TRAVELING IDENTITIES: BETWEEN WORLDS IN KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S *CIRCLE K CYCLES*

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> 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.
>
> Karen Yamashita, *Circle K Cycles* (17)

Groundbreaking in both its structure and content, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* (2001) is a multi-genre, multilingual text that captures the contradictions of hybrid identities that are "expanded geographically," or shaped by geopolitical spaces that are at once global and local. With particular attention to the history of the dekasegi (transnational workers in Japan), Yamashita charts the circular itinerary of diasporic Japanese Brazilians who return to work in an ancestral Japanese homeland.[1] Despite their Japanese ancestry, these transnational workers do not find it an easy task to blend into their host country; rather the dekasegi find themselves outside and disconnected from mainstream Japanese society. Writing autobiographically, Yamashita strategically aligns her own peripatetic identity with that of the dekasegi, showing how her individual travels lead to a non-static, elastic sense of self in much the same way that Brazilians of Japanese ancestry find themselves negotiating two dissimilar cultures. A rich commentary on Japanese and Brazilian societal differences, Yamashita's text shows how an increasingly interdependent, hyperlinking world system supports the development of elastic, hybrid, and even "digitized" identities during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The experimental structure of *Circle K Cycles*, which melds autobiographical travelogue with other forms—immigration history, collective biography, short stories, advertisements, personal photographs, graphics, and seem-

ingly random factoids—opens up such a web of motifs that it can be challenging to discuss the work without being reductive. Additionally, the fragmented, nonlinear structure, which deliberately references cultural disconnects, makes it a thorny task to address the narrative in a unified way. Nevertheless, I set forth to explore how the cyclical shape of *Circle K Cycles* and the melding of autobiography with other genres point to the development of a self that is not autonomous but inextricably connected to the external world through narratives of globalization and travel. The title, *Circle K Cycles*, emerges as symbolic on multiple levels: in addition to referencing twentieth-century economic cycles (such as that which spurred immigration between Japan and Brazil), it alludes to Yamashita's personal identity quest (which mirrors the *dekasegi* movement) and suggests how technologies such as the world-wide web manifest a type of global interconnectedness.

Background: Return to an Ancestral Motherland

Economics make strange bedfellows: the unusual labor arrangement between Japan and Brazil coupled two countries with divergent—even oppositional—value systems and created a lineage of diasporic workers who found themselves between cultures. The first motif referenced by Yamashita's title, *Circle K Cycles*, alludes to circles of "Kapitalism" and the economic cycles that emerged between Japan and Brazil. It is necessary briefly to review the history of Japanese immigration to Brazil and the return immigration of Japanese Brazilians back to Japan to work as dekasegi, factory workers and manual laborers. In a section of the text devoted to Japanese-Brazilian migration history, Yamashita comments on the economic bridge that links Japan and Brazil. She writes, "Although Japanese may regret their dependence on migrant labor and the disruption of a homogenous society, a dynamic bridge of migration between Brazil and Japan has nevertheless been established over which many travel constantly to sustain their lives and families in two homes" (14). The bridge between Brazil and

Japan reflects the dynamics of an intercontinental labor movement that began in the 1900s and continues to this day. In 1908, the first Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil aboard the *Kasato-Maru*; the Brazilian government initially subsidized their entry into the country in hopes of securing them as contract workers on São Paulo plantations. After the abolition of slavery in 1888, the newly established Federal Republic of Brazil needed a source of alternative labor to work on their (primarily coffee) plantations. On the first voyage to Brazil, there were 781 people representing 165 families from Fukuoka; many of these immigrants lived on the southern prefecture of Japan and had a lower status than Japanese citizens who lived on the mainland. Japanese workers continued to set forth to Santos (the port of São Paulo), and between 1918-1925, 20,686 individuals (representing 5,308 families) established themselves in Brazil.[2]

This transnational labor movement served Japan's desire to enlarge its presence in the world and to alleviate the problems of overpopulation in an insular nation. In *Searching for Home Abroad*, Jeffrey Lesser notes that impoverished, rural, "second-rank" Japanese citizens looked forward to the opportunity to work for a few years in Brazil. While laws of primogeniture forbade the immigration of eldest Japanese sons, many younger sons hoped that wages earned in this foreign country would allow them to gain status and respect when they returned to their mother country after an extended stay in Brazil. However, as often happens in the case of sojourner "strangers from a different shore," many of these immigrants ended up remaining in Brazil and never returned to their homeland.[3] Many of the issei did indeed manage to prosper through their hard labor and became independent farmers in Brazil. They, as well as their children, assimilated in Brazilian culture and became more Brazilian than Japanese in their cultural sensibilities. Today Brazilians of Japanese descent constitute one of the largest ethnic segments of Brazil's population; the number of Japanese Brazilians at about 1.5 million represents the largest portion of Japanese living in diaspora.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Brazilian recession created a reverse immigration. Some 200,000 Brazilians of Japanese ancestry returned to Japan in search of jobs. In a quick overview of this return migration, Yamashita explains,

> In 1990 the Japanese government had passed a law to allow nisei and sansei to acquire visas to perform unskilled labor in Japan. At the same time, this law more strictly prohibited work by other foreign workers considered illegal aliens. Both the government and business hoped to find a way to replenish the loss of unskilled factory labor, but in doing so to also replace non-Japanese foreign workers with the more familiar faces of Japanese descendants who should, it was thought, integrate more easily into Japanese life and society (13).

