The Dystopian/Utopian Aspects of Yamashita's Tropic of Orange
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Abstract: This paper posits that an effective means of teaching literature about racial conflict is through the genre conventions of dystopian literature. Through recent novels and movies, dystopia is a concept with which students have become increasingly familiar. We can build on this familiarity as we facilitate classroom discussion on race and racism. Using Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* as its lens, this paper theorizes that a greater focus on the tenets of dystopian literature allows instructors and students to discuss such complicated issues as cultural diversity and interracial tension in an academically rigorous and inclusive manner. This paper supplements its use of literary theory by dystopian literature and Asian American scholars with its presentation of select passages from the book that illustrate the thematic overlap between these two literary fields. Yamashita's novel makes clear for students that dystopia is not something that needs to be imagined because it already comprises the lived experiences of many racialized non-white persons.

Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* poses challenges for instructors and students alike. The latter have a difficult time following the plot, which is structured around the seven days of the week as a pre-colonial prophet transports an orange across the U.S.-Mexico border. The novel's multiple narrators, all of whom are based in or around the Los Angeles area at the end of the twentieth century, also contribute to the confusion. In their respective ways, each narrator reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary America while also questioning and critiquing the social construction of cultural and ethnic differences that they represent. Instructors, meanwhile, must negotiate how to prompt students to discuss the racial tensions in the novel without fostering an uncomfortable or contentious learning environment. As other pedagogy scholars have noted,¹ teaching works of literature about racial tension is a difficult task to undertake. But despite the structural and thematic challenges that the novel poses, *Tropic of Orange* not only teaches such complicated issues like cultural diversity and interracial tension but strategies on how we as individuals and fellow citizens of the world may address them with one another.

¹ Of particular influence is Huining Ouyang's "Transforming Resistance: Strategies for Teaching Race in the Ethnic American Literature Classroom." For an article that discusses the difficulty in handling conflict in the classroom more generally, I am partial to David W. Johnson's and Roger T. Johnson's "Energizing Learning: The Instructional Power of Conflict."
I taught this novel last summer for a class on Asian American Literature and Film. The class size, as is typical of many summer courses, was small. The students came from widely divergent cultural and learning backgrounds, which is to say that half of the class was made up of international students (Chinese and Korean, specifically) that chose to live on campus over break while the other half of the class were native English speakers that lived nearby. What better book to assign such an international body of students than a book with such an international scope, spanning from South to North America, from Asia to the United States?

However, we could not simply approach the novel as we had our previous reading assignments: breaking up our close reading of select passages with group work activities, creative writing prompts, and in-class presentations. The plot of *Tropic* was simply too fragmented for some students to grasp on their own; the book's themes, too complex. With this paper, I propose that an effective means of teaching the novel, which has become a source of increased interest in Asian American literature scholarship and a cornerstone to many Asian American literature classes, is through an emphasis on genre conventions, that is, how the novel adheres to the tenets of dystopian literature. Regarding this paper's definition of dystopia, I am indebted to dystopian literature theorist, M. Keith Booker, who wrote that a literary dystopia reveals "certain negative practices and institutions [while retaining] a strong utopian dimension, emphasizing that there are alternatives to the dystopian conditions being portrayed" (7). Yamashita's novel, as the students and I discussed, certainly critiques the conditions of the world while also suggesting alternatives to these same "conditions being portrayed." In other words, the novel does not simply dwell on what is wrong with the world; it also provides readers with hope for the future. Focusing on the dystopian aspects of the novel allows us to explore its themes in an academically inclusive and rigorous manner. Academically rigorous – because we can rightfully treat the novel as a conduit between Asian American Studies and genre fiction. Inclusive – because "dystopia" is a term with which a greater number of students are familiar, thanks in part to books like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The 5th Wave*, as well as their respective film

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2 This pedagogical focus on genre also reflects a greater turn toward genre analysis in Asian American literary scholarship. See Betsy Huang’s 2010 book *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Literature* or the recently published collection of essays, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, edited by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu.
adaptations. Students can identify the features of a dystopian literature narrative and are thus more open to discussing them, since they do not feel as intimidated by it as they would by talking about race and racism more directly. By focusing on the dystopian literature genre in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, we can discuss with our students our different conceptions of "diversity," "racism," and "colonialism," as well as how the novel challenges or conforms to these personal definitions.

