

THE RESONANCE OF IMMIGRANT VOICES

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I can see the kanji, hiragana, and katakana gathering. They run down the page delicately, right to left. Now they also seem to run across the page left to right. Romaji jumps out at you. You piece your recognition together like reading abstract art. That looks like a cow. That looks like a violin. Hey, this is the gas bill! And this flyer: Pi-za. They deliver. Benri Japan. Ou, this is a flyer for sexy videos! That is, you can tell by the nude photos, but read it: bi-de-o. You don't get the girl in the flyer; you get the video of her. Kinky sexist Japan traveling my spine, from my tongue to my pubis, a sentient road, a sentient border: I need a massage.

My back aches. It is longer than it should be, expanded geographically. It is shorter than it should be, compressed and digitized. It is a great abstraction, a vertebrae of pidgin utterances in which I connect to the message maybe twenty-five percent of the time. It is multiple and reversible, disconnected yet utterly connected, timeless and long-suffering and infinitely sensitive. It is border and frontier. It is both vehicle and passenger. Conveyance and traveler. It is a bridge and a beast of burden. It is my back.

(Karen Tei Yamashita. "My Back Aches." *Circle K Cycles*.)

// **I**inée!" is Karen's favorite Japanese phrase. She could be speaking to a child who is excited by a reward, or nodding approvingly at an adult who is pleased with himself, or responding modestly to someone to imply, "that's interesting," while tacitly apologizing for her lack of fluency in Japanese. The lively sound of this "inée" never fails to appear. This "inée" with its particular accent is strangely tender and thoughtful although it is be-

yond the common usage of our language and is sometimes abrupt, out of place, and formal without any meanings. Her “*iinée*” does not have a tone of self-assertion at all and elegantly and intently approves the delicate world of others. Everyone smiles at this gift of the language. Everyone thinks fondly of the graceful mind hidden behind this phrase.

The limited Japanese vocabulary spoken by Karen Tei Yamashita, a Japanese American Sansei, however, does not merely indicate the absolute “distance” from the mother tongue of her ancestors that descendants of immigrants inevitably experience. Her unsteady Japanese embraces both the deficiency and delicacy of minimal language usage. Further, it is a truthful reflection of her life, a mixture of both inevitability and fortuity: of having been born in a Japanese American community in California but raised with English, of having left this community to attend a small, white-dominated college in the Midwest and to study for about a year in Japan, of having shipped off to Brazil all alone and stayed there for ten years. Refined, intelligent English, shaky but emotional Japanese, and cheerful, eloquent Brazilian Portuguese—this superb mixture of vibrant languages, which is not a product of classroom learning, is nothing but Karen’s native tongue itself. Even when, as a writer, she writes a novel in “English,” what lies beneath it is the lively pulse of this hybrid language.

Moreover, Karen’s language is a tongue with a complex constitution like a rainbow. It is never a simple mixture of three different national languages as we might imagine it to be. For example, although the Japanese she utters sounds Japanese, traces of innumerable transferences and changes are entangled in it like loose golden threads that shine enchantingly. The discipline and emotion of modern “Japanese language” evolving in the cradle of Japanese civilization, which each of her grandparents of the Meiji Era represented, dimly echoes in it. It has the vernacular sound of a dialect, which is another, more native tongue of her grandparents. It also bears the new, unique Japanese usage that has been altered and elaborated in the immigrant community in California. Moreover, it is not impossible to detect the trace of muffled sound of colonial Japanese, which is a strange mixture of Japanese and Portuguese developed in a Nikkei community in Brazil, which Karen was totally engrossed in with passion and uncommon intellectual curiosity as a Sansei immigrant

in North America. Or it might be possible to say that it dimly reflects the vocabulary originated in physiocracy and Christian socialism, which was used by intellectual Japanese immigrants born in the Taisho Era whom she encountered in Brazil.

