

The Elasticity of Space in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

MILOŠ BLAHÚT

Affiliation: Faculty of Arts

Prešov University in Prešov, Slovakia

Email: milos.blahut@unipo.sk

Abstract

Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* is a study of space shaped by history, urbanism, globalisation, and ecology. Yamashita explores the social injustice, urban, and environmental changes happening in postmodern and futuristic Los Angeles through seven characters and their respective storylines, narrated by various narrators with different styles. Most characters experience spatial and temporal distortions in their everyday lives, allowing them to try to understand the events unfolding around them. Yamashita depicts space as an organic, changeable, and elastic unity. I argue that by viewing space more holistically, Yamashita offers solutions to some of the overarching problems California has been facing for a long time, namely racism, displacement, class differences, transformation of urban space, violence, and the threat of ecological catastrophe. The convergence of space and time in the narrative, mixed with magic realist tropes, enables Yamashita to interrogate and critique the contemporary socio-economic conditions of the Latin American community in Los Angeles.

Keywords: environment, space, postmodernism, time, gentrification

Introduction

The notion of space is a well-developed concept in several fields, ranging from geography, philosophy, cultural geography, literary theory, narratology, and urban geography. In the first half of the 20th century, space was viewed as an inseparable concept from time. Bakhtin stressed the interdependence between space and time as early as the 1930s when he devised the term *chronotope*¹ and applied it to literary texts. An important shift,

¹ The essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics" was "originally written in the 1930s but published only in 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, and was not translated into English until 1981" (Biemong at al., 2010, iii.).

known as the *spatial turn*, occurred in humanities in the 1960s: scholars such as Foucault, Lefebvre, Jameson, and others reevaluate space, place, landscape, and other similar concepts with the aid of disciplines and methodologies such as structuralism, linguistics, urban theory, Marxist criticism, postcolonial theory, or postmodern theories.

Of particular interest are the notions of space and spatiality related to social sciences developed by urban geographers and philosophers (Michel Foucault, Mike Davis, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau) and postmodern/Marxist geographers (Edward Soja, David Harvey), as these served as a springboard for further investigations of space as a phenomenon applied in literary scholarship. Henri Lefebvre treated space as a social product, and famously distinguished between a lived, a perceived and a conceived space. He states that “[s]pace is permeated with social relations: it is not only supported by social relations but is also producing and produced by social relations” (1991, p. 286). Marxist and postmodern geographer David Harvey elaborated upon Lefebvre’s triad of spaces and the concept of spatial justice, and explored the relationship between urbanisation and capitalism. In his later work, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (published in 1989), Harvey claimed that “Space and time are basic categories of human existence” (p. 201). He further argued:

Since capitalism has been (and continues to be) a revolutionary mode of production in which the material practices and processes of social reproduction are always changing, it follows that the objective qualities as well as the meanings of space and time also change. (Harvey, 1989 p. 204)

Various changes in society (progress in particular) automatically link to “the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate ‘annihilation of space through time.’” (p. 204). His (and others’) theoretical discussions about space are crucial in praxis, and he adds that “How we represent space and time in theory matters, because it affects how we and others interpret and then act with respect to the world” (p. 205). Yamashita’s novel addresses the concepts of space and time as interlinked with the social activity of the characters, so Harvey’s study might seem fruitful in this analysis. Edward Soja’s investigation of Los Angeles in his *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), in which he claims that “the particular experiences of urban development and change occurring elsewhere in the world are [...] duplicated in Los Angeles, the place where it all seems to ‘come together’” (1989, p. 221), is useful due to his inclusion and interdependence of what he observes as “the fundamental spatiality of social life, the adhesive relations between society and space, history and geography, the splendidly idiographic and the enticingly generalizable features of a postmodern urban geography” (p. 223).

The development of world literatures after World War II, in general, and American literature, in particular, was marked by the emergence of postmodern novels and poetry whose writers employed bold stylistic techniques to describe the settings (storyworlds, fictional worlds) and their interdependence with the form of the literary work. The authors aimed to address the contemporary problems faced by the rapidly expanding societies in particularly capitalist Western countries (overpopulation, climate change, gender issues, spatial injustice) and negotiate those new facets of the world to question various metanarratives (reason, religion, science, humanity). Some of the notable authors exploring the multiculturalism and multiperspectivism of American cities are Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Octavia Butler, and Karen Tei Yamashita. The last-mentioned author will be explored in this paper with reference to the representation of space in her 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*.

