

# BRAZILIAN AND U.S. AMERICAN ISSEI/NISSEI WOMEN NOVELISTS: CROSSING BORDERS BRIDGING CULTURES

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present work aims at developing a comparative study of the Japanese immigration to the United States and to Brazil, using as its main source the literary production of some U.S. American and Brazilian issei/nissei women novelists. We emphasize the interface between gender and ethnic elements in their novels, as well as the poetics and politics of representation of Brazil in U.S. American fiction. We analyze some 'translations' of our reality developed by U.S. American writers, when they choose Brasil as the object of their fiction. We selected the work of the U.S. American nissei novelist Karen Tei Yamashita, who wrote two novels about Brazil: *Through the Arc of The Rainforest* (1990) and *Brazil Maru* (1992)*

**KEY WORDS:** *interculturalism; ethnicity; gender*

## 1 - CROSSING BORDERS

National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will  
give us an international dimension  
Franz Fanon.

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Brazil, using as its main source the literary production of North American and Brazilian issei/nissei<sup>1</sup> women novelists.

Another issue explored in this work deals with the relationship between literature and history; not long ago, to suggest that the search for historical materials should also include the study of novels required some courage. However, the more recent developments in history and literary theory point towards a variety of methodological and interdisciplinary initiatives. Today, we cannot neglect the relationship between factual authenticity and aesthetic truth; the sociohistorical dimension within literary studies has been expanding in a very rich dialectical creative process.

In her book on postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon uses the term *historiographic metafiction*, which she defines as

Novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. (...) *Historiographic metafiction* asks both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of the past? Of its documents? Of our narratives? (1992: 50).

She identifies a growing number of contemporary novels which have been using historical material in their fictional production; they aim at exposing and debating the impossibility of capturing the real through discursive representation. In the atmosphere of postmodernist theoretical formulations, these novels subvert the notion of objectivity and linguistic transparency, thus exposing in their fictional world the crisis of our present discursive system. These novels develop a critical reconstruction of traditional historical accounts without any intention of substituting it, since they reveal their own status as discursive construction which, as such, can be deconstructed and reconstructed. And as they are constructing this

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<sup>1</sup> Issei: immigrant born in Japan. Nissei: immigrant already born in another country, but of Japanese parents.

fictional-historical dialectic, they make their creative method an integral part of their aesthetic material, in sharp contrast with the “willing suspension of disbelief” much cultivated previously.

There is a different preoccupation underlying the historical/fictional production of these issei/nissei novelists, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes in her essay “Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature”:

*In this work, the disciplinary boundaries between literary studies and anthropology, sociology, history, and psychology are not clearly demarcated. The difference between historical construction and textual analysis is less significant than the process of recuperating and reconstructing ethnic and cultural identity. (LIM, 1993:150)*

The interdisciplinary approach to literature as cultural product thus creates sites for sociological, anthropological, and political expressions that undoubtedly enrich our literary searches.

Also related to the issue mentioned above is the interface of ethnicity and gender that we identify in these novels. In his book *Multiculturalism*, David Theo Goldberg writes that

*As nations acquire borders, so disciplines acquire boundaries, and for much the same reasons: for policing and self-policing what can be said and done, for ordering the unacceptable and the foreign, and for licensing membership and citizenship. ... However, the confinement of disciplines is inadequate in the task of representing and comprehending intersectional identities, the nodal points marking the confluence of ethnorace, class, gender, ability, and age. Indeed, disciplines are inadequate, and generally, for their necessary partiality, will fail to comprehend the complexity of nature and social life. (GOLDBERG, 1994:27-28).*

Fortunately, some famous and concrete walls, together with others of a different nature, are being destroyed, such as the well

defined realm of the master narratives which for so long constituted the much revered canon, as well as the boundaries between history and fiction, and the concept of national identities and frontiers. In choosing to study the work of these immigrant women writers, I join the interest of those who want to render their relevant production visible. The traditional monocultural presumptions and strategically (and artificially) constructed organic identity are being challenged by a host of writers from diverse ancestries, both male and female, which burst onto the traditional cultural scene.

The work that these women novelists have been developing is not only relevant from the literary point of view. It also demands to be read for its relevance as a historical, sociological source. These books are extremely important for the reconstruction of their ethnic identities - be it Japanese American or Japanese Brazilian - which underwent deep transformations when transplanted to Western culture. The novels we have studied have quite strong historical and sociological undertones. They explore basically political, economic, social problems, the conflicts and difficulties of assimilating and adapting to quite a distinct culture. Their marked features are: past narrative, immigrant history, race suffering, and communal relations.

It is important to remark here that, while analyzing these novels, the problem of voice and authority came to my mind. Not being a nissei myself, I sometimes feared that my research might be understood as a kind of *intellectual voyeurism*, ie, I would be trying to know the *other* only through their literary artifacts. Nevertheless, when I started this project I quite honestly believed that I might be contributing to bringing new elements to the relatively recent area of Japanese studies in the United States, and especially in Brazil; after all, although of Japanese descent, these women are Brazilian novelists writing in Portuguese and publishing in Brazil.

