

Multiculturalism, Globalism, and Postmodernism: Diversity in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

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Los Angeles, as it is depicted in Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel, *Tropic of Orange*, is a postmodern city. As much as the novel is postmodern, it is also a celebration of Los Angeles' multiculturalism and the globalism of the region. Yamashita alludes to many specific pieces of literature and aspects of Los Angeles' culture, but also uses aspects of dystopianism, conspiracy theory, magical realism, hyper-reality, and fragmentation to create a postmodern novel that reflects the diversity of Los Angeles. In all of these ways, Yamashita borrows heavily from Los Angeles' literary tradition. She uses many different fragmented Los Angeles stories to build a narrative about the city, but then knocks that narrative down in typical postmodern style.

Los Angeles is often called a 'postmodern city' for several reasons. Edward Soja, a human geographer, writes: "the particular experiences of urban development and change occurring elsewhere in the world are [...] duplicated in Los Angeles, the place where it all seems to 'come together.'"¹ He describes Los Angeles as "exceedingly tough to track" and "a truly transitory landscape."² Over the past century, parts of Los Angeles have undergone significant demographic shifts. One example is the community of Yamashita's character, Bobby, who lives in the Koreatown around Wilshire Centre.³ In the 1960s, this area became an established Korean immigrant community, but subsequent waves of immigration from Central America and other Asian countries contributed to a shifting demographic character in the decades following the sixties.⁴ These changes were emphasized by Korean emigration from the community after the 1992 riots.⁵ Soja explains that because of the often obfuscating nature of communities like this one, an outsider

can only ever see glimmers of Los Angeles rather than the whole city.⁶

Los Angeles has also been described as postmodern because of the often fragmented and discrete nature of the communities within it. For example, when Soja published his book in 1989, Redondo Beach, a community populated by wealthy members of the LAX technoworld and aerospace industry, was demographically almost a hundred percent white.⁷ Directly across the San Diego Freeway from Redondo Beach was "the edge of the largest and most tightly segregated concentration of Blacks west of Chicago."⁸ The idea of Los Angeles as a fragmented postmodern city has had an influence on literature from and about Southern California. Rachel Adams writes that "Los Angeles is the city that taught us how to be postmodern," as "for well over 30 years, the architecture, demographics, lifestyles, and industries of Southern California have inspired countless essays and books on the nature and significance of postmodernity."⁹ Through its use of postmodern literary techniques, *Tropic of Orange* creates a historical excavation of the city's neighbourhoods that reveals the layers of those communities, and also demonstrates the global nature of the city.¹⁰

Another aspect of postmodernism in the novel is Yamashita's heavy use of allusions to Los Angeles' literary tradition. In part because of Hollywood's status as a centre for the production of mass culture, Los Angeles is one of the most mediated cities in America, if not the world. This means that "today it is a heavily inscribed space with manifold literary and social/cultural representations, including the colonial/mission myth and the dialectic of sunshine and noir; it is seen through the genres of

Chandlerian detective fiction, California surrealism [...] and disaster or apocalyptic narratives.”¹¹ All of these genres are used in *Tropic of Orange*. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak writes that “in typical postmodern fashion, Yamashita writes her novel through and against existing literary conventions relating to her novel’s L.A. location.”¹² Yamashita consistently incorporates iconic parts of well-known novels into the text of *Tropic of Orange*. For example, at several points in the novel, characters refer to Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust*. Emi, while telling Gabriel about the car crash on the freeway, describes the driver as an “ex-pat from the East” who “came to L.A. to die.”¹³ This is both a direct reference to Tod, West’s main character in *Day of the Locust*, and to a phrase often repeated in his novel. Later in *Tropic of Orange*, Gabriel explicitly references the same work while describing the homeless encampment on the freeway, saying to Emi, “‘L.A.’s latest gala disaster, Angel. One more day of the locust.”¹⁴ Similarly, in another scene, Yamashita obliquely alludes to Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* when Gabriel muses about the similarities between using a woman’s chopsticks as hairpins and the hairpins used by Oedipus to blind himself in the myth referenced in Pynchon’s postmodern novel.¹⁵

Allusions in *Tropic of Orange* are not simply limited to references to literature set in Los Angeles like *Day of the Locust* or *The Crying of Lot 49*. For instance, Yamashita mentions a Stephen King novel to reference general pop culture when members of the homeless encampment are listening to one of his books on tape while sitting in an abandoned van.¹⁶ She also refers to scholarship of the city, such as Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz*. Gabriel had given a map from Davis’ book to Buzzworm sometime before the beginning of the novel. In this scene:

