



The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism

Rachel Adams

If Los Angeles is the city that taught us how to be postmodern, might it also be the place where we begin to imagine what comes after? For well over 30 years, the architecture, demographics, lifestyles, and industries of Southern California have inspired countless essays and books on the nature and significance of postmodernity. Hollywood, Disneyland, the elevators at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, the futuristic cityscapes of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, freeways, suburbs, shopping malls: these have become touchstones for some of the most influential reflections on the subject of American—and often global—postmodernism.¹ Thomas Pynchon wrote of the alienating, dystopian elements of postmodern California in his 1966 *The Crying of Lot 49*, where he described the road as a “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of the freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain” (15). In the paranoid imaginings of his protagonist Oedipa Maas, traffic is an endless automated flow; the freeway exists less to facilitate human movement than to feed a city that craves only numbing, drug-induced happiness. Oedipa is little more than a pawn in a system too vast to be fully perceived or understood. Fast forward 30 years to *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita, where the Los Angeles freeways are described by Manzanar, a man who gave up his home and his career as a surgeon to become a “conductor” of the vast symphony of urban life. As he stands on an overpass, “the great flow of humanity [runs] below and beyond his feet in every direction, pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city” (35). Like Pynchon, Yamashita uses meta-

phors of a living body to depict the freeway, but in this case its rhythms are those of human motion; traffic is not a narcotic artificially introduced into the system but the very lifeblood of the city, whose roads are “a great root system, an organic living entity” (37). These contrasting images are emblematic of fundamental differences between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Tropic of Orange*, a novel that locates seismic shifts on the cultural horizon in the neighborhoods, traffic jams, and volatile borders of Southern California. Separated by 30 years, the two works can be read together as bookends bracketing one possible beginning and end to a particular kind of US literary postmodernism.

This essay proposes that *Tropic of Orange* represents an afterword to literary postmodernism that I will call the globalization of American literature. My observations originate from a growing sense that canonical works of postmodern literature no longer belong on the syllabus of my annual course on contemporary American fiction, which used to begin with *The Crying of Lot 49*. My students often respond to Pynchon’s novel as if they were victims of a cruel hoax. They have little appreciation for its darkly comic ambiguities and are unfamiliar with historical and political allusions that once would have been immediately recognizable to its readers. Its depiction of the sharp polarization of the globe, fears of looming nuclear apocalypse, and newfound distrust of a government enmeshed in secrecy and conspiratorial activity represent the concerns of an earlier generation. They fail to see what is innovative about Pynchon’s flat characters or the medium cool tones and playful self-reflexivity of his language. Their responses caused me to realize that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Pynchon’s novel has ceased to read as a work of contemporary fiction, even though many critics continue to use *post-modern* and *contemporary* as synonymous terms. While my students find *Tropic of Orange* no less challenging, they are willing to grapple with its difficulties because they recognize its form, which evokes the internet’s polyvocality and time-space compression, and its themes—the human and environmental consequences of transformations taking place at America’s borders—as belonging to their own contemporary moment. While these structural and thematic concerns may seem quite postmodern, Yamashita’s novel situates them in relation to the vast inequities, economic interconnections, and movement of people and goods associated with globalization. In what follows, I will propose that the teaching and study of American literary history can benefit from more careful distinctions

between the contemporary moment of globalization and its postmodern precursors.

My argument relies on an understanding of postmodernism as the dominant form of avant-garde literary experimentalism during the Cold War, a period marked by the ascendance of transnational corporations, the upheavals of decolonization, fears of nuclear holocaust, and the partitioning of the globe into ideological spheres. The dark humor; themes of paranoia, skepticism, and conspiracy; preoccupation with close reading and textuality; and complex formal experimentation characteristic of the most canonical works of postmodern literature can be historicized as a response to and reaction against what Alan Nadel has called the “containment culture” of Cold War America.² By this account, the formal and conceptual innovations of a group of authors that includes Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, Kathy Acker, William Gaddis, William Gibson, and others belong to an era of literary history that came to an end in the late 1980s. This more historically and stylistically bounded understanding of literary postmodernism strikes me as more useful than one that extends from the years after World War II into the present. Examples of the latter include Michael Bérubé’s proposition that postmodernism is a name for the era of globalization that we now inhabit and Marcel Cornis-Pope’s division of postmodern literature into pre- and post-Cold War varieties. Most famously, Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” a periodizing concept, but one with no apparent end in sight. Couched in such expansive terms, postmodernism is an unwieldy category that encompasses such strikingly different historical contexts and expressive forms that it threatens to become incoherent. Defining it more narrowly as a particularly successful mode of narrative experimentation that declined with the waning of the Cold War alleviates this problem and provides an opportunity to consider the distinctive features and historical circumstances of a new chapter in American literary history.