The booming Japanese economy required an increased source of manual labor to work in various blue-collar jobs, including the automotive, construction, food processing, healthcare, and hotel industries. The special work visas allowed second- and third-generation descendants of Japanese citizens to cross over into an advantageous labor market. The Japanese Brazilian dekasegi were willing to take the undesirable so-called 3K jobs. Yamashita comments, "Now they circle the three Ks. Kitanai. Kitsui. Kigen. Work designated as dirty, difficult, dangerous" (32). Many of the dekasegi were educated and middle-class citizens in Brazil, but they could earn five to ten times more in Japan even if their socioeconomic status was much lower. The jobs that they took were not glamorous, but the dekasegi were able to work and send money overseas to relatives in economically depressed Brazil. In this alternate universe, Brazilians who once occupied professional and skilled trades are demoted to working 3K jobs. In Yamashita's imaginative rendering of dekasegi experience, a former bank clerk works in an automotive assembly line, an engineer "hangs pigs on hood in a meat processing plant," a stationary store owner drives a trash truck, a teenager mixes concrete on a construction site, and a grandmother "solders tiny wires to electrical plates" (32). The 1990 Japanese law noticeably sought to preserve racial homogeneity, utilizing the labor of "familiar" Japanese descendants, but Brazilian sensibilities often conflicted with

Japanese norms. Despite their physical coding as "Japanese looking," the nisei and sansei born and reared in Brazil had acculturated to South American ways; their music, food, clothes, and outlook on life radically differed from that of traditional Japanese culture. Their "flexible citizenship," to use Aihwa Ong's term, allowed them to work in Japan, earning respite from a dull Brazilian economy. These work visas, however, did not guarantee full citizenship or entry into traditional, closed Japanese culture.

Although Ong theorizes the itinerary of high-ranking, privileged Pacific Rim businessmen and their families in *Flexible Citizenship*, her concept of citizenship in a world governed by transnational labor is useful here even when applied to blue-collar workers. She defines "flexible citizenship" as "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6). Protected by laws that allowed them entry into Japan as well as Brazil, the dekasegi participated in a global phenomenon fueled by capitalistic logistics. Their participation in Japanese culture, however, was limited, since flexible citizenship does not seamlessly translate into or dual/multiple citizenships or full, immediate participation within each culture. While the dekasegi's visas allowed for temporary Japanese membership, their status as Brazilians and 3K workers marginalized them on the outskirts of Japanese culture and society. Housed in huge complexes on the edge of proper society—spatially separated—these Brazilians of Japanese ancestry formed a unique community, living and working between worlds. Yamashita incorporates a variety of newspaper clippings, T-shirt slogans, and advertisements that suggest the extent to which the dekasegi are marginalized, seen as Other and tainted by their Brazilian connections (or even blood, since many issei and nisei Japanese married Brazilians). Making it patently clear how dekasegi foreigners are regarded with suspicion and guarded hostility, Yamashita incorporates what appears to be an announcement made over a store intercom in Japan: "Attention shoppers and clerks! Foreigners have entered the

premises. Shoppers, please take care to secure your personal belongings. Clerks, please watch for possible theft of merchandise" (47). The fact that this announcement takes place in a store is itself provocative. On one level this announcement suggests the unease that some Japanese might feel about "foreigners" (often used interchangeably with "dekasegi") entering the grocery market or mall. The recent immigrants are regarded with suspicion, considered dangerous or desperate enough to resort to picking pockets, shoplifting, or perhaps even outright robbery. On a larger, more metaphorical level, the intercom warning might expose feelings that the dekasegi are somehow suspect in taking advantage of international policies and robbing the Japanese labor market.