We devoted an entire session to the novel's famous proclamation that "Cultural diversity is bullshit" (128). These words are spoken by Emi, a third-generation Japanese American, at a sushi restaurant where a white woman with "two ornately-lacquered chopsticks" in her hair waxes poetic about the Japanese culture that she "just adore[s]" (129). To say the least, Emi's statement elicits strong reactions from students, who have been raised to consider cultural diversity as an unquestionably positive attribute of society. So why is Emi so disagreeable towards it? Because in Yamashita's reflection of contemporary society in the United States, cultural diversity has increasingly less to do with the actual human beings from other cultures – complete with their pesky traditions that dare to be different from our own – and more to do with an appreciation of the culture's cuisine (in this scene, the sushi) and objects (the aforementioned chopsticks). Emi says to the sushi chef, "We're all invisible. It's just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card" (128). The process of dehumanization is a common tenet of dystopian fiction (see, for instance, Orwell's *1984* or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*). Dehumanization, however, is not exclusive to any one genre of literature. We see in this scene how racialized non-white persons in Yamashita's novel are reduced to the foods and accoutrements of their culture, even by those individuals that consider themselves champions of cultural diversity like the white woman at whom Emi directs this statement. Many racial minority persons can relate to this situation, as became evident in my discussions with students in and out of class. Furthermore, Emi's assessment of cultural diversity as "bullshit" prompts students and instructors to consider how interracial relations, even when masked under the more positive-sounding "cultural diversity," are indeed dystopic from the perspective of those individuals that do not wholly belong to white mainstream American culture. While the term "cultural diversity" implies a state in which various cultures can co-exist, Yamashita's novel highlights how favorable talk about
"cultural diversity" highlights how human beings from different (i.e. non-Anglo-American) cultures are continually left out of the picture.

Emi’s strong aversion to cultural diversity is not unfounded. We learn later on in the novel that her family was interned during World War II. The effects of this experience are evident in her grandfather, Manzanar Murakami, a once-renowned surgeon turned homeless person conducting freeway traffic as if it was an orchestra. By naming himself after the internment camp where his family was placed (Manzanar, in California), Emi's grandfather serves as a physical reminder of a time when all Japanese persons were confined to camps where they could be questioned and closely monitored. This exemplifies another well-known tenet of dystopian literature in which a population is under constant surveillance by an oppressive government (see for instance: Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and, more recently, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy). A focus on genre conventions inevitability raises the point that dystopia does not need to be transposed into fantasized worlds (like the Orwellian Airstrip One or Collins' Panem) because it already comprises the lived experiences of racialized non-white persons. The trope of forced relocation in many works of dystopian literature reflects those experiences of the Japanese (and Japanese Americans) during WWII, as well as Native Americans before they were forced onto reservations, and finally African American slaves. These are historical connections that the students organically make and promote an intertextual discussion between Yamashita’s novel and real world history that inspired it.

We extended our reading of Yamashita’s critique of historical interracial relations to include the pre-colonial prophet, Arcangel. Described by literary theorist, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, as "the novel's historical consciousness" (3), Arcangel is said to be wandering the Americas for five-hundred years, roughly since the time of Columbus's discovery of the New World. He has been around for all the major events of colonial history, from the moments of first encounter to the unsuccessful uprisings across the various nations of South America. Through the course of his travels, he also illustrates the dystopian qualities of the contemporary world, that is, that the unequal distribution of wealth and human rights characteristic of New World colonialism is still very much in effect. While presented under the guise of economic competition, especially after the North American
Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)\(^3\) that Yamashita's novel directly criticizes, the indigenous persons of the New World are continually exploited. Dystopian literature theorist, Raffaella Baccolini, writes that "dystopia shows how our present may negatively evolve, [and] also suggests that history may not be progressive" (115). In other words, that our present is our past is our future. Arcangel, embodying each of these respectively, further illustrates that regardless of the time period, interracial relations are characterized by tension and inequality. Because Arcangel is such a difficult character to pin down (both thematically and geographically), students were hesitant to discuss him. But an analysis of Arcangel's function to the narrative must occur because he is the character responsible for warping the latitudinal structure of the planet through his smuggling of an orange that is inexplicably tied to the Tropic of Cancer. Discussing him in terms of dystopian literature conventions makes him less intimidating to discuss. Students come to understand that he is a product and opponent of the dystopia in which he lives. In other words, that he seems to be alive in order to challenge it.