My provisional name for this chapter, American literary globalism, is intended to identify a constellation of authors who are reacting against the stylistic and conceptual premises of high postmodernism and responding to the intensification of global processes that were emergent during, but muted by, the phenomenon of Cold War.³ These include the unprecedented integration of the world’s markets, technologies, and systems of governance; surprising and innovative new forms of cultural fusion;

and the mobilization of political coalitions across the lines of race, class, and other identitarian categories. For some, the perceived ubiquity of transnational corporations and increasing commodification of the world's cultures gave rise to fears about the impending demise of literary innovation. As Jonathan Franzen lamented in a controversial 1996 article:

The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single, vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality. The American writer today faces a totalitarianism analogous to the one with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine. (43)

But while Franzen was decrying the numbing effects of global consumer culture, contemporary fiction in the US was being transformed by an infusion of new writers whose distinctive responses to the conditions of globalization were hardly in danger of making "the same point over and over." Many of these authors—Jhumpa Lahiri, Sandra Cisneros, Chang Rae Lee, Junot Diaz, Ruth Ozecki, Jessica Hagerdorn, Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee, Susan Choi, Oscar Hijuelos, Edwidge Danticat, and many others—were either the children of migrants or were themselves migrants who had come to the US as a result of the global upheavals of the past two decades. Relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, their fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents.

In what follows, I read Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* as a novel that revises many of the themes and strategies employed by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*. I take these two novels as representative texts that might stand in for the larger shift from postmodernism to globalism as a dominant conceptual and thematic force in contemporary American fiction. I measure the distance between these categories in terms of their very different treatments of California and its environs, places that have so often been taken as a barometer of the American, and global, future.

Pynchon depicts California as a place of suburban atomization. Located at the edge of the American frontier, it is a testament to the exhaustion of the westering impulse once seen as so vital to the nation's manifest destiny. The labyrinthine atmosphere of office parks, freeways, back alleys, and tract houses is echoed, at the level of form, in the novel's penchant for lists, catalogues, and circuitous narrative detours. Although *The Crying of Lot 49* satirizes the classic migratory pattern from Old World to New, its representation of California is also marked by recurrent allusions to Mexico, a place that might seem to promise alternatives to the fractured, apolitical society on the US side of the border. But instead, references to Mexican things and places simply add to the cluttered accumulation of signs that point to dead ends rather than progress. By contrast, Mexican history, people, and culture are the lifeblood of Yamashita's Southern California, which is literally being transformed by the momentous flows of people and culture from south of the border. Although *Tropic of Orange* is similarly complicated in terms of plot and narrative construction, its formal difficulties seem designed less to entrap both character and reader in a postmodern labyrinth than to evoke the dense networking of people and goods in an age of global interconnection. As Yamashita represents it, California is a nodal point where globalization threatens to erupt into environmental and human catastrophe, but also where people find themselves creating unlikely coalitions that might work to remedy these problems.

Postmodern Pynchon

The subject of well over a thousand critical articles, Thomas Pynchon may be the most frequently cited author in the vast scholarship on literary postmodernism.⁴ The formal and thematic concerns expressed by his work—a preoccupation with paranoia and conspiracy, radical skepticism about foundational truth and authority of all kinds, deft mixing of genres, distrust of received historical knowledge, and confrontations with the sublime and apocalyptic—have come to define the study and teaching of postmodern fiction. Molly Hite describes Pynchon as “arguably the most important of postmodern novelists” (716), while Samuel Coale declares, without qualification, that Pynchon's writing reigns as “the postmodern vision above all others” (177). While *Gravity's Rainbow* is the Pynchon novel most frequently discussed by critics, the far shorter and more ac-

cessible *The Crying of Lot 49* is most often assigned in the classroom, meaning that it may be the best known of all postmodern fictions. In thinking about what comes after postmodernism, it is worth revisiting *The Crying of Lot 49* in order to establish how this early novel set the terms by which several generations of readers have come to understand literary postmodernity.

The Crying of Lot 49 is structured like a frustrated detective story in which too many clues pile up, leading to ambiguity and confusion rather than insight. Although its generic form seems to suggest the purposive, goal-oriented progress of a quest, neither characters nor reader are any closer to insight by the novel's conclusion. Its governing metaphor is entropy, a figure for the exhaustion of closed systems and the overwhelming chaos of information overload.⁵ Like her classical namesake, Oedipa Maas is surrounded by signs that seem to demand interpretation, but it is never clear whether they add up to a vast conspiracy or are merely symptoms of her own madness. "Why is everybody so interested in texts?" (61) asks the suicidal director Randolph Driblette, a question that identifies reading—of letters, plays, historical documents, graffiti, and the ubiquitous symbols that suddenly appear everywhere in Oedipa's world—as a fundamental activity in the narrative, but one that fails to yield productive forms of knowledge. Such moments of self-reflexivity turn the novel into an infinitely receding hall of mirrors in which words seem to have lost their ability to refer to anything other than themselves. The names of places and characters—Mike Fallopian, Genghis Cohen, Stanley Koteks, Mucho Maas, Dr. Hilarius, the Yoyodyne Corporation, San Narciso—cry out for explication that will ultimately fail to yield any particular significance. Reading is what inaugurates Oedipa's quest when she notices a stamp cancelled with the words "REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMATER" (33). Is this a simple misprint, as her lawyer Metzger suggests, or is it a subversive message associated with the underground postal network Oedipa comes to know as the Tristero/Trystero system? And is her world a legible document whose signs, if accurately interpreted, will point the way toward an underlying meaning, or is her effort to find meaning merely a defense against the world's randomness and chaos? Is the reader, whose progress so closely parallels Oedipa's own, trapped within a similarly confining network of signs? At the novel's end, these questions are left unresolved as Oedipa awaits the eponymous "crying of lot 49" (152), the call of an auctioneer that may reveal the