Several theoretical concepts, such as urban geography and spatial criticism, have been applied to Yamashita's novel to explore space, place, landscape, and their relationships. Scholars such as Ryan (2003), or Gladwin (2018), took interdisciplinary approaches to space and often provided new interpretations and perspectives of history, culture, ethnicity, identity, and ecology. Some of the most recent authors applied a postmodern approach (Hsu, 2018), incorporated the subjects of spatial injustice and the critique of ethnicity (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2011) or read the novel through a feminist lens (Frank, 2019).

As far as the notion of space is concerned (or spatial representation in literature), Löbbermann states that:

The transnational imagination of *Tropic of Cancer* [sic] has been discussed in various excellent articles [...]. Yet so far, a reading of *Tropic of Orange* in the light of postmodern geography and the work of Edward W. Soja has only been hinted at. (2008, p. 264)

Numerous scholars drew their attention to spatial representation in Yamashita's novel (Gamber, 2012; Crawford, 2013; Thompson, 2017; Maucione, 2013).

In this paper, I aim to analyse how Yamashita interrogates the contemporary socio-economic conditions concerning the United States–Mexico border area through the exploration of the spatiotemporal setting. Through the characters' idiosyncratic vision of spaces, as well as their approach to urban planning and historical events of the studied area, Yamashita points at social, spatial, and environmental inequalities.

Mapping the Space of Los Angeles

The novel consists of 49 chapters, providing seven different character perspectives that serve as voices in parallel stories occurring within seven days a week. Some of the characters are eccentric in their own distinct ways. For instance, Manzanar is a former surgeon

and currently homeless conductor, who spends his days on the Los Angeles overpass conducting an imaginary orchestra. Buzzworm, an African American Vietnam War veteran, spends his free time roaming the streets of the metropolis, a social worker. The two characters have a common trait: although their vision of space is unique, each of them is sensitive to the changes and particularities of their neighbourhoods. Yamashita provides her analysis of space in Los Angeles through the characters' direct engagement with people and their different perspectives (Manzanar takes the vantage point from above the city and listens to its "series of concerts and symphonies").

Manzanar's vision may be perceived as an idyllic one, as his observation of the traffic is described with the vocabulary evoking to readers the natural scenery full of pastoral images: "It was as if his very heart tilted forward, his arms offering and yet containing this heart, opening and closing as the wings of a great bird, coaxing the notes tenderly to brief life, conducting sound into symphony" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 33).

Being a conductor, Manzanar feel and hears the rhythms, pulsations, and sounds of the bustling city. Buzzworm's ideas, in contrast, stem from his direct involvement with the people on the streets, especially the homeless, street peddlers, drug addicts, and workers. Like a detective, Buzzworm tries to understand the sudden deaths among the Los Angeles street residents caused by drug-infused oranges illegally imported from Mexico. He has a pivotal role in the plot, since he disseminates most of the themes through his interest in local affairs and helping those in need: in one of the final and most poignant situations, he becomes "a hero" of the streets. The novel finishes with a big traffic jam and chaos on the streets: Emi, a Japanese American journalist who chases stories, is shot dead, and Buzzworm is ready to console her before she dies: "Buzzworm looked around [...] her [Emi's] death would be unforgivable. Emi's enraged media would see to that. A thousand homeless could die, but no one would forget her ultimate sacrifice" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 216).

Buzzworm represents the character who has a holistic approach to space as lived, as was rightly elaborated upon by Lefebvre, a fact demonstrated by his close observation of his neighbourhood. For instance, he is impressed by the palm trees in the city, considering details such as their nature, role, function, and position in the space. The narrator's poetic language emphasizes the trees, which "were like the eyes of his neighbourhood, watching the rest of the city, watching it sleep and eat and play and die" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 31). The neighbours treat the trees as trivial and ineffective because they do not seem to serve any purpose—"poor people don't get to have no shade. That's what porches are for" (p. 31). Buzzworm is aware of the fact that the trees serve a specific purpose, to "make out the place where he lived," and that the beauty of these trees could only be perceived

“if you were far away” (p. 31). Moreover, the palms serve a symbolic purpose in the novel; they mark the identity of people, their belonging to the place, and those grid patterns, lived and experienced, which are not shown on maps.

