

# Teaching with Collaborative Writing Projects: Creating an Online Reader's Guide to Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*

by Grace Talusan

As a companion piece to Lai Ying Yu's "Capturing the Spirit: Teaching Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*," which is also published in this volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*, this essay details how one group of my first year students in a second semester composition course went about creating an Online Reader's Guide to *I Hotel* (<http://ihotelguide.blogspot.com/>). By creating an online reader's guide, students write a resource for other readers who want to learn more about a text. The audience for the guide is other adult readers of the book. This assignment is one in a portfolio of several paper assignments in my composition course and can be adapted to other student populations and even courses in which writing is not the focus.

Lai Ying Yu's "Capturing the Spirit: Teaching Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*" is an excellent resource for background and context to the novel and an integral supplement for both teachers and students. Her article contains an analysis of the text, an interview with the novelist, and additional teaching resources. Yu's essay explores the role of visual culture in *I Hotel* and presents the connection between arts and activism. For those considering adopting *I Hotel* in their courses, but have not read the book yet, Yu's article may help you make an informed decision.

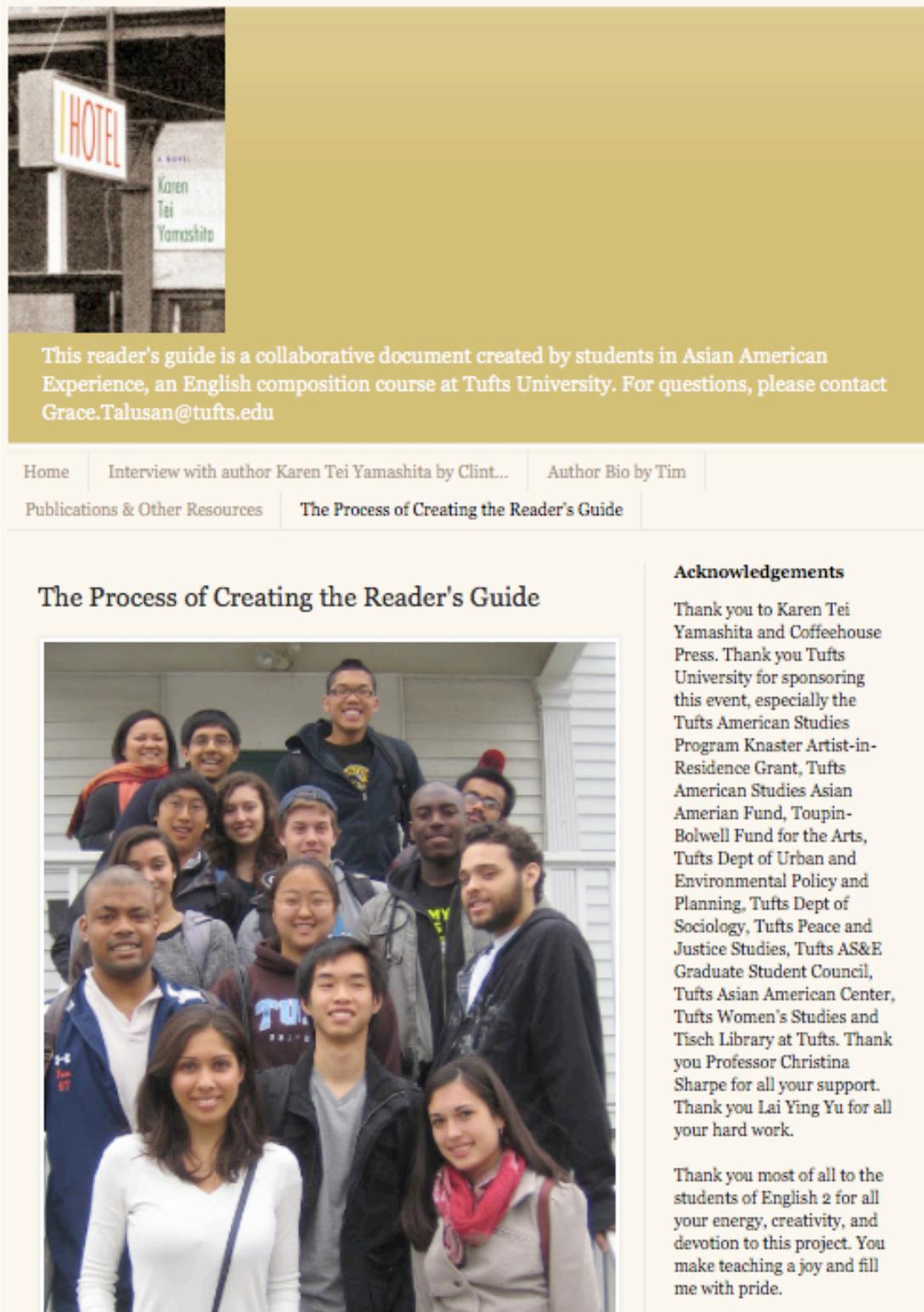
I begin this essay with a discussion of the assignment and how I implemented it using Yamashita's *I Hotel*. In the second part of the essay, I offer a teaching narrative of the experience. Finally, in a third part, I outline steps for creating an online reader's guide that could be tailored for use with any text. While there is debate about using literature in the first year composition classroom, I have found it to be a successful way to engage students in the writing process, especially when combined with a reader's guide assignment<sup>1</sup>. The online reader's guide assignment is a component of a semester-long first year writing course where students write five to seven short papers in which they take an idea through development to revision to final draft stages for assignments such as a researched argument paper, a personal essay, a textual analysis, and creative writing. On my reading list are texts commonly used in composition readers or anthologies along with apparatus such as *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein.

