The Theme of Mobility in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Brazil-Maru*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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Introduction: The Theme of Mobility in American Literature

The freedom of mobility is one of the most important values of American individualism. Indeed, the vastness of the land itself is quite amazing for someone who comes to America for the first time. On my first visit to the United States as an undergraduate student from Japan, for example, I was shocked to see the huge area of empty land passing outside of the window of the limousine I was taking to downtown San Francisco from the airport. Later, I learned that the San Francisco area is not a typical wilderness place in America, but the scenery looked overwhelmingly spacious to someone who was from a small country like Japan. Then I was really impressed by the size and variety of the American landscape when I traveled on an inexpensive Greyhound “coast to coast” pass from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to San Diego, California, in one summer. At the time, I came to my conclusion that Americans are really people who are constantly moving. My observation was confirmed when I heard an American professor comment on the mobility of American people on my visit to him after a long interval from my graduation from the university where he taught. He was glad to have me as a visitor, and he was intrigued by my anecdote concerning my association with my high school friend in Japan. He was
obviously impressed by the fact that we were still associating after many years since our graduation from high school. He indicated that he, like most Americans, had lost contact with his high school friends because Americans are people who are ceaselessly moving whenever and wherever better opportunities both professional and personal arise.

My personal impression on the mobility of Americans seems fully endorsed by the following remarks made by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Albert Borgmann. In Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance, a thematic and intertextual study of Asian American literature, Asian American literary critic Wong maintains, “America is FOUNDED on myths of mobility.” She continues, “Since its birth as a political and social entity . . . America has customarily defined its uniqueness in terms of the enhanced mobility it can offer: the opportunity to go where one wants, do what one wants, shape life anew.” Obviously, Wong is not the only scholar to point out that the freedom of mobility is a particularly distinguishing American characteristic. German-born philosopher Borgmann echoes Wong’s observation when he states that the children of the pioneers, who were hungry for land, “inherited commodious freedom in the ways they prefer to shape their private lives above all the freedom to move about, nearly at will.” As both Wong and Borgmann contend, the freedom of mobility, then, has been one of the most distinctive American values to this day.

In view of the importance of mobility as one of the fundamental human rights in American society, it is quite natural that the theme of mobility has been taken up repeatedly in American literature. Concerning the theme
of mobility as depicted in mainstream American literature, Wong notes, “A controlling influence in American literature has been the perception of an open continent and the limitless opportunities it implies.” Yet in studying such a recurrent literary theme, Wong contends, “The Asian American has been conspicuously absent in existing generalist formulations of a presumably universally applicable theory of American mobility . . . . The absence of Asian Americans in the literary scholarship on American mobility must be deemed a serious . . . omission” Having said that, Wong proceeds to undertake an examination of the mobility theme in Asian American literature, an ethnic-group-specific approach, asserting that “it can reveal the workings of dominant discourse and provide a corrective to its oversimplifications” As Wong points out, while the theme of mobility in mainstream American literature has been long examined by literary critics, the study of the mobility theme in Asian American literature has been deplorably neglected. In this essay, I examine the theme of mobility depicted in one Asian American literary work, *Brazil-Maru* by Karen Tei Yamashita, drawing on Wong’s analyses of the mobility theme in Asian American literature. In discussing the theme of mobility as delineated in *Brazil-Maru*, I particularly aim to illuminate what makes a truly successful immigration possible by considering the attitude of the immigrants in the novel toward their new homeland.

In my examination of the theme of mobility in *Brazil-Maru*, I will adopt Wong’s perspective on “necessity” and “extravagance.” In *Reading Asian American Literature*, Wong’s analyses revolve around the two concepts of “necessity” and “extravagance.” Regarding the subtitle of her book, Wong
explains, “The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness and autotelism” By Based on those two notions, Wong argues that the characters in Asian American literature must live according to the pragmatics of existence, “necessity,” and that they are not allowed to indulge in “extravagance” something more than the necessities of ordinary life. Further, addressing the mobility theme in particular, Wong remarks,

One striking difference presents itself upon even the most cursory comparison between mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility. In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, and opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community in short, Necessity. Thus Wong states that in dealing with the theme of mobility, mainstream American literature depicts mobility as an assumed civil liberty of its Euro-American characters. Euro-American characters immigrate to America because they desire to start life anew, moving wherever they please in a limitless landscape, and doing whatever they wish to take advantage of countless opportunities. Such immigration can be described as mobility as “extravagance.” In contrast, the characters in Asian American literature, Wong argues, move about the country because of “necessity.” The typical
images of such characters might be Chinese immigrants who labored as cheap workers for the construction of the railroads or Japanese American immigrants who were housed as prisoners in internment camps during World War II. Wong deplores that the characters in Asian American literature must always live pragmatically just to survive on a day-to-day basis and cannot partake freely in the fulfillment of their self-expression and individual freedom.

While there are many works, such as Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking For Is My Body* which can be described as classic examples of Asian American literary works portraying the theme of “mobility because of necessity,” *Brazil-Maru* is, on the contrary to Wong’s observation, an Asian American novel depicting the theme of “mobility as extravagance.” Indeed, the story of *Brazil-Maru* is unique in that a group of Japanese settlers in the novel immigrate to Brazil not because of “necessity” but as “extravagance,” for they arrive in their new homeland for their ideological reason, that is, the vision to establish a Christian and socialist community. Until recently, *Brazil-Maru* has not received as much critical attention as it deserves, for it has not been considered as an Asian American literary text because it is set not in North America but in South America. The traditional definition of Asian American literature dictated by scholars such as Wong limits the range of Asian American literary texts to those that are set in North America. I do not agree with this definition. Rather, I support and promote an alternative position that insists on inclusion of texts that are set not only in North America but also in South America in the category of Asian American literature. From this alternative point of
view, *Brazil-Maru* is an Asian American literary text, which treats the theme of “mobility as extravagance.” Through the discussion of the mobility theme in *Brazil-Maru*, I hope that the novel should receive more critical attention as it rightly deserves.

**Postmodern Immigrant Yamashita’s Ecological Consciousness**

*Brazil-Maru* depicts the lives of a group of Japanese immigrants to Brazil, and, interestingly, the author Yamashita, although she is a third-generation Japanese American, considers herself as a new immigrant to the United States. Since this unique view was formed from her diasporic experiences, it is important to briefly introduce Yamashita’s background. Karen Tei Yamashita was born in Oakland, California in 1957 but it was in Los Angeles that she spent most of her childhood, as her family moved there when she was a young child. Her middle name, Tei, was taken from the first name of her maternal grandmother, a small and quiet woman, who did not speak a word of English. Yamashita writes that all of her grandparents immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century.

*Circle K Cycle* ๑๐๔๐ Yamashita’s father was a Methodist minister in one of the Japanese American churches, and as a child, she enjoyed, like many sansei ๑๓๓๘ third-generation Japanese Americans ๑๓๓๘ reading Japanese folk tales such as “Momotaro” and “Urashima Taro” that were translated into English ๑๓๓๘ Yamashita, “Re: Ecofeminism and Buddhism” ๑๓๓๘

Yamashita consciously chose a path which would lead her to her Japanese cultural heritage. She went to Carleton College in Minnesota to work on a special independent major in both English and Japanese
literatures. During her junior year, she left for Japan, studying at Waseda University in Tokyo. Yamashita spent one and a half years in Japan. Following her graduation from Carleton, she went to Brazil because she had been awarded a one-year fellowship to research Japanese immigration to Brazil. Yamashita’s stay in Brazil was extended for nine years, from 1972 to 1981. While there, she married and began to raise a family. It was also in Brazil that Yamashita started her writing career. Her first two novels, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* and *Brazil-Maru*, grew out of her diasporic experiences in Brazil. *Brazil-Maru*, in particular, is the first of her three novels in terms of the chronological order of production, and Yamashita began writing this novel as early as 1974. She left Brazil seven years later with a first draft of the novel, which would be rewritten as many as five times over a course of the next fifteen years, until it was eventually published in 1990.