Karen is always more or less conscious of herself as a product of such linguistic border-crossing and vicissitudes and tries to accept the limitations as well as singularity they impose. Every time she comes to Japan, she frankly tells me how much she regrets her poor Japanese. But this regret does not arise from negative self-esteem owing to a lack of vocabulary and linguistic fluency. Rather, it is more like an existential matter: she feels regret for herself as someone born into a world where use of the Japanese language was minimal, essentially absent. Such absence cannot be compensated for simply by language acquisition through study, and it can never be overcome through technical competency or resources. If I dare to say it, Karen preserves nostalgia for the Japanese language of her ancestors, holds fast to regret for her poor command of the language, and has abandoned any realistic desire to forcibly overcome a lack of fluency. And in this condition, she has tried to discover a different path toward attaining a true tongue of her own. The echo of the truth dwells in her “iinée.” We feel that the grace stemming from this existential regret is her unselfish gift.

This linguistic abandonment has liberated her from an illusory obsession with Japanese as a perfect, timeless language. Linguistic abandonment has made her feel more sensitively than anyone else the fluidity of a constantly changing “Japanese.” The Japanese language, which consists of the three different orthographies of hiragana, katakana, and kanji, has freely incorporated European languages and alphabets on its way toward becoming an odd pidgin language. Karen understands this transformation of modern Japanese with a profound linguistic intuition. There are only a few people like her who have found a fissure in the rigidity imposed by meaning, have leapt out of the spell of language, and have accurately grasped the fluidity that is produced by the energy of primordial linguistic chaos. Growing up as a child of twentieth-century California, a place of unrelenting and remarkable multiculturalism, she has always been aware of linguistic hybridity and chaos. Later, at a Japanese Brazilian commune in the interior of Brazil where she couldn’t make herself understood in English, she communicated with Issei with

her minimal Japanese and Portuguese, although their communication was often disrupted because of reciprocal uncertainty about language. No matter how unprofessional her “research” and “interviews” seemed to be from an academic viewpoint, this experience changed the structure of “understanding” in Karen’s consciousness of language and enabled her to step outside the spell of efficiency and transparency. If so, it can be said that the new movement of Japanese Brazilians returning to and settling in Japanese society signals nothing less than the possibility of breaking down the imaginary monolingual community of “Japanese.” Japanese Brazilians are the seeds of an unknown language spread throughout the continent of “Japanese,” just as Karen herself so vividly describes them in *Circle K Cycles* (2001).

The self as a crossroads where time has passed, history has unfolded, memories have reverberated, and languages have intersected. Gradually she has been emancipated from an obsession that compelled her to firmly establish subjectivity as a writer and has begun to perceive her own corporeality as a collective “locus” in which history and memory are passing, piling up, and colliding with each other, and from which unexpected encounters and discoveries incessantly arise. Considered this way, as a crossroads, the immigrant’s experience is not a linear, geographical, physical movement of people from one place to another. Rather, it is an unknown process in which many lands and languages intersect with each other and infiltrate the historical body of a human being, where they acquire communality and collectivity and slowly become linked and altered.

Thus, “Brazil” was also discovered as a privileged “locus,” which expanded Karen’s vision through becoming connected to her body as a crossroads of immigrant experiences. The Brazil that we are about to ruminate upon is not merely a country in South America. Brazil is a landscape which flickers before us in all of its one hundred years of entangled history.

Everyday the media is filled with stories of events celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of Japanese immigration to Brazil. The Brazilian and Japanese governments have decreed “a year of interchange between Japan and Brazil,” which will be commemorated through various ceremonies and festivals. In the midst of all

this, I am trying to think about other, parallel sets of 100 years. On June 18, 1908, the *Kasado-Maru*, with the first 781 emigrants from Japan on board, docked at the Port of Santos after a two-month voyage. One century has passed since then. Besides the “official history” of “emigrants to Brazil,” there are layers of unknown “personal histories” hidden under the monolithic official narrative, and still other layers of memories that refuse to be even woven into historical time. The locus that you can never reach through a stereotyped story of “one century of hardship of emigrants in a new world” is hidden under the shadow of mossy fallen trees or in the still depths of a creek, as if it were a cave of memory that opens up in the forest of eternal time.

One means at my disposal for recalling those other one hundred years and thus gaining entrance to timelessness is the term, “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” which Yamashita chose as the symbolic continuum of the hidden stories of emigrants. Yamashita’s vivid essay (or rather, I should call it a fine piece of vignette), “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” which was written with a fresh touch and is full of autobiographical emotions, invites us to see the essence of human beings contained in the event called emigration, which no discourse based on the official history of “emigration” has managed to achieve.

