



Essay

Karen Tei Yamashita and Magical Realism: Re-Membering Community, Undoing Borders

Ruth Yvonne Hsu

Department of English, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA; rhsu@hawaii.edu

Abstract: Yamashita's use of mythic verism in *Tropic of Orange* and a reimagined doppelgänger trope in *I Hotel* depicts the ir/real nature of the taxonomy of identity and of Asian America and other minority groups being constituted in and beyond the mainstream or conventional understanding of the idea of America and of the identity of the US nation-state as being built upon discursive technologies of amnesia and misinterpellation of the subject of US history and its Other.

Keywords: hegemony; postcolonial; Asian American; transnationalism; no borders; migration

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest (Yamashita 2017a) is Karen Tei Yamashita's first novel and the one for which her writing is most identified as "magic realist".¹ Scholars of Yamashita's corpus have noted that her fiction never significantly repeats plot or character; if there is a diegetic Yoknapatawpha County in Yamashita's fiction, it is global in scale, consisting of Asian America, the Americas, and Asia (particularly, Japan, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Korea).^{2,3} However, Yamashita's writing (novels, drama, short stories, essays) do exhibit recurring themes that are presented in various diegetic universes, nonlinear chronotopes, and manipulations of realist and nonrealist Western and Asian literary traditions. Yamashita's innovative storytelling is often satirical, parodic, erudite, and ultimately un beholden to any single genre or literary aesthetic. Her writing has been described as an example of Asian American literary avant-garde (Ling 2012, p. 17).⁴ Yamashita's body of work shows an abiding commitment to representing her understanding of the complex transnational flows between and among geopolitical locations of history, power, identity in Asia and the Americas, and, most of all, the depiction of fictional characters whose lives can be thought of as mundane and yet beneath the surface are filled with vitality and courage. Moreover, a recurring effect of reading Yamashita is the effect of a reader perceiving that culture consists of cultures, produced through everyday living, and that geographical and political identifiers, such as national identity, consists of constructed, ir/real space and time. I use the virgule (slash, solidus) in ir/real to mean that the real and the ir-real are mutually constitutive, linked in dynamic contestation (not binary opposition) and, hence, make clear that borders of segregation and alienation are impossible. The ontological and existential ramifications of the idea that identity at all scaler levels is a discursive construct is urgently relevant to the present moment of worldwide and polycentric existential crisis; identity (regional, national, group, individual) as a discursive construct and the extremist and nihilistic violence that an essentialist view of identity rationalizes is one of the issues that this essay on Yamashita's use of magical realism aims to unpack.⁵

Briefly, at this introductory stage, I would like to explain that this essay examines two types of magical realism—classical magical realism in *Tropic of Orange* and a more secular version, located in Yamashita's Ulysses-like *I Hotel*, through her use of the trope of the doppelgänger. My analysis of magical realism in *Tropic of Orange* focuses on Mesoamerican mythological elements in the characterization of Arcangel and Rafaela as well as their roots in Christian mythology; when analyzing these two characters within the Mesoamerican traditions, I will borrow the term, mythic verism, first proposed by Vizenor (1989, p. 190).



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The core argument of this essay is that Yamashita's use of mythic verism and a reimagined doppelgänger trope depicts the ir/real nature of the taxonomy of identity and of Asian America and other minority groups being constituted in and beyond the mainstream or conventional understanding of the idea of America and of the identity of the United States (US) nation-state as being built upon discursive technologies of amnesia and misinterpellation of the subject of US history and its Other.⁶ Asian Americans—in terms of historical and cultural representations—have been part of a global and longstanding network of peoples and beliefs both within and outside of the political borders of the US; Asian Americans are distinct, yet have similar (not to be read as identical) worldviews and should be viewed as allies with similarly othered peoples—no matter how contingently—through our experience of Western colonialism and a rapidly deteriorating Earth. (Yamashita's (2017a) *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is a prescient portrayal of environmental degradation brought about largely by transnational corporations and globalizing capitalism.) Yamashita's representation of people of color is expansive, consisting of multiplicity and dynamism across time and space; Asian American and other minority-group characters are agential storytellers and not the stock or flat character types found in popular texts on television and film.

In order to underline the breadth and depth of Yamashita's deployments of magical realism, I will contextualize the previous points within the larger canvas of her literary corpus. Her writing revolves around the lives of politically, socially, and economically marginalized peoples in the Americas and in Asia; her work deals with the many ravages of global capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism; with the racial and ethnic and gendered taxonomy enabling systemic oppression; and with the many forms of resistance, including the victories and defeats, of the marginalized. Consistently, her storytelling foregrounds the inherent dignity of ordinary persons and their lives. Dissertations, monographs, anthologies, chapters in books, essays in academic journals, and numerous book reviews are being written and have been written on her work, from the disciplinary perspective of economics, ethnic studies, critical cultural studies, aesthetics, human geography, women's studies, environmental studies, literature departments, and many more. Her writing is taught in numerous college departments (Hsu and Thoma 2022). Additionally, her writing has been credited with repositioning Asian American literary studies—its rhizomatic roots and eruptive evolutionary paths—from one that is captive, the minor, to the white supremacist nationalistic mythos of the US to one that foregrounds a nonwhite, native, and transnational and transcultural worldview. Further, the transnational turn in Asian American literary scholarship is a notable feature of the hemispheric turn of US literary studies as a whole. Yamashita's may not be a household name; nonetheless, her writing has a devoted following in and beyond academia, in the US, and in academic communities in Brazil, Okinawa, Japan, Germany, Ukraine, Austria, the People's Republic of China, and more. The National Book Foundation awarded Yamashita the 2021 Lifetime Achievement Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. The NBF's description of Yamashita's work reads partly, "Yamashita's deeply creative body of work has made a lasting impact on our literary landscape" and "[t]hrough adept crafting, passionate research, and timely narratives, Yamashita defines, and re-defines . . . what storytelling can do . . . she compels and challenges readers to engage with ideas, identities, and complicated worlds that mirror the complexity of life".⁷

