

## Signs Taken for Wonders, Wonders Taken for Dollar Signs: Karen Tei Yamashita and the Commodification of Miracle

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Karen Tei Yamashita's 1990 novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* introduces characters who possess remarkable features or perform remarkable feats: Kazumasa Ishimaru and the magical ball that whirls in front of his face, an object that helps bring him unparalleled riches; Batista DJapan and the wondrous accuracy and endurance of his carrier pigeons whose mysterious messages suggest future events, including Kazumasa's wealth; Chico Paco and the miraculous trek to the Matakão, where his indestructible shrine serves as proof of Saint George's approval and his own fierce, fantastic destiny; Mané de Costa Pena and the feathers that, when brushed against the earlobe, can cure everything from colds to cancer. In each case, the singular sign, taken as a miraculous wonder, becomes commodified in an attempt to replicate the magic on a societal scale. Contribute to Radio Chico and you, too, can be part and parcel of a similar "miracle"; buy a feather and stroke your worries away. The particular exception to the natural world becomes unnaturally duplicated to satisfy consumer demand, amounting to a commercial delusion—and dilution—of effect. Eventually, the natural world reemerges, asserting itself in ways that often disastrously reverse the previous miracles. Yamashita's seemingly bizarre combinations of commodity theory and magic realism allow her to demonstrate how the rhetoric of the former seems informed by the flourishes of the latter, but more importantly it offers her a context to critique modes of production and consumption in global markets.

Trafficking between Japan and Brazil—as well as between these countries and wider international systems—has long been a feature of Yamashita's work. Her career as a novelist might well be traced to a 1975

fellowship she received to research Japanese immigration to Brazil. She elaborates that

Brazil is home to over a million and a half Japanese immigrants and their descendants—the largest such population outside of Japan. That community has a long and fascinating history, and is a complex and varied society. But I knew very little of this when I first arrived; chance and intuition sent me to Brazil. I admit that I wanted to spend time in a warm, tropical, and sexy place, but perhaps I still wanted to know what being a pure Japanese might be. What was the essence, the thing that might survive assimilation and integration into a new culture and society, the thing that tied communities in the North to those in the South and to the Far East? (*Circle K* 12)

A one-year research assignment turned into a nine-year stay, as Yamashita married and had children in the country. A number of later literary works seem to share some connection to her Brazilian residence. Her first drafted novel, *Brazil-Marú* (finished and published after *Through the Arc*), offers a historically-inspired account of Japanese immigrants in the 1920s. Her 2001 collection *Circle K Cycles* contains stories, essays and images relating to the more recent phenomenon of second-generation Japanese-Brazilians emigrating to Japan to take up “undesirable” manual labour.

*Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, composed after Yamashita’s family had relocated to Los Angeles, contains much of the same inquiry into migration and international labour; in this novel, however, Yamashita adds a broader preoccupation—global commodity culture—and presents this investigation in the literary vocabularies of magic realism. Her tenure in Brazil, and ongoing projects tied to that nation, might have naturally led her to place another work in a South American setting. But Yamashita finds Brazil to be such a welcoming, generous society that the otherworldly figures of this magic realist fiction would find a more likely home there: “the man with three arms or a man who had a ball in front of his head would be accepted. Without question” (Murahige 329). She also seeks to explore the ways some Brazilians have incorporated and ap-

propriated commodities from the West—seen most readily, perhaps, in certain technologies:

Brazil has a very middle-class structure that involves international technology that comes from this country and from Japan, yet next door you have people who have no relationship to that technology or who use that technology in a manner that has nothing to do with it ... you may go to a small, rural place, and someone there has gone to a lot of trouble to buy a refrigerator, but he has no electricity to hook the damn thing up. So what does he use the refrigerator for? Well, when you open the refrigerator, you'll find it's cupboard space. All the sheets and the towels are neatly stacked up in this refrigerator. And that's the kind of thing *Through the Arc* is trying to convey about living in a country that's both developing and developed.... I wanted these strange features to be absolutely natural. (Murashige 328)

This is not to say that Yamashita writes to expose foibles of Brazilian technology consumption. Far more frequently, her novel uses humor and magic to critique patterns of consumption and production, particularly in relation to international markets in which the First World mythologizes commodification and its “secrets.” The products she invents in her fiction are far more fantastic than refrigerators appropriated as linen cabinets: spinning spheres, cure-all feathers and futuristic plastics interrogate the perceived need to buy as well as the perceived “magic” of consumption.