Above all, this essay brilliantly reproduces and critically points out, from the perspective of women, the meaning of the fact that Japanese emigration to North and South America has been carried out mostly by agreements among men. What is generally called the Gentlemen’s Agreement between Japan and the United States was a series of negotiations between the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Japan and the U.S. Ambassador to Japan between the end of 1907 and the beginning of 1908, as a result of which, Japan voluntarily halted emigration to the United States. The Gentlemen’s Agreement was signed by President Roosevelt as a more moderate alternative to legislated expulsion through immigrations acts. At this time in the United States, in the wake of Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War and expansion of military power overseas, the idea of “the yellow peril” accelerated movements to ban immigration and heightened the already extant prejudice against Japanese immigrants, who were acquiring economic power in California. Because of this Gentlemen’s Agreement, the Japanese government stopped issuing passports for emigration as general laborers, limiting them

to students, tourists, and those who already had family living in the United States. These new restrictions on emigration from Japan to the United States were strictly enforced.

As an alternative new world, Japanese emigrants chose South America, especially Brazil, which seemed to have inexhaustible land for cultivation. In 1908, the year the Gentlemen's Agreement was concluded, the *Kasado-Maru* set sail with the first group of Japanese emigrants to Brazil, a coincidence that eloquently shows the major shift in Japanese emigration history set in motion exactly one hundred years ago. As someone who is directly involved in the history and memory of immigration in North America, Yamashita acknowledges the weight of the Gentlemen's Agreement, which occurred the same one hundred years ago but has not really become known to ordinary people, and flexibly tries to relate it to immigrants in South America.

At first, Yamashita detects a particular wit in the nuances of "men's agreement," which inhabit the term "Gentlemen's Agreement." Come to think of it, the whole modern history of Japanese emigration is the marvelous result of negotiations and agreements among (gentle)men. As for the women who emigrated, everything about their experience—marriage, the decision to leave Japan, the course of their lives in a new world—depended on the decision-making of husbands and brothers. Men agreed and decided, and women obediently followed. The history of emigration is indeed the history of Gentlemen's Agreement. But strangely enough, although men had the freedom and power of decision-making regarding emigration, for this very reason they tended to be at the mercy of their fate and vulnerable to depression, while the women who were forced to obey men found spiritual freedom and achieved stability in the new world. Yamashita does not discuss the manifestation of this paradoxical truth in the abstract. She shows it, instead, by focusing on the individual lives of her two grandmothers, immigrants to North America, and the lives of two grandmothers of her Brazilian friend, Lucio Kubo, immigrants to South America.

There was surprisingly little information on the lives of these four women, and they seemed wrapped in a dense fog to their grandchildren who did not spend time with them regularly and thus did not see their lives directly. Because of a generation gap, conversations between old Issei women and young Sansei were often experienced,

even if they actually commenced, as painful failures of communication, with each side trying to grope around the wall of language. Therefore, the medium of Yamashita's contemplation here is not memories of flesh and blood grandmothers, but their old fading photographs, which are valuable remnants of an era when photographs existed only as formal commemorative pictures taken at a photo studio, long before the era of snapshots. The photos Yamashita contemplates are not something that vividly captured the grandmothers' expressions in their actual daily lives but rather sealed the family history and memory within the atmosphere of a studio and hid the grandmothers' true emotions behind formal expressionlessness. But it is exactly because they are portraits frozen in formality that Yamashita (and Kubo, who is also a translator of her article) touch intimately these women's photos as if reading their palms and thus give voice to the lives confined within portraits of the past that in fact inscribe messages for the future. It is as if Yamashita and Kubo believe that it is not gentlemen but ladies who can invent new time, which is to say, men may have arranged emigration within historical time, but it is women who speak to the future about the legacy of emigration then and now.