Yamashita's innovative use of mythic verism in *Tropic of Orange* and a secularized magical realism in *I Hotel* reveals her complex view of identity and reality, itself; indeed, both these novels consist of thematic clusters connecting to other clusters on notions of the past, of space-time, and of radically non-Western forms of storytelling and worldviews. The topical concerns found in Yamashita's books often assume the shape of a potent rhizome, consisting of multiple and centripetal thematic nodes.^{8,9}

Tropic of Orange—We Are Still Here

The innovative aspects of the magical realist characters, Arcangel and Rafaela, reside in how they are depicted within dual ontological registers. Both agential characters can be

read as part of the Christian angelic pantheon and, simultaneously, as part of Mesoamerican traditions. Arcangel is at least 500 hundred years old; he possesses superhuman strength (for example, he uses hooks and chains to drag a truck and its load of oranges many meters in distance) and supernatural powers (he pulls the latitudinal line of the Tropic of Cancer northward with him to the US). Arcangel's supernatural vision enables him to map a geohistory of the Americas consisting of the enormous suffering of the people over many centuries. Arcangel, 'Perhaps, I have seen more than a man may ever wish to see.' He closed his eyes for a long moment. He could see,

Haitian farmers burning and slashing cane,
Workers stirring molasses into white gold.
Guatemalans loading trucks with
Crates of bananas and corn.
Indians . . .
Chewing coca and drinking aguardiente to
Dull the pain of their labor . . .

All of them crowded into his memory in a single moment (Yamashita 2017b, Arcangel—"Chapter 23: To Labor: East and West Forever" in the column "Thursday: The Eternal Buzz," p. 125).¹⁰

Arcangel in "Chapter 7: To Wake: The Marketplace" in "Monday: Summer Solstice", laments,

Ah woe is the great land of Brazil,
Discovered in 1500
By Pedro Alvares Cabral.
Doom! Doom! Doom!
Doom in the year 2020!
Or,
Woe is Patagonia
Discovered by Ferdinand Magellan in 1519.
In this year also,
Hernan Cortes discovered Mexico.

(Yamashita 2017b, p. 45)¹¹

The narration constructs Arcangel as the figure of a spirit of the Americas; for several hundred years, he has been both witness to and has taken on the suffering endured by the many peoples of the land; he is also a warrior—El Gran Mojado—on behalf of native peoples, and he journeys to the US to battle SUPERNAFTA, the textual iteration of Western colonialism and imperialism. It is important to note that Arcangel is not a transcendental abstraction; he consists of muscle, sinew, sweat, blood.

For instance, earlier in the book, in a scene that evokes for readers familiar with the Passion of Christ, Arcangel "clenched his fist and moved forward" (Yamashita 2017b, p. 66),

The skin against his abdomen
spread itself
as tanned leather over a drum, the hooks
drawing the large lobes of skin
backwards. In fact,
the entire surface of Arcangel's person—
from the skin on his face and his flowing white hair
to the legs of his pants—

seemed to be drawn back to the truck,
as if he were facing
a great tunnel of wind.

(Yamashita 2017b, "Chapter 11: To Wash: On the Tropic" on "Tuesday: Diamond Lane," p. 66)

"And so Arcangel, attached to his great burden, inched his way down the street . . . women and children had run forward to cup their hands to catch the blood and sweat from his torn stigmata . . ." (Yamashita 2017b, "Chapter 11: To Wash: On the Tropic" on "Tuesday: Diamond Lane," pp. 66–67). Arcangel literally and figuratively takes on the suffering of the people.

This is an appropriate location in the essay to unpack the term mythic verism. Warnes (2020) and Camayd-Freixas (2020), in their separate chapters in *Magic Realism and Literature*, unpack the complicated history of magical realism: in the period of the European Enlightenment, concepts of rationality, consciousness, and scientific objectivity came to dominate the production of knowledge, aesthetic judgement, and the realm of ethics and morality. Enlightenment ideas were thought to mean the inherent superiority and supremacy of Western man above all other creatures, including native peoples. In short, every part of the world outside of Europe was recast by Western epistemology as the Other, that is, as inherently irrational, primitive-minded, and subjugated by beliefs in savage gods and witches and their witchcraft and magic. Moreover, reality consists of the physical, observable, and tangible, whereas the magical—phenomenon that cannot be explained by scientific methods or by applications of logic—is therefore false or not real. Magical realism is a term that refers to an inter/ir/ruption of reality, which in Western thought is the norm.