Rob Wilson's and Wimal Dissanauake's seminal work in *Global/Local* suggests how the interwoven forces of globalism and localism lead to a "transcultural imaginary" which reshapes one's national identity based on economic and political affiliations, thus leading to new imagined communities. Indeed, global economics led Japanese families to immigrate to Brazil during the 1900s and created a permanent community of Japanese Brazilians that created kinship based on their shared immigration history and Japanese ancestry. However, especially intriguing is how alienating social conditions in Japan led many Japanese Brazilians to affirm their Brazilian identity over their Japanese ancestry when the dekasegi returned to work as laborers in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. While in Brazil, Japanese immigrants formed a community based on their shared "Japaneseness," but, in Japan, most Japanese Brazilians banded together on the basis of their communal Brazilian culture.[4] Imagined communities emerged and national affiliations were reimagined in ways that delineated the space between temporary and permanent worker, Brazilian and Japanese, "Third World" and "First," cultural mixedness and cultural purity. Although the dekasegi were—and still are—an essential component in factory work, greasing the global wheels of industries such as the automotive market, segments of the Japanese population may feel that their

presence and labor are unnecessary and disruptive because the dekasegi do not disappear into the local culture. This myth of national isolation and the resulting cultural misunderstandings between the dekasegi and the Japanese sometimes fuel unease and, as indicated by the store intercom mentioned in the previous paragraph, advertise xenophobia.

Mobile Identities

If "Circle K" flashes red as a symbol of global "Kapitalism" (the economic bridge between Japan and Brazil), the logo also becomes a personal symbol of the autobiographical narrator. In a travelogue section of *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita writes, "there is a joke about my name, Karen. Konbinis" (16). The narrator jokes that like many *dekasegi*, she often finds herself housed at the local Japanese Circle K, "an extension of [her] rented space," where she conducts the business of the everyday—picking up incidental goods, using the internet connections available there, placing long-distance calls to relatives in the U.S., or paying her utility bills (16). Thus, Circle K becomes a personal symbol for "Circle Karen," the on-the-go narrator who can make a transitory home even in a chain convenience store. In the travelogue sections of the text, Yamashita describes how she moves between the United States, Japan, and Brazil, often altering her identity to accommodate the particular culture of each country. The identity shifts she experiences parallel those of the Brazilian dekasegi who struggle to adapt to a radically divergent culture in Japan. Yamashita opens the text by charting her itinerary as an American foreign exchange student who journeys to Japan during the seventies in search of her genealogical roots. The teenage Yamashita, "a typical American sansei from California," picks up Japanese mannerisms and adjusts her outward appearance in order to assimilate in Japanese culture. Stressing Japan as a country that prizes cultural homogeneity, Yamashita records her emotions after being asked repeatedly about her heritage:

> What could it mean to be "pure Japanese"? I felt hurt and resentment. I came from a country where many people, including my own, had long struggled with the pain of racism and exclusion. Purity of race was not something I valued or believed to be important, and, yet, in Japan, I was trying so hard to pass, to belong (11-12).

Although Yamashita is of "unadulterated" Japanese descent, the reactions of the Japanese towards Yamashita make it clear that she is still marked as an outsider. The very act of inquiring about her ethnicity makes it apparent that Japanese locals regard her as "foreign," not truly or fully Japanese. Yamashita lists her genealogy, ultimately establishing undiluted Nikkei roots, but she feels uncomfortable about even feeling the need to establish that she is indeed "a pure Japanese." Her belief in the ideals a democratic society clash with whispers of Japanese nationalism that prize purity over cultural or genetic amalgamation.[5] Much like the dekasegi who physically code as Japanese but are considered "impure" and, thus, lesser, Yamashita feels rejected by mainstream Japanese society.

In 1975, the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship provided Yamashita with the opportunity to study Japanese immigration in Brazil. Yamashita's young narrative persona admits that she knows little about the history, circumstances, or identity of this immigrant population, but she longs to visit someplace warm, exciting, and sexy, and the reputation of São Paulo is inviting. In distinct contrast to the cultural uniformity and structure that she experiences in Japan, Yamashita experiences Brazil as a place of hybridity and mixed cultures. She lives in Brazil for nine years, during which time she marries a Brazilian architect and bears two children. She describes the street below their condominium as "a village onto itself, with small shops and businesses—the Portuguese bakery on the corner, the Korean grocery across the way, the stationary shop, the barber shop, the pool hall, the local bar, the Italian butchers, and the Japanese produce grocer—a cosmopolitan village" (12-13). Unlike the earlier description of the enclosed Japanese market that seems wary of "foreigners" who might decide to rob the store, Yamashita experiences the Brazilian street as a libera-

ting open-world market in which diverse people and businesses fuse together to form a circle, a whole. A *mestiça* culture prevails and, indeed, seems to be celebrated. However, even in Brazil, the dekasegi are not considered full Brazilians. Referred to as dekasegi or *gaijin* "foreigners" in Japan and "Japonês" in Brazil, the dekasegi are designated as outsiders in both cultures. Yamashita, however, stresses that ethnic diversity is more widespread and even welcome in a noticeably hybrid culture like Brazil than in a country like Japan.