I would also be trying to understand the rich and complex dialectic construction of diasporic identities, the interplay of present cultural experiences and past heritage as transmuted in the fictional

production of these women writers. Equally important, how these novels would be enriching the concepts we have developed about our country and our literature.

Almost all the permanent migrants from Japan reside in Brazil, the United States, and Canada. Brazil has the largest population of Japanese outside Japan. Their immigration to Brazil started in 1908, reaching its climax between 1926 and 1935. By 1942 we had around 190.000 Japanese immigrants in Brazil. In the United States, the first immigrants arrived as political refugees in 1869. Afterwards, the immigration to the United States followed a different pattern, with secondary immigration from the Hawaiian islands, to where they had started immigrating in 1885. In the 1920s, the United States had around 180.000 Japanese immigrants but the Oriental Exclusion Acts stopped this intense flow of immigration.

One of the consequences of the differences between these two immigration processes is the generational composition of these two groups. In 1940, 58% of the 242.320 Japanese in Brazil were isseis, compared to 37% in the United States. At the same time, the Brazilian nissei population was very young then; in the United States, most of them were adults, and therefore ready for military service. This caused a serious identity crisis because Japan and the United States were at war. Moreover, as adults, they had deeper awareness of the consequences this war had brought them, especially the traumatic experience of the internment camps. And they were at an age that enabled them to document much of this experience in fictional and non-fictional works.

The Japanese in Brazil worked basically in agriculture. Because the Brazilian government required that contract labour was organized in family units, family life was a regular feature of the Japanese settlements in Brazil. Besides this, they only had the opportunity to interact with the coloured people, the *caboclos* and the illiterate people which formed our population of agricultural labourers. The strong feeling of nationalism of twentieth century Japan, and the notion that they formed a special and homogeneous race, made integration

in Brazil extremely difficult, where they relied heavily on their family life and on their Japanese community. In the United States, the vast majority of these immigrants was composed of male Japanese. The reaction against integration came from the Americans, who did not welcome this immigration.

Unfortunately, we cannot go further in analyzing the differences between these two immigration processes and the consequences they had in their integration with the new culture. It is important now to analyze the novels as relevant documentary sources for these processes.

These novels, especially the earliest ones, are historically significant texts because they show a strong concern with the history of their immigration; they draw heavily on the resources of biography, autobiography, community history and folk-tales, and reflect personal experiences, social observations, and collective memory. Without ever losing this characteristic of sociological documentation, some of the works are moving away towards more powerfully literary constructions, as is the case for example, of Yamashita's novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, written in the tradition of magic realism. In Brazil, we do not have as many books written in Portuguese. The ones we selected are: *Canção da Amazônia* (Fusako Tsunoda, 1988), *Sob dois Horizontes* (Mitsuko Kawai, 1988), *Ipê e Sakura: em Busca da Identidade* (Hiroko Nakamura, 1988), *Sonhos Bloqueados* (Laura Honda-Hasegawa, 1991), *Ryu Mizuno: Saga Japonesa em Terras Brasileiras* (Tereza Ratue Resende, 1991), *Horas e Dias do meu Viver* (Chikado Hironaka, 1991), *Antologia de Poesia Nikkei* (Akemi Waki et alli, 1993), and *Kiken* (Laura Honda Hasegawa, 2000).

The academic legitimacy of the field is already consolidated in the United States, where the area of Asian American Studies has become, in the last twenty years, a recognized body of texts that has been expanding and diversifying at a quick and firm pace. One of the books we read, *Nisei Daughter* (Monica Sone, 1953) is now on its

8th printing and it has already been included in literary courses in some American universities.

Most of the novels (both U.S. American and Brazilian) evolve around similar themes; some describe aspects of their lives before they left Japan but most explore their life in the United States and Brazil. They deal with their experiences of immigration, discrimination, isolation, acculturation, generational and gender strains, the conflict between “the self that is assimilated and the self that remains unassimilatable.” (LIM, 1992: 19)

If we analyze these novels from a feminist perspective, we see that the writers are striving to create a new woman character, out of the often oppositional but intertwined demands of their ethnic and gendered selves. However, the dominant element is still the strong Confucian patriarchal orientation and, as a consequence, the inferior position of women. The ethnic element predominates in the works of the Brazilian writers, whereas the American novelists try to negotiate the tripartite construction of Japanese/American/Woman elements, when representing their subject.