Bowers, in "Indigeneity and Magic Realism: From Appropriation to Resurgence", explains the ways in which Native scholars rightly argue that magical realism does not adequately describe the function of and value of myth, story, or the understanding of the natural in works by Native authors (in Warnes and Sasser 2020, pp. 49–63). Magic, for many non-Western cultures, is indelibly part of the mundane world; magic and reality are both forms of existence that are mutually constitutive and complementary. Bowers writes that for Native scholars, myth and story do not connote "no basis in reality"; instead, these words point to natural and necessary dimensions of human expressions and ways of being in the world. Bowers further notes that what is understood to be myth in the west has been replaced by the word, story, by many Native American scholars and writers, for "[s]tory is a concept understood from within Native American cultures to be at the heart of the creation and continuity of Native American cultural thought" (Bowers 2020 in Warnes and Sasser 2020, p. 57). Stated somewhat differently, within Western epistemology, myth is false, "made-up", stories of fantastical beasts and gods that existed only in the human imagination; story, on the other hand, implies a kernel of truth garnered from the daily affairs of Man. Contrastively, in the view of many Native American scholars, the term story consists of words that create reality.¹² Mythic verism, the term favored by Vizenor, consists of two equally valued concepts. Vizenor, Bowers argues, envisions "a version of [literary] realism that is holistic and inclusive of aspects of the world beyond what can be seen" (Bowers 2020 in Warnes and Sasser 2020, p. 57). Native American authors, poets, and scholars—by using mythic verism instead of magical realism—aim to undo Western epistemological colonialism.

The use of mythic verism in *Tropic of Orange*, and the use of a secular form of magical realism in *I Hotel*, asks readers to engage in "crossreading", in which the reader attempts a transcultural "crossing over between 'epistemologically new worlds'", rather than tethering herself to a singular, and often essentialized, worldview (Owens 1998 qtd. in Bowers 2020 in Warnes and Sasser 2020, p. 56). Admittedly, a transcultural reading persona is a difficult one to build in a sustainable fashion; nonetheless, reading Yamashita is a means of acquiring the skills of a crossreader.

Arcangel, a.k.a., El Gran Mojado, battles SUPERNAFTA, while Rafaela battles drug and human organ traffickers, epitomized by Hernando, Dona Maria's son; Arcangel and Rafaela are doubles of each other, fighting on behalf of the dispossessed. In the penultimate battle scene between Rafaela and Hernando, Rafaela manifests as the Mesoamerican god called the Plumed or Feathered Serpent. This stirring battle is worth quoting at some length:

The sound of her screams traveled south but not north. He jammed her into the leather cavern of the black Jaguar [Hernando's car]—suddenly a great yawning universe in the night . . . Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent—sinuous and suddenly powerful. She thrashed at him with vicious fangs—ripping his ears, gouging his neck, drawing blood . . . Her mouth gaped a torch of fire, scorching his black fur. Two tremendous beasts wailed and groaned, momentarily stunned by their transformations, yet poised for war. Battles passed as memories: massacred men and women, their bloated and twisted bodies black with blood, stacked in ruined buildings and canals; one million more decaying with smallpox; kings and revolutionaries betrayed . . .

As night fell, they began their horrific dance with death, gutting and searing the tissue of their existence, copulating in rage, destroying and creating at once—the apocalyptic fulfillment of a prophecy—blood and semen commingling among shredded serpent and feline remains.

(Yamashita 2017b, “Chapter 38: Nightfall Aztlán” on “Saturday: Queen of Angels” p. 189)

Rafaela most certainly survives this battle with Hernando, whose trafficking business is a consequence, if not a systemic slice of the global capitalist economy, and its brutal rationale of supply and demand. Rafaela's physical injuries attest to the human aspect of the powerful Plumed Serpent. In my essay, “Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange and Chaos Theory”, I offer an extensive description of this powerful god, also known as Quetzalcoatl, who possibly dates back to “the middle of the second millennium” (Hsu 2018 in Lee 2018, p. 114). The Plumed Serpent assumed a protean quality in Mesoamerican traditions and came to mark renewal and “the fluid force of the wind” (Brundage, qtd. in Hsu 2018 in Lee 2018, p. 115).

Rafaela, as the modern embodiment of the Plumed Serpent, illustrates that Mesoamerican gods are alive and working to bring more justice to indigenous peoples. This character, in its human form, is also a maternal figure (to Sol) and a counterweight to Bobby's materialistic ambitions. Her decision to leave Bobby jolts him into realizing that material possessions are poor substitutes to Sol and to Rafaela; in short, she cures him of his addiction to wealth and his addiction to the role of the model minority, which is to be enslaved to the nationalistic trope of the immigrant climbing the ladder of the American Dream. In James Martel's terms, the regime of capitalist and neoliberal interpellation—to which Bobby seemingly willingly submits—always contains gaps, that is, the distance between the promise of financial success and belonging and actual results—most of the time, persons identified as people of color are prevented from achieving as much as they are promised.