On the move again in 1984, Yamashita and her family move from Brazil to Los Angeles, California. She views herself as participating in a movement of global flux, saying, "we are part of this change: immigrants, migrants, tourists, dekasegi, refugees, visitors, aliens, strangers, travelers all in search of work, education, new opportunities. As we crossed the borders from south to north, we were also aware of a new movement of Japanese Brazilians making their way west to Japan to find work to support their families through yet another Brazilian economic slump" (13). As Yamashita returns to her American homeland, she is aware of the migration of Nikkei Brazilians from South America to Asia in search of work. They return as temporary workers to an inherited home/host-land that eyes her Brazilian progeny with some discomfort. As Yamashita stresses, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is characterized by transnational movement: some travelers will become permanent residents in a new land; others will only pause briefly in a country before returning to their native land or extending their trip to another locale. The geopolitics of movement and labor in an increasingly mobile world are such that one is not tied to the land of one's birth. Like Yamashita, whose life experience has enlarged her American identity to include more distinctly Japanese and Brazilian characteristics, other travelers will be affected by their journeys and will likely develop a hybrid sense of self.

In 1997, a fellowship from the Japan Foundation allows Yamashita to move to Seto, Japan to study the Brazilian community living in Japan. Once again, Yamashita and her

family pack up their bags and relocate from the U.S. to Japan. Following a circular itinerary from Japan to Brazil to the United States and back again to Japan, Yamashita's movement is reminiscent of Japanese migrations to the coffee plantations of São Paulo during the early twentieth century and the return of their descendents during the 1980s and 1990s. Like the dekasegi, she must adapt her identity to suit the social norms and expectations of each country. Yamashita's originating point, however, is the United States: she is sansei, born and reared in California, and *Circle K Cycles* blends together Japanese, Brazilian, and American perspectives as she maps out an individual, circular itinerary that links U.S., Japan, and Brazil in a recurring, cyclical pattern. Both a personal and historical rendering of dekasegi experience, *Circle K Cycles* stresses the multiplicity and cultural flux that shapes the lives, identities, and affiliations, and mobility of those living in this century of global exchange and transnational movement.

Recycled Trash, Dirty Rice and Disposable Citizens

In addition to referencing the narrator's personal geographic and emotional journeys, the "K" of *Circle K Cycles* evokes the hardship of the 3K worker, the temporary laborer whose work is designated as dirty, difficult, and dangerous. Divergent cultural norms contribute to the social stratification of the dekasegi in Japan: while metaphors of trash and used cars suggest the expendable nature of overseas workers, different rice recipes signal opposing value systems. Upon Yamashita's return to Japan in 1997, Brazilian friends show her the prime locations to scavenge for still-useful appliances and household goods with which to furnish her apartment. While newly arrived dekasegi rummage through garbage bins to salvage almost-new household goods that Japanese families have thrown away, the Japanese scorn anything used and, therefore, impure: "The Japanese don't want other people's things. . . . used things bring bad luck" (30). Limited apartment space and the high cost of storage make it more practical to discard seldom-used goods rather

than retain them. An entire section is devoted to the topic of trash: one friend worries that the newly arrived Yamashita will not understand recycling protocol. In great detail, she explains the fine art of sorting trash while yet another concerned neighbor takes it upon herself to bring a poster with diagrams of the four trash groups and the trash schedule. Apparently, there have been problems in Homi Danchi, a housing complex of 2,500 Brazilians working for Toyota: "The Homeowners Association inscribed a series of regulations on a large sign with a translation in Portuguese. Among the rules are the prohibitions of throwing trash from the windows and having barbeques. After various frustrated attempts to live better with the strangers, the Association asked the police and public entities for a larger participation in the solution to their problems" (50).

The warning signs are written in Portuguese and specifically target the dekasegi population as the trash culprits. In addition to violating no-littering codes, the Brazilian "strangers" are guilty of having barbeques, presumably polluting the air quality and drawing indiscrete crowds of friends and family. A questionnaire in Portuguese is sent out to all the dekasegi condominium occupants. Among the questions are: "Have you seen the notices in Portuguese regarding the correct disposal of trash? Do you use the appropriate sack to throw away trash? Do you throw away burnable trash and nonburnable trash on the appropriate days?" (31). Not wanting to be stereotyped as an unlawful Brazilian, the perplexed narrator conscientiously attempts to be a proper trash-sorting citizen. While this prolonged attention to garbage might first seem trivial, Yamashita develops the idea of societal waste into a motif that signifies divergent conceptions of cultural purity. Trash itself is associated with the dekasegi who are expendable citizens and disposable labor, another kind of garbage. The Japanese preoccupation with keeping refuse categorized and sanitary suggests a culture concerned with maintaining appropriate divisions and hierarchies, thus separating the "pure" Japanese from the mixed Nikkei Brazilians workers. The Japanese preference for "all things new" contrasts with the Brazilian valuing of

"all things useful": that which is not of immediate use—furniture, appliances, labor—is tossed aside in Japanese society while Brazilian culture often finds a use for discarded, often imperfect and impure, objects.