In *Canção da Amazônia* the female character voices the prevailing attitude towards Japanese women, when she thinks about herself: “Although he did not speak, Sueno understood her husband and considered his will her destiny. It would always be thus” (TSUNODA, 1988: 63)<sup>2</sup>. Actually, Sueno never speaks in the novel; her thoughts come to us through the narrator’s voice. This in itself is quite meaningful since the choice of point of view in this – as in most of the novels we analyzed – has not only aesthetic but ideological implications as well. Most of the female characters in these novels are inwardly talking to themselves, but their personal musings acquire a dimension which is not at all private, as can be felt from

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<sup>2</sup> Embora ele não falasse, Sueno compreendia o marido e considerava a vontade dele o seu destino. Assim seria sempre. (as citações traduzidas para o inglês neste trabalho são de minha autoria).

the quotation below, when Mitsuko comments about the exploitation of women in the marriage negotiations, in which she takes no part:

Even marriages had a different meaning in the past; at that time, marriage meant basically one more farm worker in the family; that's why it was not only the man who searched for the more robust girl to be his wife, his family also preferred a strong girl who had an iron health. They did not attach any value to her looks or intelligence. Her worth was measured by the weight she could carry and the length of land she could clear in a day. To know how to sow, knit, or to embroider, was of secondary importance. (KAWAI, 1988:80)<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that these novels were written by women, they do not give much prominence to their female characters. With very few exceptions, the family, not the individual, is the main focus of their novels. Nevertheless, the novelists manage to create remarkably strong, although silent, women characters who give us a woman's point of view – although indirectly - about the story of the Japanese immigration to the United States and to Brazil.

It is interesting to notice that some writers try to justify what they call their “adventure” in writing. They explain that, because they only have domestic responsibilities, they have more time to spend on less relevant tasks such as that of writing. Their way of thinking well illustrates the difficult, anxious struggling creative position of the so called minority/woman writer. In her dissertation about a Japanese woman novelist, Donatella Natili explains that in Japan, women writers were producing brilliant material between

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<sup>3</sup> O próprio casamento tinha significado diferente de hoje; naquela época o casamento significava um braço a mais na família, por isso não era só o moço que procurava a moça mais robusta pra esposa, a família dele também dava preferência a moça com saúde de ferro que tivesse muita força. Se a moça era bonita ou inteligente, isso não tinha a mínima importância. O valor da moça era medido pelo peso que ela carregava e a extensão de terreno que capinava num dia. Saber costurar, fazer tricô ou bordado, isto estava em segundo plano.



the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, having produced their best work in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. She explains that, under the feudalism and expansion of Buddhism that followed, women's role in society was restricted to those of wife, mother, and *geisha*. Only in the 1920s women writers returned to the Japanese literary scene. However, Natilli continues, they were labelled as *joryusakka*<sup>4</sup> and their work *joryubungaku*<sup>5</sup>, which was seen as popular, aesthetically inferior literature. This attitude also reflects the traditional hierarchy of gender roles, according to which women's tasks are less important than those of man, to whom is ascribed (at least theoretically) the role of supporting the family.

When we read the novels more carefully however, we can identify an ironic contradiction between the stereotype of the invisible, humble, submissive Japanese women, and their enormous courage, the sensibility, intelligence, and strength that can be felt in these novels. They all live extremely difficult lives, working hard while they see their dreams unfulfilled and their hopes crushed by the harsh reality of daily life. They give birth in quite unsafe circumstances, they help transform deep forests into productive cotton fields, they are beaten by the weather, diseases, epidemics, in the isolation and poverty of their agricultural setting. And they silently and painfully reflect on the feeling of displacement they experience, powerless that these women were to change the course of their lives; most immigrants did not succeed in returning to Japan as they had originally planned, as the following metaphorical description shows:

I think that there are specimens which can be transplanted to foreign countries and others which are inappropriate for that process, even though they are all Japanese and not more than young seeds. I feel I belong to this second category. Thus, wouldn't all my maladies be caused by this removal of an exotic

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<sup>4</sup> Escritor mulher.

<sup>5</sup> Literatura das mulheres.

specimen? I remember having said this once. However, after forty years I realize that, unable to return to the land of my birth, I set roots, contorted, in the soil of the country where I was replanted. (HIRONAKA, 1994: 17)<sup>6</sup>.

The urban environment is not less cruel because of the suspicion and unwelcome attitude towards them (more strongly felt in the novels written by issei/nissei U.S. American novelists). They overcome tremendous difficulties in order to provide the education that will give their children a better future. And they all represent a decisive, determining force in the family trajectory, which normally follows an upward mobility which follows from hard work for all the members of the family – male and female – as well as the decisive importance they attach to education for their children.

Almost a hundred years after the first wave of Japanese immigration to Brazil, Laura Hasegawa's last novel, *Kiken*<sup>7</sup> (2000) retraces the route undertaken by her Japanese ancestors and for the same reason: improve their financial situation and return to their country – now, Brazil. Their diasporic identity gives rise to complex feelings, as they are seen as Japanese in Brazil whereas in Japan they are foreigners, *gaijin*; the narrative developed by Kimiko threads the lives of several *dekasseguis* who work hard in jobs the Japanese themselves do not want; however, they are never part of Japanese life. They miss the tropical climate and vegetation, they find it hard to understand the Japanese language, and to live in quite small housing conditions. But they face the hardships bravely,

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<sup>6</sup> Penso que há espécimes transplantáveis para países estrangeiros e outros inapropriados para tanto, ainda que todos sejam japoneses e por mais que não passem de tenras mudas. Devo pertencer, ao que penso, a esta segunda categoria. Então, não teriam os meus males todos derivado do traslado feito de um espécime exótico? Lembro-me de ter dito isso um dia. No entanto, após quarenta anos constato que, sem poder retornar à terra de minha origem, enraizei-me contorcida no solo do país em que fui replantada.