Yamashita is not alone in tying together the miraculous and the marketable. That an inanimate object can possess curiously magical qualities has long been an idea present in commodity theory; Karl Marx, in his famous digression “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” suggested that the process of commodification contained an inherent sense of the supernatural:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing,

abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.... The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing, which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (163-4)

Henri Lefebvre elaborates that

To Marx, the commodity form ... possesses the peculiar capacity of concealing its own essence and origin from the human beings who live with it and by it. The form is fetishized. It appears to be a thing endowed with boundless powers. The form reacts upon its own content and takes possession of it. The thing turns man into *its* thing, disguising its own origins and secret of its birth, namely, that it is the product of specific human interrelations. (47)

So much power is assumed by the commodity that it ultimately seems producer, rather than product; its apparently mystical properties have led scholars such as Arjun Appadurai to consider how “commodities, like persons, have social lives” (3). The willingness to endow inanimate objects with anthropomorphic qualities extends well beyond Marxist models; contemporary economists as well as media analysts continue to invest in the “magic” elements of “realist” markets. Michael T. Taussig finds a number of subtle, yet telling, examples while perusing mass media publications:

We read of the “economic climate,” of the “sagging dollar,” of “earning booming ahead,” of “cash flows,” of treasury bills “backing up,” of “runaway” and “galloping” inflation, of “climbing interest rates,” of “bear markets” and “bull markets,” of factories referred to as “plants,” of “money growing” in accordance with investment.... These metaphors are common

manifestations of what Marx referred to as commodity fetishism occurring in a developed capitalist culture, wherein capital and workers' products are spoken of in terms that are used for people and animate beings. (30-1)

Such is the supernaturally proactive appearance of commodities, Taussig argues, that "definite social relationships are reduced to the magical matrix of things.... Instead of man being the aim of production, production has become the aim of man and wealth the aim of production; instead of tools and the productive mechanism in general liberating man from the slavery of toil, man has become the slave of tools and the instituted processes of production" (32). Marx may have initially theorized that man "magically" transforms objects into commodities, but since *Capital* others have concurred that contemporary commodity culture continues to accumulate strength from its own mystical powers, including those that transform men into objects.

Some thirty years ago, Jean Baudrillard shifted the focus of this commodity-as-magic discourse, exploring how the process of material consumption likewise seemed a somewhat mystical exchange. Consumption implied "the mythological sequence of a folk-tale: a Man 'endowed' with wants or needs which 'lead' him towards objects which 'give' him satisfaction. Since man is, nonetheless, never satisfied (he is, indeed, criticized for this), the same story begins over and over again, with the sterile self-evidence of old fables" (69). What remains particularly "fabulous" about this construct is the implicit, inherent authority of the consumer. In Baudrillard's view, "freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple," as choice has already been given, by fiat, to the broader industrial collectives determining market supply; if anything, "the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where *freedom of choice has been forced upon him*" (72; emphasis original). What emerges in consumer culture is a system of needs that disguises its intents and effects within a myth-structure of individual needs and desires, and for Baudrillard the "magic" lies in the ability to manipulate:

*man's relation to objects, man's relation to himself* is rigged, bamboozled, manipulated—consuming this myth as he consumes

objects—because, accepting the timeless postulate of a free, conscious subject (in order to have this resurface at the end of history in a happy ending), they cannot but attribute all the dysfunctions they uncover to a diabolical power—here the techno-structure, armed with advertising, public relations and motivations research. This is magical thinking if ever there were such a thing. They do not see that needs, taken one by one, are *nothing* and that there is only a system of needs, or rather that needs are only *the most advanced form of the rational systemization of the productive forces at the individual level*, where ‘consumption’ takes over *logically* and necessarily from production. (75)