The magical nature of Rafaela derives in addition from her links to the Archangel Raphael, who is considered a healer in three religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The figure of the Archangel Raphael in *Tropic of Orange* illustrates the close kinship of these three major religions and the political exigencies accumulated over the centuries that have erased the history and memory of their kinship; the followers of these three monotheistic religions have become enemies. The essential point in *Tropic of Orange* is that identity in terms of religion is constructed from discursive and historical conditions.¹³ In short, it is the clinging to fundamentalist identity that enables the othering of those whom we perceive as different from us and that enables our rationalizing our feelings of hatred and enmity toward them.

Yamashita's use of the Archangel Raphael connects this figure to the Archangel Gabriel (the character Gabriel in *Tropic of Orange*) and Archangel Michael (Arcangel). Crossreading

Rafaela and Arcangel from within the Mesoamerican and Judaic, Islamic, and Christian traditions will bring readers closer to the way that Rafaela is a blending of these traditions and to the way that *Tropic of Orange* is thematically organized.

I Hotel—We Are Multitudes

Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* is a 604-page tour de force novel focusing on the Asian American Movement within the historical context of the Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam War, and counter-cultural movements of the 1950s to the 1970s. The novel consists of ten novellas, representing the years 1968 to 1977; in 1977, the multiethnic battle to save the International Hotel ended when police stormed the International Hotel building and ejected any remaining residents, mostly indigent Asian Americans. As in *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita's narrative canvas consists of polycentric thematic clusters to do with identity constructs; and the common cause that exists among racial and ethnic groups; and the idea that social, political, and economic justice is an ongoing battle that must be persistently fought for. Well-known philosophers, politicians, and revolutionaries make cameo appearances in *I Hotel*, and the diegesis focuses predominantly on the everyday living of ordinary characters. Due to space constraints, I focus this essay on the chapter Theatre of the Double Ax from the novella, *1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel*, and specifically on the literary double or doppelgänger trope. The figure of the doppelgänger, in Theatre of the Double Ax, is not supernatural nor mythical figures from the mists of prehistory; however, the doubles in this chapter can be read as secularized magical characters, particularly when linked with the chapter Chiquita Banana! (in *1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel*). I will unpack the significance of the doppelgänger as an instantiation of secular realism.

I use the term secular magic realism to mean that the doppelgängers in Theatre of the Double Ax are diegetically constructed as if they have magical powers, but only in the very narrow sense that these characters appear out of nowhere, as if out of the air; however, they are not other-worldly nor supernatural beings. Rather, the doppelgängers are Homo sapiens situated in the physical and material world represented in *I Hotel*—Yamashita tells a story about revolutions that rise and fall due to human actions; the divine has no part.

In the section "Doppelgangsters" in Theatre of the Double Ax, Gerald K. Li encounters a white man who appears suddenly walking toward Gerald. This white man looks like him and is also named Gerald K. Li. Gerald then runs into another twin, also with the same name, before he encounters a third double. The nonrational, almost magical way in which the Gerald K. Li doubles show up in the story is worth exploring in detail:

Looking down the road, he sees a man approaching with two black cases, one in [sic] each hand . . .

"Smoke?" he offers Gerald.

.

.

.

"Let me introduce myself", says the man. "I'm Gerald K. Li".

"What do you mean you're Gerald K. Li?"

"You don't know Gerald K. Li, the great Chinese saxophonist?"

"Well, yeah, but you're not even Chinese".

.

.

.

Gerald looks hard at the white guy and thinks it could be true. This guy could be the white version of his Chinese self (Yamashita 2019, p. 266).

Even though Gerald recognizes that the man could be his twin, he fights the white Gerald and takes the other man's money, one hundred dollars (later, Gerald finds only ten) earned playing saxophone as Gerald K. Li, the "great Chinese saxophonist"; Gerald K. Li

also takes the two black cases presumably containing saxophones—the original Gerald is able to play a saxophone from each side of his mouth. This magical ability stands for this character’s ability to blow simultaneously hot and cold, or to speak fraudulently out of both sides of his mouth. Next, near Stockton, Gerald runs into a Chinese American who confesses that he is known as Gerald K. Li. Then, Gerald arrives in Merced, decides he badly needs a drink, walks into a bar and “[T]he bartender looks at Gerald significantly, and when Gerald bothers to look back, he freezes in shock. He’s staring at his twin, his spitting image, his actual doppelgänger” (Yamashita 2019, p. 271). Gerald is then surprised to be addressed by his “doppelgänger” as Jack, Jack Sung, the poet. The Merced Gerald K. Li tells Gerald/Jack that he is Joe, Jack’s brother. Gerald tells Gerald K. Li/Joe Sung at one point, “‘You do look like me’. Gerald is still amazed at the mirror image” (Yamashita 2019, p. 274). Gerald K. Li/Joe Sung and Gerald/Jack Sung switch places; Joe Sung, the former bartender, wants to work actively on revolution. After Gerald/Joe leaves, Gerald/Jack takes over the bar. For over two weeks, no one notices that it is Gerald and not Joe behind the bar, or perhaps, Gerald is Jack’s double, making him also Joe’s twin. It is the magical quality of these doubles’ interjection into realist diegesis (ordinary streets, bars along Route 99, an actual storied highway) that brings these Gerald K. Lis and Jack Sung under the category of magical realism. However, unlike the supernatural entities that appear in classical magical realist fiction, the Gerald K. Li/Jack Sung are not angelic or supernatural. For that reason, I would use the term secular magical realism to describe this literary device in *I Hotel*.