<sup>7</sup> *Perigo*, em japonês.

in true Brazilian way: “bola pra frente que atrás vem gente, não é assim que falam em *nossa terra*?” (HASEGAWA, 2000:23- italics mine)<sup>8</sup>

As we said, women are quite rarely the main characters in most of the novels we studied. They usually remain on the margin, mute. Yet, it is through their indirect narrative or their point of view that the events and their analysis of them come to us. Although with different degrees of emphasis, both the U.S. American and the Brazilian novels are very rich in details depicting the invisible, silent force of these women, who constitute the moral, unifying element in their traditional family values, while, at the same time, they strive to realize ambitions that contradict the patriarchal norms of Japanese culture. By writing about the experience of immigration, these women leave for future generations their perspective of this complex process, as does the female character in *Horas e Dias de meu viver*:

If the grandchildren, who had Brazil as their motherland, and if their children, could someday have the slightest glimpse, at least an infinitesimal notion of the hopes and afflictions of their grandmother, their great-grandmother at the time they moved to Brazil from a distant time and from an Asian country composed of islands ... . I write this very modest memorial about my life with this hope kept in the deepest recess of my soul. (HIRONAKA, 1994:98)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This typically Brazilian expression does not translate well: “keep the ball rolling because there are people coming behind you; Isn’t it how it is said in our land/country?”. The idea is that you must keep going despite drawbacks, because the world keeps moving, things might change for the better.

<sup>9</sup> Se os netos nascidos tendo o Brasil como pátria, se também os filhos deles, um dia chegarem a vislumbrar uma nesga infinitesimal que seja das esperanças e aflições que teve sua avó, sua bisavó, nos dias em que passou a morar no Brasil, vinda em tempos idos de um país asiático constituído de ilhas (...). Escrevo este singelo memorial de minha existência com essa esperança encerrada no recôndito da alma.

An ironic ambivalence is born out of this intersection of feminist and ethnic urges. Although critical of aspects of Confucianist values, most of these women characters choose to remain within that social structure, trying to work from within and not overtly challenging the values of her ethnic group. Lim writes about this: "r the Asian born woman, moving away from a relatively closed patriarchal world into a relatively democratized, egalitarian , interrogative America, immigration can be a freeing liberalizing experience" (1993, p.238) *Nisei Daughter* is an autobiographical novel, which also insists on the past narrative of Japanese immigrant history and the experience of the internment camps in the United States during World War II. However, the master narrative of victimization and discrimination gradually acquires more survivalist, positive nuances. With refined humour and irony the author shows us Kasuko's difficult inward/outward journey from the point when, she, as child , "made the shocking discovery that I had Japanese blood" (SONE, 1995:3) until she perceives, as a mature woman, that "I used to feel like a two-headed monstrosity, but now I find that two heads are better than one" (SONE, 1995: 236) . By claiming cultural hybridity she tries to solve the cultural and psychological divergence in her personality, as the novel shows.

Another book which also gives us the interplay of history/ fiction and gender/ethnicity is Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, which deals basically with the traumatic experience of the U.S. American issei/nissei population during World War II. In this novel, the characters do not have proper names; they are called "papa", "mama", "son", "wife", and so on. Their voices and their authority are so diluted in American society as is their individual personalities in the hierarchical organization of Japanese culture. These *non-persons* also recall the anonymity of the oriental faces, whose ethnic features are so visible, so easy to identify, and yet so difficult to distinguish by the Caucasian race. The author explores the pathetic impotence of the issei patriarch, his humiliations, his pathetic struggles against white male authority.

“Papa” is always drunk, incapable of accepting the reality of his place in Western culture, where men are more threatened to disfunction than women. The oldest son in a family that had for centuries been of the samurai class, now misplaced in an industrialized nation, her *papa* keeps brandishing his cane, a pathetic version of the Samurai’s sword:

When he was angry he would wield it like the flat of a sword, whacking out at the kids or his wife or his hallucinations. ... I see it now as a sad, homemade version of the samurai sword his great-great-grandfather carried in the land around Hiroshima, at a time when such warriors weren’t much needed anymore, when their swords were both their virtue and their burden. (HOUSTON, 1974: 34)

His irrational behaviour distorts Japanese patriarchal values into an abusive and futile machismo, which is doomed, as his death signals it. Lim comments about this: “katsuki Houston was representing the antinomies of patriarchal tradition and evolving feminist consciousness in their mutually erasive positions, foreshadowing the death of her ethnic past and its displacement by a feminist discourse”( LIM, 1993: 582).