Despite Baudrillard’s attempts to debunk capitalism’s willingness to invest in “magical thinking,” there remains something mystical about the fact that the process continues to work, that producers and consumers alike participate in collective myths based on the mere appearances of needs and goods, sovereignty and satiety. There may be no “necessary reason” why markets function, but monetary and intellectual investment in the signs of the capitalist miracle certainly helps perpetuate the system. Goods, to put the consumption myth at its most succinct, are assumed to be good. In fact, such signs reinforce Baudrillard’s broader claims regarding consumption as “a *process of signification and communication*, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning” (601). Infusing commodity theory with a semiotic sensibility, Baudrillard shifted attention from a strictly material perspective to focus on the cultural environment of consumption, while signalling the vital importance of signs—in “value,” in advertising, in possessing—to economics.

What happens, however, if such a “sign” becomes a commodity itself? Can the magical power of representation find its own market? Yamashita’s characters buy and sell “miracles” or, in some cases, the signs of miracle; their actions, however, are neither unique nor new. Insofar as any commodity, in Marxian terms, contains something magical in both production and acquisition, and insofar as any commodity,

in Baudrillardian terms, reflects a system of signs that may or may not “magically” impart social meanings, certain commodities—reflecting a system of signs that may or may not impart magical meanings—seem to have enhanced powers in the marketplace. A number of critics have begun to explore intersections between the material and the otherworldly, particularly in terms of selling the sacred. Patrick Geary charts the physical travel and social significance of “sacred commodities” through the Middle Ages, a period dating well before Marx but, nevertheless, demonstrating the kind of commodity fetishization he would later explore. Geary held that “relics were the saints, continuing to live among men. They were immediate sources of supernatural power for good or for ill, and close contact with them or possession of them was a means of participating in that power” (176). Because these relics would occupy a naturally limited geographic area, communities would buy allegedly authentic relics from elsewhere, and hope that their sacred power would travel with them. Not any remains, of course, would suffice. Collectively reading the signs of any commodity purchased as would-be relic, society would have to grant the object the status of divinity: “For remains to be valuable, they had to undergo a social and cultural transition from being perceived as ordinary human remains to be venerated as the remains of a saint” (177). Put simply, if materials were to obtain the status of the miraculous, they had to perform miraculous feats;

The identification of false relics and the determination of genuine claims ultimately rested on very pragmatic, functional evidence: if the relics worked—that is, if they were channels for supernatural intervention—then they were genuine. If they did not, they were not authentic, regardless of the strength of external evidence. Once relics had achieved recognition—had come to be perceived as genuine and efficacious—their continuing significance and value depended on their continued performance of miracles and on their relative value compared with other relics and other sources of power. Studies of relics’ value indicate considerable fluctuations in both the short and long term. (178)

Geary's study is illuminating within the commodity discourse outlined above in several ways. Essentially, one magic transformation is supplemented by another: a community must decide to "animate" otherwise ordinary remains with potentially special significance, whereupon the remains themselves are repeatedly called upon to do something "miraculous" in order to validate and retain that standing. Because the object will, apparently, neither move nor verbally announce its own importance, the community must find the miracle that "matches" the remains, thus declaring an "incontrovertible" connection between the two. If, on the other hand, the status of wonder-worker is lost, the remains can be sold to another community, following a pattern of miracle revealed, miracle commodified, commodity outdated, commodity exported. Yamashita's fiction alternatively supports, stretches and subverts this pattern, questioning the seemingly tenor-vehicle relationship between miracle and commodity while criticizing methods of revelation, commodity and export.