Buzzworm studied the map. Balboa’d torn it out of a book for him to study. *Quartz City* or some such title. He followed the thick lines on the map showing the territorial standing of Crips versus Bloods. Old map. 1972. He shook his head. Even if it were true. Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyway?¹⁷

Davis’ book is mentioned in an offhand manner and Buzzworm misremembers the title, calling the map old. This implies that Buzzworm, and by extension Angelinos, disregard the scholarship of the areas because they feel they know better than any scholar could. This quote also refers to the shift-

ing postmodern nature of Los Angeles, as it implies that demographic maps of the city are not valid for very long periods of time. Yamashita also refers to the greater movement of city boosterism in Los Angeles in a more disparaging way than when any of the characters refer to literature. Emi asks Gabriel if he has ever seen an ‘I heart L.A.’ bumper sticker, and then says, “‘That *L.A. is a desert paradise, sunshine, blonde people, insipid, romantic* is B.S. Nobody hearts L.A.’”¹⁸ This is an obvious reference to how Los Angeles’ image has been manufactured since the birth of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in 1888.¹⁹ The phrase, “It all comes together in LA,” is an immodest and boosterish *Los Angeles Times* slogan from the 1990s.²⁰ Yamashita refers to this slogan as well, when Buzzworm says “‘Hell, L.A. don’t go nowhere, and look at this. Shit just comes to us.’”²¹ This quote demonstrates a distortion of booster ideals of the city. Instead of seeing the confluence of things, ideas, and people in Los Angeles as positive as the *Los Angeles Times* seems to, Buzzworm sees those same things as troublesome ‘shit.’

While *Tropic of Orange* refers directly to works that form part of the literary tradition of Los Angeles, it also draws from several genres that are integral to that tradition. This compilation of genres is characteristically postmodern, as postmodern literature often uses a blend of styles and genres to demonstrate the lack of metanarratives in both literature and society. *Tropic of Orange* is an example of this technique. Yamashita uses several genres that are present in other postmodern literature from Southern California, including dystopianism, detective fiction, magical realism, fragmentation, and hyperrealism.

Los Angeles has been the setting of countless dystopian films and novels. Mike Davis writes: “there is a dramatic trend over time toward the merging of all Los Angeles fiction with the disaster [...] narrative.”²² Certain characteristics of the city lend it to apocalyptic story lines, including its precipitous position on the San Andreas Fault. The fear of the ‘Big One’ pervades cities on the West Coast, and is equally present in the minds of characters in the novel, including Emi, who carries an earthquake kit in the trunk of her car.²³ Hande Tekdemir writes: “the confluence of people and global markets in Los Angeles not only presents us with a vital image of a dynamic city, but also displays a place that is teeming with tension.”²⁴ In *Tropic of Orange*, environmental and human disasters such

as global warming, poverty, urban violence, and civil war loom at the edges of the narrative.²⁵ The most explicitly apocalyptic aspects of the story are the fiery pits on either end of a strip of the freeway that allow for a homeless occupation of abandoned cars and the firestorm that the government uses to expel the homeless at the end of the novel. The cataclysmic arrest of Los Angeles traffic creates the dystopian world of reclaimed cars on the freeway, where the homeless are able to win the fight for space that they normally lose in Los Angeles.²⁶ Buzzworm describes the fires, which have tapped a natural pocket of gas below the freeway, as “‘Goddamn Eternal Flame’” that “‘ain’t never gonna blow out.’”²⁷ He describes the heat on the section of freeway between the fires and the black smoke covering the whole area, and then rhetorically asks Gabriel, “‘Is this hell?’” while likening the homeless people living on the freeway to the Day of the Dead.²⁸ Gabriel reduces the situation to simply “‘L.A.’s latest gala disaster,’” and Manzanar’s narration refers to the ultimate traffic jam in Chapter 35 described as “‘one more L.A. disaster.’”²⁹ The characters seem unsurprised that these events are taking place in Los Angeles; this is because of the consistent expectation of eventual dystopia that forms part of the Los Angeles postmodern literary identity.