source of the mysterious clues or draw her further into a self-referential labyrinth that will never lead to revelation or knowledge. Paranoia is the novel's reigning sensibility, a sentiment that Patrick O'Donnell calls "the symptomatic condition of postmodernity" (qtd. in Coale 5). This, coupled with what Thomas Schaub describes as its "necessary ambiguity" (67), its playful self-reflexivity, evident delight in incoherence and uncertainty, and depiction of the world as a text that offers an excess of signs while frustrating signification, have led many critics to declare *The Crying of Lot 49* a paradigmatic instance of literary postmodernism.

Few critical readings of *The Crying of Lot 49* remark on its treatment of place, despite the fact that it anticipates the writings of the many critics who would find California the locus of postmodernity in the 1980s and 1990s. Pynchon's California is a place that values superficiality over depth, a state where neighborhoods and downtowns have been eradicated in favor of vast, sprawling networks of freeway, and where faceless new information industries have made workers ever more alienated from the products of their labor. Wandering the impersonal, maze-like halls of the Yoyodyne corporation, Oedipa comes across the engineer Stanley Koteks, who laments: "Nobody wanted them to invent—only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook" (70). Yoyodyne is located in San Narciso, a suburb of Los Angeles that is "like many named places in California, [. . .] less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (13). The suburbs of Southern California are isolated pods connected by endless miles of freeway; residents no longer live in cities unified around a central core but in "concepts" determined by negotiations among corporations, developers, and politicians. The sense of alienation projected by these locations is amplified by the novel's disorienting treatment of space. Although Oedipa spends a lot of time driving, her journey is not described in a way that could be plotted on a map. The pileup of metaphors and catalogues gives the impression that her movements could as easily be taking place within her own tortured interiority as across a physical landscape.

Pynchon's California is the setting for a parodic rendition of the classic American narratives of immigration and westward movement. Adherents of the underground network called the Tristero/Trystero left Europe

after losing their aristocratic patronage, arrived in the US, and migrated to the West Coast. As the historian Emory Bortz explains to Oedipa:

other immigrants come to America looking for freedom from tyranny, acceptance by the culture, assimilation into it, this melting pot. Civil War comes along, most of them, being liberals, sign up to fight to preserve the Union. But clearly not the Tristero. All they've done is to change oppositions. (143)

The Tristero/Trystero cannot be equated with other persecuted groups who have come to America to ensure the perpetuation or defense of their political ideals. Although they are a dissenting minority, their secret machinations are motivated by nothing more than resistance for its own sake. Their purposeless opposition makes sense in the context of a Southern California where life has become so standardized and claustrophobic that any sign of protest can be seen as a welcome assertion of agency, yet it also points to a depressingly reduced conception of the dissent so integral to the American national consciousness.

The Tristero/Trystero's seemingly pointless acts of subversion are echoed in Oedipa's experience of UC Berkeley, celebrated home of the free-speech and antiwar movements. Returning to the campus where she was once a student, Oedipa feels estranged from the new spirit of activism she encounters there, prompting her to wonder:

where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina who'd mothered over [her] so temperate youth? [. . .] Among them they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts. (83)

Raised to perceive the most controversial politicians of her time as "dear daft numina," Oedipa is more suited to literary than political analysis. During this visit to Berkeley, she finds a bewildering array of "swaying card tables, long paper petitions dangling to the earth, posters for undecipherable FSM's, YAF's, VDC's, suds in the fountain, students in nose to nose dialogue" (83), but these signs of political awareness are evacuated of significance, their meaning inchoate as anything else in the novel. Trained as a good close reader, Oedipa is alienated by the notion of the university as a place where students are taught to be critics of their world rather

than of texts. As O'Donnell describes her development over the course of the novel:

literate, suspicious, and sensitive (like any good New Critic) to the subtleties of paradox and ambiguity, the more information Oedipa gathers, the more connections she finds, confirming her sense that she is part of some tangled network of linkages whose origins and ends ever recede into obfuscation as the information mounts. (191)

Feeling herself constrained by conspiratorial forces too vast and complex to ever be fully understood, Oedipa behaves like an ideal Cold War subject by seeking out irony and contradiction rather than understanding herself as a political agent. When Metzger jokes about the authorities “pressing the wrong button” (33), he underscores the sense of civic disempowerment and insecurity associated with the early Cold War period, in which nuclear apocalypse could just as plausibly come about from a mistake made by one’s own government as an enemy attack.⁶ These details anchor *The Crying of Lot 49* in its historical moment, a decade that included the United States’ escalating involvement in Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. The novel’s emphasis on texts and close reading, its thematization of paranoia and conspiracy, and its pessimism about the possibility of political resistance all might be understood as reflections on a geopolitical context in which ordinary citizens feel alienated and disempowered by the political process.

