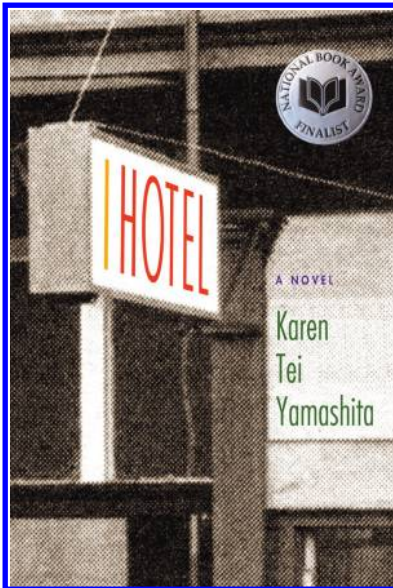


MICHAEL ZISER

## Checking In

Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*

Coffee House Press (Minneapolis, 2010)



Many members of this year's multiethnic college-freshman class were born in 1993, the year before Newt Gingrich and John Boehner's *Contract with America*, the blueprint for today's interlinked and seemingly unstoppable abandonment of the public welfare investments of the New Deal, the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, and the sexual revolutions of the 1970s. Even the most precocious and politically aware of these students will likely date their political awakening to sometime during the second term of George W. Bush. They will not be able to vote in their first national election until 2012. When they arrive on campus, however, many will encounter syllabi in American culture and politics courses shaped by the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, that bitter era of reckoning with the new attitudes toward race, class, gender, and sexuality that bloomed with the coming-of-age of the Baby Boomers. What their older professors regard as existential questions about the validity and utility of the multicultural accommodation forged in those years, today's freshmen are likely to view as a mystifying archive of arguments with few clear connections to their own historical context of national economic decline, global warfare, and the surveillance state. For them, the New Left might as well be the Wobblies.

Although few would suggest that the new generation should simply get with the Aquarian program, the loss of political and personal memory from one generation to another presents a serious challenge for the fragile American tradition of leftist political dissent, and the gap between the Boomers and Generation Z is one that must be carefully bridged in the few years left before the Boomers retire from public life. This is not a question of persuading freshmen to declare allegiance to the politics of *Soul on Ice* (Eldridge Cleaver), *Sexual Politics* (Kate Millet), or *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (Oscar Zeta Acosta); rather, it is the more difficult task of freeing them from the flattened and narrowed representations of their parents' politics as retailed in pop

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By this point, the symbolic significance of the hotel is clear: it serves as the crucible in which the many varied traditions of Asian immigrants were temporarily united in defense of the poorest among them.

culture while encouraging them to imagine themselves as similarly empowered political agents.

So, despite the evident surplus of superficial and self-congratulatory Boomer memorials to their youthful radicalism, there is still a crucial place for writing that captures both the feel and the historicity of a politically open moment. Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*, in a genre all its own somewhere between historical fiction and creative nonfiction, is an inventive attempt to re-present such an era in a way that is simultaneously heuristic and available to the imaginations of the young.

The historical core of the book comes out of Yamashita's decade-long research into the rise of multicultural politics, particularly the Asian-American Movement, in the San Francisco Bay Area of the late 1960s and early 1970s, gathered out of various libraries, archives, geographies, and living memories. From that material, Yamashita has produced a sort of *roman à clef* of the major and minor figures responsible for the consolidation of Asian-American identity and political power from 1968 to 1977. Readers knowledgeable about the place and time will easily recognize many of the figures thinly disguised behind her pseudonymous and composite characters (Ling-chi Wang, Takeo Terada, Florence Hongo, Richard Aoki, Mo Nishida, S.I. Hayakawa, and dozens of others) as well as actual events (the student protests at San Francisco State, the demolition of the International Hotel, the occupation of Alcatraz, etc.). Those for whom this history is new will be drawn toward traditional historiography of the period (Erika Lee and Linda Yung's *Angel Island*; Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai's *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism*; and Estella Habal's *San Francisco's International Hotel* would make a great trio of background reading).

Reminiscent of her two previous historically-based works about Japanese diaspora communities in Brazil, *Brazil-Maruru*

(1993) and the *Circle K Cycles* (2001), *I Hotel* naturally lacks the zanier plot elements of Yamashita's early magical-realist novels, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) and *Tropic of Orange* (1997)—no mysterious plastic substances, trialectics, or portable latitude lines here! What *I Hotel* lacks in the fantastic, however, it more than recoups through its unorthodox form. Composed of ten independent but interlinked novellas, one for each year from 1968 to 1977, *I Hotel* tells its story through an astonishing variety of technical means, ranging from first-person narration to screenplay to graphic novel (the last achieved with the aid of illustrators Leland Wong and Sina Grace). The multitude of perspectives may preclude the deep psychological insights readers sometime expect from novels, but on the other hand it is not difficult to read *I Hotel* as a radical form of autobiography (Yamashita was born in Oakland) limning the rooming-house consciousness of the author herself.

