In an interview with Ryuta Imafuku, Karen Tei Yamashita reflects on the impetus for her novel *Tropic of Orange*: “How do we bring people into a work of literature who seem to be invisible and who have been invisible in that literature of Los Angeles for so many years?” To answer these questions, Yamashita began writing *Tropic* in a rather unconventional manner – on a Lotus spreadsheet – graphing together the lives and stories of her seven ethnically marked characters to create her own map of Los Angeles. The final product offers her characters’ “vision of the world, their vision of Los Angeles, in seven days” (Imafuku). This novel approach and the exciting polyvocal geography-grounded text it produced trends along with the recent “spatial turn” in literature, where theorists eschew a primary focus on history to investigate the impact of geography on a piece of literature. The following presentation extends this premise into the field of literary cartography. Literary cartography is described by Barbara Piatti and her coauthors describe as a “fugitive field” that draws together geography, critical literary analysis, and technology to provide additional context and interpretation of the novel. The following essay presents a palimpsestic map series designed for use in the classroom that makes graphically evident the cross-migrations of diverse actors who contribute to the identity, culture, history, economics, and success of Los Angeles, and, by extension, the United States. By reading the novel spatially, students of all levels can gain a new perspective of the cross-migrations and attendant histories of Yamashita’s characters. This, in turn, prompts clearer understanding of Yamashita’s focus on border crossing, immigration, socioeconomic disparities, mobility, and
ultimately, the maps clarify the networks, fissures, forces, and fault lines within the social and spatial construction of Yamashita’s real-imagined Los Angeles, nudging students toward more nuanced understandings of the text both as fiction and as a reflection of our current transnational realities.

For the purposes of this talk, I define literary cartography as an approach that utilizes Geographic Information Systems (GIS) methodologies to analyze textual evidence on a geographic scale. As Louis Hamilton notes, GIS serves as “a powerful tool for social and political analysis on an increasingly minute level” (116). Aligning GIS with literature highlights relationships that may have been previously overlooked by making use of a more distanced analysis. This spatial focus offers what we might call a translation of literature, in that it provides new ways of assessing texts from different angles. Such an approach confirms Franco Moretti’s assertion that “geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens, but an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes its depth” (Moretti, Atlas of the European Novel, 3). The maps created by plotting a novel’s imagined geography against economic, racial and ethnic data can reveal hidden biases and beliefs while recasting our understanding of local geographies.

In terms of multi-ethnic literature, this approach can be very useful in fully excavating and understanding counter-narratives often produced by writers of color. Rereading texts, especially ethnic texts, via GIS allows us to analyze textual evidence on a geographic scale, thus better understanding the correlations between space and events. For multiethnic texts like Yamashita’s, the stakes are even higher; as Sarah Radcliffe rightly points out, maps are ideological tools that reflect the dominant culture’s political, economic, and historical viewpoint. Allowing multiethnic texts to direct both map-making and meaning-making enables researchers
and students to connect spatial reality to the imagined reality of the text and encourages new ways of viewing national borders, US history, and the current terrain of the United States. Thus, the maps presented here serve, in the words as Moretti asserts act as analytic tools, not metaphors, “bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden” (3). In other words, the maps offer a visualization of a novel’s theme, enabling new avenues of inquiry and assisting students who may struggle with analysis.

This project began as a collaboration between myself and a student researcher trained in Geographic Information Systems technologies. Over an eight week summer project, we attempted to tag (using xml coding software) each character’s whereabouts throughout the entirety of the novel. We began using a simple system that noted not only the character and place, but also whether the location was the character’s origin, a fleeting reference, a historical reference, or a place visited by the character. This created a massive spreadsheet of locations and movements from which the maps presented here were created.