In 1981, Yamashita moved back to Los Angeles with her family and her architect/artist Brazilian husband, Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, and her children, Jane and Jon. The circumstances surrounding her family and the Brazilian economy urged Yamashita to “immigrate back” to her home country. Upon returning to Los Angeles, Yamashita found the city quite different from the one she used to know. It was filled with immigrants from all over the globe, and she found herself adapting to her own country. In her interview with Michael S. Murashige, she maintains, “I found my family part of this great movement of immigrants to the city, and I certainly identify with that movement.” Murashige Thus Yamashita regards herself and her family as new immigrants to America. Since 1990
she has been teaching creative writing and Asian American literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Yamashita published her third novel, *Tropic of Orange*, in while she lived with her family in Japan for six months as a winner of a Japan Foundation Artist Fellowship to study Brazilians of Japanese descent with unskilled work visas living in Japan under the changed immigration laws of the Japanese government. In *Circle K Cycles*, a collection of essays and short stories, which elucidates lives of Brazilian workers across Japan.

Having introduced Yamashita’s background, I now state that ecofeminism is my primary theoretical framework to discuss the theme of mobility in *Brazil-Maru*. While narrating immigrants’ stories in *Brazil-Maru*, Yamashita consistently expresses her ecological consciousness. For example, she questions “the sin of the immigrant” who cleared away a huge area of the Brazilian rain forest in an irretrievable way. Surely, “ecological balances are threatened,” as Chinese-born geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out, “when people move to a new environment and have to adjust their habits to new conditions” *Man and Nature* An immigrant’s way of life, then, should involve inevitably an ecological concern. Ecology, as leading ecofeminism critic Patrick D. Murphy indicates, “can be a means for learning how to live appropriately in a particular place and time, so as to preserve, contribute to, and recycle the ecosystem” *Literature, Nature, and Other* In her novels, Yamashita enthusiastically addresses the issue of the relationship between the “built” world and “the moral sensitivity and imagination of the people who live in it” Tuan, *Morality and Imagination* For this reason, I believe that ecofeminism is an indispensable literary
theory to apply to Brazil-Maru in order to appreciate the novel fully. In the following section, then, I would like to depict, more precisely, what exactly ecofeminism entails.

**Ecofeminism as a Postmodern Ethic of Place**

Ecofeminism combines both ecology and feminism as its central features. It is a relatively new and constantly changing field which has evolved, as Karla Armbruster notes, from a diverse background including socialism, philosophy, women’s spirituality, and grass-roots political activism. Of the origin and implications of ecofeminism, Carolyn Merchant writes,

> Ecofeminisme was coined by the French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 to represent women’s potential for bringing about an ecological revolution to ensure human survival on the planet. Such an ecological revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature.

It is significant to note that a perspective of ecofeminism has emerged as an antidote to Western metaphysics, especially, in Stacy Alaimo’s words, “Cartesian models of knowledge, agency, and subjectivity” that typically characterize the philosophy of the Enlightenment. This mode of thought of the Enlightenment eventually evolved into modernism, which can be defined, according to Borgmann, as “the fusion of the domination of nature with the primacy of method and the sovereignty of the individual.” Needless to say, this “individual” is a male, western, phallocentric Being, to whose nature “metaphysical dualisms such as those of culture/
nature, human/animal, reason/emotion, mind/body, self/other, subject/object, activity/passivity, form/matter, and man/woman” are central.

Bigwood These dualisms are, as Carol Bigwood notes, “ecodestructive,” since modernism tended to be the white male subject’s aggressive appropriation of “the other” — women, nature, indigenous peoples, and colonized countries. In this milieu of ecodestructive modernist thinking, ecofeminism has emerged in order to deconstruct both androcentrism and anthropocentrism.

Androcentrism and anthropocentrism are deeply rooted in modernism. The white male subject’s aggressive appropriation of “the other,” as Borgmann articulates, was justified by universalism, which took over the medieval order of Christianity as a new foundation of moral conduct. When considering the characteristics of universalism, Borgmann writes,

Moral universalism is just a particular way of arranging the common order and recognizing shortcomings and merits within it. It is an arrangement that favors appropriation through formal and abstract intelligence and implementation through the subordination of the particular to some universal measure. . . . Universalism neglects these ways of empathy and care — which women are traditionally thought to value — and is harsh toward the human subtleties and frailties that do not convert into the universal currency.

Fortified with universalism, a Western male subject has forced women and nature to accept the position of object. Within this context, nature, for instance, has been viewed as a static entity that exists somewhere outside
of culture to be discovered by humans for either exploitation or reverence. In the same spirit, women have been seen, more often than not, as objects that can freely be used, oppressed, and even craved and fetishized. In this Eurocentric, male chauvinistic anthropocentrism, the individual attained lofty subjectivity and proceeded to exploit women, nature, nonhumans, indigenous peoples, and colonized countries without compunction or restraint. Thus within this Eurocentric worldview characterized by the modernist mindset, a distinct hierarchy was formed in which the European male dwelled at the top of the social constellation.

Placed in this perspective, the view of nature became extremely anthropocentric. If the individual admired nature and searched for it, it was because he sought out comfort and healing there for an ego that had been injured in “culture.” Such a view of nature is clearly inscribed in a variety of writings in “culture” that treat nature as a healing element; this view is exhibited, for example, in works as varied as those by Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Hemingway. In addition, “The Anglo-European natural history orientation is,” as Murphy points out, “also fundamentally Judeo-Christian in its postlapsarian vision of the fallen state of humanity, a vision that constitutes alienation as the necessary condition of all human cultures and that is reinforced through efforts to define nature writing as invariably pastoral” (Farther Afield). Following Murphy’s observation, it is worth noting that an androcentric and anthropocentric vision regarding nature is predominantly a Western notion with its Judeo-Christian religious background.
Unlike these cultures in the West, however, those in the East have a quite different relationship with nature. In Zen Buddhism, which originated in China and further developed and flourished in Japan, for instance, the relationship between humans and nature is not one of subject and object. Interestingly, Chikao Fujisawa, a Japanese scholar of Zen Buddhism, points out a common ground for the worldview of Martin Heidegger, a German existentialist philosopher, and that of Shinto and Zen. Fujisawa recounts Heidegger’s observation of a Western Being:

According to Heidegger, Being remains an invaluable treasure buried in this devitalized world which is subordinated to the prosaic technological order. The homelessness or self-alienation of modern man left to the mercy of all-denying nihilism cannot be overcome otherwise than by his recuperating “genuine selfhood” rooted in what Heidegger defines as meta-physical nothingness susceptible of effacing the antinomy between the subjective and objective.

According to Fujisawa, Heidegger’s call for “effacing the antinomy between the subjective and objective” has already been realized in Buddhism. Fujisawa contends that in Nirvana, the enjoyment of absolute bliss in Buddhism, “subjectivity and objectivity are nothing other than two grains of dust sticking to the blurred surface of a mirror”. To be more exact, Fujisawa elaborates that in Buddhism “not only man but also all other sentient and insentient beings are endowed unexceptionally with Buddhahood, whereby the dualistic view which contrasts man with nature must be cast off”. As Fujisawa points out, there is no hierarchy between humans and nature based on the subject and object position in Zen
Buddhism. Humans and nature co-exist harmoniously in this eastern way of thinking. Moreover, nature in Buddhism is not a static entity, for one of the basic viewpoints of Buddhism is that nothing remains the same.

Such Buddhist worldviews are distinctively expressed in Japanese haiku, a poetry form consisting of only approximately seventeen-syllables, within which there must be a word indicating one of the four seasons. The haiku poet composes a poem by closely observing and incorporating diverse elements of nature. As Ann Atwood indicates, the poet must be sensitive to “the moods of earth”:

The haiku form itself . . . is paradoxical in nature. It is both simple and profound, constrictive and expansive, meticulously descriptive and yet wholly suggestive. . . . Linking itself with nature, with the moods of earth and the cycles of the seasons, the haiku telescopes in a single word a limitless range of sensations and ideas which are part of man’s common fund of experience.