We believe that the challenge to the traditional, prescriptive notions of the literary realm has been proving stimulating. Today, we witness the rewarding transgression of the rigid *no trespass* signs, and the code switch between fictional and non-fictional materials has become estrategically blurred. On the other hand, the multicultural scenario of the modern world invites a rich dialectic exercise between inter-semiotic languages and intercultural realities. However, I believe that we should also keep in mind what Ernest Renan described as his idea of a nation: “the rich legacy of memories ... the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage.” (RENAN, in BHABHA, 1990:19). Hence the need to acknowledge the contribution of the work that these immigrant women have been developing and

which definitely brings a much richer understanding of both the U. S. American and the Brazilian literatures and cultures.

## 2 – BRIDGING CULTURES

The U.S.American nissei Karen Yamashita prefaces her first novel about Brasil - *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* - with a poetic description of the fantastic atmosphere she creates:

I have heard Brazilian children say that whatever passes through the arc of a rainbow becomes its opposite. But what is the opposite of a bird? Or for that matter, a human being? And what then, in the great rainforest, where, in its season, the rain never ceases and the rainbows are myriad?

I came to know the work of Yamashita as an unexpected outcome of my comparative study of these issei/nissei women novelists; Karen Tei Yamashita came to Brazil in 1975 to study the Japanese immigration to our country. Here, she married a Brazilian and instead of spending the two years she had planned, she stayed in Brazil for nine years. Back in her native California, she wrote two novels about Brazil: *Through the Arc of The Rainforest* (1990) and *Brazil Maru* (1992).

*Brazil Maru* is a multigenerational saga about a group of Japanese immigrants who founded an agricultural commune in Sao Paulo in 1925. This group tried to build a socialist utopia amidst the suspicion the Japanese faced because of their position during World War II - although on a much smaller degree than the hardships they suffered in the United States, for the historical reasons we know. On a deeper level, the novel also explores the universal conflict between individual freedom and community duties, the age-old I/ US dialectic we face daily as social beings. This novel is extremely rich in history and character and its thought-provoking content

deserves close discussion; however, I will focus my attention on Yamashita's first book, because it more fully develops the theme I want to emphasize in the present work, namely, the perspective of the cultural outsider about Brazil.

I would like to begin our study of Yamashita's *Rainforest* by quoting her introductory words to this novel, for they are quite revealing of her initiation into Brazilian culture:

The story that follows is perhaps a kind of *novela*, a Brazilian soap opera, of the sort of which occupies the imagination and national psyche of the Brazilian people on prime-time TV nightly and for periods of two to four months, depending on the popularity and success. This is not an exaggeration. The prime-time *novela* in Brazilian life is pervasive, reaching every Brazilian in some form or manner regardless of class, status, education or profession, excepting perhaps the Indians and the very isolated of the frontiers and rural backlands. In traveling to the most remote towns, one finds that a single television in a church or open plaza will gather the people nightly to define and standardize by example the national dress, music, humor, political state, economic malaise, the national dream, despite the fact that Brazil is immense and variegated. Yet even as it standardizes by example, the *novela's* story is completely changeable according to the whims of public psyche and approval, although most likely, the unhappy find happiness; the bad are punished; true love reigns; a popular actor is saved from death. Still, the basic elements must remain the same. And what are these elements? Claude Levi-Strauss described it all so well so many years ago; *Tristes Tropiques* - an idyll of striking innocence, boundless nostalgia and terrible ruthlessness. I thank you for tuning in.



This misleading essentialization of Brazilian culture does not do justice to the author's achievement. It might be interpreted as the author's "representational tact", warning us of her self-conscious, inevitable partiality. According to the words of Gregory Rabassa (the translator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) which we read in the

book's back cover, Yamashita "has given us a mingling of aspects, facets, and points of view that in concert reveal the complex pith of Brazilian culture". One cannot help wondering at his authority in stating the above words, since he did not know much about our country.

From Yamashita's initial words we get the impression that she will create a narrative about us from a classic master narrative about Brazil – Levi Strauss' - interpreting our culture through the mediation of other foreign texts. However, this apparent estrangement gives place to a dialogic identification between the author and the culture she is writing about.

The book was received with strong adjectives, some of them of an ambivalent nature, but with a laudatory quality: "a story that is bizarre and baroque, funny and sad" (Utne Reader); "humor and exuberant melodrama" (Los Angeles Times Book Review); "a Bosh triptych reproduced by Gaugin" (New York Times Book Review).

The novel is written in the tradition of magic realism. Developed like a *novela* as the author states, it much resembles *Saramandaia*, a *novela* which Globo showed in the 70s, when social criticism could only be dealt with in the realm of the unbelievable. Yamashita lived in Brazil from 1975 to 1984 and she may have felt more comfortable in dealing with our country's social problems under the disguise of the humorous and the fantastic. But the novel's texture, plot, and technique are rewardingly rich, despite its masterful comic irreverence.

It features a bizarre cast of characters, including Kazumasa Ishimaru, a Japanese man with a strange ball which permanently floats close in front of his head, J.B.Tweep, an American CEO who has three arms; Michelle Mabelle, a French professor of ornithology who has an "unusual trinity", three breasts, the "triplets" which are fondly named "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" by her American lover. Mané Pena, a Brazilian peasant who discovers the art of healing by tickling one's earlobe with a feather. *Jangadeiros*, *faxineiras*, *despachantes*, invalids, also populate this fictional Brasil.