Cars also signify differing views on what constitutes trash and the proper disposal of unwanted machinery. Automobiles that are still valuable by Brazilian standards are discarded in Japan. One ingenious Brazilian importer/exporter even devises a business that exports discarded cars and reassembles them in India and the Philippines: "Cars are sawed in half, sent in containers, and welded together upon arrival" (31). Divergent cultural economics allow the dekasegi importer/exporter to apply Brazilian economics and thus profit from his business of recycling Japanese cars. Although his business is decidedly more modest than that of automotive super-powers such as Toyota, Honda, and Mitsubishi, he engages in his own brand of international business. He cannot assemble the cars in Brazil because the Brazilian government is interested in protecting its own automotive industry and will not permit it. Working around bumps in the road, the dekasegi entrepreneur simply relocates his goods for assembly in India and the Philippines. On a smaller scale, his industry replicates the tactics of larger, international companies that are willing to move their plants to countries where labor is cheap and business codes are permissive.

Using recipes to further season her analysis of cultural difference, Yamashita unobtrusively slips in a number of Brazilian and Japanese recipes. The recipes for rice are the most obvious indicators of divergent cultural mindsets. Rice, of course, is a staple in each culture, but the different recipes for cooking rice suggest differences that extend beyond dietary preferences. For *gohan*, or Japanese rice: "Wash rice until the water runs clear. For each cup of rice, add a cup of water. Place in rice cooker, and push the button." The ritual for cooking rice is clear, precise, untainted by excess flavoring. It is also aided by a modern appliance, the rice cooker, and Yamashita notes that when one eats this rice in Japan, one savors the "purity of it" (82). Reading rice as a sociocultural marker then, the recipe for *gohan* indicates a mind-

set that appreciates simplicity and, perhaps, uncomplicated homogeneity. While short-grained rice is a staple in Japanese culture, rice and beans is "the food that defines the [Brazilian] people, the daily blessing, the comida sagrada" (83). The recipe for cooking Brazilian *arroz* requires additional steps. One must "Rinse rice and drain. Sauté chopped garlic, onion, and salt in oil. Add rice and sauté. Add water. For each cup of rice, add about 2 cups of water. Bring to a boil. Lower heat and cover until tender. (If you live in Japan, dump the sautéed rice into the rice cooker, add water, and push the button)" (81). In contrast with the Japanese formula for rice cooking, the Brazilian recipe requires additional components—garlic, onion, salt, and oil are integral ingredients. Japanese rice is too plain, homogenous, for the South American palate; Brazilians savor more flavors and compliment their rice with meat, especially beef (instead of fish). Symbolically, this zest for multiple flavors suggests a Brazilian appreciation or acceptance of a mixed society. Although Brazilians cook rice on the range, Japanese Brazilian dekasegi adapt their recipe by using the rice cooker. The Japanese seem to appreciate purity in many forms, and they are also more closely associated with technology—manifest in a rice cooker, in this case. Brazilians of Japanese ancestry who work in Japan adapt traditional Latin American rice recipes by using the rice cooker. So, while their recipe for rice identifies their Brazilian sensibilities and a preference for extra spice, their cooking technique could suggest a partial shifting into Japanese culture.

Yamashita's sly focus on garbage and rice points to how the dekasegi are regarded as disposable, somehow "dirty" like their rice, and her stories indicate the downfalls of globalized movement in terms of labor exploitation. The dekasegi arrangement is one in which both parties stand to benefit—the dekasegi can send money home to support families in Brazil and Japan gains a source of 3K labor. Still, the dekasegi are dehumanized by the machinery of international industry. Foreigners on the margins of Japanese culture, they are not sufficiently protected by Japanese or

Brazilian laws. Part immigration history, part personal travelogue flavored by recipes and images, *Circle K Cycles* also included a myriad of often-interconnected stories that reveal diverse portraits of the dekasegi in Japan: there is nine-year-old Jose who is bullied by his Japanese schoolmates (87); Miss Hanamatsu '96, whose Eurasian beauty makes her an object of lust; and there is Mario, who married a Brazilian woman, but takes up with another dekasegi to ease his *saudade* (homesickness) for Brazil.

Perhaps one of the most compelling stories that directly addresses the effects of globalization is about a 3K worker named Zé Maria, who attempts to become an advocate for dekasegi rights after loosing three fingers in factory work. His encounters with corrupt *empreiteiras* (contract-work companies) and an unsympathetic liaison for the Brazilian Embassy in Japan suggest the transnational worker's difficulty obtaining protection and legal assistance when working abroad. Appealing to the liaison's power to protect foreign workers, Zé Maria tries to convince her that his case represents "an opportunity to raise some serious issues about the laws and the empreteiras….Shouldn't the Brazilian government protect the interests of its citizens abroad? Isn't that the job of the Brazilian Embassy? Isn't that your job?" (40-1). Zé Maria's pleas, however, fall upon deaf ears, and he is deported back to Brazil and imprisoned for a crime that he did not commit. Zé Maria's trials suggest the futility of fighting against corporate Japan, the Brazilian Embassy's failure to protect workers, and the tendency of diplomats to look the other way to ensure that business continues booming. Citizens caught in-between worlds, the dekasegi find themselves lacking sufficient protection from either country when it comes to labor laws and individual rights.