But the horizons of contemplation that Yamashita tries to step into here do not simply make it possible to deconstruct the gendered structure of emigration, which is based on masculine authority, from the viewpoint of women who actually occupied the center of immigrant life. In order to think about what this something else is that Yamashita was trying to accomplish, it is necessary to briefly retrace the circumstances under which Yamashita first went to Brazil. In the mid 1970s, Yamashita returned to college in Minnesota after a short stay in Japan on a study abroad program. She cancelled her plans to return to Japan in order to study kabuki and instead sought new intellectual growth through on-site research of Japanese immigrants living in South America, which was not yet a recognized academic field. Paul Riesman, an anthropologist and Yamashita's advisor at Carlton College (son of sociologist David Riesman, who is famous for his book *The Lonely Crowd*), had taught Yamashita the importance of profound examination of the self while objectifying it as an "other." For Yamashita, who had been marginalized within American society as an Asian minority and had been unable to identify with Japanese society during her short stay, Paul Ries-

man's teachings, which urged students to relativize themselves as social "others" in order to become highly conscious of how the borders of any given community, which are in fact almost invisible, come to be demarcated, was indeed suggestive. Known for his research on the society of the Fulani, a half-nomadic tribe that inhabits the Upper Volta (present-day Burkina Faso), Riesman proposed a new methodology called "introspective ethnography" and became one of the first to introduce the self-reflexive narrative mode for research, which altered the assumption of positivistic neutrality in standard anthropological practice. Yamashita aimed to collect oral histories of immigrants in a Japanese Brazilian community, reflect upon them through questions about her own identity as a descendant of immigrants in North America, and connect these oral histories to anthropological research, aims all of which were greatly indebted to Riesman's suggestions. This is the something that Yamashita was trying to accomplish besides deconstructing the gendered structure of Japanese emigration to North and South America.

Yamashita thus went south halfway around the globe and set foot in São Paulo when she was twenty-five. She sought advice from Takashi Maeyama, an anthropologist at the São Paulo Center for Japanese-Brazilian Studies, which played a leading role in research on Japanese immigrant communities in Brazil. Maeyama advised Yamashita to conduct oral histories of Issei women who lived in Japanese Brazilian farms in the interior of São Paulo. Maeyama suggested this partly because a critical reconsideration of the supposedly subordinate role of women in immigration history had barely begun, but also because the Issei were aging.

Holding a tape recorder, Yamashita started to interview those women, and this continued for several months. But ahead of her lay the fact that the academic theme of an oral history of female immigrants would gradually collapse due to the reality that she was obliged to face.

Yamashita recalls how, during her interviews of Issei women, the women's husbands and brothers always came around and interfered. Soon they began to take over the conversations, and the women grew quiet and withdrew into the background of their stories. The men told splendid, heroic stories full of adventure and seemed able to talk for days. Indeed, the men knew a lot more than the women about their immigrant history, had had more exciting experiences, and held opinions about the very things Yamashita wanted to know.

Thus, Yamashita gradually got caught up in the presence of men who didn't want to let go of a stranger with a Japanese face, who appeared suddenly in front of them as a listener of their stories. Yamashita was touched by the talkativeness and passion of these men, who were avidly transforming memories piled up within themselves into stories, and she gradually began to feel that her original academic plan to collect the "oral history of women" was extremely artificial and stiff. It goes without saying that her historical novel *Brazil-Marú* began from this moment. She later honestly confessed that she had begun to feel rather sick and tired of those days in Brazil spent with the old women.

Here is hidden an interesting issue regarding the rupture between the truth that academic formality requires and the truth that living reality seeks. Around the same time, Yamashita encountered a group of "angry youth" who had just graduated from the University of São Paulo, and she married one of them, Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, who was majoring in architecture. Ronaldo's best friend was Lucio Kubo, the so-called "shogun," a Japanese Brazilian Nisei with a degree in philosophy. Yamashita and Kubo deepened their friendship while acknowledging the differences and similarities of each other's immigrant genealogy. Karen and Ronaldo had two children, a fusion between an Asian body and a Brazilian body of a mixed heritage of Portuguese, Italian, African, and Indio. They were unmistakably hybrid children growing up cheerfully in Brazilian creolized society. Under such circumstances, no academic research could be fully satisfying for Yamashita, because her new Brazilian reality that was created both by inevitability and fortuity in a foreign land outshone any discovery that could result from a narrow academic framework such as the oral history of female immigrants. It can be said that neither Yamashita's adventurous young spirit nor her sincerity in life allowed her to draw a clear line between academic work and family life and manage to do both well.