The author begins by surprising us when she gives Kazumasa's *ball* (which could be taken as his second brain) the status of an omniscient, ubiquitous narrator who tells the whole story when in fact it has already been destroyed : "By a strange quirk of fate, I was brought back by a memory. (...) That I should have been reborn like any other dead spirit in the Afro-Brazilian syncretistic religious rite of Candomble is humorous to me" (YAMASHITA, 1990: 3). These initial words of the novel dismantle some traditional conventions of representation which grant an authoritative voice the power to objectify the colonial subject. One cannot help recalling Mary Louise Pratt's words, when she criticizes the unchallenged empowerment of the seeing-man, the monolithic voice of the "imperial eye":

Despite the fact that they too are on unfamiliar territory, these writers ... claim authoritativeness for their vision. What they see is what there is. No sense of limitation on their interpretive powers is suggested. ... they are still up there, commanding the view, assigning it value, oblivious to limitations on their perceptual capacities, their relations of privilege perfectly naturalized (PRATT, 1992: 217,221)

Thus disarmed of any expectations of conventionality of form and content we enter this freewheeling black comedy which, although hilarious, is a revealing satire on important aspects of Japanese, American, European, and Brazilian culture. Through laughter it presents a serious critique on the excesses of science, philanthropy, the cruel race for profit of capitalism, and the exploitation of the poor, illiterate population by pop evangelism. But most of these negative aspects that invade Brazilian life are represented by the outsider, the foreign influence that disrupts our culture in the name of the 'civilizing mission'.

The plot is brilliantly interwoven, with the narrative taking place simultaneously in several different places, because the panoramic range of observation of this all-powerful *ball* takes us everywhere. All the elements of the story are gradually drawn from

places as far apart as New York, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, and Ceara towards the rainforest, the center of globalized interest which is about to be apocalyptically destroyed, together with all the birds of Brazil.

At the beginning of the novel Kazumara decides to leave Tokyo for São Paulo with the ball, who/which follows him everywhere; in São Paulo live Tania Aparecida (or "Tania Cidinha", as her husband usually calls her) and Batista, "an avid conversationalist about soccer and women and politics" (YAMASHITA, 1990: 14); these are fitting names for a "goiano-paulista" *despachante* described as a "clerk-runner in a document processing service" (YAMASHITA, 1990:11) and his wife, whose environment is permeated with *delegados*, *cafezinhos*, and bribes. It is important to emphasize here that these words are not translated into English; instead, the novelist explains their meaning to the reader – obviously, not a Brazilian one.

In the Amazon basin we are introduced to Angústia and her husband Mané da Costa Pena; he becomes world famous because of the *Matacão*, a mysterious solid substance formerly hidden beneath the primeval forest that attracts the attention of scientists, supernaturalists, and ET enthusiasts. An inhabitant of the *Matacão*, Mané Pena appears on TV to a worldwide audience who become acquainted with the power of his healing feather that is about to change his life and that of the world around him

On the coast of Ceara, Chico Paco with his *jangada*, the invalid Gilberto and his sandbottling, dona Maria Creuza and his lace work live quietly and humbly, fed on lobster and *badejo*, while up in New York the free market has produced J.B.Tweep, or simply J.B., a Caucasian American who, with the three arms nature has endowed him, is about to found an empire based on the large scale, artificial reproduction of Mane Pena's miraculous feather.

*Rainforest* could be described as an intercultural text. The author's Japanese, American, and Brazilian background are all blended in her representational practices and we cannot feel her clear allegiance to any of these cultures. Perhaps Yamashita's choice

of the tradition of magic realism invites us to discard conventional notions of nations and to embrace a world in which culture has become plural and therefore refuses to stay still within geographical boundaries. We are here reminded of James Clifford's appropriate comment that "Cultures do not hold still for their portraits"(CLIFFORD, 1986:10).

The language Yamashita uses deserves some commentary: I believe the author had the U.S. American reading public in mind since the novel was written in English and published in the United States. However, she peoples the novel with Portuguese words, most of which are not translated, since they are meaningful in our cultural context only. Apart from the characters already mentioned, we have *Dona Feliz, tia Gustinha (Dona Angústia), Seu Toninho, Chiquinho, or Paquinho (Chico Paco), Beto, Gislaine*. No explanation is given to the familiar Brazilian titles *seu* and *dona*. Her remarkably accurate spelling, the proper use of stresses, and the correct employment of plural forms is worth emphasizing.

Many other words are given without translation, and they are not printed in italics; they just appear naturally and without any warning: *pastéis, goiabada, lambada, saudades, trios elétricos, malandro, pirarucu, jatubá* (sic), and our usual exclamatory *Nossa Senhora!* . She translates some important manifestations of our culture such as songs; but she insists on writing the Portuguese original: "A perereca da vizinha 'tá presa na gaiola"(Literally, the neighbor's frog is imprisoned in a cage)"(YAMASHITA, 1990:125) and inscriptions along the back of trucks: "'Carrego tudo no meu peito aquilo que Deus manda de cima" (I bear in my breast all that God sends from above.)" (YAMASHITA, 1990: 67). She also interprets some typically Brazilian cultural practices, such as "poupança - a money market that pays interest while promising to keep up with inflation" (YAMASHITA, 1990: 92) and "Carnival, that devil-let-loose time of the year" (YAMASHITA, 1990:189).