Eran Dorfman in *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism* writes that the doppelgänger in Western literature is frequently portrayed as a furtive or secretive figure, a malignant shadow portending disaster, or a figure with which the “real” original, the protagonist, must combat. The doppelgänger becomes in the first half of the twentieth century the container of aspects of the self that must be denied, that must be rejected and exiled outside of the self. This move sets up an existential battle between different parts of the self, which is ultimately self-destructive. Dorfman argues that, instead, “the crucial thing about the double . . . is to reconcile it with the pretentious original . . . the question is how to make them complement rather than contradict and fight each other” (Dorfman 2020, p. 2). To Dorfman, the rejected pieces of the self are aspects of the self’s “multiple identity, namely, an identity that accepts the double as an integral part of itself . . . the double is never a singular entity . . . the double is not simply an alter ego, a similar Other with which I somehow need to cope. The double . . . incarnates the inevitable remainder and opaque element of singular subjectivity and stable self-identity, connecting them to other beings and identities. The double is what defies unicity and opens up the subject to multiplicity, since it reveals that the boundaries between I and world, I and Other, I and me, are far from being clear” (Dorfman 2020, p. 3). The doppelgängers in *Theatre of the Double Ax* significantly reimagine the conventional Western metaphor by taking it out of the service of Western narratives based on fear, insecurities, and denial. Yamashita, in short, has appropriated the Western doppelgänger for her own purpose in *I Hotel*.

The first important point to note about the doubles in *Theatre of the Double Ax* is that Gerald does not fear his doubles; he does not see them as malignant entities: Gerald is initially merely incredulous that a white man can look like his twin; the Stockton Gerald K. Li resembles Gerald to such a degree that he does not even remark on Stockton Gerald’s features; the Merced doubling is the most astounding—the Gerald K. Li/Jack/Joe Sung doubling occurs as if it is an optical illusion, a magic trick. Additionally, the doubles do not evoke the trope of the abject, alienated other nor the trope of the vengeful return of the rejected or orphaned self nor the intervention of angelic visitations in the affairs of humanity.^{14,15} Gerald fights his doubles but not in mortal combat, not in desperate fear nor aversion of the othered self. The kung fu-style fight scenes consist of drawings and descriptions of the 108 moves of a t’ai qi set, but these creative and exciting descriptions are not identical to the descriptions of actual t’ai qi sets (Yamashita 2019, pp. 267–68, 270–71, 273–74, 276–77). Gerald K. Li is intertextually associated with Iron Ox of the 108

outlaws in *The Water Margin*. Like Iron Ox, Gerald is a big eater and likes to drink alcohol (Yamashita 2019, p. 269); he likes to get into fights; he has a double saxophone and Iron Ox wields two axes. On the other hand, even though Gerald easily gets into fights, he is a reluctant revolutionary and does not see himself as a champion of the masses. Nonetheless, Gerald is well-known in local jazz scenes as the “Chinese saxophonist”. Additionally, in the narrative world of *I Hotel*, which seeks to reimagine Asian American culture as central to the narrative of America, Gerald is a cultural revolutionary in that he helps to undercut the racist stereotype of Chinese and Asian Americans as merely coolie labor or computer nerd; in *I Hotel*, Asian American and other people of color are revolutionaries, musicians, singers, architects, and protagonists.

The second key point regarding Yamashita’s innovative secularization of magical realism has to do with her extended allusion to *The Water Margin*, a novel that has been passed down through generations in the Sinophone world and that has been adapted in modern times into comics, films, and television. Yamashita brings *The Water Margin*, specifically the story of Iron Ox, into modern-day US in order to spotlight the power of the common people in resisting and forging meaningful changes in their lives. Notably, one of the distinctive features of the epic *The Water Margin* is that it is the first novel to be written in the vernacular (speech used by ordinary persons as opposed to the Chinese language used by intellectuals or by court officials) of the time, the Northern Song Dynasty. In terms of the larger canvas of *I Hotel*, Theatre of the Double Ax points to the close similarities between the narrative world of *The Water Margin* and the narrative world of *I Hotel* of the US Civil Rights, counter-cultural, and Asian American movements, when outnumbered and relatively powerless individuals and small groups combat mendacious and corrupt society on behalf of commoners. Like much of the history of Asian Americans, *The Water Margin* tells the story of honorable men and women forced into exile or a marginalized life and labeled as merely bandits. Yamashita’s allusion to the 108 outlaws links these heroes to Asian American cultural and political revolutionaries fighting an oppressive US socio-political and economical system on behalf of the marginalized and disenfranchised. The overall structure of *I Hotel* asks readers to perceive the marginalized as multiracial and multiethnic, and not only as a particular minority group. Yamashita’s intertextual deployment of the outlaw, Iron Ox, foregrounds his filial piety toward his mother, the central woman in his story. This character’s heroism, in *I Hotel*, is not narcissistic individualism modeled after an Enlightenment-based American individualism; it consists of acts of valor in the service of the disempowered and of the aged.