## Part I: The Online Reader's Guide Assignment

Beyond texts commonly used in composition readers, I try to include one additional book on the reading list of my first-year writing course. Sometimes this book is a work of nonfiction by a single living author, but I make special efforts to include novels, especially by living authors. Particularly useful for teaching is a book by an author who is scheduled to visit campus, so students will have the opportunity to interact with the author and use the experience as material for the online reader's guide.

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## The Process of Creating the Reader's Guide



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Figure 1: Screen shot of homepage of online reader's guide for *I Hotel*. Photo credit: Linell Yugawa

I tend to adopt books from a small press publisher or books that have not received a lot of media attention. Moreover, by creating a space online that calls attention to the book, I believe the online reader's guide does important cultural work. Although it is only one website, the online reader's guide may contribute to literary and popular visual culture. This assignment is a variation of other assignments I have read about from high schools and colleges using technology in the classroom, specifically blogging software for pedagogical purposes. I was also inspired by Viet Thanh Nguyen's interactive reading guide to the first twenty pages of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (<http://www.bcf.usc.edu/~vnguyen/dictee/dicteeindex.htm>).

Using literature in the composition classroom can be difficult; I nevertheless believe there is something important about the book as an object and asking writing students to read a book together, even as this book as an object has changed with the rise of online booksellers and electronic books. Students are welcome to read the adopted book by accessing it in any available form—in paper, as an electronic book, as an audio book—as my point in adopting a book is for students to share a reading experience that requires more time and commitment than a single article. Although students are invited to access the required text in any form, most choose the paper version.

The assignment, "The Online Reader's Guide" is a way for students to engage together with the adopted book. I have repeated this with several classes. In previous courses, my classes have published online guides for *We Are All Suspects Now* by Tram Nguyen, *Blue Boy* by Rakesh Satyal, *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers, and *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* by Ethan Gilsdorf. The reader's guide assignment receives positive feedback from students and from online readers who have accessed the guides and used them in their book clubs and university courses. Long after the students complete the course, their intellectual work is available for others to draw from.

This assignment may be adapted for a variety of book-length texts, and I generally choose books that are newly published or do not already have a reader's guide. However, there is no reason why many versions of a reader's guide for the same book should not exist as each would reflect that particular group's priorities and interests. Creating the online reader's guide to *I Hotel* took most of a semester to complete, but this assignment can be expanded or contracted as instructor time allows.

My discussion here focuses on spring semester 2011 when I taught the assignment using *I Hotel* in the first year writing course at Tufts University titled Asian American Perspectives. In this small class, capped at twelve, students take a second semester of composition to fine-tune their academic writing skills while reading and discussing texts related to Asian American Studies. Although a few students may go on to take other classes in the Department of English, for most, Asian American Perspectives is probably their last formal writing course. With the creation of the Asian American Studies minor in 2012, students now have the opportunity to continue with this interdisciplinary field at Tufts. My goal with this experiential learning assignment is for students to practice writing as a process with many tasks and stages before the final document, which is a publication online.

The online reader's guide assignment is designed so that students can work as a group as well as individually on a common goal with a practical purpose. They write their own pieces individually and share them with the group for editing and feedback. The pieces they create individually become part of the collaborative effort. During the process, they consider the needs of their audience. They think about who could potentially come across their guide and what that hypothetical reader would expect.