In her important essay, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World," Kandice Chuh notes that Yamashita's deliberate decision to write a set of fictional stories based on her research on the dekasegi allows Yamashita to inscribe a type of communal biography that more fully captures the dekasegi experience. Chuh comments, "this emphasis on relatio-

nality as leading to a sense of the incompleteness of narrative—there is always another story waiting to be told—refuses and refutes claims to definitive, discrete knowledge. Understanding emerges from precisely the sites of intersection of individual stories, which are those spaces in which individual authority erodes in favor of collaborative storytelling" (629). Unlike transcribed interviews, Yamahita's imaginative rendering of the dekasegi experience (which pairs short stories with "found art" in the form of advertisements and newspaper clippings) leaves room for additional voices and perspectives. The text invites the reader to wonder how much is *really* true and relieves the author and the interviewee of the burden of purveying universal truths regarding dekasegi history. Yamashita as author is the primary influence who gives the narrative shape and significance, but the shadowy voices of the actual Japanese Brazilian workers whom Yamashita consulted are also absorbed into the body of *Circle K Cycles*. Neither is the reader passive, but, rather, he or she becomes an indispensable third agent who must discover a way to fuse the disparate sections of the text in order to create order, unity, an overarching storyline, and a sense of purpose.

Infused with autobiographical reflections and creative collective biographies, Yamashita's text also contemplates what G. Thomas Couser calls an "auto/bio/ethics of representation." By "auto/bio/ethics," Couser refers to a fusion between "auto/biography," a term which stresses the relationship between writer and significant other(s) in life narratives, and "bioethics," which asks readers to contemplate an ethics of living. Both the content and structure of Yamashita's work advocate an ethics of writing and, perhaps, reading. Overtly political, *Circle K Cycles* draws attention to the uncomfortable position of manual laborers working abroad and forces the reader to think about the ethics and consequences of global markets. The narrative structures that Yamashita chooses protect her "vulnerable subjects"—vulnerable due the dekasegi's status as easily replaceable workers who are temporary residents in a foreign land. Theirs is a story that must be told, but it must be told

with discretion and awareness of their precarious arrangement. While Yamashita claims the first-person singular to record her own experience, she creates character names and personas for the dekasegi.[6] The reader has difficulty discerning how much, if any, of the situations and characters that Yamashita narrates are true, but she is more accountable for the ideas and information that she reveals in her autobiographical sections because they assume the authority of the "I." Strategically, Yamashita empowers her subjects by providing an outlet for public disclosure while still protecting them with individual anonymity. It is then the reader's responsibility to ponder, question, internalize, disseminate, and/or dismiss the ethical questions regarding globalization, fair labor practices, disempowered national identities, and gender discrimination that Yamashita's work prompts.

Webbed Identity: Digitized Selves

If Circle K references cycles of "Kapitalism" and "Circle Karen's" personal, itinerant identity, it also seems to allude to the tangled technological web that has enabled international travel and work. So, perhaps Circle K also suggests a type of "Kyberidentity," a multiple, de-centered sense of self. While Yamashita's twenty-first century identity is one of transnational embodiment and plural affiliations, her identity also reflects a digitized self. Constant references to (often-imperfect) technology infiltrate the text. In an autobiographical section that describes her flight from LAX to Narita, Japan, Yamashita complains that her body does not fit comfortably in the airplane: as she glances at one of the four American movies "flickering endlessly" on the Boeing 747, her legs dangle and her knee aches, because she "does not participate in the medium American height" (15). She further comments, "our travel through space and altitudes is a continuum of digital dots on a flight monitor, precisely mapped, pushing through the same air, flight after flight" (15). This is an era controlled, or aided, by technology in the shape of automated flight monitors, VCRs on airplanes,

computers, e-mail, television, and rice cookers. The endlessly flickering movies on the flight are like the buzz of technological white noise, omnipresent to the point where the technology becomes invisible, natural, forgotten. Yamashita further expresses her frustration when unable to contact relatives and friends in the U.S. via the internet in Japan:

> E-mail. Internet. Connect. Sorry, your modem is busy or is not connected. Please check setting for proper connection. Click help. . . . From my computer to your computer. Hardware vertebrae. Cable nerves. KDD. AT&T. My back aches. We are not connected (16-7).