These language games can be interpreted as a discursive evidence of the author's acknowledgement that one cannot thread

one's way through the complex semiotic net which is intrinsic to a specific culture. I feel that a lot of the effectiveness in this particular aspect of the novel would be lost if the author had tried to use English words in the situations described briefly above.

The book also creates some of the funniest situations I have ever seen produced in literature, although with an extremely serious purpose, as one review aptly remarks: "Yamashita's novel may say more about saving the rainforest than its non-fiction counterparts do." (Utne Reader). See, for example, the description of *Matacão*, where all the characters meet, moved by the greed that utterly distorts their personality:

The *Matacão* has been, since its dis-covering, a source of curiosity and confusion in the scientific world. Geologists, astronomers, physicists, archaeologists and chemists were suddenly thrown into an unsettling prerevolutionary state where the basic parameters of scientific truths were undergoing a shift similar to that experienced when Einstein redefined the Newtonian world. Nowadays, scientists cannot present papers or new findings without having to answer the now-common retort, "But what bearing does the *Matacão* have on your findings?" or "How do you reconcile your hipotesis with the *Matacão*?" (YAMASHITA, 1990:95)

From the very beginning we are introduced to a plethora of absurd characters, who all have strange features, the most unbelievable stories and origins, and to whom all sorts of weird things happen. Unfortunately they all lack depth and this is one of the weaknesses of the novel. This superficiality might have been an intentional indication that she could go no further, or just sheer impossibility of doing so, given her limited experience of the rich regional variety of characters who inhabit worlds as distant as Tokyo and the Amazon rainforest. They sometimes are described almost as superheroes; at the same time however, they can be interpreted as cripples, pathetic instruments of a cruel, absurd capitalist world.

See, for example, the introductory description of J.B., on his way to becoming a capitalist entrepreneur, and about whose freak of nature the ball comments:

J.B. was far from ashamed of his extra appendage and only kept it out of sight to prevent hysterical reactions from observers on drugs or those prone to wild hallucinations. He accepted his third arm as another might accept ESP, an addition of 128k to their random access or the invention of the wheel. As far as J.B. was concerned, he had entered a new genetic plane in the species. He never speculated that he was the result of Nobel prize-winning sperm. He was a better model, the wave of the future. (YAMASHITA, 1990: 30)

The humour is sustained throughout the book; we feel this to be a strategy the author uses to distance herself from this intercultural contact she is personally involved with and about which she would write only six years later. She is therefore not only geographically separated from Brazil, but also at a safe temporal distance from what seems to have been an intensive and extensive experience of Brazilian culture.

Another very effective textual strategy Yamashita uses to stand apart from what she is constructing is the choice of this peculiar narrative persona; the story is told in the first person but its informational, experiential, and even judgemental quality is granted to a ball that has already been destroyed by the time it is narrating the story.

She may also have adopted this transgressive strategy as a shield under whose protection she can freely criticize - but not without some degree of skepticism - what she sees around her, as she moves, camera-like, through the cultures she is quite familiar with. Some of the writing caught the spirit of Brazilian life very well and revealed a very sensitive knowledge of life in our country; her description of the *favela* felt very true:

Kazumas and I followed her up the dirt road lined with tiny houses, the better of which were cement block structures with tin or tile roofs, but all created out of construction-site scraps and cardboard with plastic wrappings for windows. Some of the houses were stuccoed and painted in bright colors – pink and blue and orange. Oil cans and pots surrounded the houses or hung from the eaves, filled with ferns, begonias, ivy and draping succulents. Barefoot children ran in and out between the houses, stumbling over sleeping or scavenging dogs and scattering the chickens that wandered freely everywhere. The bigger girls all carried babies and toddlers on their hips wherever they happened to go. The boys pulled carts piled high with smashed aluminium cans and old Coca-Cola bottles. Old people sat in dorways or stared out the windows. As evening drifted over the city, men and women poured out of the buses and walked slowly up the paths, greeting and calling to their children as they arrived. Some brought loaves of bread and baskets with fruits or a plastic bag containing a liter of milk. The men were dirty and wet with perspiration, their hands and fingernails filled with the grime of their labor. The women trudged wearily from domestic jobs and piecework in factories. The workday had come to an end. (YAMASHITA, 1990: 42)

She also describes several instances of Brazilian hospitality, cheerfulness and the sustained hope of solving their problems with the instant wealth provided by *jogo do bicho*. Yamashita's satire is specially reserved for some fanatical religious attitudes that go to extreme sacrifices in their votive pilgrimages to pay debts to the saints; these attitudes become horrific when ignorance and fervour are exploited by capitalist evangelism, which merge religion and media and whose pervasive "Praise the Lord" radio stations serve the sole purpose of making their leaders criminally rich.