Current scholarship suggests that otherworldly figures and signs are by no means limited to Christian figures in religious relics; Taussig explores the intersections between commodity and supernatural authority in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. In this study, Taussig analyzes the impact of capitalist production—particularly within the sugar and mining industries—on rural populations in Colombia and Bolivia. He finds that the study's subjects "represent as vividly unnatural, even as evil, practices that most of us in commodity-based societies have come to accept as natural in the everyday workings of our economy, and therefore of the world in general" (3). In particular, representations of the devil also signify changes in modes of production and/or standards of living (17). But the devil is, nevertheless, a spirit that must be satisfied, a tricky proposition in industries, such as mining, that appear to violate areas within the devil's sovereign realm of nature. The solution, for rural Bolivian miners, appears to involve a commodity exchange designed to placate all parties involved. Taussig explains:

the miners stand between the spirit owners of nature and the legal owners of the mines, which before the early 1950s were



private capitalist enterprises and are now state owned. In effect the extended chain of exchanges in the Andes is this: peasants exchange gifts with the spirit owner; the spirit owner converts these gifts into precious metal; the miners excavate this metal, which they “find” so long as they perform rites of gift exchange with spirit; the miners’ labor, which is embodied in the tin ore, is sold as a commodity to the legal owners and employers; these last sell the ore on the international commodity market. Thus, reciprocal gift exchanges end as commodity exchanges; standing between the devil and the state, the miners mediate this transformation. This circuit ensures barrenness and death instead of fertility and prosperity. It is based on the transformation of reciprocity into commodity exchange. (224)

The above example is not intended to compare Yamashita’s characters with Bolivian miners, nor to equate commodity exchange and gift exchange; it represents, however, yet another way intersections between “supernatural” and commodity events have been imagined. Here, Taussig finds, the commodity becomes “a liberated object,” one that “stands over its subjects, evolving its own rites and its own cosmology” (226). More broadly, it reflects how the translation of “real” events into “magical” discourses generate methods of coping and strategy: “Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby to change its destination” (15). Taussig tends to view “certain fantastic and magical reactions to our non-fantastic reality as part of a critique of the modern mode of production” (10). In Yamashita’s fiction, however, a modest variant may be at work: her novels depict magic/fantastic/otherworldly characters, situations and events as part of a broader critique of modern modes of consumption. She considers the wealth of ways that commodity culture can be interpreted as possessing magical qualities, and exaggerates the disturbing elements of this interpretive tendency by making many of the sought-

after commodities “magical” in their own right, or authentically “representative” of various miracles.

Curiously, Yamashita herself does not claim any “magic realist” moniker, likewise denying to an interviewer that she composes science fiction or Asian-American women’s narratives (Murashige 323). She remains, however, clearly interested in the workings of global markets, often working through them in ways both playfully magical and painfully realist. A particular subset of this tendency is attention paid to the international dissemination of products from the United States as well as from Asia; Rachel C. Lee claims that in Yamashita’s fiction, “the agents of (neo)colonial expansion derive not only from European stock but also from the Pacific Rim ... the United States is not a singular ‘foreign’ presence in the country” of Brazil (*Americas* 106). In “giving globalization an Asian cast,” *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* overtly “builds to a cumulative effect hinting at the ‘Japanification’ of Brazil and the United States” (Lee “Cultural Production” 247). As in Yamashita’s 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*, the tensions resulting from the First World’s capitalist aggressions and assumptions in Third World contexts remain a central concern. But if Yamashita calls attention to the packaging and placement of First World products in Brazilian contexts, her novels also concern the ways in which those products are consumed and understood within their “new cultures.” This double-sided focus is critical, according to David Howes: “we need to know more about the social relations of consumption—or in other words, the logic by which goods are *received* (acquired, understood and employed) in different societies” (2; emphasis original). Howes and Constance Classen argue that such an investigation will likely reveal an only partially successful attempt by the West to generate a truly global market; Third World consumers may buy Western goods, but adapt them to their own purposes: “although Third World people may seem to be manipulated into buying consumer goods which are alien to, and destructive of, their cultures, in fact, they are actively employing consumer goods to express and forge their own unique cultural identities” (178-9). In this fashion, “Rather than let consumer goods colonize them, local peoples instead ‘colonize’ consumer goods, imposing their own systems of values and practices on

them and maintaining their cultural integrity” (191). The transformation from refrigerator to linen cabinet might be seen as such “colonization.” But more importantly and more insidiously in Yamashita’s novel, Western methods of capitalist expansion may be co-opted in an attempt to corner Brazilian markets, with widely varying results.