Although Yamashita continued recording the stories of Issei men and women, she abandoned her original plan to pursue anthropological research and began to nurture her imagination as a writer, which eventually bore fruit in the form of a novel, *Brazil-Marú*. She was aware of the linguistic limitations that prevented her from interviewing those Issei using sophisticated Japanese or from reading Japanese newspapers and archives, and such awareness must have caused an ethical hesitation in regard to the pursuit of empirical an-

thropological research. But she thought she could creatively unify those innumerable voices of immigrants into a fictional narrative. Or rather, she must have clearly realized that only such a method would enable her to reflect her own existence as a descendent of immigrants in North America onto the land of multiracial Brazil and, conversely, to reflect the relentless history of Japanese Brazil in the mirror of her own life. To put it another way, it was impossible to describe a reflexive reality encompassing her immigrant blood through the narrow academic language of anthropology. The fiction of academism did not allow her to reveal the truth of the Karen Tei Yamashita who now had a family in Brazil as if she were a new immigrant. In a sense, the fiction/novel was more truthful for her, whereas anthropology was merely fictitious.

Yamashita's essay, "Gentlemen's Agreement," was translated from English to Japanese by Lucio Kubo, a Brazilian Nisei critic. When I read his Japanese, I was impressed with the tenderness and intensity of collective thoughts produced at the place where Japanese, English, and Portuguese intersect. At the same time, I was caught off guard by Yamashita's observation about the different understanding/experience of "generation" between Japanese immigrant communities in North America and those in Brazil. Because so few Japanese North Americans have undertaken studies of Japanese South American communities, the terms "Nisei" and "Sansei" have acquired stable definitions wholly internal to either North or South America, and as a result, the inherent contingency of "Nisei" and "Sansei" subjectivity has been neglected. It was Karen Tei Yamashita's writings that first revealed to me the existence of this profound contingency. The first reason why I was attracted to the fictional works that Yamashita presents is her unique cultural vision, which was produced by the unusual route of "migration" and "relocation" whereby a Japanese North American entered into a Japanese Brazilian community. As impressively described in "Gentlemen's Agreement," Yamashita made her decisive "migration" from north to south, a migration both geological and epistemological and that resulted from a rerouting of Japanese emigration beginning in 1908, as if she had traced back the history of immigration. In doing so, she ended up riding a "time machine" through Japanese emigrant history, because she discovered that "Sansei" North Americans are "Nisei" in Brazil due to the fact that emigration from Japan to South

America began a few decades after the start of emigration to North America.

For Yamashita, “Nisei” was a privileged concept, assigned specifically to the generation of her parents in North America. It was never a mechanical concept that merely indicates generation based on birth within an immigrant community. The “Nisei,” who were born of Issei parents in the United States and grew up being fully conscious of their own identity as the first generation of Japanese Americans, is the generation that was inevitably assimilated into American society, had a good command of English, and held in common the will to establish their new identity as American citizens. Integration and assimilation into American society were unconscious ideals for most Nisei in North American society and remained so until the beginning of the 1960s, even after they had experienced the injustice of the wartime internment. After the mid-1960s, however, a new generation, the Sansei, challenged white hegemony and racism in the way their parents never did. The Sansei favored collective demonstration, and supported the civil rights movement across the nation. The Nisei ideal of integration and assimilation was rejected, as angry Sansei subverted the traditional values of the Japanese American community. Sansei in North America deeply absorbed the politics and art of the civil rights movement and 1960s counterculture. They searched for new identity and solidarity across races and ethnicities.

As a young Sansei who was the legitimate child of such an era, Yamashita was surprised to find in Brazil, in the person of Lucio Kubo, a “Nisei,” sporting long hair, a goatee, bell-bottom jeans, and gaudy sunglasses, absorbed in a hot argument about jazz and Dadaism. It was like a revelation. For Yamashita, who was struggling to overcome the Nisei values of obedience and assimilationist conservatism instilled in her by her parents, the urban reality of Brazil in the mid 1970s where these defiant “Nisei” were living must have been dazzling. At this moment, Yamashita discovered that her journey south was a “time machine.” And this time travel was also a visible experience for Kubo. If Kubo was for Yamashita the impossible and strange reflection of her “Nisei” parents in their youth, Yamashita was for Kubo a “Sansei” coming from the future, a surprising manifestation of his own child who has not yet been born. This is the secret of Yamashita’s and Kubo’s long-lasting friendship, a sanctuary that almost anybody cannot invade. Both are, for each

other, parent and child, sister and brother.