With amazingly accurate and rich details, Yamashita exposes the problems related to Brazilian poverty, bureaucracy, and graft; however, we feel that her situational motivation differs from that of authoritarian, essencializing colonial representations. The narrator/*ball* is the central *character* in the novel and it is always in control of

the situation, even when it allows some degree of freedom to his characters; when they are quoted speaking for themselves they act like pathetic figures, trapped as they are by the tempting but false promises of economic, cultural and technological development made by U.S. Americans, Japanese, and Europeans whose main contribution turns out to be quite destructive.

Yamashita is also extremely satirical of the American way of using research, high technology and their capitalist *credo* to exploit other countries; J.B. discovers the miraculous power of the feather and invests all his money and energy in transforming it into big business. The Japanese is described as gullible, stupid, totally controlled by the Americans. Kazumasa becomes an eternal philanthropist in his largesse with the money from the lottery which he keeps winning with the help of his "personal satellite", and which keeps increasing with the speculative strategies adopted by his cousin Hiroshi:

Many people stopped referring to Kazumasa as the Japanese Santa Claus and began to call him the Japanese Robin Hood. It was, they said, just a more modern way of stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Hiroshi himself explained the phenomenon to the press as "recycling capital." (YAMASHITA, 1990: 81)

The novel is overcrowded with characters but, as the novel swirls madly towards its apocalyptic end, most of them either die of a typhus epidemic or disappear together with the rainforest, for whose destruction they are to blame:

The *Matacão*, too, was slowly but definitely corroding, as was everything else made of *Matacão* plastic. Buildings were condemned. Entire roads and bridges were blocked off. Innocent people were caught unaware - killed or injured by falling chunks of the stuff. People who stepped out in the most elegant finery made of *Matacão* plastic were horrified to find themselves naked at cocktail parties, undressed at presidential

receptions. Cars crumbled at stop lights. Computer monitors sagged into their CPUs. The credit car industry went into a panic. Worst of all, people with facial rebuilds and those who had added additional breasts and the like were privy to grotesque scenes thought only to be possible in horror movies. And there was no telling what might happen to people who had, on a daily basis, eaten *Matacão* plastic hamburgers and French fries. (YAMASHITA, 1990: 207)

Yamashita has a Gargantuan appetite for facts about Brazil. We sometimes feel that the author might have produced this work in a kind of brainstorm, given the unbelievable nature and variety of action that she saturates the novel with. But as all good Brazilian *novela*, love endures. Kazumaza, now with his mind unobstructed by his ball, recovers his old dreams of love and life in Brazil in the arms of Dona Lourdes, fulfilling in this marriage the union of the Japanese and Brazilian cultures. Michelle Mabelle manages to escape back to Europe but her lover J.B. is punished with a tragic fate, as do Chico Paco and most of the inhabitants who naively or not, conscious or unconsciously, had collaborated to the destruction of the rainforest.

Yamashita's work can be compared with that of other U.S. American novelists who also wrote about Brazil, as for example, John Updike (*Brazil*, 1994) and John dos Passos (*Brazil on the Move*, 1963); their choice of characters, themes and setting might have some degree of similarity, in the sense that they all explore our everyday experience which they see as exotic. However, their treatment of Brazilian material differs in the sense that Yamashita's is a more relational approach to our culture whereas dos Passos and Updike (and even Elizabeth Bishop in her unfortunate *Brazil*, written for the Sunday Times World Library in 1962) have a more patronizing attitude towards Brazilian culture, typical of the imperial outsider.

Yamashita's is the more fictionalized among the works mentioned here and as such it elaborates more freely on the actual facts; nevertheless, she gives us an amazing richness of details of



Brazilian life that could only have been grasped by someone with a strong desire to absorb our culture, not simply to come here as an external observer to document superficial glimpses of a foreign culture. We feel that she not only adopts a more interactive perspective with this fantasy world she creates but she also shows more honesty and more authenticity in her transformation of what she might have experienced here and what she later wrote about. And what is worth mentioning here is that, on reading these novels about Brazil, we end up learning not only about how they see us, how we are constructed by foreign eyes: we also learn a lot about them, their values and prejudices.

**RESUMO:** *O presente trabalho objetiva desenvolver um estudo comparativo do processo de imigração japonesa para o Brasil e para os Estados Unidos, utilizando como fonte principal a produção literária de mulheres isseis/nisseis brasileiras e estadunidense. Enfatizamos a interface gênero/etnia desenvolvida nesse romance, bem como a poética e a política da representação do Brasil na ficção estadunidense. Analisamos algumas 'traduções' de nossa realidade, desenvolvidas por escritoras estadunidenses, quando elas escolhem o nosso país como objeto de sua produção ficcional. Selecionamos o trabalho da escritora estadunidense de origem japonesa Karen Tei Yamashita, a qual escreveu dois romances sobre o Brasil: Through the Arc of The Rainforest (1990) and Brazil Maru (1992)*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *interculturalidade; etnia; gênero*

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