Stopping at a Mexican bar as he travels north, Arcangel takes exception to the fact that none of the menu-items are traditional Mexican cuisine. To Arcangel, this phenomenon signals more than just the United States' economic relationship with (or, perhaps more accurately, dominance over) Mexico. The state of this menu reflects how the United States continues to attempt the full erasure of Mexican culture. Becoming his professional wrestling alter-ego, El Gran Mojado (or "The Great Wetback"), Arcangel connects this contemporary economic dominance to previous events in history, further proving Raffaella Baccolini's argument that history does not always entail progress:

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\text{\textit{Have you forgotten 1848 and the}} \\
\text{\textit{Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo?}} \\
\text{\textit{... The following year,}} \\
\text{\textit{1849,}} \\
\text{\textit{everyone rushed to get the gold in California,}}
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\(^3\) The North American Free Trade Agreement opened up trade restrictions between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. It was designed as a measure to compete with the newly-formed European Union (EU) and went into effect on January 1, 1994.
and all of you Californianos who were already there
and all of you indigenas who crossed
and still cross the new border
for a piece of the gold have become
wetbacks.

My struggle is for all of you.
(133, italics in original)

The United States, Arcangel points out, has a long history of dominating Mexico: determining where the two countries would be separated, via the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, and who would have the right to the land's profitable resources (i.e. the gold). To no one's surprise, only white Americans have a natural born right to this gold, thus excluding any "wetbacks" that try to lay claim to it. And now, the United States is taking over Mexican culture by replacing it with their own. At the Cantina de Miseria y Hambre (The Bar of Misery and Hunger), Mexican beers have been replaced by American beers, and nopales (Mexican prickly pears) have been replaced by "a hamburger, Fritos, and catsup," the special of the day (131). Arcangel actively looks to negate the feelings of cultural estrangement from which the patrons and the workers at the bar suffer. Like all protagonists of dystopian literature, Arcangel feels trapped by the circumstances of the world in which he lives. He states that for "five hundred years" (i.e. since Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas), he has wandered the lands of the New World in search of retribution and resolution. While he has found none thus far, he hopes to finally end the dystopic circumstances of the New World by defeating the cowardly SUPERNAFTA. By framing the discussion around the conventions of dystopian literature, students come to understand how Arcangel represents many of the dystopic elements of the novel pertaining to economic exploitation and historical injustice, even as they are masked under the language of economic competition in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But just as Emi points out about "cultural diversity," Arcangel illustrates how "economic competition" really masks the same old economic exploitation that has been around since New World colonialism.
The professional wrestling match between Arcangel and SUPERNAFTA determines the fate of the entire western hemisphere. In perhaps a fitting end to Arcangel’s narrative, the match culminates in a moment of mutual destruction, as that is perhaps what it takes in order for the world to move beyond the dystopia currently permeating it:

*Mojado’s great wings flapped back and forth
and back and forth,
fanning a great storm,
fanning the flames to cold smoke and
stoking NAFTA to a live nuke.
Everyone gasped as the great SUPERNAFTA imploded.*

But only Bobby saw SUPERNAFTA’s final weapon, his pointing finger a missile launcher that sent its tiny patriot into Arcangel’s human heart.