The narrative that Karen Tei Yamashita was trying to weave essentially came into being at that moment thirty years ago when she “discovered” continuity and incongruity between South American Nisei and North American Sansei. In other words, at this very moment she captured the fluid inconsistency of time from which the collective history of immigrants arose. It is a linear history that has been warped and arrested, circling back and scattered around after innumerable windings and reversals. When the complicated thread of time called immigration has become one hundred years long, it consists of layers of complex time, severe reversals, and unexpected returns, strangely yet richly expanding.

In the corridor of this chaotic time, men and women seize the day. They try to critically relive the past of their parents and grandparents. There is a strong will that produces a familial and collective understanding. It exists at the center of the collective spirituality of immigrants and binds the generations together firmly but gently. It can be said that a novel like *Brazil-Marú* (1992), which was published more than ten years since Yamashita first went to Brazil, reflects the Brazilian truth of a rising novelist who could not ignore the intensity of the dreamy voices of men in a Japanese Brazilian community. If so, “Gentlemen’s Agreement” (2006), written by the same writer as the established author of a richly developed oeuvre, can be said to be Yamashita’s peaceful declaration of her everlasting yearning for immigrant women. In this essay, Yamashita is speaking to the shadows of grandmothers while conjuring up their self-reflective voices from the photos. For Yamashita, who established her position as a writer by writing a story of men, it is a message of love for the forgotten women, a modest gesture that nonetheless holds immense implications for the future.

This humble, incomparable gift was translated by Lucio Kubo himself. It is like a miracle. While I undertook the task of revising it slightly while trying to leave the nuances of Kubo’s Japanese, which is somewhat quaint and sounds strangely resolute, the jolly voice of “shogun,” who is also my friend, always reverberated through my body. In Showa 3 (1928), before deciding to come to Brazil, Lucio’s grandfather, Tetsu Kubo, published a readers’ guide to the New Testament through an old publisher handling books on Christianity, Ichiryu-sha in Nagoya. I obtained one volume from the series The

First and Second Thessalonians and read it while I was engaged in the revision. When I saw the following passages in the preface, I heard in Lucio's voice a reverberation of the past future of his grandfather's words:

The impression of Paul from reading Galatia is that of a doctor who tried to explain the right regimen to a patient who had believed in the wrong regimen. The impression of Paul from reading Thessalonians is that of a parent whose child made a cutting remark. It is easy to be a doctor but difficult to be a parent. It is because Paul became a good parent that the Thessalonians' church could be established. Christian churches today, which have become like trading stock companies, missionaries who have become employees in the trading companies, and followers who behave like stockholders, all of them must learn a lesson from this book indeed.

(Tetsu Kubo, *The First and Second Thessalonians* [Nagoya: Ichiryu-sha, 1928], 7-8.)

Although this book was dedicated to textual analysis of the Bible, I feel that the problem of exchanging nuanced emotions between generations of immigrants was already present in it. Lucio must have been born like a child who "made a cutting remark." Tetsu never imagined that such a grandson might be born in the future Brazil, but somehow he unconsciously anticipated in this book the consequence of a chain of time in his religious mind. And Lucio, who must have been a rebellious child, became a parent of children who are making a cutting remark, just like Karen did. For the descendants of immigrants who are creating families in a land which can never perfectly become a world of their own, nothing is more difficult than negotiating generational ties. Indeed, it is forever "difficult to become a parent." This is the truth of immigrants.

"All of them must learn a lesson from this book indeed." The decisive but somewhat easygoing idiosyncrasy of Tetsu's concluding remark is Lucio's voice itself for me. I assume that Karen would understand well where this quaint voice came from: a place where time is a twill fabric with each thread woven together intricately, where all the voices of men and women flutter about, a place that resonates like an echo in the valleys and mountains. ■