On a literal level, this disjuncture merely refers to glitches in the system when the user cannot send an e-mail or connect to the internet, an indispensable tool when attempting to remain in contact with loved ones abroad. On another level, Yamashita's technology problems speak to the inability of digitized identities to capture the full person behind the keyboard. The choppiness and abrupt phrases that appear on the computer monitor mimic the continuum of digital dots and spaces on the airplane's flight monitor. Written structure reinforces content; the broken phrases and Yamashita's inability to connect to the web while in Japan suggests cultural discontinuity as well. Fragmented in form, but unified in the sense that distinct motifs emerge, the very structure of *Circle K Cycles* mirrors the connects and disconnects associated with globalization.

In *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004), Vincent Moscow contemplates how, during the monumental boom of the internet during the 1990s, "cyberspace was opening a new world by transcending what we once knew about space, time, and economics" (4). In addition to creating incredible, inerasable connections between diverse peoples and places, the internet fulfilled "an intense longing for a promised community, a public democracy" (15). Even today, the internet is sometimes thought of as a symbol for what is possible. Human interconnectedness becomes a slogan for globalization: connection between people in incongruent countries is only a click away. To many, globalization as signified in the world-wide web does not

seem threatening, but liberating, democratic, utopian. Internet identity suggests a universal presence unbounded by national affiliation and accessible to people in any country (although more available to certain classes and educational levels). Bodies fade away, no longer acting as a container of one's race, gender, sexuality, politics, class, or education. Thus, digitized identity stresses the interconnected, pluralistic, ever-wandering, constantly expanding, and revisionary nature of selfhood. Yamashita, however, expresses wariness of technological dependence although her attention to aircraft machinery, frequent references to computers, and the experimental nature of her text indicate the extent to which it is necessary and ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. In *Hypertext 3.0*, George Landow acknowledges the liberating potential of cyberspace, but he also draws attention to how those in power can monitor and manipulate such technologies. In a detailed discussion, Landow calls attention to how Big Brother governments in China, Singapore, and Zimbabwe have utilized the internet for their own purposes, utilizing censorship and surveillance devices.[7] Thus, theorists like Moscow and Landow who specialize in hypertext study are careful not to endorse the "myth of the sublime" attributed to technological advances; they do, however, acknowledge and applaud the internet's democratic potential.

The fact that portions of *Circle K Cycles* were first posted as an internet travelogue—Ryuta Imafuku's www.cafecreole.net—is particularly intriguing and reinforces the concept of an interrelated world that extends beyond mere economic links. The idea of a café creole website itself suggests a chatty hangout in cyberspace that is open 24/7 to impromptu discussions concerning geographical identities, diaspora, and cultural plurality. The "creole" website reinforces Yamashita's own culturally mixed experiences and beckons responses from a world where many people are or feel their own cultural and/or biological hybridity. However, the lure of democratic possibility and connectedness through an in-synch, interconnected world is still disrupted by glitches in communication. Upon closer inspection, even assessment of

the virtual world points to cultural hierarchies and nation-state divisions.

Linguistic accessibility on the café creole website demonstrates one of the ways in which internet access can be limited. Although the café creole website is in Japanese, there are complete translations in English if you click on a hyperlink. Yamashita's travelogue is accessible in both English and Japanese, but only *one* of the entries is translated into Portuguese. Why is it significant that only one essay is translated into Portuguese? The limited translation available might merely point to difficulty locating a Portuguese translator or suggest that Brazilians are less likely to be interested in logging onto such a website. However, it might also suggest that even in the geographies of cyberspace, English is still the privileged language. A note on the website that hyperlinks from the Japanese homepage to a private entry for English speakers reads, "Cafe Creole is basically a multilingual site with special concern in Japanese and English writings, but for the convenience to the users of English-only browser which cannot display Japanese fonts, we've newly prepared this extra entrance." Although this is a multilingual site hosted by a Japanese webmaster, the Japanese entries are only fully translated from Japanese into English and convenient to those who read English. English phrases and segments even appear on the website meant for Japanese readers. English, it appears, enjoys preferential treatment even on this global, multilingual website. Proficiency in English opens door (private portals even!), and in this example at least, it represents the colonizing language of even internet territories.

As witnessed in the surge of advertising and popular culture on the rest of the world, global identity is increasingly Westernized and American in nature. In "Hypertext and Spatial Consciousness," a paper posted on the internet, Karen Stiegman posits that spatial consciousness as represented by the internet does not represent a democratic utopia, but a territory that has already been colonized and shaped by capitalist interests. She writes, "thus, precisely *because* the Internet allows for a disembodied virtual identity . . . hyper-

space comes to be the place where spatial identity itself can be mythologized and become part and parcel of the mythology which is signified as a unitary (white, male, middle-class—i.e., bourgeois) identity. . . . In other words, a spatial consciousness *is*—and remains—a national consciousness that serves the always already dominant community of the First World." Even in a space delimited by geography, internal politics, privilege, and national hierarchies exist. Yamashita's ambivalence regarding technological world webs registers an awareness of this imbalance, a distrust of globalized technology, while also reinforcing the concept that economic cycles are not equally advantageous to all.