Similarly to how Yamashita borrows from Los Angeles’ dystopian tradition, she also leans on its tradition of *noir* detective fiction. This is most apparent in the Gabriel voiced chapters, though it is often also referenced in Emi’s chapters when she interacts with Gabriel. Gabriel’s chapters are the only ones clearly written in the first-person; while Bobby’s chapters seem to be in the first-person, he refers to himself as ‘Bobby’ rather than ‘I,’ as Gabriel does. The following passage is indicative of Gabriel’s narrative style:

Suddenly I felt really tired, reached for the cold coffee next to the keyboard. Maybe Rafaela would give me a call. Just a short call would do – my fix from the South. If I associated Emi with caffeine, maybe Rafaela was like Prozac. It was a balancing act. Who was I kidding? Mine was a mind game. L.A. was out there.³⁰

The style of the writing in Gabriel’s chapters mimics the short, clear phrases that are found in works by Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley, who have both written series of ‘hard-boiled’ de-

tective novels set in Los Angeles. Detective novels are ‘mind games,’ often for both the reader and the main character, and the passage above alerts the reader to similarities between Gabriel’s narrative and the narratives of crime fiction. As a journalist, the content of Gabriel’s chapters thematically reflects the detective genre. He consistently keeps track of and attempts to unravel several conspiracies, including the epidemic of cocaine-filled oranges, the homeless occupation of the freeway, and an elaborate system of illegal child organ exchanges over the Mexican border at the hands of the C. Juarez cartel.

There are several metafictional moments in dialogue between Emi and Gabriel that draw our attention to Yamashita’s use of the detective genre. At one point, Emi greets Gabriel, asking, “‘So how’s my soft-boiled detective?’” to which Gabriel responds, “‘You’d think I’d be hard-boiled by now judging by the heat down here.’”³¹ This is a direct reference to descriptions of characters like Chandler’s iconic ‘hard-boiled’ detective Philip Marlowe. Later, in the same conversation, Emi says disparagingly: “‘There you go again trying to be part of a book,’” which demonstrates awareness to Gabriel’s heavily allusive character.³² Yamashita pulls tropes from this genre to both allude to Los Angeles’ literary history and to create a distinct voice for Gabriel between the other fragmented narratives in *Tropic of Orange*.

Magical realism, another genre evoked in *Tropic of Orange*, is closely associated with postmodern texts from Latin America. Yamashita’s novel “depicts an unstoppable flow of people and goods moving back and forth between the US and Mexico” and it “illustrates the affirmative consequences of these flows in its creative fusion of Latin American-inspired magical realism with allusions to such Anglo-American sources as hard-boiled detective fiction” discussed above.³³ The Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez was one of the founding authors of magical realism as we know it today. The name of the character Gabriel in *Tropic of Orange* can be seen as a reference to Márquez. The novel and the character Arcangel explicitly reference one of Márquez’s most commonly known magical realist texts, *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*.³⁴ Arcangel is one of the most blatant representations of magical realism in *Tropic of Orange*. In an “embodiment of extreme corporeality,” Arcangel is able to pull both a truck that has blocked traffic to a Mexican market, and then pulls a bus across the

border between the United States and Mexico.³⁵ He seems to be more than five hundred years old, saying that he was at Plymouth Rock when the pilgrims arrived in North America, and that he has travelled throughout Latin America for centuries while interacting with a variety of communities.³⁶ The magical realism in the character Arcangel demonstrates how migrant culture is often “represented as living on the borderline between fiction and reality.”³⁷ He is able to transform his appearance at will; he does so at the Cantina de Misericordia et Hambre when he first becomes El Gran Mojado to announce his challenge to SUPERNAFTA, and again at the end of the novel during the fight, when, as El Gran Mojado, he sprouts large wings.³⁸

There are other magical transformations in the novel. Raphaela becomes a fire-breathing snake during her battle with Doña Maria’s son, who simultaneously turns into a feline animal. Hande Tekdemir summarizes magical realism as “an odd, matter-of-fact integration of reality and fantasy, an almost taken-for-granted intimacy between the extraordinary and the familiar,” which can be seen in Raphaela’s battle.³⁹ Simply and unassumingly, after the ‘villain’ pushes Raphaela into the car, “her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent.”⁴⁰ In this scene specifically, magical realism is used to make a traumatic incident palatable for both the characters and the reader.