In order to understand what Atwood implies, an actual appreciation of haiku is essential. An excellent illustration of this point can be found in haiku written by Matsuo Basho (松尾 大庭) who is considered to be the most accomplished haiku poet and master in Japan. The first haiku is,

White gleams the stone
Of the mountain rock; whiter yet
The wind of autumn. [td. in Dumoulin]

A second example of Basho’s poetry is,

Only silence alone
Into the rocky cliff penetrates
The sound of the cicada. 聴 in Dumoulin ごく
What kind of sensations are supposed to be invoked in a Japanese person, a cultural insider, by these two haiku? Loneliness and silence. Significantly, as Heinrich Dumoulin explains, “Zen practices the loneliness and silence of the Void in long, somber hours of meditation.” Like many haiku poets, Dumoulin points out, Basho studied his art under a Zen master, and he “carried this silence within and listened to the deepest ground of nature, where all sounds lapse into stillness and thereby merely accent its awesomeness” ごくごく. Thus, to Dumoulin, Basho demonstrates a naturalistic worldview of Zen Buddhism, in which, unlike in the Judeo-Christian view of nature, “Nowhere does man assume a towering and masterful position in the universe, nor is he possessed of a ‘royal nature’... that subdues the earth to its will and lifts its eyes to heaven” ごくごく. As Dumoulin astutely describes, in the world of haiku, nature is neither subordinated nor worshiped by humans.

Many other haiku also portray a different relationship between humans and nonhumans from that in the West. The haiku of Kobayashi Issa ごくごく's for instance, exemplify this well. Issa also studied Zen, but as a son of a farmer, he was more liberal and flexible in his practice of Zen compared to the stricter Zen practitioner Basho, who was from a samurai ごくごくculturally elite ごくごくclass. Yet many of Issa’s haiku still demonstrate the Zen Buddhist views of nature and embody a genuine sense of gentle Buddhist humor. The following two haiku by Issa illustrate his rather wry attitude to nonhumans. The first one is,
Don’t kill! . . .
The fly is asking you
To spare his life
By rubbing his hands.

This haiku humorously expresses a Buddhist virtue of non-violence. The second example was composed when Issa went to a local event of a frog-fighting contest. He cheered for a skinny frog:

Be brave,
Skinny frog!
Here I am
To back you up.

Well illustrated in both is Issa’s empathy with and comradeship for nonhumans.

A germane anecdote regarding the religious figure Ryokan 料理僧 who well rounds out this illustration of the Zen worldview of the human-nature relationship. Ryokan was a Zen monk and poet who lived in obscure poverty despite his genius in poetry and calligraphy. Calling himself a great fool, Ryokan loved playing with children in his neighborhood while making a living by begging. When he was “rediscovered” by Japanese academia after World War II as an exceptionally accomplished poet who had lived the life of a recluse, anecdotes related to his humble and humane way of life began to be commonly included in popular children’s books. In this way, virtually every adult in contemporary Japanese society is now familiar with the following story recounted by John Stevens:

One spring day, Ryokan noticed three bamboo shoots growing
under his veranda. . . . On the shoots were pushing against the bottom of the floor. . . . He decided to chop an opening in the floor and to burn a hole in the section of the thatched roof covering the veranda to permit the bamboo to grow unimpeded, but when Ryokan put a candle to that part of the roof, the entire veranda caught fire and burned down.

Described here is Ryokan’s gentleness, a conviviality that extended even to plants. His act of kindness represents a mentality that embraces an idea of how one living creature is related to another in the overall scheme of all living things sharing a common home called the earth.

Expressed, then, in the haiku of Basho and Issa as well as the anecdote about Ryokan’s mindful stewardship of nature, is the Zen worldview of the East, in which humans and nature co-exist harmoniously and in absence of hierarchical order. In contrast, there is strict hierarchy, to the metaphysical thinking of the West, concerning the relationship between humans and nature based on the subject/object position of the former and the latter respectively.

Ecofeminism tries to break down such Western hierarchy. According to Murphy, who promotes ecofeminism as an affirmative literary theory, its development requires an integration of “a triad of perceptions” — ecology, feminisms, and the Bakhtinian dialogical method — that is, Bakhtin’s conception of participatory discourse. In the light of Bakhtinian conception, man is, first and foremost, a social being who shapes and is shaped by his physical, social, and cultural environment. That said, as Murphy maintains, “Conceptual-
izing self/other as interpenetrating part/part and part/whole relationships rather than dichotomy is fundamental for apprehending the mutually constitutive character of the dialogics-ecology-feminisms triad” Literature, Nature. In Bakhtinian discourse, accordingly, “the other” ceases to exist, being replaced by “another,” thus denying any hierarchical order. Significantly, Murphy furthers the Bakhtinian concept of “another” to include inanimate things as well. Murphy, then, states his vision of ecofeminism as “volitional interdependence among human and nonhuman alike” and “the ecological processes of interanimation the ways in which humans and other entities develop, change, and learn through mutually influencing each other day to day, age by age” Literature, Nature. In this context, ecofeminism closely resembles the Zen philosophy found in the haiku of Basho and Issa illustrated above.

Ecofeminism is also closely related to postcolonialism and multiculturality. Opposing Western hierarchy as depicted above, Murphy, for his part, asserts the necessity of recognizing differences in nature, culture, gender, race, and the like. He notes, “Recognition of the necessity of diversity in nature leads ecofeminism to recognize the necessity of cultural diversity in humanity, which in turn leads to a recognition of the need for ecofeminism to be postcolonial and multicultural” Farther Afield. As Murphy indicates, recognizing differences in nature and culture inevitably leads ecofeminism to a liberatory orientation toward a truly democratic society as well as a healthy ecosystem.

Murphy’s assertion for recognizing differences in nature and culture resonates with Bigwood’s call for “searching out differences, those subju-
gated knowledges.” Bigwood is a self-declared disciple of Heidegger, who, according to Tuan, indicates that “a careful and reverential study of the root meaning of certain Greek and German words can uncover for us the fundamental nature of human reality” \textit{Morality} As Fujisawa explains, Heidegger deconstructs all the schools of Western philosophy based on the notion of the Western phallocentric Being:

Heidegger went so far as to claim that all the schools of Western philosophy beginning with Socrates and ending in Hegel and Nietzsche should be brought to erasure inasmuch as they were too pre-occupied with the unilateral assertion of their narrow standpoints to be able to locate correctly and precisely where Being lurks. Borrowing Heidegger’s existential-phenomenology in deconstructing Western metaphysics, in \textit{Earth Muse}, Bigwood investigates how ecology and economy intersect in “eco,” which comes “from the Greek oikos, meaning ‘home.’” She attempts to inscribe “home as a postmodern place open to difference” \textit{ }

In describing her vision of home, Bigwood maintains that it is “a caring place from which to openly encounter differences between cultures; races; the past, present, and future; and genders and between the human and nonhuman” Such a concept of home seems especially useful for immigrants, since they are situated in and exposed to multiple layers of differences. Because all of Yamashita’s novels deal with the lives of immigrants, Bigwood’s perspective of “home as a postmodern place open to difference” becomes, accordingly, important as a critical framework to examine Yamashita’s writings, especially \textit{Brazil-Maru}, which recounts the story of a group of Japanese immigrants to Brazil.
Murphy’s view of ecofeminism as being multicultural and postcolonial resonates well with Bigwood’s perception. When speaking of encountering differences, Bigwood maintains, “What is most important in such encounters in our particular time and culture is not so much the discovery of commonalities with others as it is the wonder and respect provoked by positive differences” 首項 She continues,

Thus, it would be a mistake to image the gathering now needed in the many-worlded-earth-home as a round dance of many colored people around the globe... the image of nations holding hands is not an image of openness to difference, since one cannot escape the implicit assumption that this mingling is due to that controlled by the neo-colonialist benevolence of the West. 首項

At the same time, Bigwood insists, “Central to an open turn to other cultures ... must be the recognition of the diversity of cultures within one’s very own neighborhoods” 首項 Bigwood seems absolutely right when she states that, in order to realize such openness, “there is a need for ethics that emerge from nonhierarchichal diverse ways of people’s bodily being and their openness to unique localities and past histories” 首項 In such openness based on such ethics, we might cultivate, while disrupting a Western metaphysical will to dominate, “new ways of being that let in difference as difference” 首項 Bigwood 首項 Thus, as both Murphy and Bigwood argue, ecofeminism is both multicultural and postcolonial, which, I believe, makes this theory positively liberating.

As discussed above, ecofeminism is a revolutionary vision in that it deconstructs the notion of the Western phallocentric Being whose
aspirations are to control and dominate nature, women, indigenous and marginalized peoples, and colonized countries with his self-righteous universalism. According to Heidegger, Bigwood explains, the modern human being is characterized by a homelessness, which is “overlooked in the eagerness of human beings to attain the organized conquest of the earth” Decidedly, ecofeminism departs from the abstract, immortal, “alienated” self of such a modern human being. On the contrary, it acknowledges our mortal, bodily being, whose “relational” self exists in the web of interconnectedness with differences in gender, race, culture, and nature, including both nonhuman and inanimate entities. If we faithfully put this theory into practice, starting from home to neighborhood to the globe, such persistent praxis should have a tremendous effect in realizing a truly liberating society within a healthy ecosystem, in which we are only one entity who shares our earth-home with “differences.”