Another distinguishing feature of Pynchon’s California is its palpable proximity to Mexico, which seems as if it must provide a vital key to unlocking the mysteries of the text. When Pierce’s sanity begins to slip, one of his personae speaks in “hostile Pachuco dialect” (2); Oedipa’s husband Mucho sells used cars to poor Mexicans; John Nefastis lives in a “pseudo-Mexican apartment house” (83); and Oedipa wanders into “an all-night Mexican greasy spoon” (96) in San Francisco. Such ubiquitous allusions to Mexico and Mexicans might be read as yet another set of clues, autobiographical traces of the author’s stay in Mexico City from 1960 to 1962 while writing his celebrated first novel, *V*. The Mexican capital is the scene of an apocryphal story in which Pynchon managed to evade a magazine photographer who had been sent to take his picture, never again to appear in the media spotlight. So too Mexicanisms in *The Crying of Lot 49* might provide another way to locate the novel in its historical and

geographic context. During the Cold War, Mexico was perceived as an important ally of the United States, its geographical position providing a buffer against the incipient communism of other Latin American nations. Mexico's newfound financial and political stability made it a model for the possibilities of democratic progress in the region. At the same time, its association with a violent and exotic revolutionary past enticed more radical Americans with the possibility of escape from the stultifying political atmosphere of the United States. But to read Pynchon's Mexico as either an autobiographical or sociopolitical referent would be to miss the point. In keeping with the novel's postmodern sensibility, its Mexicanisms are more like so much background noise, adding to the clutter of signs whose meaning may amount to no more than endless deferral and information overload. Mexico itself is less important as a literal place than as a figure for the impossibility of self-knowledge or certitude. It appears to Oedipa as a way to liberate herself from the feminine mystique of Tupperware parties, housework, and marriage, but what she discovers is that her neuroses cannot be left behind through physical travel. While vacationing with Pierce in Mexico City, Oedipa contemplates a painting by the surrealist Remedios Varo in which the image of frail girls imprisoned "in the top room of a circular tower" (11) mirrors back her own sense of claustrophobia and confinement by forces she cannot understand. She realizes that instead of finding a retreat, she has reached a place that is "only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape" (11). This Mexico is less a real locale than a name for one of many forms of restless disappointment that precede Oedipa's quest to understand the Tristero system.

Mexico is also linked to the exhaustion of the revolutionary energies that surface over the course of the novel without amounting to anything. During her visit to Berkeley, Oedipa finds the campus "more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about . . . the sort that bring governments down" (83), but despite this passing reference to the political promises of decolonization, there is no suggestion that such potential will ever be realized on US soil. What is more likely is that these middle-class American students are simply mimicking the behavior that led to revolutions elsewhere in the world. And there is little hope for such cataclysmic change in the figure of the exiled Mexican revolutionary Jesus Arabal, whom Oedipa comes across while wandering the streets

of San Francisco. Arabal is an acquaintance from her travels in Mazatlán and a member of the Mexican CIA, a clandestine anarchist organization that traces its history back to such notorious revolutionaries as Emiliano Zapata and the Flores Magón brothers. When Pierce and Oedipa met him in Mexico, Arabal was waiting for an antigovernment rally to which nobody showed up. Arabal's faith in the need for resistance is restored by his chance encounter with Pierce, whom he finds to be the purest embodiment of bourgeois privilege and thus the perfect target of his political struggles. Oedipa questions whether Arabal's fate would have been different had the meeting never taken place: "she wondered if, without the miracle of Pierce to reassure him, Jesus might not have quit his CIA eventually and gone over like everybody else to the majority priistas, and so never had to go into exile" (98). For both Oedipa and Arabal, Pierce is a connective link who makes them believe that otherwise random events might be part of a larger design. Yet the alternatives Oedipa imagines for the Mexican Arabal are equally bleak: were he not an impoverished exile in the United States, where his revolutionary energies have no outlet, he would have been absorbed into the political machinery of Mexico's ruling party, the PRI. Like the girls in the Remedios Varo painting, Arabal can find no way out of this confining circularity. Mexico, as it is portrayed in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is neither an escape, as Oedipa wishes it to be, nor a place to realize alternatives to the limited political horizons of the United States.

The representation of Mexico in *The Crying of Lot 49* might stand in as a paradigm for Pynchon's postmodernism, especially when it is read against a more recent novel like *Tropic of Orange*. Mexico could serve as the source of political resistance, personal realization, or a means of anchoring the novel in time and space. But like the other apparent clues promised by Pynchon's text, it becomes yet another signifier unmoored from its referents in the surrounding world. It resists an interpretation that would seek cultural or historical significance, pointing instead to close-reading strategies designed to uncover irony and ambiguity. In this, the postmodernism of Pynchon's novel powerfully reflects on the atmosphere of its Cold War moment. Its themes and strategies must be seen in historical terms, as the expressions particular to a time and place that is now nearly half a century in the past.

