



## Chapter Four

### Geographical and Bodily Metamorphoses

#### I. The End: Bobby and Negation of the Tropic of Orange

*Tropic of Orange* ends in the scene when the wrestle match between El Gran Mojado (which is played by Arcangel) and SUPERNAFTA is held in Pacific Rim Auditorium, and the family of Bobby, Rafaela, Sol eventually reunite in the Auditorium. The significance of Bobby in *Tropic of Orange* is illustrated from his Pan-Asian ethnicity and his role in the ending scene as the one who grabs the Tropic of Orange and finally lets it go. The narrative introduces Bobby as follows: “Bobby’s Chinese. Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (Yamashita, 1997: 15). Bobby’s role as a Pan-Asian immigrant broadens the scope of *Tropic of Orange* for it adds the Asian element, the third dimension to binarism of the North-South, and the U.S.–Mexican border crossing. As for the ending scene, it is valuable and meaningful to question why it is Bobby who plays the crucial role of grabbing the Tropic of Orange, and also why he loosens his grip, letting the Tropic of Orange go. It would be helpful for us to examine Bobby’s relation to Rafaela, and *Tropic of Orange* in order to comprehend why Bobby is endowed with such a significant act.

From the beginning of *Tropic of Orange*, Rafaela and Bobby stay respectively in Mexico and the United States for Bobby is preoccupied with work, material possessions that he believes will ensure their survival in the United States, while Rafaela decides to go back to Mazatlán. Bobby is drawn to the materialist aspect of the new world: “Everything was a gift to her [Rafaela] and Sol: all those amazing things he loved to buy. She had scorned his materialism, but it was his way of showing his love, of trying to delight her with the nice things that other Americans had. That is what she wanted to tell her. No, she didn’t miss

television, but she missed Bobby” (Yamashita, 1997: 116). On the contrary, Rafaela describes the gap, or the line that divides and separates Bobby and her: it is “as wide as an entire culture and as deep as the social and economic construct that nobody knows how to change” (Yamashita, 1997: 254). That is to say, Bobby and Rafaela stand on each side of the line (also the border after Rafaela goes back to Mexico). Therefore, the reunion of the family in the final scene indicates more than an affiliation of minorities as the solution to the era of multiculturalism, as Li interprets in her essay. I contend that the reunion of the family as an assertion of an integrated identity, a final point of the metamorphosis process.

In addition to concentrating on Bobby’s Pan-Asian character and its significance to broaden the scope of *Tropic of Orange*, I consider that Bobby’s act of letting go the Tropic of Orange symbolizes the division arising with the border is replaced by the emergence of a borderless future, an evocation that resonates with the epigraph, taken from Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s work: “...jumping borders at ease/jumping borders with pleasure/amen, hey man” (Yamashita, 1997: 1). It is also worth paying attention that it is not until the time Bobby lets go the Tropic of Orange that he can finally *embraces* his family, not to be stuck on the other side. Namely, the Tropic of Orange, though as an epitome of Aztec spirit, still is a border that leads to division and separation. Throughout the novel, the Tropic of Orange’s substitution for Tropic of Cancer and its northbound approaching the city of L.A., causing turbulence and metamorphoses, is endowed with a subversive intention. However, towards the end of the novel, while the Tropic of Orange has encountered and confronted with the city of L.A., it is important to point out that Tropic of Orange still possesses attribute of “border” and only by relinquishing this invisible, “imaginary line”<sup>12</sup> are there possibilities of embracing, reunion, and finally, the ideal of integration. While knitting the whole story by

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<sup>12</sup> There is one scene when Rafaela discusses with Gabriel what a Tropic of Cancer is: “Gabriel, what is the Tropic of Cancer? I mean I know what it is, but what *is* it?” “A line. An *imaginary* line.” (Yamashita, 197: 151). I think this dialogue expresses the absurdity and human obsession with these imaginary, on-real lines and borders.

the northbound movement of the Tropic of Orange, Yamashita defies the line in the final scene:

He[Bobby] cuts it [the orange]. But then he sees it[the Tropic of Orange] too....So he grabs the two ends. Is he some kind of fool? Maybe so. But he's hanging on. ...Little by little the slack on the line's gone. Thing's stretching tight. Just Bobby grabbing the two sides. Making the connection. Pretty soon he's sweating it. . . . Tied fast to these lines. Family out there. *Still stuck on the other side.* He's gritting his teeth and crying like a fool. *What are these goddame lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide? What's he holding on to? What 's he holding on to?....Like he's flying forward to embrace.* Don't nobody know he's hanging on to these invisible bungy cords. That's when he lets go. Lets the lines slither around his wrists, past his palms, through his fingers. Lets go. Go figure. *Embrace.* That's it.

(Yamashita, 1997: 267-8. My emphasis)

## II. Metamorphosis and Alternative Cartography in *Tropic of Orange*

This thesis is a study of the implement of magical realism and the trait of geographical and bodily metamorphoses in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. By paying attentions to the two lead characters, Arcangel and Rafaela, the thesis deals with Soja's Thirdspace, a critical rethinking of the spatial logic in geography and the tradition of metamorphosis in literature. In chapter two, "The Aleph of Los Angeles: Arcangel and Magical/Real Thirdspace," by drawing on Soja's Thirdspace spatial logic and the metamorphic space in magical realist text, I argue that Arcangel's Aleph vision, as a magical realism implement, and his role as a trickster exemplifies the conceptualization of Thirdspace based on the attributes of dynamics,

all-inclusion, simultaneity, radical openness, and unlimited possibility.

Chapter three, “The Mother of the Tropic: Rafaela and Magical/Real Metamorphoses,” focuses on the significance of Rafaela’s metamorphosis into the serpent, a sacred imagery in Aztec civilization. Rafaela’s metamorphosis occurs as a response to both personal (her being kidnapped and separated from Sol) and communal crisis (Mexico being exploited by the global economic structure and the agreement of NAFTA with the United States). Rafaela’s intimate relation to the Tropic of Orange and the imagery of serpent, and her role as being the biological mother of Sol contribute to not only a metamorphosis narrative characterized by mutability, but an alternative maternal narrative, as Li argues.

In *Tropic of Orange*, the metamorphoses undergone by Rafaela and Arcangel add a new dimension to the literary tradition of metamorphosis. At the beginning of the novel, Rafaela’s metamorphosis to the snake conforms to the tradition of metamorphosis, defying the human/animal division with an altered body. Focusing on Arcangel’s Aleph vision and northbound journey with the Tropic of Orange, chapter two presents a distinct model of metamorphosis which turns to the change and transformation of space as evinced in the geographical metamorphosis of Los Angeles. Within these metamorphoses, conflicts and uncertainties are expressed, however, possibilities and alternatives are expected and revealed at the same moment. My exploration of these two characters of Mexican origin, Rafaela and Arcangel, in the thesis does not intend to posit a Mexican nativism. Rather, my purpose here is to draw attention to the integration and copresence of the ancient and the mutable, enclosed in the process of metamorphoses in *Tropic of Orange*. Hence, Rafaela is characterized with both her bodily transformation to the serpent, suggesting her being an embodiment of Aztec civilization, and her maternal relation to the Tropic of Orange, which is a mobile line and induces the spatial metamorphosis with mutability. The case is the same with Arcangel. While being an ancient soul and deity of Aztec, Arcangel’s trickstering

performance exemplifies the mutable energy and transformative force within his ancient body. Yamashita's dealing with the theme of metamorphosis through Rafaela, Arcangel, and the Tropic of Orange in *Tropic of Orange* therefore sheds light on the theme and narrative of metamorphosis. I argue that Yamashita expands the application to spatial metamorphosis by drawing upon Soja's conception of Thirdspace, which is itself closely related to the spatial imagination of Borges, the master of South American tradition of magical realism. With this trope of metamorphosis expressed through Arcangel's Aleph vision, trickstering performance, Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent, and the mobile Tropic of Orange, *Tropic of Orange* constructs a "tropic narrative" where mutability resides, defying the controversy around border-drawing by the exertion of geographical and bodily metamorphoses.