One of the first maps we constructed simply translated each of these locations onto a map of the world, fully expecting the points to cluster around Los Angeles, the purported “place” of the text. To our surprise, the dots ranged up and down the west coast, beyond Mazatlan, where the text begins, and even across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans:
By mapping these locations, it became clear that one of Yamashita’s main purposes in the text was to unsettle American popular notions of geography and to reveal that geography itself can often reflect one’s ideologies. Yamashita’s map does not align with the typical American renderings of the world map where Europe and the United States are positioned at the center and top of the map, and the rest of the world toward the bottom and to the sides. Instead, Yamashita re-centers the world map direction on the Pacific Rim. In the classroom, this image generates intense conversation as students realize the map they are used to seeing as scientifically accurate is, in many ways, a representation of Western ideologies. We discuss why the world map we have come to accept is presented as it is and what implications Yamashita’s map has for her text and the way we see the world. This conversation anticipates Manzanar’s famous claim: “There are maps and there are maps and there are maps. The uncanny thing was he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and
consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56). Students become increasingly aware of the ideological nature of maps, understanding them less as absolutes and more as starting points.

While these preliminary maps reflect the parameters of Yamashita’s Los Angeles, the secondary maps we developed chart the movements of specific characters against the social, cultural and economic geographies of that location. These palimpsestic maps that layer real-world data against the imagined travels of Yamashita’s characters allow for a clear visualization of Yamashita’s primary concerns of transnational identity, the vestiges of colonialism, and the simultaneously real and imagined power of borders. In the classroom, these maps assist in explaining harder to comprehend histories in the text as well as offer a starting point for further investigation.

For example, students are often discomfited by the characterization of Bobby Ngu as “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15). This description to many students seems beyond the pale; yet, Yamashita’s description of Bobby is not only feasible, it also offers insight into her thematic focus on borders and maps. Yamashita explains quickly in text that Bobby’s arrival in the U.S. is a result of Chinese diaspora, American capitalism, and the Vietnam war: Bobby’s family left China during the Chinese Revolution and settled in Singapore, where Bobby’s family set up a bicycle factory, which eventually closes due to competition from a new American factory. Left with little economic capital, Bobby and his brother begin to slip into a local Vietnamese refugee camp, until they are eventually “counted” as Vietnamese refugees, given the last name Ngu, and evacuated to the United States. Yamashita’s description of Bobby thus clearly reflects her critique of both capitalism and
American international policy. In addition, this extensive background also calls into question static descriptions of identity.

Yet, while Yamashita clearly explains how Bobby arrived in the U.S., the second half of his description – “speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” – still befuddles students. K-town, as the name suggests, has consistently been viewed as a Korean ethnic enclave, and Los Angeles itself contains the largest concentration of Korean Americans in the United States. Yet, in mapping the location of Bobby’s home against census data in 1990 and 2000, an interesting shift in population becomes apparent:
The green dot represents Bobby’s home location, while the top map series shows a decreasing population of Korean Americans in the immediate vicinity. The second map series reflects an increasing Latino population. These population shifts reflect the changing economic status of many Korean Americans in Los Angeles. As they gained affluence, many of the first inhabitants of K-town moved to the richer suburbs, leaving behind the older inner city neighborhood of Korea-town. This left a multiplicity of cheap housing as well as a need for cheap labor in the still predominantly Korean-owned businesses and restaurants. New immigrants from Central and South America took advantage of both plentiful jobs and cheaper lodging, driving up the Latino population.
Here’s a clearer look at the expanding Latino population in Koreatown:

Thus, despite the number of Korean store fronts and signs, the percentage of Koreans and Korean Americans living in Koreatown has dropped from 30% in the 1990s to 23% in 2000. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of residents in Koreatown are Latino; as of 2000, cultural geographers Lee and Park report Latinos accounted for 60% of the population in 2000. As cultural Lee and Park further explain, this trend “engendered more transnational, flexible, and hybrid identities” (251). Yamashita’s placing and racing of Bobby thus reflects not only this new hybridity that characterizes many of the spaces of Los Angeles and its inhabitants but also
reflects her larger theme of questioning the authority of many dominant maps that delineate space as clearly and ethnically marked.