**Mobility as Extravagance: Building a Rousseau’s Republic in Brazil**

In the previous section, I have explained what exactly ecofeminism entails, and now I proceed to discuss *Brazil-Maru* from this theoretical framework. *Brazil-Maru* presents a picture of Japanese colonists who immigrate to Brazil because they aspire to establish a Christian, socialist community in the New World. The novel chronicles a history of a rural community of Japanese Brazilians from the 1920s to the early 1940s. *Brazil-Maru* evolved from Yamashita’s anthropological field work on the history of Japanese immigration to Brazil, which she conducted from 1995 to 1998 following her graduation from Carlton University. Regarding the
circumstances in which *Brazil-Maru* was conceptualized, Yamashita reflects,

> When I landed in Brazil to explore the Japanese immigration there, I discovered the basis for *Brazil-Maru*, which was a commune, and I studied their history and their system. I really wanted to know what this project could be. . . . I wanted to know that it was possible to be idealistic and to create a different system or a new way of living — indeed I wanted to see that work. I was coming out of a period in the United States when many college-educated people of my generation wanted to try that kind of experiment, to come together to divide our work, to have more leisure in doing it, and not be as concerned about capital; a social experiment of that nature. To meet with people who had tried this from the early 1970s — people who could’ve been my grandparents — was fascinating. Gier and Tejeda

The motivation of immigration for the group of Japanese settlers in *Brazil-Maru* is completely different from that for the characters in many other Asian American texts. While the latter immigrate to America because of economic “necessity,” the former go to Brazil in search of freedom of thought and way of life, that is, for reasons of “extravagance.”

*Brazil-Maru*, which consists of five sections narrated by five different characters, depicts the founders of this Japanese colony, who are inspired by the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, following his teachings, try to shape their lives anew in the tropical rainforest. Accordingly, each of the five sections begins with quotations from the works of Rousseau, and these characters are, in fact, based on the people Yamashita interviewed for
her research. In her conversation with Murashige, she explains,

It was a revelation to meet people who could say, “I was most
influenced by a book I read in my early youth before I left Japan, a
book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau called Emile. When I read that book,
I wept.” You know, this man is telling me this, and I’m thinking,
“You wept reading Emile? I thought that book was so dry.” But I was
impressed. It was fascinating to hear an Issei telling you, “I came to
this country because I wanted to come here. I wanted to start a new
life. I believed that there are things about my Japanese culture, my
past, that could flourish in a new setting.”  

Similarly, Yamashita’s characters in Brazil-Maru proudly undertake the
task of pioneering in “nature” where they aspire to create a new
civilization.

Part One of Brazil-Maru chronicles the progress of the immigrants
from the very beginning of the pioneering of their colony, Esperança, to the
foundation of New World Ranch, a commune with a collective labor opera-
tion of a poultry business initiated by Kantaro Uno. This section is sym-
bolically titled “Emile” to indicate that the settlers of Esperança are
genuinely inspired by Rousseau’s philosophy and teachings. In Jean
Jacques Rousseau and Education From Nature, Gabriel Compayré summa-
rizes Rousseau’s viewpoint expressed in Emile: “Man is naturally good,
and society, man’s work, is bad”  Compayré further explains
Rousseau’s observation of society: “With its customs and prejudices,
society is detestable and perverted, and it must be thoroughly
reformed.” According to Compayré, therefore, Rousseau contends that we
should revive nature’s authority in order for it to replace the rule of ancient and antiquated tradition. Concerning Rousseau’s proposal to realize his contention, it insists, in Compayré’s words, that we should “supersede the empire of stern discipline and oppressive restriction, which mutilate and deform the human faculties, by the reign of young liberty, which will assist in their expansion” In an attempt to create a self-governing community, Emile, Compayré notes, inevitably must “remain alone in the presence of nature and her might” In Emile, Compayré states, “Rousseau had in view more than a simple pedagogical reformation: he was announcing a social revolution” The characters in Brazil-Maru, likewise, abandon their home country, a politically and socially repressive Japan at that time, and seek the liberty to live their lives on their own terms in the Brazilian forest. Their determination to immigrate to Brazil to live their ideal in the New World is, indeed, a revolutionary act among the Japanese of the.

In order to depict the sense of mission felt by the Japanese colonists, early in the novel, Yamashita relates an anecdote regarding Ichiro Terada, the narrator of the first section of Brazil-Maru. The anecdote describes how Ichiro is given the nickname of Emile by his father and a pair of his mentors, Kantaro Uno and Shūhei Mizuoka, on the ship, The Brazil-Maru, during its voyage to his new homeland. Ichiro is nine years old when the founders of Esperança disembark from the ship at the port in São Paulo. Young as he is, Ichiro intuitively recognizes that his life will not be the same as before from the moment he accepts Emile as his nickname:

They spoke of something they called the true Japanese spirit and the
possibility that this spirit could best be raised in a new country, free from the old ways. Once they pointed to me and said something about a French writer named Rousseau. “Here then is our Japanese Emile.”

My father laughed and said, “We will make an experiment of you, Ichiro, in Brazil.”

I was puzzled by this talk.

Mizuoka smiled, “Don’t be frightened by this talk, Ichiro. All of us must be changed by life in Brazil. It is all for the best, but children naturally absorb change. You’ll see. Language, customs, manners, everything. You watch!”

Yamashita stresses how Ichiro, even as a young boy, is well aware that the people in his group are different from other passengers on board: “I knew even then as a young boy that we were somehow different from the other immigrants on the ship... because we were called Christians and because we were going to Brazil with our own money to settle on our own land” Unlike contract laborers who are committed to several years of labor to pay for their passage, the people of Ichiro’s group have paid for the passage on their own. While most of the contracted workers intend to return to Japan eventually with their earned wealth, the people of Ichiro’s group embrace their special mission to settle permanently in Brazil and create a new community according to their Christian and socialist ideals.

The idea of Rousseau’s republic becomes the moral foundation of Esperança and, later, New World Ranch. As Charles Taylor notes, Rousseau’s republic is “characterized by equality, reciprocity, and unity of purpose,” and it is unity of purpose that Kantaro emphasizes most in his
efforts to establish the New World Ranch commune. Kantaro, Ichiro observes, is a great orator who plants seeds for a common dream in the minds of the community members: “He spoke of projects, both great and small, with fervor and optimism, as if the tasks we took on in our daily lives, no matter how trivial, were part of a larger, more important scheme. He spoke of Esperança as if it were the seed of a great dream, a special experiment which would change the world.” Kantaro is able, Ichiro stresses, to make the members of New World Ranch believe in his leadership in order to realize their common dream: “Kantaro Uno was a man who understood dreams; his talent was in his ability to articulate visions with the exuberant assurance of a future that must, we thought, be captured in his very movements. If Kantaro knew your dream, it seemed that he must also be capable of making it a reality.” By ten years after their immigration to Brazil, the great orator Kantaro firmly establishes his status as a leader among young members of Esperança.

Like Rousseau before him, Kantaro views sports as an effective means of reinforcing the common purpose and values of his community. Kantaro asserts, “How is it that people in the rural backwoods, pioneering a new settlement and opening virgin forests, have the time to play baseball? I always answer that we in Esperança have come to build a new life, and sports, like other cultural pursuits, must be a part of this new life.” Kantaro organizes the Esperança baseball team and takes it to other Japanese colonies for games. The team’s victory over the São Paulo team marks a historic moment for Esperança: “For Kantaro, winning that particular baseball game was more than a display of physical talent, it was
proof that Kantaro had chosen the correct path... that Esperança was not just an idea, but that we were alive and well and strong. Baseball was a test of worth and spirit. Not surprisingly, when Kantaro calls for their participation in his new enterprise of the poultry business as an extended project to develop the sense of this communal purpose and spirit, more and more bachelors as well as families begin to join the New World Ranch commune, "which most people simply called ‘Kantaro’s Place’" Ichiro, with all the others, joins in this agricultural project using intensive methods on a large scale. Thus, in the first section of Brazil-Maru, Kantaro is portrayed, through Ichiro’s eyes, as a young hero who is able to enunciate the vision of Rousseau’s republic.