The third key point is that Yamashita’s doppelgänger depicts the vital, life-giving utility of the legacy of Asian cultural heroes in Asian America. The story arc in Theatre of the Double Ax illustrates that descendants of Asian immigrants should not feel shame or ambivalence about their cultural ancestry; instead, they can claim and integrate aspects of their past into their American subjectivity. “Where is Asian America?” is a refrain tactically embedded in the story that eventually elicits from a reader the realization that Asian America is everywhere in America, where railroads were built, where migrant workers set up camp, where urban centers took root and grew, in jazz clubs, in sit-ins, and in political demonstrations. Asian American culture as portrayed in *I Hotel* is dynamic and blended with non-Asian worldviews.

The fourth key point about Yamashita’s doppelgänger is that it helps to unpack the discursive and material nature of identity constructs: Gerald’s double is the white Gerald and the Stockton Gerald and the Merced Gerald and Jack/Joe Sung. The narrative technique of doubling re-members all marginalized peoples as sharing a common history—a marginalized subject is constituted by the socio-political superstructure of wherever that subject is located. A racist discourse would have the racialized subject split off parts of the self that a Euro-centric, white supremacist, normative discourse signifies as the Other. The doppelgänger figure in this chapter works against that reductive and essentialist formulation of identity. Further, while magical realism—the intervention of magical beings, frequently angelic in nature—focuses the core of magical realist stories on supernatural

interventions; one of the essential implied theses of *I Hotel* is that the future of Asian Americans lies in the hands of Asian Americans (and their allies) rather than in other-worldly interventions. This reading of the doppelgänger is aligned with the interlinked narratives of the ten novellas consisting of *I Hotel*, that is, revolutions or substantial changes in common lives is forged in the red-hot crucible of everyday living.

“Chiquita Banana!”, immediately preceding “Doppelgangsters”, is a parody of the masculinist worldview that dominates *The Theatre of the Double Ax* and its analogous text, *The Water Margin*. First, Chiquita Banana’s two daughters (drawn as bananas)—Suzie and Anna May Wong¹⁶—are conjoined twins, a double of Chang and Eng, the actual conjoined twins, originally from Siam, and presumably from which the phrase Siamese twins derives. Readers in the US may recognize the name Suzie Wong and its connotative meaning in American popular culture. Anna May Wong has become better known in recent years; her image is on one of an unprecedented set of quarters rolled out in 2022 by the US Mint. Chiquita Banana tries to shoot her lover, Don Juan Samuel, who has been drugging and pimping out Anna May and Suzie. Instead, Don Juan grabs Chiquita Banana’s gun and shoots her. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Suzie’s and Anna May’s sister, Moulan Rouge from China, magically arrives on the scene; she chops Don Juan in half with one of her two broad swords and separates the conjoined twins, Suzie and Anna May, with a blow from her other sword. The final frame of this short graphic narrative shows one of the newly separated (or released?) twins asking, “Now what?”, while Moulan Rouge from China hugs her. This narrative allows for multiple layers of interpretation. Chiquita Banana is dressed to remind the reader of Carmen Miranda. Additionally, the name Chiquita stands for Chiquita International, an American company that was the largest producer and distributor of bananas and other produce. The company in late 2014 merged with two Brazilian companies. Banana (and pineapple and orange production in the Americas) has a long and convoluted colonial history that is best dealt with in a different venue. For purposes of this analysis of the doppelgänger in *I Hotel*, Suzie and Anna May are conjoined twins; both cope with “low self-esteem;” both have secret dreams of becoming performers, they are the children of a colonial history primarily via their mother, Chiquita. Suzie and Anna May mirror each other and they are constituted in the transnational discursive Imaginary of Asia and the Americas. Mother and daughters continue to be exploited by a neoimperialist, multinational capitalistic system. Significantly, it is Moulan Rouge who magically appears to save Suzie and Anna May; Chiquita cannot be saved. “Chiquita Banana” underscores the necessity of understanding colonialism in Asia in order to more fully grasp the history of the indigenous and Asian America in the US. The taxonomy of identity is constructed by a Euro-centric and white supremacist mythology; on occasion, lasting and meaningful transgression of US nationalistic hegemony needs outside intervention, in the form of legacy stories and cultural heroes transported from stories from beyond the confines of the US. The narrative world of *I Hotel* is not defined as an essentialist or singular cultural reality.