In the classroom, maps like the one above assist students struggling with understanding the novel’s geographic details by offering a data-backed graphical rendering that clearly expresses the novel's themes. The maps have proven especially helpful in classrooms resistant to critical multiculturalism; the data and maps substantiate Yamashita’s themes, encouraging students to do more research into issues of transnationalism, capitalism, and hybridity that she presents.

Because literary cartography and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) focus on space production, they both offer powerful tools for recognizing and problematizing the stubborn nationalism and historical ideologies that underpin dominant understandings of space. As Eric Bulson explains, “ways of representing the city are decisively influenced by material conditions, political, historical, and social contexts, and literary conditions” (12). This line of reasoning can be extended to an author’s creation of place within a text, which offers the reader a second way of reading and engaging the text. Along these lines, another map that has proven useful in showcasing Yamashita’s themes in the classroom focuses on Arcangel’s 500 years of travel:
In this map, we plotted every site visited by Arcangel and drilled down into the specific history of each geographic location. The map reveals the majority of these sites as points of contact, colonization, or geopolitical upheaval – quite literally, every time the map “changed.” Presenting students with the depth and breadth of these changes encourages them to more clearly understand the profound history of colonialism and its continuing effects today. Taking the map one step further, we compare the world map of conquest against the borders of Aztlan, the mythical Mexican ancestral homeland. So doing fulfils Sarah Wald’s assertion that “seeking justice requires a struggle over geography” (87). Here, students are encouraged to visualize Yamashita’s continued focus on the ever shifting nature of borders and the political and personal fallout that can accompany them. I present the map alongside discussions of border transactions, such as the interrogation of Arcangel by border control agents as he crosses the “New World
“Border” that “waited for him with the anticipation of five centuries” into the United states” (198) and/or Bobby’s realization that it’s easier to send goods across a border than persons: “Cuz is staring at her new Nikes. Made in China. Nikes get in. But not the bro” (230). So doing emphasizes to students the high stakes and lasting impact of colonialism and its linked cousins capitalism and globalization. The map also suggests the ways geopolitical forces and borders constrain and delimit understanding of the always already multicultural history of our own nation state.

The maps discussed represent just a small sampling of the total series developed for use in the sophomore literature survey. Students find the maps to be compelling and useful in better understanding the varied themes of Yamashita’s text. Yet, while using the maps in any level class alone allows students to read Yamashita’s text through a geographic lens, actually including students in the process of mapping allows them to create meaning and to develop their own readings/critical approaches to literature. However, humanities projects like this one are limited due to the extensive amount of training required to master the mapping software (ArcGIS). Last year, I collaborated with colleagues trained in GIS and cartography to create a “virtual learning community” where two separate classes – one of English majors and one of GIS majors – engaged in a hands-on collaborative literary cartography project. The project asked the English majors to look at the text spatially and suggest ideas they would like to see become maps; the GIS majors independently created these maps, and both classes used the final maps in research essays. Four out of eight of the resulting interdisciplinary undergraduate research projects were later presented at either a state or national undergraduate research conference. In addition, the maps devised by the students have since been used to teach the novel in sophomore-level classes. Both pedagogical approaches extend the field of literary analysis to focus on geography, borders,
and spatial construction, challenging students to read and understand the text in a more interdisciplinary manner.

In the introduction to *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti contends: “A good map is worth a thousand words…it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces you to look for new answers” (3). The maps presented here aim to effect the same result within the classroom. Ultimately, Using GIS technology to map the terrain of Yamashita’s work has pedagogical value in that it makes graphically evident the cross-migrations of diverse actors who contribute to the identity, culture, history, economics, and success of Los Angeles, and, by extension, the United States. As Buzzworm explains in the novel, “If you could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe you could get the real picture” (Yamashita 81). Utilizing palimpsestic maps allows students of all levels to read the novel spatially, more clearly articulating Yamashita’s focus on border crossing, immigration, socioeconomic disparities, colonialism, and multiculturalism. The maps clarify the networks, fissures, forces, and fault lines within the social and spatial construction of Yamashita’s real-imagined Los Angeles, nudging students toward more nuanced understandings of the text both as fiction and as a reflection of our current transnational realities.
Works Cited