Yamashita’s Ecofeminist Perspective

While describing the pioneering of the settlers of Esperança, Yamashita repeatedly expresses her ecological consciousness of how humans and nature should coexist harmoniously on the earth that both of them share as a home. In the first section of Brazil-Maru, she depicts the vigorous labors of the first immigrants to create a new civilization in the dense forests of Brazil. In their efforts to construct habitable spaces and facilities, the colonists forcefully change nature, cutting down trees, burning fields afterward, and consequently forcing numerous species of animals and insects of those virgin lands to become extinct. In short, they figuratively stage a war against nature and ostensibly conquer it. Yamashita, however, cautions against such human appropriation of the land as environmentally destructive and unethical through the voice of the narrator Ichiro:
In those days, we thought that the forest was so wide and so deep that it would never end, that carving out our small piece of it wouldn’t make such a great difference to something so immense.... Perhaps it was a great sin to destroy the forest in this way. Ever since, we have tried to replace the forest with a new life — growth, sustenance, call it what you will. I have lived here a mere lifetime, but the forest had peacefully existed here for many centuries. What we have taken from the earth will, I think, take many more lifetimes to return in kind. When my father talked of the sin of the immigrant, I believe he meant this sin of clearing the forest away forever.

Using Ichiro’s voice, Yamashita criticizes those humans who arrogantly assume a position of subject and destroy nature as object. She suggests that, after all, humans are only one of the entities in the larger scheme of the earth — a home that is shared by all the entities. Therefore, damaging the organic harmony of the environment, Yamashita implies, is a grave “crime” perpetrated by human arrogance.

Further, Yamashita presents the sense of the land not as a static entity but as an animated one that has come to be the way it is through centuries of encounters with the others, including humans. This notion is delineated in an anecdote concerning the mounds found at the new construction site for the chicken farming facility of New World Ranch. Mizuoka, the school teacher and scholar of Esperança, is summoned to study them, for he has also been an amateur archeologist. He announces that they are the burial sites of Indians and unearths some ancient pottery, bones, and tools. While proceeding to excavate them further, he explains about the Indians to
Ichiro: “While digging around the mounds, he liked to talk and tell long involved stories about Indians. It was from Mizuoka that I learned that the land we lived on had a past of unwritten words, a silent spirit that lived in the forest we cut and burned and changed forever” 図4 Recounting this anecdote, Yamashita advocates respect for the land, that is to say, the earth itself. Clearly, she indicates that humans should become aware of the fallacy of anthropocentricism that has become a prevalent element of contemporary social thinking.

Yamashita’s ecofeminist perspective about the relationship between nature and humans is also manifested in Kantaro’s speech about his new plan to start the poultry farms on the ranch. Kantaro promotes this new enterprise with the proposition that it will allow ecology-minded farming with the use of the droppings of chickens as fertilizer:

“The main thing,” Kantaro said, “is rejuvenating the land. The future depends on fertilizer. Without it, the land will go bad, people will desert their farms, and there will be no future. . . . Until now, we have occupied ourselves in the great task of clearing the virgin forest. We have used the land, planted coffee, rice and cotton. In a matter of years, we’ve become guilty of depleting the soil of its natural fertility. Many Japanese have left the land and gone off to the city. We must find a way to keep people on the land. The answer is simple: restore the land’s fertility.” 図5

The attraction of the poultry farming business for Kantaro obviously lies in its prospect for contributing to the regenerating of the earthly mechanism. Describing the reason for Kantaro’s fascination with his new
enterprise, Yamashita reflects her environmental ethics, which is similar to that embraced by Murphy, who stresses that humans should be ecologically conscious in order to preserve and recycle the ecosystem. It is clear that Yamashita is keenly interested in viewing the development of an environmentally ethical relationship between nature and humans.

The Importance of Women’s Caring and Nurturing Labor

In Part Two of Brazil-Maru, Yamashita attempts to illuminate the physical and domestic facets of life in the commune and call attention to the importance of the task of a caretaker. In order to do this, she utilizes the voice of Haru, who is Kantaro’s wife. Haru narrates the period of the commune from the beginning of the poultry farming operation in the late 1940s to the wake of World War II. Of five narrators created in the novel, Haru is the only woman. This is natural, Yamashita explains, because Brazil-Maru is essentially a man’s story: “In many ways this is a man’s tale. This going forth with ideas, creating structures based on theories and ideas, building grand schemes. It’s a male thing.” Nevertheless, in the metaphysical landscape men are busy creating, it is women who are in charge of the tasks of tending the daily needs of the commune members and nurturing their physical well-being. Yamashita is well aware of this fact when she says, “Women come along, and, as Haru says, they clean up. They have to make it work, sweep out the houses, make everybody like each other.” In Murashige’s Through Haru’s voice, Yamashita emphasizes that the commune ultimately cannot function without women’s caring and nurturing labor.
In *Brazil-Maru*, Haru tries to believe that she is also a part of a grand scheme Kantaro has been advocating in the creation of the new civilization in the Brazilian rainforest; Haru, however, genuinely cannot feel that she occupies a place in such a lofty vision. She is too busy with domestic chores such as cooking and taking care of babies, the old, and the sick to think about the larger scheme. Finally, Haru comes to realize that she herself is a part of Kantaro’s dream, which is, indeed, a sober realization she must accept:

I have tried to think like Kantaro that I have been a part of something special, but every day, people want to eat at the same hour. Children need their diapers changed. Old people must take their medicine. The dirt comes in with muddy feet.

There was a long time when I could not sleep at night. I would lie in bed and stare into the dark. Every night it was the same Kantaro snoring, me staring into the dark. One night I thought about it. I am a part of Kantaro’s dream; that is why he sleeps and I cannot.

As Penny A. Weiss notes, in Rousseau’s republic, the sex-ruled family is advocated in order to develop “unselfish dedication to the common good of the state.” Similarly, New World Ranch is organized around sex-ruled assignments of constructing chores and nurturing chores.

Compared to men’s labor of constructing, women’s chores of nurturing are historically and traditionally regarded as insignificant and inferior; yet Yamashita strongly believes in the importance of the task of a caretaker and advocates raising recognition for such a task. As Bigwood points out,
women’s work appears to be passive compared to men’s “externally obvious activities like engineering and construction in which the finished product is equally obvious.” Moreover, women’s caring labor, Bigwood continues, “cannot be easily quantified in terms of money and prestige” However, as Bigwood maintains, “[C]onstructing [by] building [facilities such as bridges and roads] depends upon the physical health that cultivating brings to our dwelling on the earth” In Brazil-Maru, Haru is virtually Mother to everyone in the commune. As a caretaker, Haru provides not just a physical space in which to live but “a kind of softening and rounding out of the space through relational bonds wherein the dependent other can support itself by belonging to that vibrating, swelling space” Through the portrayal of Haru’s nurturing roles, Yamashita is clearly indicating that Haru is really the backbone of the commune, its large-scale poultry farming operation, and, by extension, Kantaro’s metaphysical vision itself. Further, Yamashita expresses an ecofeminist perspective that promotes “a cultivator and caretaker model of being human” in opposition to “the model of constructor, designer, and controller,” which is inevitably anthropocentric and eco-destructive She emphasizes that the nurturing mode of tending things that grow should not be regarded as less important than the constructing mode of building things that do not grow. Rather, the former mode is truly indispensable since it provides the basis for the latter mode’s activities to take place. In Brazil-Maru, Yamashita stresses her ecofeminist position that nurturing practices deserve to be fully recognized because they are the very foundation of our dwelling on the earth.
The Extreme Homogeneity Arising from Rousseau’s Doctrine

Part Three of *Brazil-Maru* explains that Kantaro’s commune, like Rousseau’s republic, becomes exceedingly successful because of the unity of the purpose of the commune members, and, at the same time, it also depicts the danger that underlies Rousseau’s doctrine, namely, its extreme homogeneity. This part of the novel deals with the period from the years following the war to the end of the 1940s. During this time period, Kantaro stresses unity of purpose in his efforts to create the New World Ranch commune. He tightly controls his people by reminding them of “the general will” of their community, that is to say, “the vision” of their commune in that the purpose of their immigration to Brazil is to live “the Christian ideals of nurturing the spirit and the land in the New World” 1940s. In an attempt to usher his people toward a new ideal, Kantaro eloquently addresses young representatives from Japanese colonies all over Brazil who have gathered at a conference he has organized in São Paulo. In order to persuade them to take part in the new project of large-scale poultry farming, Kantaro asserts,