Studying the map (of Los Angeles in 1972), Buzzworm asks a question:

Buzzworm studied the map. Balboa'd torn it out of a book for him to study. *Quartz City*² or some such title [...] whose territory was it anyway? Might as well show which police departments covered which beats; which local, state federal politicians claimed which constituents; which kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where. [...] If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture. (pp. 72–73)

Buzzworm's rumination shows his feelings about the dispossessed and displaced low-income residents and ethnic minorities of the city, who were forcefully pushed to the outskirts of the city and left without help from local authorities and the state. However, maps used by cartographers and geographers do not record the space and place on a spatio-temporal level. Rodriguez confirms: “Buzzworm and Manzanar occupy spaces profoundly different from the representations of space they know from maps, master plans, and even non-natives of the city” (2017, p. 109). He further reads the novel as an urban study, drawing attention to David Harvey and his influential publication on city planning and spatiality *Social Justice and the City* (1973). Harvey's analysis of space stemmed from Henri Lefebvre's insistence on the residents' “right to the city,” which Harvey further explored in his essay, adding that “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (2008). Buzzworm is community-conscious, has his own vision, and even plans to tackle the social injustice in the city, which he calls “gente-fication” (Yamashita, 1997, p. 72). The narrator explains Buzzworms' idea:

Buzzworm had a plan. Called it gentrification.³ Not the sort brings in poor artists. Sort where people living there become their own gentry. Self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification. Latinos had this word, *gente*. Something translated like *us*. Like *folks*. That sort of gente-fication. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees. Some laughed at Buzzworm's plan. (p. 72)

² The name Quartz City refers to a famous book by Mike Davis, titled *The City of Quarts*, a sociological study of the late twentieth century Los Angeles, its history, future, and economy.

³ The term *gentrification* refers to the refurbishment of neglected areas, which involves the displacement of those who are poor or homeless.

Maucione states that:

Buzzworm's plan for neighborhood restoration—what some of his fellow residents mockingly refer to as “This Old Hood”—exemplifies, then, the kind of anticapitalist, post-humanist ecological project that may begin to be effective in dismantling the mythologized rhetorical power and sociopolitical and environmental destruction inherent in global capitalism's misuses of humans and habitat. (2013, p. 94)

Buzzworm's plan is an idealised version of the lived space, which could be perceived as a critique of urban development. Buzzworm distinguishes between the areas in the city that are safe and which are dangerous, especially for people of different races. “When he came home, he realized he was considered the enemy. If he stepped over the invisible front line, he could get implicated, arrested, jailed, killed. If he stepped back, he'd just be invisible. Either way he was dead” (Yamashita, 1997, p. 186). In one scene, Buzzworm remembers how the city residents got easily fooled and were displaced by city bureaucrats:

Some woman just like grandma stood up and wanted to know what the master plan was. How'd she know it wasn't gonna be more than just widen the freeway? Bureaucrats [...] made the palm trees look decorative. This was the plan. Just a little freeway widening. Wasn't gonna affect her house. Her house was her house. Wasn't gonna affect her [...]. By the time the freeway could be widened, people forget what they got promised. (1997, p. 73)

Through a masterplan prepared by the bureaucrats, which entailed the construction of freeways, the residents were deprived of their space, and lost their right to the city. Consequently, the space was used by gangs and prostitutes. Lee shows that “Los Angeles, through Buzzworm's eyes, is a den of social injustice and economic iniquity” (2007, p. 509).

Buzzworm's activism stems from his near-scientific observation of non-human nature in the city, namely palm trees. When he explains the differences between various species of the trees, the residents are perplexed by his explanations and retort: “You like these damn palm trees, dig 'em out and haul 'em away. Be our guest” (Yamashita, 1997, p. 30). Buzzworm shows his appreciation of trees in the city by teaching the residents the importance of trees:

I just want to let you know the age of these fine specimens. Been standin' here a long time and will continue to long after you and I are gone. These trees're like my watches here, markin' time. Palm tree's smart, knows the time for everything. (1997, p. 30)

Space as Layers

The characters in Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* are very sensitive concerning the space they occupy. They reflect on the distribution of wealth in the neighbourhoods, ecology, urban planning, or any changes happening in near-future Los Angeles. Manzanar Murakami⁴ is a Japanese-American conductor, living in the streets of Los Angeles, and observing the city from the overpass.