More subtly, magical realism is present in the novel through the gradual distortion of time and space that occurs as the Tropic of Cancer moves northward with Arcangel from Gabriel’s Mexican property. Gabriel is one of the first characters to comment on the spatial and temporal changes that are occurring, saying to Emi: “‘Something’s wrong today, [...] Yesterday, too. [...] I mean the length of the day. The weather. The light for godssake. Time. It’s got something to do with time. Place. Damn! Every which way you turn, the sun is in your windshield.’”⁴¹ In his own narration, Gabriel says that “it seemed that for every hour [I worked on the news that was coming in], there was another half hour hidden away that I had to catch up to. Time and a half.”⁴² The physical geography of Los Angeles is warping at the same time. When Buzzworm is talking to the young homey, the boy describes dodging bullets, saying that it “‘was [...] like space curved.’”⁴³ Later in the novel, Buzzworm explains to Emi and her producers that the streets are changing, stretching, and colliding into each other.⁴⁴ By the time Arcangel arrives, as El Gran

Mojado, for his fight with SUPERNAFTA, Los Angeles’ geography has been gradually and completely warped by the magical events taking place. Magical realism in this way is used in *Tropic of Orange* to show the postmodernity of Los Angeles; the temporal and spatial distortion of the city demonstrate its adaptability as well as its shifting and amorphous nature.

The fragmented and postmodern nature of Los Angeles is also represented in the fragmented narrative structure of *Tropic of Orange*. In the first few pages of the book, before the narrative begins, we are presented with a grid labelled ‘Hypercontexts.’ It lays out the days of the week and the chapters in each day that correspond with specific characters. Although it “locates the central characters in time and space, it also provides a deceptive sense of order to a narrative that ultimately refuses to come together in any coherent manner.”⁴⁵ The novel presents “an overload of events and information that makes it difficult to distinguish relevant clues from background noise.”⁴⁶ When Arcangel promotes his fight with SUPERNAFTA, the narrator explicitly states that they have created a situation of information saturation.⁴⁷ The fragments and information overload create a sense of hyperreality, which postmodern philosophers credit as a staple characteristic of Los Angeles.⁴⁸ Hyperreality has historical roots in Southern California—it was there that the first pioneering theme parks were built, and it therefore acts as a destination for a different reality.⁴⁹ Soja writes that “the visible aggregate of the whole of Los Angeles churns so confusingly that it induces little more than illusionary stereotypes or self-serving caricatures—if its reality is ever seen at all.”⁵⁰ Each of the fragmented stories in the novel is deliberately and distinctly narrated to augment the novel’s hyperreality, and the resulting polyvocality emphasizes the globalism of *Tropic of Orange*.

In *Tropic of Orange*, there are no Anglo-American characters. The seven main characters cover a variety of different ethnic groups that populate Los Angeles, from Japanese-American Emi to African American Buzzworm to Raphaela, who is a Mexican immigrant.⁵¹ Using the mixture of stereotypical Los Angeles genres discussed above to create a postmodern reality, the novel tells stories that are not part of the normal Los Angeles narrative, and therefore gives voices to the normally voiceless. Adams writes: “the novel aspires to channel multiple voices, particularly those that have historically been silenced or marginalized.”⁵² Each char-

acter has chapters assigned just for them, in which they can express themselves however they wish, be it in detective-style first-person for Gabriel, choppy first-person or third-person for Bobby, or metafictional Brechtian poetry for Arcangel.⁵³

The novel goes much further in its investigation of migration and diversity than a simple and naive celebration of multiculturalism.⁵⁴ When Gabriel and Emi are at a Japanese restaurant, Emi “exposes multiculturalism’s official rhetoric as superficial” in her interactions with a white woman who is also eating there.⁵⁵ The woman says, “I love living in L.A. because I can find anything in the world to eat, right here. It’s such a meeting place for all sorts of people. A true celebration of the international world.”⁵⁶ When Emi sees that the other woman is wearing chopsticks she responds to her statement by asking if the woman would wear forks in her hair. This draws attention to how “multiculturalism has become a fetishized commodity, largely appropriated and co-opted by large corporations and their marketing devices.”⁵⁷ The attitude of the woman at the restaurant demonstrates the oversimplification of the issues immigrant populations face, which *Tropic of Orange* tries to dissemble.

The destabilization of the Tropic of Cancer as the migrants unwittingly haul Mexican territory into Los Angeles “simultaneously illustrates the artificiality of national borders and deconstructs the opposition between colonial centre and periphery,” while also demonstrating the interdependence between the global north and south.⁵⁸ In the novel, California is represented as a nodal point “where globalization threatens to erupt into environmental and human catastrophe, but also where people find themselves creating unlikely coalitions that might work to remedy these problems.”⁵⁹ By the end of the novel, Manzanar’s music pulls the characters and people together in a way that mimics how his beloved freeways pull the city together at the beginning of the novel. Robin Blyn suggests that “we

might therefore conclude that Manzanar is a figure for the implied author of the text, his music the metafictional equivalent of the novel’s own art.”⁶⁰ His music pervades the second half of the novel. Emi listens to musical fax tones, which sound like “a melody she could not place but knew,” while “in the distance, an insane and homeless conductor thrashed in silence to the same rhythm.”⁶¹ For the finale of a series of television shows broadcast from the freeway, Manzanar conducts a “homeless choir numbering near 500 featuring three homeless tenors.” When El Gran Mojado appears in the centre ring, he is “accompanied by a choral symphony that came from outside the auditorium and slowly swelled to fill it by the people themselves.” The narrator reports that “everyone knew the music [...] as if from some uncanny place in their inner ears, as if they had sung it all their lives.”⁶²