> What is the destiny of young Japanese men like ourselves a half world away from our homeland? This is our destiny! ... We in Esperança have spent our hard labor on this dream, but we have proven that it is no idle dream, that it can work! Who among you is willing to make this sacrifice for the future? 1940s

Kantaro wins the imagination of “a new generation of young Japanese immigrants in Brazil who needed to find reasons and a focus for their energies,” forging “the general will” of these people in his endeavors to succeed in the poultry business 1940s
Yamashita portrays Kantaro as an excellent orator who can convince his followers to hold and live for “the vision.” Indeed, the inculcation of Kantaro’s vision into his followers is so thorough that it can be seen in the speech of Befu, a poultry farming expert and Kantaro’s brother-in-law: “This is not a simple business operation for profit! It is a way of life! It is a great human experiment!” Moreover, Kantaro also wins the business interests of Japanese Brazilian financial institutions. In fact, his strong leadership to establish the new business as a means of realizing his vision allows him to obtain a series of investment loans from a network of banks and cooperatives that the Japanese settlers have created in and around São Paulo in order to support their own interests. As the business steadily grows, Kantaro comes to be known as “King of Eggs.” During the founding years of the poultry farming operation and even after the success of the business, however, the commune members of New World Ranch are not really rewarded with material affluence. They must be, on the contrary, rather frugal of their spending on everyday necessities. Nevertheless, they feel content with what they have because of their sense of mission in voluntarily striving for their common goal. Owing to “the general will” that Kantaro has ardently initiated, the New World Ranch commune eventually reaches a pinnacle of success.

While this section describes that New World Ranch, like Rousseau’s republic, becomes enormously successful because of the general will of the commune members, it also relates the danger that lies beneath Rousseau’s doctrine, that is, its extreme homogeneity. In the latter part of the section, Kantaro, the narrator of the portion, recounts the eventual decline
of the commune because of its extreme, enforced homogeneity. As Taylor maintains, it should be noted that Rousseau’s republic inevitably becomes a highly homogeneous society:

In Rousseau, three things seem to be inseparable: freedom [???] the absence of differentiated roles, and a very tight common purpose. We must all be dependent on the general will, lest there arise bilateral forms of dependence. This has been the formula for the most terrible forms of homogenizing tyranny, starting with the Jacobins and extending to the totalitarian regimes of our [???] the twentieth [???] century. But even where the third element of the trinity is set aside, the aligning of equal freedom with the absence of differentiation has remained a tempting mode of thought. Wherever it reigns, be it in modes of feminist thought or of liberal politics, the margin to recognize difference is very small. [???]

Kantaro’s commune also becomes an extremely homogenous community where people are not allowed to hold different viewpoints and are subservient to what is seen as the general will of the collective unit.

In this tightly controlled, homogenous community, Kantaro becomes a sinister dictator. He purges the discontented and the unfit from his commune. Those who are sent away from the commune include Saburo, Kantaro’s younger brother, and Genji, Kantaro’s nephew. Ichiro, Saburo’s close friend, reflects about Saburo’s departure from the commune, which is disguised by the pretense that he is going to study the managerial style of another cooperative:

That Saburo should be sent to study Palma’s way of life was no
coincidence. Kantaro, I believe, was looking for some way to be free of Saburo, who paid Kantaro none of the respect an older brother might expect. I knew that Saburo had more than once gotten into arguments with Kantaro. Saburo’s disagreeableness always put Kantaro’s leadership into question. 

Kantaro wants to expel Saburo because Saburo has been critical of Kantaro’s leadership ever since they arrived in Brazil. In the totalitarian regime of his commune, Kantaro thus turns out to be a tyrant, who is determined to maintain absolute control over his people, and whom no one can dare challenge.

In this section of *Brazil-Maru*, Kantaro is no longer a young hero as portrayed in the previous portions, and his insatiable personal desire eventually leads the business of the New World Ranch commune to bankruptcy, causing the commune itself to collapse subsequently. Despite his devotion to establishing the new civilization in “nature” following the principles embraced by Rousseau’s republic, Kantaro ironically cannot resist the lure of the city. He purchases a house in São Paulo, spending a huge amount of money on his mistress, her piano, concerts, theaters, banquets, and patronizing young struggling artists. Eventually, the members of the commune become aware of the financial crisis of the commune because of Kantaro’s extravagant spending. Nevertheless, they follow Kantaro’s leadership until the commune essentially collapses. Only when Kantaro’s people are evicted from the commune property after it is finally confiscated by its new owner, does a faction of the group decide to abandon him to found and manage their own commune separately. Kantaro leads the rest
of people on a wandering journey to a new Brazilian rural area in search of a new promised land. Under these circumstances, Kantaro envisions himself as a contemporary Moses, an image he returns to continually in subsequent years. Careful readers of the novel may wonder why the people of Kantaro’s commune have obeyed him so blindly. How has Kantaro been able to accrete such a virtual dictatorship over those people in their egalitarian community? The answer lies in the very nature of Rousseau’s republic, that is, its inability to foster a space to allow difference.

The Danger of Cultural Nationalism

Part Four of Brazil-Maru depicts the negative aspects of cultural nationalism in an extremely homogenous community such as Kantaro’s. The section is narrated by Genji, Kantaro’s nephew, and describes the reconstruction of Esperança during the period from 1928 to 1939. Although the commune is rebuilt, it never recovers to the degree of its true apex. The setbacks are evident, particularly among the second-generation members of the commune. They are socially handicapped and unable to live outside of the commune because of their lack of education. The most serious drawback for them is their inability to speak Portuguese. Kantaro considers it unnecessary for the children of his commune to study Portuguese because they have come to Brazil to create a new “Japanese” civilization, not a Brazilian one. Needless to say, he firmly believes that Japanese culture is superior to Brazilian culture. A couple of youngsters challenge Kantaro by asking why they are not allowed to go to a Brazilian school and then to a university. Kantaro’s response is merely to talk about “the
history” of their commune, by which he means that they should remember how the founders of the commune have come to Brazil with a special “vision” to live “Christian” and socialist ideals and create a new “Japanese” civilization in the New World. The youth in Kantaro’s commune, therefore, cannot receive any education beyond middle school. Because of this, they remain incapable of living outside of the commune. Ichiro, in fact, reflects in the novel, “It was possible to never leave Esperança, to never speak Portuguese, to ignore the rest of the world” 不可 Tokyo. Instead of creating a new culture, Ichiro observes, it was as though the members of the commune “sort of got preserved, pickled in miso,” as in a traditional Japanese cuisine 不可 Tokyo. The young adults in _Brazil-Maru_ find themselves confined in their commune because of cultural nationalism that Kantaro has persisted in fostering.

Because the identity of young people in Kantaro’s commune is not Brazilian but is essentially Japanese, they are not equipped with any skills to live in the larger society outside their own community. The realization of Genji, the narrator of this section, of this fact vividly conveys the sense of puzzlement the young people in Esperança feel when they encounter Brazilians outside of their commune. Like Saburo, Genji, the unfit, is sent away from the commune to São Paulo to live with the family of Kasai, Kantaro’s journalist friend. Genji is a victim of Kantaro’s whimsical experiment in artistic pursuits. The spoiled and clumsy child Genji was taught to paint as a young boy by a painter whom Kantaro brought into the commune and who was given free room and board in exchange for offering art classes to the community’s children. Initially, Genji is
regarded as a child genius at painting although he has simply copied his
teacher’s works. After the decline of the commune, however, Genji can no
longer imitate his artist teacher because the teacher has decided to leave the
commune. Neither can he obtain any painting materials. Not being able to
pose as an artist, Genji eventually evolves into a degenerate who cannot fit
into the structure of communal life. Much in the same way, Genji never
proves himself to be any use in the city. After a series of fiascos at his
initial worksite, Genji is fired by two subsequent employers. After that, all
he does is sleep, smoke, and watch television in addition to making nightly
peeping forays upon the neighbors. Yet Genji forms a kind of friendship
with Kasai’s son, Guilherme, a second-generation Japanese Brazilian like
himself. When Guilherme, a university student, takes Genji to his campus,
Genji hears a lively discussion among the politically active Guilherme and
his friends on big changes they believe should be made for the sake of Brazil
and the future of its people. Genji wonders,