Global California in *Tropic of Orange*

Recall that when Oedipa Maas describes the freeways of Southern California, she likens them to the veins of a drug addict “nourishing the mainliner L.A.” Whereas Pynchon uses a passive construction—the road as a “hypodermic needle inserted” by an unknown agent—Karen Tei Yamashita’s language emphasizes the human activity that turns the freeway system into “an organic living entity” (37). These differing conceptions of character and language are a good place to begin a consideration of how the concerns of contemporary fiction have changed over time, turning literary postmodernism into a historical category rather than a description of the present. While they may seem an unlikely pair, *Tropic of Orange* and *The Crying of Lot 49* share elements of plot and form that make them ideally suited for comparative analysis. A significant portion of both novels takes place in a dystopian Southern California, which becomes a microcosm of broader geopolitical tensions of its time. And both novels are ironic, formally experimental, and highly allusive, borrowing from multiple genres, including the noir/detective novel so closely associated with Southern California locales. But three decades after the publication of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Tropic of Orange* looks to different sources of inspiration, historical contexts, and geographic frames from those favored by its postmodern precursor.

In an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita remarked that “in 1991, if you had said I was doing a ‘postmodern project,’ I’d have thought, ‘What the hell is that?’” (qtd. in Gier and Tejada). Despite her disclaimer, it isn’t surprising that *Tropic of Orange* frequently appears on syllabi of courses in postmodern literature, since it shares certain structural and thematic concerns with experimental fiction of previous decades. The alternative networks of communication anticipated by Pynchon’s Tristero/Trystero system are fully realized in Yamashita’s work, where the internet is both a metaphor for global interconnectedness and the novel’s organizational principle. *Tropic of Orange* begins with a grid titled “hypercontexts” that lays out the correspondence between its seven plotlines and the days of the week during which the action takes place. Although this map locates the central characters in time and space, it also provides a deceptive sense of order to a narrative that ultimately refuses to come together in any coherent manner. The identification of spatiotemporal coordinates cannot explain the mysterious events

that unfold over the course of the week, which include a smuggling ring that kidnaps small children for their organs; the appearance of poisoned oranges on the supermarket shelves of California; a massive accident that brings the rush-hour freeway to a standstill; an uprising of homeless Angelenos; seismic shifts in L.A.'s urban geography; strange mutations in regional weather, flora, and fauna; and a 500-year-old man so strong that he can pull a bus with cables hooked to his own body. Like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Tropic of Orange* presents an overload of events and information that makes it difficult to distinguish relevant clues from background noise. As Gabriel, the novel's erstwhile detective, concludes:

I no longer looked for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off my storylines. If I had begun to understand anything, I now knew they were simply the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger and larger. (249)

Although these holes are no closer to being filled by the novel's end, Gabriel has come to accept the uncertainty of his chaotic, transitional environment by recognizing its likeness to the ubiquitous technology of the internet.

The figure most closely associated with a postmodern worldview in *Tropic of Orange* is Gabriel's girlfriend Emi, the hip, hypercontemporary TV producer who is "so distant from the Asian female stereotype—it was questionable if she even had an identity" (19). Emi loves speed, surfaces, and the newest technologies. Disdainful of Gabriel's passion for film noir, she has a television that can project four different stations simultaneously so that "at any moment, she could judge which channel had the more exciting screen" (125). A woman whose reality is confirmed only when she sees it on the evening news, who rejects tradition and declares that "cultural diversity is bullshit" (128), Emi seems to represent the future that many critics have associated, for better or worse, with Southern California.⁷ That is, until she becomes the casualty of a drive-by shooting while sunning herself on the roof of the *Newsnow* van. Caught on film, her demise will be endlessly replayed for TV viewers so that "in this sense, she would never die" (250). Ironic to the very end, her final question is yet another stab at Gabriel's beloved film noir: "what color is blood in . . . black and . . . white?" (252). Her last words are a comic recognition of her failure to interface completely

with the computerized technologies that have defined her life: "Abort. Retry. Ignore. Fail . . ." The shallow theatricality of Emi's death could not be more postmodern. But her unsentimental elimination also suggests that she is no longer useful, that the future belongs instead to characters like Gabriel or the community organizer Buzzworm, who are both more respectful of the past and willing to harbor utopian visions of the future. Indeed, Yamashita's decision to kill off her character seems to repudiate the postmodern "waning of affect" famously described by Fredric Jameson (10) by leaving the world to those with deeper commitments and belief in the possibility of social change.

Emi's death might stand in for the novel's rejection of the superficiality and relentless irony of postmodern aesthetics that her character represents. Rather than categorizing *Tropic of Orange* as a work of postmodern fiction, I would argue that the novel is more aptly described as a reaction to and an effort to move beyond its experimental precursors. Indeed, despite certain similarities with earlier works of experimental fiction, *Tropic of Orange* was unrecognizable to the major publishers who had been printing the work of high postmodernists like Pynchon since the 1960s. Even editors who appreciated the well-established conventions of postmodern literary experimentation declared it to be—in Yamashita's words—"too experimental and [they] didn't want the politics" (qtd. in Gier and Tejada). Yamashita eventually placed her novel with the small nonprofit Coffee House Press, which is dedicated to publishing the work of underrepresented authors. Yamashita and her work may have been inscrutable to publishers for several reasons. Although she describes herself as an Asian American writer, she does not fit easily into conventional understandings of this category. She began her literary career in Latin America, where she intended to write an oral history of Japanese women immigrants living in Brazilian agricultural communes. After becoming frustrated with conventional historical and ethnographic forms, she turned to fiction as a more appropriate means of capturing the "truth" of her subjects. Since her return to the US, Yamashita has written fiction, poetry, and performance pieces that consistently tie the history and culture of Asian America into the broader framework of the Americas and the planet.⁸ Her work is part of the explosion of ethnic American writing that has changed the contours of fiction in the US since the late 1980s, but it also expresses the more global, multiethnic perspectives of a generation that is refashioning older understandings of identity and politics. Although