(262, italics in original)

Mutual destruction can at least ensure a new beginning. We can possibly move on from the exploitative practices personified by SUPERNAFTA and the hardships of the hemisphere’s indigenous persons personified by El Gran Mojado. The dystopic aspect of this moment, however, is in the fact that SUPERNAFTA had a "secret hidden weapon" (134) the entire time. Therefore, the fight was never a fair one because the possibility of an El Gran Mojado victory was never as assured as a SUPERNAFTA victory. This illustrates the drastic measures needed to un-write a dystopia; it is much easier (and actually all but guaranteed) that the dystopic circumstances will simply continue unchallenged. My students wondered what we should make of the fact that this moment of mutual destruction is witnessed only by Bobby, a "Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown" (15). That the end of colonialist history is seen only by an individual with such a diverse and global background? Here, the students and I agreed, is where the heretofore dystopic narrative finally gestures towards a utopia.

Students were immediately drawn to Bobby. Perhaps due to his rough disposition, which they took to calling "bad ass," they felt an affinity towards Bobby that they didn't feel for many of the novel’s other characters. *Tropic of Orange* ends with him finally reuniting
with his Mexican American wife, Rafaela, and their son, Sol, who leave him due to his busy work schedule. Described as "a truly global family" by literary theorist, Rachel Adams (266), Bobby's and Rafaela's family reunion suggests reconciliation for the racial and cultural problems permeating both the novel and the real-world United States that the novel reflects. The new world (not the New World in a colonialisf sense) is heralded by a truly multi-racial, multi-cultural, international family reuniting in the ruins of the previous world's conflicts. That this family's patriarch, Bobby, single-handedly witnesses the end of colonialist conflict suggests that the tensions of history will not be so quickly forgotten. The "alternatives to the dystopian conditions" that M. Keith Booker references can therefore be realized without the dystopic world returning (Booker 7). Moreover, as Caroline Rody asserts, mixed race families like Bobby's are "projections of an emerging interethnic consciousness" (146). This type of consciousness, a product and producer of contemporary notions of cultural diversity, certainly signals an end to the dystopic elements of the book regarding interracial tensions, as the world will be comprised more frequently by such global individuals like Bobby and his family.

Bobby is not only the sole person to witness the epic conclusion of the Arcangel-SUPERNAFTA wrestling match; he is also the one that keeps the new world in its nascent state together. Bobby "grit[s] his teeth and crie[s] like a fool" (268) while he holds together the Tropic of Cancer, which Arcangel had previously entangled in the "aberrant orange" (11) and transported north. He is taking over Arcangel's role in rendering the world whole. However, while Arcangel's work was figurative, ensuring that the injustices of history were addressed and resolved, Bobby's labor in this scene is quite literal. His family looks on, and the crowd from the professional wrestling event rushes past him. The responsibility on what to do next is his alone. In the final plot point of the book, he relinquishes his hold on the line – meaning, the new world freshly ushered into existence – that he's been holding in place and lets happen what will. He thinks to himself the closing words of the book, "Lets go. Go figure. Embrace. That's it" (268). He will not fight how the world thinks and operates, as Emi and Arcangel had done (and, truthfully, had to do). This new world is still so young. It has its own inevitable growing pains to experience. That it will be allowed to do so – under the observant watch of Bobby's and Rafaela's "global family" (266) – is as utopic as this narrative gets. Emphasizing how Yamashita's novel adheres to dystopian literature
conventions ultimately ends as all discussions on dystopia should: with a discussion on the utopic impulse that follows.

Teaching literature centered on racial tension is difficult. This is especially true when that racial tension is historicized as it is in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. Such historicization risks giving students the idea that these tensions are too ingrained in us to ever be overcome or, worse yet, that these tensions are a thing of the past. However, by focusing on some of the genre conventions of dystopian literature, the conversation bypasses the discomfort inherent in any conversation about race and racism. Instead, students and instructors can discuss how race functions – not just in literary works like Yamashita's but in the real-life histories and societies that these works of literature reflect. Just as the genre of dystopian literature provided writers like Yamashita with a lens in which to examine interracial tension, foregrounding an analysis of the dystopian literature genre conventions provides us with a means of discussing the racial conflict in the novel with our students.
Works Cited

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