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Tropic of Orange: Workers, Workers, Workers

Laborers have had it rough since the beginning of recorded history. From Athenian slave labor to medieval serfs, the proletariat class has been kept at bay from achieving the lavish life of the bourgeois. And not surprisingly, even in modern Los Angeles we can see the plight of labor has not greatly improved. In her novel, *Tropic of Orange*, Karen Tei Yamashita develops the plight of working class Americans and Mexicans. Using the character Bobby Ngu and Rafalea Cortez, as well as Rodriguez the brick-layer and Arcangel and his stage persona of El Gran Mojado, Yamashita shows how capitalism society disregards the humanity of the working class and prevents them from having a high standard of living. Similarly, in Matt Garcia's *A World of Its Own*, Garcia details the conditions of Mexican citrus workers in California

Yamashita uses the married couple of Bobby Ngu and Rafaela Cortez as the quintessential example of working class America – immigrants who came to Los Angeles seeking a better life. While they achieve modest success, tension arises in their relationship because of their life as laborers in Los Angeles. The story of Bobby's immigration is one of the first ways in which Yamashita poses criticism of capitalism in her novel. Posing as Vietnamese refugees, Bobby and his younger brother were forced to immigrate to America from Singapore as boys when their dad's bike factory was ruined: "One day [when] American bicycle company put up a factory. Workers all went over there. New machines. Paid fifty cents more. Pretty soon, American company's

selling all over… Can't compete. That's it" (17-18). In this quote the short, choppy sentence fragments show Bobby's quiet resentment for the factory which drove his father out of business. This new American factory can make newer, better bikes, but there is a high cost. Because of this capitalist foreign venture, a local factory is driven out of business, and two young boys are driven away from their homeland and made to fend for themselves. However, as a result of these terrible conditions, Bobby and his brother are unknowingly given a shot at the American Dream, which Bobby seized for his family. Now Bobby "Sorts mail nonstop…Nighttime got his own business. Him and his wife…Never been so happy as when he got married to that woman. Can't explain. Happier he is, harder he works. Can't stop. Gotta make money. Provide for his family…Gotta buy his kid the best…That's how Bobby sees it" (16-17). Bobby has achieved a level of success that is truly a dream; he is able to care for not only his wife and kids, but also send money to his father back in Singapore, and put his brother through college. Bobby is happy, and even proud of the work he does. But Bobby's success has a dark side, and Yamashita shows how materialism corrupts the Dream. Bobby becomes too involved in his work and as a result grows distant from his family: "He's so proud of the bro. But when they get together, there's nothing to say. Bobby's too busy working. The kid brother wants something more. Rafaela wanted something more. Maybe she was right" (80). Bobby fell into the trap that he should keep working and keep buying things and this would make everyone happy. But money does not make people happy, and neither do things. As the famous economist Suze Orman says with regard to how people should prioritize life, "People first, then money, then things."

Bobby is just beginning to realize this when he realizes how much he misses Rafaela. He reminisces: "Rafaela said pretty soon he was gonna work himself to death. Was that the plan? Rafaela didn't want to watch him die. So she left" (204). What she really wanted to tell Bobby, what Karen Tei Yamashita wishes to expose, is that no one cares for the workers and that, if left unchecked, they would just work and work like machines until they broke and then would be replaced. Los Angeles can just replace the workers with someone else, another immigrant who wants a shot at success. That is what life for the uneducated working class is like. And Rafaela realizes this. There is a segment in the novel where Bobby remembers Rafaela's college papers, papers about "the globalization of capital. Captialization of poverty. Internationalization of the labor force. Exploitation and political expediency. Devaluation of currency and foreign economic policy" (162). So, through her education, Rafaela is enlightened about the plight of laborers and the capitalistic system. And because she realizes this, she wants respect and better treatment as a laborer. She joins a union, Justice for Janitors, to try and be part of change. But Bobby refuses listen to her. So to force Bobby to take notice, Rafaela leaves with Sol. And so Bobby, madly in love and concern goes on a wild-goose chase to find his wife and kid that takes us to the finale at Pacific Rim Auditorium. Bobby, Rafaela, and Sol get their happy ending, and the family is brought together again. Yamashita uses this couple, the only fulfilled characters in the novel, as a symbol of hope, that despite the harsh treatment and indifference of society, it is still possible for individuals and families to flourish in America.