There are maps and there are maps and there are maps. The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 52)

Manzanar views the maps as layers, beginning within "geology" and "artesian rivers" and moving through man-made constructions, such as:

[...] civil utilities: South California pipelines of natural gas, the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage, the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 52)

His vision of space resembles Buzzworm's; however, Manzanar's observations are more symbolic and prophetic. His vision is enhanced by sound patterns of the city streets and maintenance. The artificial constructions in Los Angeles are viewed as "an organic unity," and he, being a musician, perceives them as "audible layers [...] to create a great mind of music" (p. 52).

Furthermore, Manzanar appropriates the whole network of roads, pipelines, and geological formations to animal sounds: "noise that sounded like a mix of an elephant and the wail of a whale, concentrating until it moaned through the downtown canyons, shuddered past the on-ramps and echoed up and down the one-ten" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 104). Manzanar's vision of Los Angeles, the system of freeways as "a great root system, an organic living entity" (1997, p. 35), is compared both to a symphony and ecosystem. Mermann-Jozowiak also contends that "While Manzanar's cartography is primarily phenomenological, it is simultaneously historical, political, and ecological" (2011, p. 14). The pattern Manzanar sees is dynamic, poetic, and even temporal, which, at least from the very beginning of the novel, represents Lefebvre's notion of "conceived space"—the space

⁴ Manzanar was one of the camps where several thousands of Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II.

mapped by architects or urban planners. However, Manzanar records the residents traffic jams and experiences during the day and likens them to the rhythm of the music he conducts, which resembles the “lived space.”

After all, this was L.A. There was a schedule of sorts, a program, an appropriate series of concerts and symphonies in accordance with the seasons and the climate of the city. As noted by many others, climatic change in L.A. was different from other places. It had less perhaps to do with weather and more to do with disaster. For example, when the city rioted or when the city was on fire or when the city shook, the program was particularly apt, controversial, hair-raising, horrific, intense—apocalyptic, if you will. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 34)

Readers are provided with Manzanar’s subjective experience of space—or the “lived space,” which Lefebvre called “representational space,” and which is “linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art” (1991, p. 33). The narrative is filled with metaphorical expressions and symbols.

Near the end of the novel, Arcangel,⁵ a mysterious figure, arrives in Los Angeles as a messenger, Manzanar conducts from an overpass and senses the changes in the pattern (grid) of the city: “[...] the movement of traffic had almost altogether stopped, not only in the freeway valley below but virtually everywhere. The tenor of this music was a very different sort, at times a kind of choral babel” (Yamashita, 1997, p. 204). His orchestra includes homeless who take up the baton, but also people of different origins, metonymically represented through musical instruments: “lutes and lyres, harmonicas, accordions, sitars, hand organs, nose flutes, gamelons, congas, berimbaus, and cuícas” (1997, p. 204). Lee calls Manzanar’s vision as “romantic universalism” (2007, p. 517). Indeed, Manzanar’s perception is idyllic and pastoral, in contrast to Arcangel’s legacy or Buzzworm’s ideas. The chaos that ensues, the police raids, and the violence in the streets signify the oppression of those who were socially excluded, marginalised, or deprived of their natural rights. Manzanar’s conflation of living organism and manmade artificial constructions (maintenance or freeway infrastructures) represents the merging of human and nonhuman. I find Parker’s explanation of the conflation as the destabilization of “the epistemological and ontological boundaries between the real/imagined, past/future, North/South, and human/nonhuman” (2022, p. 279) as not very convincing.

⁵ Arcangel has other names, for example, Mojado. Sanchez explains that “‘Mojado’ and ‘wetback’ are two popular variants used in Mexico and the United States, respectively, to refer to people who cross without documents” (2014, p. 163).