Concluding Thoughts

Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* suggests that national and geographic affiliations shape one's identity even though this identity is elastic, subject to change. The Japanese families who first traveled to Brazil in the early twentieth century adapted to Brazilian culture, and the dekasegi working in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s struggled to adjust to a country in which they are seen as Other in their "impurity." Connecting cultural acculturation to experiences in her own life, Yamashita remembers her experiences as an American teenager ardently attempting to be accepted within Japanese society during the 1970s as well as her time within culturally mixed Brazilian society during the 1970s and 1980s. Yamashita's text is notable in its treatment of globalization, diasporic identity, and twenty-first-century technology, and *Circle K Cycles* indicates that interconnectedness in terms of economics, hybrid selfhood, and cyberspace is not without friction and hierarchies. Yamashita's vision also highlights the extent to which Japanese and Brazilian economic histories are inextricably interwoven, and her text exposes the confusion experienced by those attempting to negotiate plural cultural identities.

2008 marks the one-hundred-year anniversary of Japanese immigration to Brazil. In some way, this centennial marks the melding of Japanese and Brazilian identities and econo-

mies while commemorating the ascent of globalization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Can we embrace the possibilities offered by a denationalized identity while realizing that this identity is often tied to the economics of global industry? Perhaps, but Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* nudges our conscience, reminding us of the sometimes-unsettling effect that the world-wide market has on the blue-collar transnational worker. The economic cycles that Yamashita envisions do not reflect a benevolent world economy or convenience without consequence. Rather, her vision of globalization telescopes systems of exploitation and cultural misunderstandings that occur when transnational workers like the dekasegi are swept up in the cycles of global capitalism. One's sense of self is not truly autonomous, but swept up in a web of connections that links even the casual consumer of a bottle of Coke or, perhaps a new Toyota Highlander, to the lives of workers far away. As tempting as it might be to embrace the familiar convenience of having a Circle K store on every corner in every country, global interdependence is not innocent . . . and, as Yamashita illustrates, not all global identities are created equal in the economic tug-of-war between countries.[8]

Notes:

1. The Japanese term "dekasegi" does not have an English counterpart but roughly translates as "working away from home." The term is "dekassegui" in Portuguese, but I use "dekasegi" in this essay in order to stay consistent with Yamashita's usage.

2. Jeffrey Lesser's research represents a fascinating and much more thorough account of Japanese-Brazilian immigration patterns and history than the condensed version that I present in this essay. See Lesser 2002 and 2003. See also Daniel Linger's *No One Home* (2001) for a study that includes interviews and distinct voices from Japanese Brazilians working in Japan.

3. I borrow this term from Ronald Takaki.

4. Takeyuki Tsuda's research examines how dekasegi will exaggerate their Brazilian identity to the extent to which they wear flashy "Brazilian" clothes and approximate samba dances in the street of Japan although they never engaged in such performances in Brazil.

5. I realize that it may seem ethnocentric to assert that Japan as a nation seems to prize cultural purity, but sociologists and social historians have documented this phenomenon. John Lie is one sociologist who asserts that

Japan has long been perceived as a nation that is distinctive in its ethnic and cultural homogeneity. He writes, "many Japanese believe that they live in a monoethnic society, which they also regard as one of their most distinctive—and, some would add, positive—characteristics. The assumption that Japan is a monoethnic society is widely shared not just by scholars of Japan and the Japanese themselves but also by virtually everyone else. A study of Japanese Americans, for example, notes that Japanese 'are among the most homogenous people in the world, on both physical and cultural dimensions' (O'Brien and Fugita 1991: 3). The philosopher Allan Bloom (1990: 21-2) asserts: 'Japanese society . . . is intransigently homogenous.' In a book devoted to the subject of polyethnicity, the historian William McNeill (1986: 18) remarks: 'More than any other civilized land . . . the Japanese islands maintained ethnic and cultural homogeneity throughout their history'" (Lie 2001: 1).

Japanese attempts to preserve a monoethnic culture clash significantly with Brazil's outward acceptance and seeming acceptance of cultural hybridity.

6. During her time in Brazil, Yamashita conducted several interviews with Japanese Brazilians, which she later fictively recreated in *Brazil-Maru* (Chuh 623).

7. See Landow, particularly Chapter 8, "The Politics of Hypertext: Who Controls the Text?," for a more thorough discussion of how certain countries censor the internet, manipulating it for purposes of surveillance (321-376).

8. I thank Rebecca and Joseph Hogan for their wise minds and generous hearts; their suggestions were invaluable to me as I reshaped this paper. I also express my gratitude to James Phelan and all participants of his 2005 NEH summer seminar for their diverse and engaging recommendations when I initiated this research.

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