In “War & Peace”, the narrative gradually undoes or, at least, troubles essentialist and binary definitions of identity. The novella that includes this chapter is entitled *1971: Aiiieeeee! Hotel* (Chan et al. 2019), a reference to the two anthologies that attempted to delimit the real (versus fake) Asian American and Chinese American and Chinese cultures. The first page of “War & Peace” consists of two drawings of Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston. The captions say “Son” and “Daughter” (Yamashita 2019, p. 244); the backgrounds of the two drawings are two nondescript houses, probably representations of their childhood homes. On the next page are two drawings of a more mature or older Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin; the captions say “Sister” and “Brother”, meaning that they are figurative siblings. The backgrounds of both borderless drawings, separated by a gutter, are drawings of the Golden Gate bridge, one larger than the other. The next set of drawings furthers the suggestion that these two literary personae are doubles of each other (Yamashita 2019, p. 246): the drawing of a monkey is in the background of the drawing of Frank Chin; the caption says “Wittman Ah Sing”, which is the name of the protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, written by Maxine Hong Kingston.

Kingston, in that novel, links Chin intertextually with one of the most famous and powerful mythical characters in Chinese literature, the Monkey King. Simply stated, Chin is the contemporary and American Monkey King (Wu and Yu 1977). The caption under the drawing of Kingston is Pandora Toy, which is the name of a character in *Gunga Din Highway* by Chin; Pandora Toy is Chin's unforgiving satire of Kingston. Under both captions on this page is the word "Fake". Both Wittman Ah Sing and Pandora Toy are fake in the sense that they are fictional creations. "Fake" also refers to the polemic that Chin launched at Kingston, criticizing her writing as disseminating fake Chinese culture: Chin accused Kingston of pandering to her white readers and their fetish for the myths, legends, and Chinese American characters in her breakout novel, *Woman Warrior*. The obvious problem with this argument is that no one has the authority or ability to determine what makes an authentic culture. The two drawings on page 246 (Yamashita 2019) are drawn as if they are moving toward each other, across the gutter, and will soon merge. On the next page, readers see Kingston associated with the famous Fa Mulan, supposedly "Real" (the caption under the caption, Fa Mulan) but only in the sense that this character is the protagonist of a poem about a woman who disguises herself as a man in order to fight in an army against rebels. Frank Chin is likened to Kwan Kung, who is both the god of war and literature. Kwan Kung stands for the belief that literature can be a method of warfare, and that a warrior should be adept in both the pen and in martial arts. The last two pages of "War & Peace" are noteworthy. They show a more elderly Chin and Kingston; the captions say father and mother and father and mother in Chinese writing. The backgrounds show parts of a Chinese dragon, which is a supreme entity, god of both the sky and waters of the Earth, and the emblem of emperors. The captions for the two drawings on the last page say, simply, Patriarch and Matriarch, meaning that they are both, in their own way, the father and mother, the patriarch and matriarch of Asian American literature.

In conclusion, Karen Tei Yamashita's deployment of mythic verism in *Tropic of Orange* and of a secularized magical realism in the form of the doppelgänger in *I Hotel* bring about radical deconstructions of the underlying structuring that enables binary and essentialist formulations of identity categories. These identity categories restrain, distort, and discipline the bodies of immigrants and of people of color under the regime of heteronormativity and Euro-centric, white supremacy. Yamashita's work seeks to foreground nonessentialist worldviews and favors multiplicity-in-identity. Her idea of community is expansive, inclusive, and always open, fluid in membership; her vision of community is that of a coming-community, or many such communities of ordinary persons.

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Notes

- ¹ Yamashita's three most taught books are *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, *Tropic of Orange*, and *I Hotel*. These three novels contain marked uses of magical realism. Coffee House Press reissued these novels in 2017, 2017, and 2019, respectively. This essay refers to the reissued editions.
- ² William Faulkner created an imaginary place in his fiction called Yoknapatawpha County. A helpful digital project on this imagined space is the [Digital Yoknapatawpha \(2016\)](http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/family/credits.php) <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/family/credits.php> (accessed on 26 October 2022).
- ³ Rody writes about Yamashita and "[h]er gigantic canvasses and striking designs, as they accommodate a transnational scope and histories of global migration, become arenas for the dramatic interactions of people of multiple histories, languages memories, and tastes in food and music who tend to morph into crowds of distinct classes or ethnicities, which then converge in spectacular crowd-meets-crowd scenes" (Rody 2022, p. 99).
- ⁴ Jinqi Ling, in analyzing Yamashita's novels, offers a complex and extended analysis of the term avant garde, "I redeploy the term to show that the concept "avant-garde" is not a self-sufficient aesthetic category tied to particular historical situations or moments, but a multiaccidental configuration able to link radically experimental aesthetics to radical political critique beyond the context of its birth. 'Asian American literary avant-garde' thus implies, in my usage, an expansion of the term beyond its traditional

emphasis on Euro-American formalism rooted either in modernist or, according to Robert Boyers, certain early Euro-American postmodernist (thence high modernist) literature (1991, 726–728)". (Ling 2012, p. 17).

5 Eran Dorfman writes in *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism*, "I consider the significance of the double in an age of identity politics. The double unveils the interdependency not only between me and the Other but also between different social and political groups. The personal drama of love and hate provoked by the double can serve as a model to understand the broader convolutions in which peoples and social groups are enmeshed. I consider the bilateral complex relationship that binds together Israelis and Palestinians. These two peoples are actually doubles of each other, and I use Sartre's text *Anti-Semite and Jew*, as well as Girard's theory of the surrogate victim, to show that rival groups need each other to define themselves, yet they refuse to admit that this is so" (Dorfman 2020, p. 8).