Manzanar has a unique vision or wild imagination and sees the “contemporary urban landscape of *Tropic of Orange* [...] [as] one of madness and alienation” (Ammons, 2010, p. 151). I would rather adopt Sexton’s argument about the overlapping of spatial and temporal settings:

Tropic of Orange envisions Los Angeles as a site of interconnectivity between natural and social worlds, where magical events function as extreme versions of the conditions humans will confront in an Anthropocene world. The distortion of L.A.’s environment and climate, a result of the orange and the Tropic of Cancer traveling towards the city, anticipates a world reshaped by humans. This reshaped L.A. is not the infinitely malleable city of postmodern fantasy, but a site where the many social, environmental, and historical maps of a changing world most obviously overlap. (2017, p. 16)

Manzanar lives in contemporary reality, and Yamashita uses his vision to explain and interrogate some of the forces affecting the dynamics of space of Los Angeles, such as migration of Mexicans into the United States, drug and organ trafficking, or historical events. Ammons succinctly adds that “He [Manzanar] was not crazy. L.A. was the crazy one” (2010, p. 153). This transgression, violation, blurring, or subversion of the boundaries, which is a typical feature of postmodern poetics, as proven by Brian McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), is to be represented in the episodes/chapters by other characters, such as Rafaela Cortes or Arcangel.

Elasticity of the Spatiotemporal Setting

In Yamashita’s novel *Tropic of Orange*, history plays a crucial part. Some of the seven main characters reflect (and one even represents and personifies) history, the phenomenon itself encapsulating the notion of time. The characters view the space they occupy in the context of history, which is recorded as maps superimposed on each other. If Buzzworm imagines all maps to be placed one upon the other, he conflates space and history. Some characters in the novel view spatiotemporal landscapes in quite an unrealistic, if not magical way. These episodes are, however, more fantastic than real. As stated above, the most precise generic term for such a narrative would be magic realism.

At the beginning of the novel, Rafaela Cortes⁶ is a Mexican woman who works and lives in Mexico with her son, Sol. One day she is captivated by one orange growing on the tree

⁶ The names of the characters are often very symbolic: the surname of Rafaela Cortés refers to a 15th-century Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés; Hernando—a drug and organ smuggler, who chases and rapes Rafaela, refers to Cortés, too. Gabriel Balboa suggests another Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

in the area marking the Tropic of Cancer. Ultimately the orange is taken by Arcangel. As Rafaela overhears her neighbour's son, Hernando, talking on the phone about his illegal organ trafficking, she is in great danger and sits on the bus with Sol and Arcangel, pursued by Hernando. Rafaela flees to the United States of America. Changes ensue in a dramatic and fantastic chain of events, just as space and time begin to move, curve, and stretch. At least, this is what the characters can feel, sense, and visualise.

Rafaela senses, observes, and even experiences changes around her. Sitting on the bus with her son and Arcangel, heading north, and being chased by Hernando, the man involved in illegal trade with body organs, Rafaela magically touches the imaginative line—Tropic of Cancer,⁷ but this time it is “protruding innocently from the suitcase” (Yamashita, 1997, pp. 132–133).

Moving northern latitude, from Mexico to a farther north, Arcangel also carries history with him, which is a metaphor for long-term immigration from South America to North America, but which allegorically represents historical movement of labour northwards and the trade between Mexico and the United States of America, both legal (fruits, i.e. the trade between the U.S. and Mexico) and illegal (represented in the novel through immigration, drug trafficking and illegal organ trafficking involving children). Arcangel, the only mystical character, a poet and performer, represents both a history of the colonised of the past and the cultural and economic condition of the dispossessed of the present (he pretends to be one of the people). Sexton sums up: “*Tropic of Orange* follows seven characters through seven days of surreal, unnatural disasters, as the transportation of oranges and organs across the U.S.–Mexico border literally warps time and space, smashing Mexico and Los Angeles together” (2017, p. 14).

This movement of the oranges from Mexico has also other implications. The fruit is poisoned as it was injected with drugs and illegally imported from Mexico to the United States of America. Buzzworm recollects: “All oranges were suspect. And deemed highly toxic. Waste companies hauled the rotting stuff by the tons to landfills. Environmental experts declared them toxic waste. Sniff the chalky fungus and you could be dead fast” (Yamashita, 1997, p. 122). Readers learn that the oranges symbolically epitomise migration, as Rafaela Cortes' son, Sol, travels north with Arcangel, and also the trade between Mexico and America—both legal and illegal.

⁷ Tropic of Cancer is an imaginary line running across the globe from east to west, which “marks the most northerly latitude at which the sun can appear directly overhead at noon. This event occurs at the June solstice, when the northern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun to its maximum extent.” (“Tropic of Cancer”, 2021).