some critics include this kind of writing in the rubric of postmodern fiction, its reception by publishers is evidence that it represents a significant departure that calls out for a new category altogether.

In *Tropic of Orange*, the Cold War vision of the globe that so dominates the texts of high postmodernism is replaced by other geopolitical cleavages. The novel's imagined geographies are informed by the massive demographic and perspectival shifts introduced by contemporary globalization and linked to the long history of conquest and colonization in the Americas. Whereas the genealogy of the Tristero/Trystero in *The Crying of Lot 49* is rooted in the history of transatlantic immigration, *Tropic of Orange* emphasizes the violence and destruction wrought by earlier European arrivals on the American continent. Its vision of America's future is tied to Latin America and Asia. Archangel, a supernatural figure who appears in the guises of migrant worker, streetcorner prophet, performance artist, and Mexican wrestler, is the primary link to the hemisphere's bloody past and the promise in its future. His performances and spontaneous "political poetry" remind audiences of another American history formed by New World slavery, thefts of land, failed uprisings, and revolutions. As its epigraph explains, *Tropic of Orange* is also about "the recent past; a past that, even as you imagine it, happens." Published in 1997, the novel alludes to a "recent past" that includes many events of global significance—the signing of NAFTA, the war on drugs, the tightening of immigration restrictions—that are felt with particular intensity in Southern California because of its proximity to the US-Mexico border.

Focusing on the US-Mexico border is one way that the novel draws attention to the divide between North and South that Immanuel Wallerstein has described as one of the great geopolitical polarities of the twenty-first century (280–88). While this division is not new, its consequences have become more apparent in the absence of Cold War ideological conflicts and the growth of the global economy. As we have seen, *The Crying of Lot 49* also looks south of the US border. But the relationship of North to South in *Tropic of Orange* means something quite different from its meaning in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Oedipa comes to realize—in a place "only by accident known as Mexico"—that her location is relatively unimportant, since revelation could have come in any number of places. By contrast, US-Mexico relations are absolutely crucial to Yamashita's narrative design, for they represent both the most destructive aspects of globalization and the inspired fusion of people and cultures

resulting from northward migration. So vital is this connection that at one point in the novel L.A. is described as “the Village of the Queen of the Angels of Porcuincola, the second largest city of Mexico, also known as Los Angeles” (211). Mazatlán—a romantic retreat for Oedipa and Pierce Inverarity—is also the location for the first chapter of *Tropic of Orange*, which takes place in a vacation home bought by Gabriel in an attempt to rediscover his Mexican roots. Moving back and forth between the US and Mexico, the novel reflects on a post-NAFTA context in which the international border has become a vital node in the global economy and a focus of concerns about national security as well as a constant reminder of the inextricable fusion of Latin and Anglo American cultures. The signing of CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement) in July 2005, combined with ongoing debates about immigration and domestic security, have ensured the ongoing currency of the topical questions raised by *Tropic of Orange* in the early twentieth-first century.

Yamashita’s concern with the interrelation of North and South is manifest at the level of style as well as content. *Tropic of Orange* depicts an unstoppable flow of people and goods moving back and forth between the US and Mexico despite the most vigilant forms of border security. The novel illustrates the affirmative consequences of these flows in its creative fusion of Latin American-inspired magical realism with allusions to such Anglo-American sources as hard-boiled detective fiction and Hollywood film. Of course, *The Crying of Lot 49* is also a generic hybrid, but its references to physics, classical mythology, Renaissance drama, and Freudian psychoanalysis are largely European in orientation. Among the authors Yamashita cites as influences are Pablo Neruda, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez, as well as the “border brujo” performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, who is the inspiration for the fantastical character of Archangel (Gier and Tejada). The use of Spanish-language words and phrases, supernatural events such as the literal movement of the border, the battle between the jaguar and the serpent, and references to mythical figures like Limpíão and La Malinche all reflect the imprint of Latin American narrative traditions. The inspired melding of Northern and Southern cultural forms is further evident in the novel’s structure, which vacillates between the linear, goal-oriented model of plot development of the Anglo-American detective novel and cyclical understandings of time indebted to Amerindian sources such as the Mayan codices. The nonlinear conception of history is most fully articulated by Archangel,

who prophesies a pattern of violence and renewal “based on the ancient belief that doom comes in fifty-two-year cycles” (48). This view is anticipated by the opening “hypercontexts,” many of which gesture to cyclical structures like times of day, days of the week, and seasons. Based on indigenous American understandings of temporality, the circular conception of history expressed by Archangel, in which the angry and dispossessed people of the South periodically rise up against their Northern oppressors, contrasts with the linearity of the Western calendar and the weakened sense of historicity posited by Jameson as a feature of the postmodern moment. Yamashita’s engagement with multiple literary precursors points to a more historically engaged and geographically expansive American archive than that of the high postmodernists, whose preoccupation with the Cold War often leads them to conflate America with the United States.