They consider the impression they are making on this reader with the public document. With these considerations in mind, I find that students are eager to minimize errors in their writing, which is, of course, a goal of any writing course.

There are other skills this assignment develops outside of writing. Students practice social skills such as team building and collaboration as they complete a common goal while also taking responsibility for their contributions. They learn how to communicate effectively with each other, manage their time, and overcome conflicts. Also, students practice media literacy skills. The technology skills required to complete this project are as simple as the skills required to send an email. New, cost-free platforms are developed regularly that make uploading content and sharing it with a wide audience relatively easy. Some platforms are partial to text while others are more focused on images. Certainly, Asian Americans are using the Web to raise awareness, for example with the microblogging social networking website Tumblr, on which “Raise Our Story” showcases photos and stories from young, undocumented immigrants. Suey Park’s “hashtag activism” on Twitter calls attention to problems with representations of Asian Americans in popular culture with the 2014 #CancelColbert campaign (Kang). While an online reader’s guide for *I Hotel* may be unlikely to go viral, its presence on the Web claims a space online for Asian American literary culture.

## **Part II: Teaching Narrative: Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* in First-Year Composition**

In January 2011, I introduced my first-year composition students to our class assignment: we would write an online reader’s guide to *I Hotel* by Karen Tei Yamashita in advance of her visit to campus in March as the American Studies Knaster Artist-in-Residence. We set a goal to publish an early draft version of the reader’s guide during the author’s visit with the idea that this would be revised after Yamashita’s visit was over. This gave students six weeks to read the 605-page novel and write an early version of the reader’s guide.

To promote their critical engagement with the assignment, I showed students other examples of online reader’s guides, and we discussed the merits and drawbacks to a variety of available guides. Many sources are accessible online, including those posted by the publishers themselves, such as the Penguin Group, or created by avid readers, such as in ReadingGroupGuides.com. We discuss book reviews and their role as a supplement to reading a book. We consider the purpose of the guide and the distinction between our project and student study guides such as those published by CliffsNotes and SparkNotes, which students sheepishly admit to using when they do not have time to read a book.

I devote one class session of one hour and fifteen minutes to introduce the purpose of the reader’s guide assignment, talk about other reader’s guides, discuss what they would do if they could create their own reader’s guide, and, finally, have them start to break their project into tasks and assign roles. We come up with a schedule for when tasks should be completed, and I add this to the schedule of classes and homework that I post online.

Some of the questions that I ask students to consider during the first discussion of the assignment include:

- a. Who is our intended audience for the reader’s guide?
- b. What would a successful document look like and what would it perform?
- c. What is our purpose in creating it?

- d. How do we want to engage the audience?
- e. What level of attribution are you comfortable with?
- f. What platform would best support this?
- g. What are the components of this reader's guide?
- h. What are the tasks and timeline for this project?
- i. How will we get feedback, revise, and complete this on time?
- j. How will we keep on track and be accountable for our parts?

Major tasks to be completed include: track progress; submit assignments; upload draft version; revise draft; and upload final version. It is important that students feel a sense of ownership over the project. My role as a teacher is to guide students, present models, offer questions, and keep them accountable to deadlines.

Certainly, publishing the reader's guide was open to negotiation. We had tools to keep the guide accessible only to the class or to the Tufts community, but students decided that they wanted it available to the general public. Whatever we decided in the end, it was productive to talk about these levels of privacy and how that impacted what they wrote. Furthermore, we discussed online identities and what it may mean to be associated with this online guide after the class was over.

After the initial group meeting to decide how to delegate the tasks, the students briefly checked in with each other as a team to see how the project was progressing. They went through the steps of developing, writing, and revising with their peers as the editorial board. The students did not finish the whole book before drafting the guide, but wrote the sections piecemeal. This was part of the thinking, discovery, and processing stage of the project and they continued this process until the end of the semester.

I knew I was undertaking an ambitious project in the spring of 2011, but I was inspired by Yamashita's lead as a teacher. Many years ago, she told me that she assigned her creative writing students the seemingly impossible task of writing an entire novel in one academic term. It was a challenging assignment, writing a novel, but I understood from her that it was good to set high goals for students to try to reach. My students, faced with the heft and weight of *I Hotel*, seemed daunted, but also expressed excitement about tackling it together. They seemed proud to be part of an intellectually challenging project, and one student said, "This is what college is all about." Most of his classmates smiled and nodded in agreement.

