” makes me nervous. I didn’t set out to write about homelessness or temporality, but in writing about LA, I suppose I couldn’t not write about these issues. Okay, that sounds naive since I also think that experimental and speculative writing is more often about ideas, rather than real full-dimensional characters. So maybe it’s about characters inhabiting ideas. A few of the characters in *Tropic* (Manzanar and Emi) were taken from characters in the performances produced previously in LA (published much later in *Anime Wong*), but I haven’t thought about regenerating them again in another project. As for new work and what’s yet unexplored, the family archive project seems to be an epistolary meditation. On the big side, it’s about war and race and the philosophical trajectory of civil rights and reconciliation, but that sounds boring and pompous. I hope the letters read personally, intimately.

Sexton: Reading *Tropic* for the first time recently, I found myself ebbing and flowing with personal interest and connection to the writers one moment, after which I’d be deeply troubled in another, experiencing something of the effect of what’s happening with your characters. Do you generally want your readers to be hopeful about our world, or troubled by it? To deal with it as real, or as utter foolishness, or something else?

Yamashita: I think you realize from that spreadsheet at the beginning of *Tropic*, that the structure of the book was laid



Karen, John, and Jane Tomi (sister) at the 5th Avenue parsonage, Los Angeles. Photograph provided by Karen Tei Yamashita.

out over seven days and seven characters who performed seven narrative genres in seven timeframes and moving geographies. I chose that structure and stuck with it, and it produced a kind of literary kaleidoscope that described, for me, LA and troubled, as you suggest, all our narratives by placing them side-by-side. I feel I'm a hopeful and positive person, but I've also been very blessed and untested. I'm not sure how much pain I'm capable of living through. I want to think that when I fail, I take responsibility and get up and try again, and that going to where it hurts is real, is necessary to know. Writing is probably an easy way of learning by

imagining. What readers do with all this is their business, though one hopes that the integrity of the writing is passed along.

Crisman: I wonder if we can shift the focus of the conversation a little bit. As you know, the theme of this issue of *Boom* is the urban humanities—a set of academic programs, scholarly approaches, and research agendas emerging at UCLA and UC Berkeley. You gave a very compelling talk at the *Knowledge Design: Making Urban Humanities* symposium at UCLA a couple of years ago, providing insight into

your writing methods as a kind of speculative scholarly practice. I would be interested in revisiting this conversation a little bit, in part because the methods that gave rise to your novels (particularly, *Tropic* and *I Hotel*) were so delightful and unexpected. But before rehashing anything, I would also be interested in hearing your thoughts about the teaching side of things: pedagogical approaches, means for allowing that speculative possibility found in your books to manifest in the classroom, and so on. I think reflecting on your role as a professor of creative writing within the contemporary university is part of this, but also, of course, might the relatively unique structure of the Literature Department at UC Santa Cruz, I imagine, also play a role?

Yamashita: I want to answer in the spirit of being useful, but teaching creative writing is tricky, and I really have no tricks up my sleeve. There are books by writers about writing, and they are revealing, but nothing seems to really provoke writing except reading. So in the beginning, I match student writers to each other, usually by what they read and the genres in which they write, to create conversations and community, to connect intellectual colleagues. After that, I spend a great deal of time listening to and reading the work, starting with what is there, what is interesting, then mostly asking questions that may be rhetorical or formed out of honest curiosity, but hoping to challenge the thinking embedded in the writing. There is a process of working through things with each individual writer; with one writer, it might be at the level of the sentence, with another, the question of audience. More than talent, writing requires a kind of creative, playful, and stubborn resilience. Not sure how one teaches this except to facilitate the doing and the matching of minds.

But I think you want me to say something more specific. Okay. What I have experimented with for many years is working with Italo Calvino's novel, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, which is a novel explored by "you" the reader who must navigate the beginnings of ten different novels in which Calvino imitates and reveals the narrative conceits of each novel genre. I use Calvino's novel as a text, parsing out each section into ten weeks, partnering students in panels to present and decipher the work for their fellows, and creating writing prompts to write it yourself. This has been more or less successful over the years, and I've had to add a reader with the beginnings of ten women-authored novels to balance out Calvino's first-person male protagonists, all in pursuit of the female character. Even when students protest, I stubbornly continue to teach this text. This is the closest I get to my own speculative writing experiments, but I'm not interested in whether students know this. What I want to convey is the rich possibility of genre and narrative voice, that no matter what story you tell, you create a character who speaks and imagines for you.

I'm a fiction writer in a literature department. Maybe my creative writing colleagues and I are the oddballs, but we are perhaps the necessary right brain of the place. I figure creative writing is another door to the meaning of literature; you can critique the writing, but having to try your hand at it yourself makes you humble. The most fascinating scholarship of my colleagues is creative and formulated with the same imaginative processes of any new ideas. As you suggest about its unique structure, the Literature department at UCSC encompasses a diverse program of languages, geographies, theoretical discourses, and interdisciplinary thinking, and I have benefited from and grown in this way. **B**