The “hypercontexts” at the opening of *Tropic of Orange* also set the stage for a narrative written in many different voices and dialects, from Emi’s fast-talking hipster vernacular to the streetwise cadences of Buzzworm and the immigrant Bobby Ngu to the earnest reflections of the Mexican housekeeper Rafaela and the political poetry of Archangel. This chorus of voices is another way of distinguishing *Tropic of Orange* from *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is told exclusively from Oedipa’s point of view. Of course, polyvocality is a strategy employed by many high postmodernists. However, they tend to use it as a sign of authorial mastery, whereas Yamashita’s technique, which is clearly inspired by her ambivalent experiences as an ethnographer, seems designed to channel the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record. Within the novel itself, Archangel assumes this task when he appears in the guise of many different populist figures, each with a distinctive voice and point of view. In the climactic showdown he appears as a Mexican wrestler named EL GRAN MOJADO, who announces that “*My struggle is for all of you*” (133). Of his antagonist, the robotic SUPERNAFTA, who claims to represent progress, technology, and commerce, EL GRAN MOJADO tells his audience:

He is only concerned with the
commerce of money and things.
What is this compared to the great
commerce of humankind?

In contrast to the injustice inevitably involved in the “commerce of money and things,” “the great commerce of humankind” represented by Archangel/EL GRAN MOJADO is a dialogue inclusive of many voices. *Tropic of Orange* models that commerce by presenting a story that must be told by multiple characters from across the spectrum of race, class, gender, and geography.

As the novel illustrates, the conflict between these two forms of commerce is amplified by the conditions of contemporary globalization, which have resulted in the dispersal and intensification of economic disparities. But globalization has also given rise to new modes of protest that Nick Dyer-Witheford labels the “new combinations” and Giovanni Arrighi, Terrence K. Hopkins, and Wallerstein call “antisystemic movements.” According to Dyer-Witheford, the “new combinations” are political networks that bypass traditional coalitional categories, giving rise to “a proliferation of concrete utopianisms envisaging ways more or less outside or beyond the market system” (194). These innovative forms of mobilization are as much a product of the age of globalization as are the great inequities and threat of cultural homogeneity associated with the spread of transnational capital. In *Tropic of Orange* the potential of the “new combinations” is best represented by the homeless Angelenos who invade the freeway after a massive accident brings traffic to a standstill. Less systematic and secretive than Pynchon’s Tristero/Trystero, their activities are spontaneous, collective, and dangerously anarchic. This revolution is fully televised. In a carnivalesque reversal, cars abandoned by their owners are taken over by the indigent, who treat them as homes rather than means of transportation. While everyone knows the situation is temporary, there is the suggestion that it may have more enduring consequences for the city as a whole. Significantly, Buzzworm notices,

amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was a big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. You name it. The whole system was coagulating then and there [. . .] Only way to navigate it was to feel the streets with your own two feet.

So people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he did. (219)

Using the by-now familiar metaphor of the city as body, Buzzworm real-

izes that even if L.A. suffers a debilitating illness, its human inhabitants will persist, rediscovering forgotten means of conveyance and perception. In the novel, the dreaded gridlock does not bring urban life to an end. Instead, the crisis forces people to see and feel the city differently, as they experience it by foot. And perhaps, the novel suggests, these new experiences, like the L.A. riots of 1992, might lead to lasting changes in the way that individuals and communities perceive one another.

Such changes remain unrealized on the horizon in *Tropic of Orange*. It is possible that they will never materialize. The freeway could be cleaned up, SUPERNAFTA could recover from his wounds, and life in Los Angeles could return to its regular patterns. However, the novel also persistently intimates that history need not proceed only in terms of the cycles of doom predicted by Archangel. If characters like Buzzworm and Gabriel do not succeed in realizing their utopian projects, they also are not defeated. The mass movement of people and land that takes place over the course of the narrative suggests a mounting crisis, a coming wave of humanity that cannot be turned back, that promises to “crush itself into every pocket and crevice, filling a northern vacuum with its cultural conflicts, political disruption, romantic language, with its one hundred years of solitude and its tropical sadness” (170–71). Like many recent social critics ranging across the political spectrum from Mike Davis to Samuel Huntington,⁹ the novel insists that this meeting between North and South is inevitable, but it does not disclose whether its consequences will be catastrophic or inspiring. It ends ambiguously with the fall of EL GRAN MOJADO but also with the reunion of a truly global family—the Singaporean Bobby, Mexican Rafaela, and their son Sol—in Los Angeles. There is no suggestion that the seething crowds who followed Archangel to the North plan to return home; if they remain they will further contribute to the Latinization of Southern California. Despite its unresolved ending, *Tropic of Orange* leaves its audiences in a very different position than does *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the reader, as Hite describes, must conclude that her “own world is a text that behaves in the same way [as the novel], inscribing ostentatiously free agents in preexisting stories that ultimately determine them” (716). Yamashita’s readers may feel alarmed at the environmental and human catastrophes—global warming, poverty, urban violence, civil war—that threaten to erupt just beyond the novel’s frame, but they will not find themselves confined in a claustrophobically self-referential fiction designed to mirror a lack of agency over their own