When Yamashita visited our class at Tufts' Asian American Center, the students used the opportunity to ask the writer direct questions about parts of the book that still puzzled them as well as about the historical events surrounding the book's context. At that meeting, the students were excited to tell her about the online reader's guide. They had a sense that this website and the attention they paid to its creation was a product of their intellectual labor.

### Part III: Steps for Creating an Online Reader's Guide

#### The Assignment: Create an Online Reader's Guide.

##### My goals:

- Students will work as a team to envision, develop, and create a free and accessible document published online that may serve as a resource to future readers of *I Hotel*.
- Students will decide how they want the document to look, what they want it to contain, what its purpose is, who its audience is--they will have agency over their document.
- Students will create content and practice writing skills.
- Students will edit each other's content and practice editorial skills.
- Students will practice leadership and oral communication by leading a ten-minute discussion in class on the novella for which they are responsible.
- Students will practice communicating to different audiences by writing and editing content that will be visible to each other, to their professor, to the book's author, and, eventually, to a wider audience.
- Students will think about how they want to present themselves online. They can take credit with their full names, anonymously, or with screen names. This choice is to encourage them to think about different contexts for online identities.
- An overall goal is to give students the opportunity to have a writing experience that feels relevant, alive, productive, meaningful, and useful and to extend this experience beyond the classroom.

##### The Process:

1. I created a private page through blogger.com where every student was also an administrator. The private page would not be made public unless everyone agreed to this and until the class felt ready to put the draft reader's guide online. The goal was to have this happen by the time Yamashita visited Tufts, which was six weeks after the start of the assignment.
2. We discussed in class reader's guides students had seen before, what they appreciated about those guides, and how they would improve upon them.
3. We made a list about what we wanted in our reader's guide and how to divide the labor involved. They decided that each student would take a section of the book and write an entry on it for the reader's guide. They knew that all the pieces should come together as a reader's guide, but they wanted their entry to have their particular stamp. Some wanted to do summaries and analysis while others wanted to write discussion questions. They decided that their entries would reflect their interests. Having very different entries based on the student writer's interest seemed a fitting approach to *I Hotel* since the novel itself comprises multiple perspectives and different genres.
4. Each week, we read one section of the book and one student led the class discussion. They used their preparation for leading class discussion to help them write entries for the reader's guide.
5. When we were nearing the end of the project, I gave some lessons on revision techniques and each student was responsible for editing a classmate's reader's guide entry. This connected them to another writer and gave them experience as both writer and reader.

6. We agreed that the bulk of the work would be completed by Yamashita's visit and, a few weeks after the visit, the final draft would be finished by the last class meeting of the semester. The draft form of the reader's guide was available during the entire process. By making it available, it also helped to make the point that even published writing can be a dynamic document.

**Ideas for Variation:**

For a shortened version of this assignment, students could make a reader's guide to a single novella from *I Hotel* or another short story or essay. Or, instructors could highlight one particular event or year from *I Hotel* and tie that into other lessons. Teachers may also go in a different direction and show interpretations or works that *I Hotel* inspired. Students could also come up with a resource showing connections between the social movements *I Hotel* depicts and contemporary student-led movements.

**Conclusion**

A few years have passed since my first year students created the online reader's guide to *I Hotel*. In fact, those students graduated in May 2014. I have repeated this assignment with other texts in subsequent courses and plan on continuing because it's a proven way to practice essential skills such as editing and revising as well as collaboration and interpersonal communication. The impact of the website extends beyond the course and not only for those who are searching for resources and companions to the novel. I gave my students many occasions to revise their work and saved formal evaluation (grades) for the final drafts in their portfolios at the end of the semester. My point was that writing can always be improved. This lesson stayed with at least one student because a graduating senior who worked on the *I Hotel* guide contacted me recently about the website. He was using his section as a writing sample for a prospective employer, but before sharing the link, he wanted to go back and do some minor editing.

For my part, I have had many experiences when I felt invisible and unheard. I have wondered, am I being ignored or overlooked because I am a woman, or is it because I am Asian, or over 40, or not very tall? I will never know, but I believe that it is important to take up space. This online reader's guide to a novel by a fellow Asian American woman is a way for me to take up a sliver of space in the endless galaxies online, at the same time that the website we created claims visual space for *I Hotel*.

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<sup>1</sup> For those looking for more about the pedagogical debate surrounding literature in the composition classroom, see Wayne State University's "Teaching Literature in Composition Courses" and Nancy Morrow's "The Role of Reading in the Composition Classroom."