Later on, Rafaela Cortes is chased and raped by Hernando, as she moves north to the United States of America. In an intensely dramatic scenario, Rafaela symbolically and magically transforms into a snake and subdues Hernando, who for a moment represents jaguar. The realistic depiction of the events overlaps with magic or fantastic.

Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent—sinuous and suddenly powerful. She thrashed at him with vicious fangs—ripping his ears, gouging his neck, drawing blood [...]. And there was the passage of five thousand women of Cochabamba resisting with tin guns an entire army of Spaniards, the passage of a virgin consecrated to the sun-god buried alive with her lover, of La Malinche abandoning her children and La Llorona howling after, of cangaceira Maria Bonita riddled with led by machine guns [...]. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 188)

Her transformation into a serpent and the battle against Hernando allegorically represents the Mexicans' struggle against the Spanish conquerors in the past. The realistic mode of writing changes into a mythical and fantastic one, as filtered both through the imagination of the omniscient narrator and Rafaela. However, the macabre event becomes even more puzzling for the reader when Rafaela wakes up (apparently, she lost consciousness when Hernando had beaten and raped her). The narrator portrays the real human-like Rafaela, who takes out from her mouth "a chunk of something fibrous between her teeth with her tongue" and is "horrificed to see a wad of black fur emerge and shift along the dirt like scattering feathers" (1997, p. 189). Ultimately, the diegetic space of the novel and the symbolic representation merge.

The novel, however, does not only conflate two narrative spaces; Yamashita also lets her space be seen as "timeless," which is acceptable with the rendering of the space-time continuum at the diegetic level, and within the experimental (postmodern) novel. Moreover, such perception of space and time is within the domain of the character (Rafaela) and her senses described via free indirect discourse:

Sol with his salted cob wandering in and out of the corn, wandering as if in some timeless space, at every moment farther and farther. Her heaving breath pummeled in her ears. How long would it take to run such a distance? Breathless, she stretched her arms reaching toward Sol. To everything there seemed to be an eerie liquid elasticity. How far must she race? How far must she reach to touch her Sol? (Yamashita, 1997, p. 103)

Rafaela and other characters (for example, Manzanar) sense "an eerie liquid elasticity" and "This elasticity of the land and of time" (1997, p. 129) speaks about Rafaela's confusion over the changes happening in Mexico—economic factors, such as immigration, or environmental issues, like global warming.

Manzanar, looking south, also has visions similar to Rafaela's:

For the first time, [...] an uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space, forced his hands and arms to continue. He was facing south on his overpass podium, and he knew the entire event was being moved, stretched. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 107)

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja provides an interesting exploration of the spatio-temporal dimension of Los Angeles from the postmodern and Marxist perspective:

Los Angeles [...] is exceedingly tough-to-track, peculiarly resistant to conventional description. It is difficult to grasp persuasively in a temporal narrative for it generates too many conflicting images, confounding historicization, always seeming to stretch laterally instead of unfolding sequentially. (1989, p. 222)

Manzanar views Los Angeles and its infrastructure as dynamic, changeable, important. L.A.'s infrastructure could signify a regenerative aspect of the city, as the freeways enable the mobility of goods and people, often by illegal means.

The elasticity of space and time foreshadows dramatic and often negative changes in the characters' lives (Rafaela is raped, and violence commences in the streets of Los Angeles as Manzanar "conducts" an orchestra from an overpass). The troubles begin once Arcangel becomes present among the common people in Los Angeles. He brings the only orange from Mazatlán, while "several thousand oranges [are] rotting in toxic landfills" (Yamashita, 1989, p. 183). On his way north, Arcangel meets a character called Rodriguez. The conversation between them illustrates the point:

"I have been travelling a long time."

"How long?"

"Five hundred years."

"Impossible." Rodriguez laughed at the joke.

"Perhaps. I have seen more than a man may ever wish to see." He closed his eyes for a long moment. [...] He could see Haitian farmers burning and slashing cane workers stirring molasses into white gold. Guatemalans loading trucks with crates of bananas and corn Indians who mined tin [...]. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 125)

Arcangel is simultaneously a real person, a wrestler, and, symbolically, a manifestation of the oppressed people from South America, encompassing all nations in the history of colonisation. When Arcangel arrives at the U.S.–Mexican border and speaks to the officials, the historical present merges with the historical time as he recites his poetry about the immigrants he represents and those who are being detained at the border:

Then came the kids selling Kleenex and Chiclets
the women pressing rubber soles into tennis shoes,
the men welding fenders to station wagons and
all the people who do the work of machines:

[...]