6 James Martell's *The Misinterpellated Subject* has deeply influenced my thinking while preparing this essay on Yamashita's use of magical realism in *Tropic of Orange* and *I Hotel*. Martell's thesis is that the ruling elite's interpellation, that is, the construction of the other, reveals its own lack, its inability to completely subsume the target of its call to submit to the ruling elites' disciplinary regime. Much of Yamashita's writing undercuts "global capitalism and liberal ideology" (Martell 2017, p. 4). Martell continues, "I see the subject as having always been anarchist, decentralized, and multiple within herself . . . it takes a phenomenon like misinterpellation to make that evident to the subject herself" (Martell 2017, p. 6). Yamashita uses magical realism (and satire and parodic laughter, and a vast number of blended genres) to unseat the notion of the unitary subject, of narrative linearity, of Western literary elements of the protagonist and antagonist, and much more. In Yamashita's writing, literature mirrors societal oppressive, disciplinary regimes at the same time as her writing reveals the dominant regime's opposite double.

7 Other awardees over the years: Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ursula K. Le Guin, Don DeLillo. The NBF also noted that even though Yamashita's writing may not have a wide popular following, she enjoys a committed readership among scholars and other avid, general readers. <https://www.nationalbook.org/national-book-foundation-to-present-lifetime-achievement-award-to-karen-tei-yamashita/> (accessed since November 2021).

8 The image of the rhizome is commonly associated with its appearance in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (Felix and Guattari 1987); its anarchical organization fits with Yamashita's experimental and highly unconventional stories.

9 Vernon Cisney's analysis of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Cisney, Vernon W. "The Writer Is a Sorcerer: Literature and the Becomings of A Thousand Plateaus". *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2020, pp. 457–80, <https://doi.org/10.3366/dlgs.2020.0412>.

10 A brief explanation of the dual chapter headings in the body of the text and in the citations: *Tropic of Orange* contains two tables of contents. "Contents" is a list that begins with "Monday: Summer Solstice" and concludes with "Sunday: Pacific Rim". Each day of the week consists of a list of chapters, from 1 to 49 in total. Readers can decide to read the novel from the first page to the final page, 230; from chapter 1 to 49. The novel has another table of contents, in a grid format. The top row of this grid runs from Monday to Sunday; the left-most column of this grid lists the names of the seven characters of *Tropic of Orange*: Rafaela Cortes, Bobby Ngu, Emi, Buzzworm, Manzanar Murakami, Gabriel Balboa, and Arcangel. Readers can read from column to column or from row to row—column to column will mean reading what happens with each character on Monday, then Tuesday, and so on. Reading row to row allows readers to follow a character, say, Bobby Ngu, day by day, from Monday to Sunday. In this essay, I will give the entries from "HyperContexts". The sequence of chapters used to read through *Tropic of Orange* does affect a reader's interpretation of the novel.

11 Yamashita reworked the litany of Western colonial invasion in *Tropic of Orange* into an incisive, comedic satire entitled "Manifesto Anthrobscene", published in an issue of *McSweeney's*, "Plundered". Artwork in "Manifesto Anthrobscene" is by Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira.

12 In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (Silko 1977), words do not only tell a story, words can heal or bring about destruction.

13 As this essay was being finalized, Salmon Rushdie was stabbed multiple times on stage at the Chautaugua Institution; media reports and responses from other writers and literary institutions show the widespread belief that the attacker was acting on the fatwa placed on Rushdie in 1989 by the Grand Ayatolla Khomeini due to Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, deemed by clerics such as Khomeini to be blasphemous against Mohammad and, hence, Islam.

14 Dorfman, in discussing the doppelgänger in Henri Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla", writes, ". . . the Horla . . . does not seem to represent anything ideal but rather everything that is dark and demonic" (Dorfman 2020, p. 30). On "The Shadow" by Hans Christian Anderson, Dorfman argues that "the conflict between the man and his shadow signifies a split between essence and appearance, that is, two forms of sight. The result of the split is the gradual transformation of the learned man himself into a shadow" to the utter abnegation of the original (Dorfman 2020, p. 6). In the epilogue of *Double Trouble*, Dorfman writes about the doublings—the feared Other, the denied Other—in the Palestinian–Jewish conflict. I am minimizing what I find to be one of the most compelling chapters of Dorfman's book when I quote, "The double is a savage, uncontrollable force, and the individual, if it wants to live and love, must admit its existence yet never completely possess it. It is by addressing myself but also others that I may come to terms with my doubles: others who preceded me and others who will come after me" (Dorfman 2020, p. 189). Yamashita's use of the doppelgänger is an attempt to embrace our multitudes of doubles, including the heroic and the shadow.

15 For example, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A very old man with enormous wings".

16 The caption of the first frame reads, ". . . by some guy named Wong" (Yamashita 2019, p. 262).

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