Rather than try to locate a single dramatic narrative that condenses the entire experience of the time, as less venturesome novelists might, Yamashita opts to tell ten distinct but overlapping narratives, each involving three different main characters and each told from differing narrative points-of-view, with subchapters delivered in different styles ranging from first-person limited to teleplay script to surveillance file. Each section is primarily set in its given year, beginning with the 1968 tale of a Chinese young man, Paul Lin, whose father has died and left him to inherit the seemingly irreconcilable traditions of San Francisco's Chinatown and the Bohemian intellectual and political scene coming to prominence in the 1960s. As it turns out—in both Yamashita's narrative and in the history upon which it is based—the cultures of Portsmouth Square and Sproul Plaza are not so incommensurable after all. This Paul learns when he meets Chen Wen-guang, a Chinese ex-pat professor of Chinese literature at San Francisco State University (then State

College). The professor serves as a connection between the young Paul and many of his fellow SCSF students (Edmund Lee and Judy Eng most prominently) and as a link to the radical politics of the 1940s. (After being expelled from the United States for his connections to Communism, Chen headed to China to fight alongside Zhou Enlai during the early Chinese revolution; in the 1960s he remains, despite small misgivings, committed to Maoism). His political experience makes him a natural mentor for students caught up in their own smaller moment of rebellion, and it opens Yamashita's novel to the broad back-story of the Chinese diaspora in California and its complicated transnational status.

But Yamashita well understands that her story must embrace ideologies outside the Left and Asian-American ethnicities beyond the Chinese. In the first chapter, the complexity of the moment is expressed through the figure of S.I. Hayakawa, the semanticist and traditional Republican Japanese-Canadian-American president of San Francisco State. His crackdown on student protesters, including the infamous incident in which he literally pulled the plug on a student PA system, helped propel him to a single, troubled term in the United States Senate on a wave of the same antiradical and antistudent sentiment that made Ronald Reagan into a nationally recognized conservative leader. He too is a part of the story of Asian California, albeit ultimately a marginal one.

In later chapters, Yamashita goes on to explore the Japan-Town Collective, a radical San Francisco community organization, and the Third-World Liberation Front, a Berkeley student group advocating curricular changes in support of the world's indigenous peoples. For 1970, we are thrown into the International Hotel of the title, an aging single-room occupancy hotel (at the edge of San Francisco's old Manilatown and Chinatown) catering mainly to aged Filipino farmworkers and dockworkers. Slated for demolition by its Japanese conglomerate owner to make way for the construction of the massive highrises that now house the firms of the Financial District, it becomes a squat and an important mixing place for Yellow Power and Black Panther radicals. Later chapters range from a highly experimental meditation on the enmity between the twin origins of contemporary Asian American literature, Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin; the connection between the organized Filipino Left and the budding Mexican farmworkers move-



Karen Tei Yamashita on the roof of the re-erected International Hotel in San Francisco. PHOTO BY MARY UYEMATSU KAO

ment; the Native American occupation of Alcatraz; the advance guard of Vietnamese refugees; the Coit Tower murals painted by a *Nisei* Communist who was for a time the roommate of Paul Lin's father; and an uproarious pig-roasting contest between Filipino and Pacific Islander cooks.

The novel ends with the forcible eviction of the International Hotel residents and activists and the leveling of the building itself. By this point, the symbolic significance of the hotel is clear: it serves as the crucible in which the many varied traditions of Asian immigrants were temporarily united in defense of the poorest among them. As one activist with a strong sense of the novelty of the "Asian-American" identity produced in that moment remarks: "Goes to show, you can weld anything to anything" (p. 480). Although there is a utopian moment of solidarity, when the I Hotel (wired up with microphones as part of the public protest) becomes a "gigantic organic voice-box of our own making," Yamashita's book is equally committed to presenting the shearing and centrifugal forces at work, the divisions and disagreements that remain part of the structure of any particular history and of any individual psyche that emerges from it (p. 580).

And in time we may remember, collecting every little memory, all the bits and pieces, into a larger memory, rebuilding a great layered and labyrinthine, now imagined, international hotel of many rooms, the urban experiment of a homeless community built to house the needs of temporary lives. And for what? To resist death and dementia. To haunt a disappearing landscape. To forever

embed this geography with our visions and voices. To kiss the past and you good-bye, leaving the indelible spit of our DNA on still moist lips. Sweet. Sour. Salty. Bitter. (p. 605)

Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Yamashita manages to capture the combination of continuity and contingency

in the making of cultural and political identities, offering dozens of historical rooms (taken, abandoned, and unclaimed) into which her readers, especially younger ones looking for a way to connect to the political past without being smothered by it, might check the unfinished fragments of their own lives. **B**