lives. Indeed, their position is more akin to the inhabitants of gridlocked L.A. Being stuck in traffic does not mean they are immobile. Rather, they are confronted by circumstances that force them outside the enclosed boundaries of the stories that they know, causing them to see and feel the world differently.

Reflecting on the future of cultural studies, Michael Denning writes:

a central task of a transnational cultural studies is to narrate an account of globalization that speaks not just of an abstract market with buyers and sellers, or even of an abstract commodification with producers and consumers, but of actors: transnational corporations, social movements of students, market women, tenants, radicalized and ethnicized migrants, labor unions, and so on.
(28–29)

As students and teachers of contemporary literature know well, fiction is often one step ahead of cultural studies, particularly when it comes to representing the agency of those who are typically depicted only as demographic abstractions. *Tropic of Orange* is about the way that populations from many different national and economic backgrounds come together in Los Angeles, where they variously champion, are victimized by, or simply live in the circumstances of globalization. In keeping with Yamashita's interest in oral history, the novel aspires to channel multiple voices, particularly those that have historically been silenced or marginalized. To say that *Tropic of Orange* provides the ingredients for the "account of globalization" Denning is calling for is not to claim that it represents its moment more accurately than does *The Crying of Lot 49*, but rather to underscore the extent to which the two works belong to different chapters in literary history. These novels are an ideal pair because each translates the cultural and political dilemmas of its time into the aesthetic and thematic innovations of narrative fiction. Any attempt to define what makes Yamashita's moment distinctive will require different forms of literacy, historical knowledge, and attention to emergent sensibilities that break from earlier understandings of "the contemporary."

One promising avenue in Americanist literary history is the recent realignment of the field's geographic parameters to reflect multiple Americas that are more mobile and expansive than the borders of the US nation-

state. As we have seen, Yamashita's imagined geographies are informed by a heightened awareness of how America is being transformed by the massive demographic and perspectival shifts wrought by globalization. Since the 1990s, many critics have proposed that nation-bound categories of literary study be replaced by alternative geographical frames such as the Caribbean, the Americas, the Black, the trans- or circum-Atlantic, the Pacific Rim, continents, hemispheres, and worlds.¹⁰ In Americanist literary study, such creative remapping has helped to bring attention to underrepresented authors, yielded innovative combinations of authors, and shed fresh light on well-known works. In a parallel development, many works of contemporary US fiction recognize a planet that is tied together through the increasing interpenetration of economies, cultures, and kinship. If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in one part of the world are inevitably affected by events in another.

If the postmodern vision of global geography is filtered through Cold War divisions and anxieties, contemporary US fiction takes other spatial and ideological imaginaries as its setting. It draws on a global archive of literary traditions in its search for innovative formal strategies. Of course, for over a century modernism and then postmodernism have relied on allusions to multiple languages and traditions. But contemporary US fictions tend to frame such borrowings differently, in terms of the contact among people and cultures resulting from globalization. It seems premature to say exactly what the reigning thematic and aesthetic sensibilities of the era of American literary globalism will be, given the difficulties of defining any form of cultural expression at the moment of its emergence. What this kind of comparative reading can accomplish most productively is to generate a more precise understanding of literary postmodernism, one that does not encompass anything and everything but sees it as a set of innovative narrative responses to the cultural conditions of its time. What better place to start identifying its successor than California, whose constantly shifting landscapes and populations have given rise to some of America's most apocalyptic nightmares, as well as its fondest utopian hopes for the future?

Notes

1. These include works by Janet Abu-Lughod, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Soja.
2. See also Ann Douglas and Patrick O'Donnell.
3. For varying examples of this terminology, see Samir Amin, Arjun Appadurai, Thomas Friedman, and Saskia Sassen.
4. To put this in some perspective, there are 1,184 articles on Pynchon in the MLA database, compared with 886 on Gertrude Stein, 649 on Ralph Ellison, and 395 on John Dos Passos, three of the most important US modernists of the previous generation.
5. See Gordon Slethaug xvi.
6. This sentiment was dramatized on film just two years earlier in Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* and its darkly comic counterpart, Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*.
7. See Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, Jameson, and Soja.
8. See also Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, *Brazil Maru*, and *Circle K Cycles*.
9. See Davis's *Magical Urbanism* and Huntington's "The Hispanic Challenge."
10. See for example Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez, Claire Fox and Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Paul Giles, Paul Gilroy, Gregory S. Jay, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, John Muthyala, Carolyn Porter, Joseph Roach, John Carlos Rowe's "Nineteenth-Century US Literary Culture and Transnationality" and *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, Jose David Saldívar, and Doris Sommer.

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