Always about the people. What people? I asked Guilherme about
this. He said that I am Brazilian, that I have to start living in Brazil.
Esperança was not the world. The Liberdade [the area in the center
of São Paulo where a large Japanese immigrant community has been
established] was not the world. I was the people. ๑๑๑๑
Since he has mainly been taught “the history” of Esperança along with
very basic middle-school-level lessons in Japanese within his commune,
Genji is incapable of comprehending that he himself is one of the people who
belong to the nation of Brazil.
Through the illustration of Genji and other young adults in Esperança, Yamashita is cautioning that strong cultural nationalism jeopardizes the successful establishment of the community in an adopted place one calls a new home. Genji, like other young people in Esperança, has never learned Portuguese and is not equipped with any tools to function outside his own community. This is caused by Kantaro’s educational belief that the children of Esperança should know, first and foremost, about “the history” of their commune, and that this is sufficient understanding and worldly sophistication for them. Thus they are taught only very basic lessons in Japanese by a series of amateur teachers within their community. Accordingly, Genji identifies himself as an Esperançan and not as a Japanese or a Japanese Brazilian. During a conversation with Guilherme, Genji gets confused: “What is Japan? Just like Esperança, I thought. Just like this Japanese barrio, this Liberdade. But Guilherme said this is not Japan. This is Brazil. You are Brazilian, he said” .amazonaws. Consequently, Genji, as well as other young adults in Esperança, cannot live successfully in a larger world outside of his own community.

In *Brazil-Maru*, Ichiro and Saburo, two characters who do receive education outside Esperança, paradoxically prove that their exposure to different cultures and discourses helps them better understand their status in society. Ichiro is grateful to his father who sent him to a Brazilian school to study Portuguese. He reflects,

Unlike other Japanese of my time, I was taught to read and write in Portuguese. This ability to deal comfortably in both languages has since been invaluable to me... He urged me to get the
tools to live in a new country, a country which he knew and I began to realize would be the only place I would ever call home. “Brazil is a rich, wonderful place to make a home,” he would say. “We are very fortunate to be welcome in such a country. It is our responsibility to give it something in return.” When I reflect upon these things now, I realize that my father saw beyond Esperança, which seemed to me to be the entire world.

Attending Kantaro as an interpreter on a series of failed negotiations with potential investors to save Esperança from bankruptcy, Ichiro finally comes to see that Kantaro’s leadership failed because of the corruption of his character. Eventually, Ichiro decides to leave Kantaro to establish a separate commune elsewhere with many other members of Esperança. Near the end of the novel, Ichiro proudly and tellingly notes the academic achievement of his grandson, a sort of success unheard of for the children of Kantaro’s original commune.

Similarly, with the survival tool of language abilities, Saburo, Kantaro’s younger brother, is the other person who can objectively view his location in the larger society. After a virtual expulsion from Esperança because of his disrespectful behavior toward Kantaro, Saburo returns to Esperança during the war. While he has been away from Esperança, Saburo acquired several foreign languages, which allows him to learn of the victory of America over Japan through the Spanish newscasts on the radio he has secretly kept with him:

“Everyone at Palma speaks several languages,” said Saburo. “... I was teaching several people to speak Japanese, and in return, I got
some lessons. And Spanish isn’t so different from Portuguese. I can’t
understand everything, but I know enough to follow the war. I
haven’t gone anywhere, but through that box,” Saburo pointed, “the
world has come to me.”

With their language skills, both Ichiro and Saburo are situated in multiple
social discourses, which distinguish them from the rest of the commune
members in that they become capable of seeing their social positions in the
world beyond their relatively myopic community.

**Two Opposite Evaluations of the Cooperative Experiment**

In Part Five of *Brazil-Maru*, Yamashita presents two evaluations of the
experiment of Esperança: one is through Guilherme’s point of view, which
represents a general assessment by a Brazilian of the rural, isolated ethnic
community; the other is through the voice of Guilherme’s wife, which is
dissimilar to her husband’s point of view. The fifth section of the novel is
the Epilogue, which completes the history of Esperança, using Guilherme’s
voice, and covering the period from 1944 to the early 1950s. Of the two
evaluations of the experiment of Esperança, the second, alternative view
held by Guilherme’s wife fully recognizes the meaning and value of the
vision that the Japanese settlers of Esperança have embraced. In fact, she
is familiar with the lifestyle of the commune. Her father, who is a repre-
sentative figure of successful indigenous people, established a farming
cooperative similar to Esperança after learning commune management
from the original leader of Esperança, Kantaro’s father-in-law Okumura.
After the outbreak of World War II, Okumura had to hire this man, the
Bahiano, as the director of Esperança Cooperative because of the war-time law that prohibited Japanese immigrants from holding the office of president or director of any business. During this period, the Bahiano learned from Okumura everything about cooperatives, and he came to see the positive aspects of the cooperative way of life. Being the daughter of the Bahiano, Guilherme’s wife knows the commune experience at first hand and accurately perceives the benefits of such an experience. Guilherme describes his wife’s praise of Esperança: “She admits her involvement in political events was influenced by an ideal of cooperation she learned from these people. ‘Self-sufficient with three meals a day,’ she emphasizes. ‘In the Brazil of today that is something from which we can learn’”

Recounting the positive assessment of the benefits of the commune experience, Yamashita thus fully recognizes the vision that the Japanese settlers in Esperança embraced, relating the genuine potential it had as early as the 1930s.

In evaluating the experiment of Esperança, however, Yamashita, nevertheless, uses Guilherme’s point of view as an overall assessment of the potential weaknesses of the cooperative experience. He points out that, despite the lofty vision embraced by Kantaro and the other founders of the colony, their revolutionary enterprise has proved itself to be a failure because of their cultural nationalism, which arises directly from the homogeneity of the community. Guilherme’s voice represents a perspective on the experiment of Esperança from the viewpoint of someone whose identity has been formed as second-generation Japanese “Brazilian.” In fact, Guilherme was raised in the city and had many non-Japanese and racially
mixed friends. He observes,

I surmised that nisei living in the rural interior were isolated and followed the old traditions. . . . To me, the Japanese community, referred to as the *colônia*, was a confined world. It amazed me that there could be so many thousands of us all over Brazil involved in so many kinds of work, and yet we could seem so provincial, so small.

To Guilherme’s eyes, Esperança does not present any picture of “the vision” or “a new civilization” that Kantaro and the other founders of the commune aspired to realize. Instead, Kantaro’s experiment in Esperança seems to be utterly parochial to him: “What was Kantaro Uno’s place. . . . A small insular statement within a confined world” ๗๙๗๗๗๗ Kantaro and the other commune members have not been able to see themselves as people of the country of Brazil. They have insisted that they build a new “Japanese” civilization with “Christian” faith in the tropical land. As a result of this enforced practice of cultural nationalism, the members of the commune inevitably suffer from feelings of stagnation, isolation, confinement, and inadequacy.

Guilherme’s last remark at the end of the novel describes the dire and terribly ironic situations that many of the descendants of the settlers have come to confront, now nearly seventy years after the first pioneers arrived in the New World. Guilherme refers to the later years of Ichiro, Japanese Emile, who is the narrator of the first section of the novel. Ichiro is one of the members who, at last, abandoned Kantaro to establish a separate commune that is more pragmatic and open to different peoples and cultures.
than Kantaro’s original commune. Guilherme observes,

Ichiro Terada proudly announced recently that his grandson passed the college exams in agronomy. . . . On the other hand, he speaks with concern about his granddaughter, who graduated with honors in architecture. Unable to find steady work in Brazil, she is one of over Japanese-Brazilians who are currently in Japan working as menial labor.

Because of the bad economy in Brazil, Ichiro’s granddaughter is unable to find work in her own country in spite of her excellent qualifications in her field. Like many Brazilians of Japanese descent, therefore, she must go to Japan to find work. Under the newly changed immigration law of Japan in the 1980s, Brazilians of Japanese descent became able to work in Japan only with menial labor visas. The Japanese government made a hasty assumption, when they were really forced to open the door for foreign workers because of the lack of labor force in Japan, that foreign workers of Japanese descent would be a less problematic and more harmonious component of society in a country like Japan, a highly homogeneous country. Ichiro’s granddaughter, accordingly, is able to work in Japan. Yet she can only get menial work and not the kind of work she was educated for. She represents thousands of other Brazilians of Japanese descent who are currently working at menial labor in Japan, occupying the lowest social stratum in the country.