Later, in the novel, there is a chapter about Rodriguez and Arcangel, where the two men work together to build Gabriel's wall. Rodriguez symbolizes a common Mexican worker, who has no way to escape the hard life of labor. Rodriguez is a very minor character in the novel that only interacts with other Hispanics; through this, Yamashita points out something easy to forget: that the Hispanic laborers that many hire outside Home Depot are real people too, and that they have lives beyond doing cheap work, they also have families. But Rodriguez is old, and his family, torn. At two of his sons are dead; one of them died because he turned to drug dealing as a way to escape poverty, and another one died as a soldier fighting for revolution, again to escape poverty. During this discussion, Arcangel laments about the work he did with a gravedigger, burying the dead soldiers of men who fought a war over marijuana. Yamashita highlights that these illegal drugs, of which the US is the greatest buyer, causes people to die needlessly. Rodriguez's son dies as a drug dealer as well, again putting a more personal face on the evils of drug dealing fueled by capitalism. Because of the capitalistic society, and especially in Mexico, workers may work all of their lives, like Rodriguez, and remain trapped by poverty. Rodriguez does not condemn his sons for wanting more out life, but their deaths have brought him only great sadness. And not even his remaining son brings him much joy. This last son is an alcoholic, who cannot appreciate his father's skill at wall building, but only condemns him for it, saying that "[Rodriguez] is working all these years only to die… poor people are doomed to work to their deaths. That [they] eat and drink all [their] earnings because anyway [they] will

die" (144). And the saddest part is that this son tells the harsh truth; this is how life is for many laborers, in LA, in Mexico, and all over the world.

The last story of Tropic of Orange is the most magical one, the story of five hundred year old Arcangel and the end of journey to the North, which culminates in the world's greatest wrestling match between SUPERNAFTA and El Gran Mojado. This amazing fight is the hallmark of Yamashita's criticism of capitalism. El Gran Mojado is one of Arcangel's many performance personas, and he is, "[p]art superhero, part professional wrestler, part Subcomandante Marcos" (132). A true champion of the people, El Gran Mojado challenges SUPERNAFTA, a man who is concerned only with "money and things" (133), to do battle. The names of the fighters are both very symbolic; El Gran Mojado, which means "the great wetback," refers to a derogatory term for Mexicans who crossed a river to illegally enter the US, whereas SUPERNAFTA refers to NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which made a trade bloc between the US, Canada, and Mexico. According to an article by the Economic Policy Institute, this agreement was bad for workers and supported big business in all three countries involved (EPI). Yamashita portrays SUPERNAFTA to be the villain of Arcangel's storyline, so this trade agreement is a villain to the working class. It is also mentioned that no one had seen SUPERNAFTA in person, but only pictures of him and his flaming head. SUPERNAFTA is a phantom image that the public physically perceive, but because of this abstraction he is even more fearful. We cannot see capitalism menacing the lives of working families directly, but it is a very real presence that must also be feared. El Gran Mojado, on the other hand, is known not by mass media, but by word of mouth of

all of the people, like an old folk legend. By creating this contrast between the close-knit world of mouth to mouth communication and the impersonal urban newspaper, Yamashita shows the superiority of this "old" way of life. Finally, the sad tale of labor ends when Arcangel finally reaches the North, and SUPERNAFTA and El Gran Mojado finally meet at Pacific Rim Auditorium. Immediately before the fight in the final chapter of Arcangel's tale, SUPERNAFTA and El Gran Mojado expound their ideologies for the audience to hear. SUPERNAFTA claims that the kids of the world should want the future and look forward to it, because in the future they will have a "12%" cut of the action: "That's progress working for you. Some people don't want progress. My opponent doesn't want progress" (259). This is essentially the argument of the trickledown theory, that the success of the rich will still support the poor and that is the way to make the lives of everybody better. El Gran Mojado thinks otherwise though, saying that "The myth of the first world is that/development is wealth and technology progress./ It is all rubbish./ It means that you are no longer human beings/ but only labor…/ How will ninety-five percent of us/divide twelve percent" (261)? And after this, the two men fight to the death. In this chapter Yamashita makes a very absurd statement; she has two personifications of capitalism and of the common people in a wrestling match, to symbolize the fight between two different ideologies, which is absurd because of just how complicated the real dispute actually is. By making it into a simple violent fight she reduces both claims to their core. And in the end, El Gran Mojado manages to beat SUPERNAFTA, but SUPERNAFTA fights dirty and both of them

die. This is to say that the workers cannot destroy big business or they too will be destroyed.

Now that we have seen how Yamashita has used her characters to portray the labor struggles in Los Angeles and in Mexico, we can draw comparison to Garcia's article about the citrus laborers in California and make conclusions about Yamashita's revision of images of LA workers. One major difference between *Tropic of Orange* and the Garcia article is the idea of racial discrimination. One of the major ideas of the article was how Mexican citrus workers were greatly discriminated against compared to white workers especially in terms of the housing projects. This idea was not a focus of Tropic of Orange. In Garcia's article, Garcia talked about how Mexicans (and Japanese) had to pay similar rents to whites for much worse living conditions. Also, it was made very clear that the farm owners were only building these housing projects for their workers to get what they could from them: "The employer's motive for going into social work…is neither narrow selfishness nor altruism, but enlightened self-interest, which means that what is good for the Mexican is good for the employer and good for the community,"(Garcia 64) that is, it was almost as if making homes for the Mexicans was like sharpening work tools to get better results from them. This idea of an inhuman working class can be seen both in the Garcia article and in *Tropic of Orange*. In the end, Yamashita takes a strong stance against the current treatment of workers, against the negative effects of capitalism, but provides hope, hope that even in today's world, for good families like that of Bobby and Rafaela, things can turn out alright.

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