25 million dead Indians,

[...]

Then came the rain forests, El Niño, African bees, panthers, sloths, llamas, monkeys,
and pythons.

Everything and everybody got in lines—citizens and aliens—

The great undocumented foment,

The Third World War,

The gliding wings of a dream. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 172)

Arcangel/Mojado is both a rem(a)inder of the past, and a contemporary representation of the clash between traditional and rural Mexicans and modern Los Angeles, with all the economic and cultural negative impacts associated with it. Mojado represents the world of magic, folklore, and also politics. By moving across the borders, Mojado blurs the distinction between the geographic borders (between Mexico and the United States of America) but also represents the history, cultures, and social practices of the peoples of Latin America. Thompson points out that “Arcangel/El Gran Mojado, who, like Manzanar, is not bound to realism (especially not human-defined timelines). However, his travels and visions are quite real and correspond to real, historical events” (2017, p. 99). As Arcangel arrives at the U.S.–Mexican border, his memories in narrative past and written in the form of a poem stylistically merge with the present, which is represented by the communication between him and custom officers in a free direct speech. The humorous exchange of information provides an immediate access to the past of the events represented by Arcangel, as he is simultaneously a “Post-Colombian,” an ordinary traveller and messenger, a former Harvard Student, and a wrestler.

In her novel, Yamashita depicts space and time as changeable, dynamic, and transformative phenomena. Her novel may be viewed as an allegory of historical events of several nations, namely Mexicans and North Americans. The events happening in time and in space merge within the narrative, and provide readers with critique of cultural, historical, economic, political and ecological aspects of California and of the U.S.–Mexican relations. Rody remarks that “Yamashita’s literary imagination in every way resists artificial division; when geography itself starts moving across national borders, *Tropic of Orange* becomes an allegory of the transnationalization of the U.S. novel” (2004, p. 134).

The novel finishes with a traffic jam, during which the homeless start to occupy empty cars, and the chaos in the streets ensues. Yamashita's novel traces the impact of human behaviour on social life from a historical perspective and highlights the political and ideological implications caused by the people's decisions in urban planning. Yamashita observes the effects of urban planning on the natural habitat in Los Angeles. Apart from urban planning, globalisation takes its toll on the ecology of the metropolis.

Conclusion

Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* addresses the issues of the postmodern Los Angeles, affected by globalisation and free trade, as well as social injustice, factors which have had a negative impact on nature and urbanisation. In mapping the city, the characters in the novel view these changes in their perspectives, some in a prophetic way, such as the mystical Arcangel, while others, like Manzanar Murakami, perceive space and time holistically and as an organic unity, connecting human and non-human aspects of life. Other characters, for instance, like Buzzworm and Rafaela Cortes, experience the elasticity and the curves of space and objects around them, which mark the changes in the city dynamics, such as the migration of people from Mexico, import and export of goods (both legal and illegal), changes in social space (namely gentrification, displacement of marginalised groups, urban planning) and ecological issues.

Contemporary Los Angeles is a city in which social and spatial injustice is clearly visible. Several geographers have studied this phenomenon, such as Edward Soja and David Harvey and are included in the theoretical framework of the present study. Buzzworm, a street activist, who is obsessed with palm trees and interested in maps, records the injustice done to those marginalised groups on the outskirts of the metropolis, such as the homeless or old-age pensioners. He suggests steps to improve the conditions of those groups that have been subjected to exploitation and even racial oppression for a long time. The novel can be read as a fictionalised urban study of space and place transformations in the neoliberal American environment. Arcangel represents the temporal and spatial crossings in the form of the character who can "travel" in history and time. He is the past, the present, and the future of the Mexican population: he symbolises the oppression but also the potential of the Latin American residents in their struggle for identity, place, and individual rights.