To present Los Angeles as a postmodern city, *Tropic of Orange* borrows from several different genres, including dystopianism, detective *noir*, and magical realism, all of which are part of Los Angeles’ literary tradition, alluded to throughout the novel. The narrative is presented in a fragmented and hyperreal narrative structure, and while “each incident and character might at first seem irrelevant to the others, the novel [...] underlines the subtle connections among people, goods, and events in the globalized world,” which is illustrated by Manzanar’s music.⁶³ While the story may seem to imply a positive metanarrative about multiculturalism in a way that is distinctly not postmodern, the ultimate futility of the symbolic challenge between the people and the government in El Gran Mojado’s fight with SUPERNAFTA, as well as the government’s violent raid against the homeless encampment, deconstructs that metanarrative and allows the reader to continue to interpret *Tropic of Orange*, and therefore Los Angeles, as postmodern. Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* presents a postmodern Los Angeles by telling many different Los Angeles stories.

Notes

1. Edward W. Soja, "It All Comes Together in Los Angeles," in *Postmodern Geographies; The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 221.
2. Edward W. Soja, "Taking Los Angeles Apart: Towards a Postmodern Geography," in *Postmodern Geographies; The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 222, 233.
3. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces: 'It All Comes Together in Los Angeles,'" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 41 no. 1 (2011): 8.
4. Mermann-Jozwiak, 8.
5. Mermann-Jozwiak, 8.
6. Soja, "Taking Los Angeles Apart," 223, 231.
7. Soja, 231.
8. Soja, 231.
9. Rachel Adams, "The Ends of America, The Ends of Postmodernism," *After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction*, special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 248.
10. Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces," 2.
11. Mermann-Jozwiak, 8.
12. Mermann-Jozwiak, 8.
13. Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997): 58.
14. Yamashita, 162.
15. Yamashita, 129.
16. Yamashita, 169.
17. Yamashita, 80–1.
18. Yamashita, 123.
19. Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces," 6.
20. Soja, "It All Comes Together," 191.
21. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 114.
22. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1999), 280.
23. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 61.
24. Hande Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier and Re-Definition of Space in *Tropic of Orange*," in *Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase; Contemporary North American Dystopian Literature*, ed. Brett Josef Grubisic, Gisele M Baxter, and Tara Lee (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2014), 96.
25. Adams, "The Ends of America," 266.
26. Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces," 18–9.
27. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 156.
28. Yamashita, 156–7.
29. Yamashita, 162, 205.
30. Yamashita, 93.
31. Yamashita, 162.
32. Yamashita, 162.
33. Adams, "The Ends of America," 263.
34. Hande Tekdemir, "Magical Realism in the Peripheries of the Metropolis: A Comparative Approach to *Tropic of Orange* and Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills," *The Comparatist* 35 (2011): 43.
35. Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier," 98.
36. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 212.
37. Tekdemir, "Magical Realism," 50.
38. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 132–4, 262.
39. Tekdemir, "Magical Realism," 42.
40. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 220.
41. Yamashita, 61.
42. Yamashita, 154.
43. Yamashita, 86.
44. Yamashita, 189–91.
45. Adams, "The Ends of America," 259.
46. Adams, 260.
47. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 213.
48. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 392.
49. Davis, 393.
50. Soja, "Taking Los Angeles Apart," 222.
51. Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier," 96.
52. Adams, "The Ends of America," 267.
53. Tekdemir, "Magical Realism," 46–7.
54. Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier," 107.
55. Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces," 4.
56. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 129.
57. Mermann-Jozwiak, "Yamashita's Post-National Spaces," 4.
58. Robin Blyn, "Belonging to the Network: Neoliberalism and Postmodernism in *Tropic of Orange*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 2 (2016): 194–5; and Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier," 106.
59. Adams, "The Ends of America," 252.
60. Blyn, "Belonging to the Network," 202.
61. Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 176.
62. Yamashita, 192.
63. Tekdemir, "Post-Frontier," 96.