Considering the dream and vision that the original founders of Esperança embraced, Ichiro’s granddaughter’s story, among many other stories of countless Japanese Brazilians presently working in Japan,
presents an extremely distressing picture of the Japanese Brazilian experience. In presenting the bleak reality of the story of these Japanese immigrants, Yamashita is recounting a history, among many histories, of a particular place in which these particular characters find themselves situated. Yet the novel conveys the sense that this is, after all, a moral lesson to all people who move to a new land in search of a new home, urging them to be wary of the shortsighted and inward turning behaviors that lay at the heart of Esperança’s inefficacy.

**Conclusion: The Importance of Being Open to Differences**

In *Brazil-Maru*, Yamashita presents her ecofeminist views on how one should make a home in the new landscape. As in *Brazil-Maru*, in pioneering in a new land, humans must necessarily shape nature in order to build their world, that is to say, to construct the facilities to sustain their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. In conducting such activities, however, humans often assume an anthropocentric attitude toward nature. They obviously believe that they are entitled to “conquer” nature based on their self-evident premise that they occupy the position of subject in relation to that of object taken by nature. When embracing such a philosophy, humans ruthlessly exploit nature and, as a result, severely affect the environment, as do the Japanese immigrants in *Brazil-Maru*. In opposition to such an approach to nature, Yamashita suggests an alternative view, that is, a non-hierarchical and harmonious relationship between humans and nature.
Yamashita’s ecofeminist perspective as described above is clearly communicated throughout the novel. As Bigwood asserts, “To reconceptualize our relation to nature in a way that is not hierarchical and oppositional, we need a new method of thinking that is not the straight-lined, goal-oriented, and unfeeling way of reason as characterized in metaphysics.” Contrary to western metaphysical thinking, in other words, humans should adopt, as Bigwood maintains, “the forgotten philosophies of those indigenous peoples who have lived and thought with the seasonal rhythms and ancient history of their land and who have not turned their backs on all that came before them” ChangedEventArgs. In Brazil-Maru, Yamashita elaborates upon these principles. By recounting an anecdote of Mizuoka’s attempt to excavate Indian remains, for example, Yamashita indicates the sense of the land as an organic entity which should be treated with respect by humans who are merely a single entity that shares this, in Bigwood’s term, “world-earth-home” with many others.

To Yamashita, in addition to having a non-hierarchical, harmonious relationship with nature, it is also significant to be open to differences in peoples and cultures when we attempt to create a home in a new landscape. When dealing with the mainstream culture of the country her immigrant characters encounter, Yamashita’s protagonists resist taking an assimilationist position. In Brazil-Maru, Kantaro is well aware of the fact that his group is taking their cultural baggage along with them to Brazil: “Although we could not foresee the events of our lives in this world, it is true that we had brought with us everything, all the elements, all our cultural baggage, all our wisdom and all our faults, the very impetus to
strike out in new directions and all the self-imposed barriers that might deter us from our purpose.” While describing Kantaro’s remark about immigrants’ “cultural baggage,” Yamashita, unlike many assimilationist second-generation Asian American writers, positively recognizes the old culture that immigrants carry along with them. Nevertheless, she cautions against the cultural nationalism that is prevalent in Kantaro’s vision. Repudiating interactions with different cultures and peoples, such nationalism confines the young adults of Esperança in their tiny community and prohibits them from pursuing the freedom of living life as they choose. Indeed, this is extremely ironic in that the founders of Esperança have immigrated to Brazil in order to attempt to do just that. By depicting the second-generation Japanese settlers of Esperança who are utterly dysfunctional in the larger world, Yamashita clearly advocates interacting with “differences.”

In promoting the importance of encountering differences in cultures, Yamashita embraces the idea of receiving and learning something from “differences” and giving and teaching them something in return. Yamashita is indicating her position through the words of Ichiro’s father, that is, his appreciation of being welcomed by a new homeland and, therefore, his intention of giving it something in return. Indeed, Kiyoshi Terada, Ichiro’s father, is humbly grateful for the fact that he has been welcomed by his new homeland and, hence, attempts to reciprocate the generosity he has received from the country of Brazil. Thus Terada, a pharmacist, acts as a doctor not only for people in Esperança but also for poor Brazilians in neighboring communities, earning him love and respect of
those local inhabitants. Through the portrayal of Terada, Yamashita affirms encounters with “differences” in that one can be influenced by “differences,” and one can then influence “differences” in exchange, engaging in a dynamic process of interaction and reciprocation. Needless to say, such interactions among differences can positively empower each party involved and energize the society itself. In *Brazil-Maru*, Yamashita points out the fallacy of cultural nationalism by delineating the helplessly inadequate second-generation Japanese immigrants in Esperança. Through the voice of Guilherme, who comments on their provinciality, Yamashita suggests that it is indispensable for an immigrant to be exposed to different peoples and cultures and have positive interactive communications with them in order to be one of the people of any new home country.

On the whole, Yamashita advocates an ecofeminist perspective of encountering and interacting with differences both in nature and culture when making a home in a new foreign landscape. Narrating immigrants’ lives in the Brazilian frontier, Yamashita necessarily portrays their relationships with nature. In doing so, she decidedly cautions against anthropocentrism. In addition, she expresses an ecofeminist sensibility, which is similar to the one embraced by Bigwood, who describes her notion as “a postmodern ethic of place”; Bigwood’s concept of the “world-earth-home” ○ the idea of us sharing with others the one and only earth as our home ○ attempts to create “a caring place from which to openly encounter differences” NullPointerException. With this stress upon the importance of an ecologically ethical way of dwelling and multiculturalist identity formation, Yamashita is clearly in the same camp with Bigwood, who urges us to observe a
postmodern ethic of place. When immigrants embrace such ethics, they can establish, Yamashita indicates, a truly energizing community in the new landscape, one that will emerge out of a place they can call a home, and to which they can belong as one of its redefined and developing peoples.

Note

In Brazil-Maru, although a group of Japanese colonists say that they immigrated to Brazil because of their determination to lead Christian and socialist lives outside of politically and socially repressive Japan of the ᶷ, there were, in fact, specific factors that promoted emigration of Japanese nationals overseas around that time. According to Motoko Tsuchida, in １９２０when the Imperial Economic Conference was held, emigration came to be considered as a viable means to solve Japan’s growing domestic problems such as “increasing population, unemployment during the chronic recessions following the First World War, and the relief of victims of the Great Kanto Earthquake” １９２０ Yamashita herself provides a historical background of Japanese emigration to Brazil in the prefatory comment of the novel:

Japanese immigration to Brazil has followed patterns of their exclusion from the United States. In １９２０ when the Gentlemen’s Agreement was signed to limit Japanese immigration to the United States, the first shipload of some １９２０Japanese arrived at the port of Santos in the State of São Paulo. In the １９２０, when Exclusion Acts were passed by the United States government, the slow stream of Japanese immigrants to Brazil became a flood, and thousands came to Brazil to work as contract laborers on coffee plantations. . . . While the vast majority of these immigrants came to Brazil as contract laborers, a small percentage came as settlers, buying tracts of land and colonizing farming communities. ６ p. ６

A group of the Japanese colonists in Brazil-Maru are such settlers, and despite the fact that the characters of the novel insist that their immigration was motivated by an ideological reason to lead their lives freely in the New World, these economic circumstances were undeniable factors to urge Japanese nationals to emigrate overseas in １９２０ the year when the group of Japanese immigrants in Brazil-Maru arrived in Brazil.
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Synopsis:

In this essay, I discuss the theme of mobility in Brazil-Maru 2002. Japanese American author Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel, using ecofeminism as my primary theoretical framework. Before starting my analyses of the novel, I first explain what ecofeminism exactly entails. Then I explore Yamashita’s ecofeminist and multiculturalist perspective, in which, through the portrayal of the lives of her immigrant characters, she stresses the importance of an ecologically ethical way of dwelling and multiculturalist identity formation through recognizing “differences” in nature and culture, realizing a non-hierarchical relationship among them, and positively encountering and interacting with them.