The characters in the novel visualise the city maps as no cartographer or urban planner has done so before, viewing the city as a continuous flux. They focus on places with trees that give L.A.'s residents identity and comfort. The dystopian world presented in the novel

is a mixture of fantasy and reality, and, in many instances, everyday situations are populated with the mysterious supernatural character Arcangel, whom the common residents treat as “one of them,” inviting metaphorical reading. The characters in Yamashita’s novel, *Tropic of Orange*, provide the readers with a message and hope, if not clues on how people might reevaluate their approach to urban planning and nature in the Anthropogenic era.

References

- Ammons, E. (2010). *Brave new words: How literature will save the planet*. University of Iowa Press.
- Bemong, N., & Borghart, P. (2010). Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope: Reflections, applications, perspectives. In N. Bemong, P. Borghart, M. De Dobbeleer, K. Demoen, K. De Temmerman, & B. Keunen (Eds.), *Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope: Reflections, applications, perspectives* (pp. 3–16). Academia Press.
- Crawford, C. (2013). From desert dust to city soot: Environmental justice and Japanese American internment in Karen Tei Yamashita’s “Tropic of Orange”. *MELUS*, 38(3), 86–106.
- Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. Verso.
- Frank, N. D. (2019). How Karen Tei Yamashita literalizes feminist subversion: Extreme domesticity, space-off reversals, and virtual resistances in “Tropic of Orange”. *Humanities*, 8(1), 28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010028>
- Gamber, J. B. (2012). *Positive pollutions and cultural toxins: Waste and contamination in contemporary U.S. ethnic literatures*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Gladwin, D. (2018). *Ecological exile: Spatial injustice and environmental humanities*. Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (1973). *Social justice and the city*. The University of Georgia Press.
- Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review*, 11(53), 23–40. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>
- Hsu, R. Y. (2018). The cartography of justice and truthful refractions found in Karen Tei Yamashita’s “Tropic of Orange”. In S. G.-L. Lim, et al. (Eds.), *Transnational Asian American literature: Sites and transits* (pp. 75–99). Temple University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Jansen, A. M. Y. (2017). (Dis)integrating borders: Crossing literal/literary boundaries in “Tropic of Orange” and “The People of Paper”. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, 42(3), 102–128. Oxford University Press.
- Lee S. (2007). We are not the world: Global village, universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s “Tropic of Orange”. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 53(3), 501–527.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell.
- Löbbermann, D. (2008). Mapping transculturation: Spatial metaphor in Karen Tei Yamashita’s “Tropic of Orange”. In W. Raussert & R. Isensee (Eds.), *Transcultural visions of identities in images and text: Transatlantic American studies/Festschrift in Honor of Günter H. Lenz* (pp. 263–279). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

- Maucione, J. (2013). Literary ecology and the city: Re-placing Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's "The Tropic of Orange". In K. E. Waldron & R. F. Lanham (Eds.), *Toward a literary ecology: places and spaces in American literature*. The Scarecrow Press.
- McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. Methuen.
- Mermann-Jozwiak, E. (2011). Yamashita's post-national spaces: "It All Comes Together in Los Angeles." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 41(1), 1–24.
- Pooch, M. (2016). Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, "Tropic of Orange". In *DiverCity–Global cities as a literary phenomenon: Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles in a globalizing age* (pp. 165–204). Transcript Verlag.
- Rodriguez, C. M. (2017). Relentless geography: Los Angeles' imagined cartographies in Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 8, 104–130.
- Rody, C. (2004). The transnational imagination: Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". In E. R. Ty, & D. C. Goellnicht (Eds.), *Asian North American identities beyond the hyphen* (pp. 130–148). Indiana University Press.
- Ryan, M. (2003). Cognitive maps and the construction of narrative space. In D. Herman (Ed.), *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences* (pp. 214–242). CSLI Publications.
- Sexton, M. (2017). "Tropic of Orange", Los Angeles, and the anthropocene imagination. *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43(1), 13–32.
- Soja, E. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. Verso.
- Thompson, K. (2017). Traffic stops, stopping traffic: Race and climate change in the age of automobility. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 24(1), 92–112.
- Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System (PacIOOS) (January 25, 2016). *Tropic of Cancer*. Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System (PacIOOS). https://www.pacioos.hawaii.edu/metadata/world_tropic_of_cancer.html?format=fgdc
- Vint, S. (2012). Orange County: Global networks in "Tropic of Orange". *Science Fiction Studies*, 39(3), 401–414.
- Yamashita, K. T. (1997). *Tropic of Orange*. Coffee House.