As Yamashita composed *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, the specific translations of product use or marketing strategy may have mattered relatively little. Maureen O’Dougherty writes in *Consumption Intensified* of the spirals of inflation rocking the country’s middle class, spiking a comparatively modest 100-200% rate in 1984 to 2,700% by 1993 (51-2). The primary result, O’Dougherty found, was “the ant effect” of stockpiling; as one of her interview subjects admitted, “you fill your cart full and at times you don’t want to” (70). This “intensified consumption” was not, however, restricted to necessities of living; instead, Brazilian consumers found themselves increasingly drawn to foreign cars, Disney vacations and, generally, anything that signaled a transnational market. In O’Dougherty’s opinion, this specific trend in Brazilian consumption reflected not only the rampant inflation but the widespread desire to achieve “social distinction,” “modernity” (112) and the appearance of First World citizenship (101). She elaborates that

The fever to consume (as Brazilians put it less rationalistically and more judgmentally) extended to international travel and goods. Despite inflation, recession, and salary devaluations on one hand and Brazil’s restrictions against, and heavy taxation on, imported goods on the other, Brazilians have been pulled into the expanding transnational consumer market during the crisis.... These global consumption practices are central to the realization of middle-class identity, both as symbolic means of presenting and providing status outwardly, and as the material means of securing and leading a modern life at home. (112)

The “rushes” on seemingly miraculous goods in Yamashita’s fiction may, ultimately, indict not only the West’s attempts to capitalize on Third World markets but the hyperconsumption pervading Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s; O’Dougherty’s study evokes an environment

where any product—but especially a foreign commodity—sells simply because of its First World status. This holds particularly true in mass media representations, which extend the mythical idea that consumption can magically signal a cosmopolitan modernity. Yamashita's novel is a literary model of the popular Brazilian soap operas called "telenovelas," and Diana Crane observes that these telenovelas, like the American soap operas that they, in turn, are based upon, feed their huge audiences constant doses of consumer values, even as they promote particular products (7).

Yamashita, again, adds her own dose of magic realism to the telenovela format, simultaneously critiquing the modes of both production and consumption. She seeks to put the already surreal nature of consumer culture into sharper relief through characters that attempt to turn the miraculous into the marketable—blurring the distinction between the singularity and the commodity. The processes of commodification may seem, at any number of points, to harbor something magical within them; post-Marxian economic discourse has often relied on somewhat supernatural language to describe the transformation of material into product, and the subsequent market powers of that product. In Yamashita's fiction, however, the consistent question concerns whether products already deemed "magical" or "miraculous" can be proliferated by production, or copied in consumption. The resulting consequences recast distinctions between the unique and the universal, between one culture's economic intents and another society's reception of goods, and ultimately between man and nature.

The poor in *Tropic of Orange* often remark that that lines of media and mass transit, far from providing magical webs that should bring races and classes into a communal existence, ensnare them into positions that the first-world "spiders" can still exploit. Supposedly goodwill gestures that help spin these webs do little more than preserve the existing order, making hierarchies look like grids of equality (238). Ironically, perhaps, the miracle of new technologies, combined with the labor of immigrant peoples, becomes somewhat inverted in the opening of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. Kazumasa's ball—a mysterious sphere floating six inches from his face, acquired in a freak childhood accident—lands him

work in Japan's rail system when it demonstrates an ability to gauge potential faults in railway track; when technological advances yield similar results, Kazumasa finds a similar position in Brazil. In relatively limited form, the course of events charts a disturbing capitalist arc, an odd modification of what Geary found with religious relics: miracle revealed, miracle commodified, miracle outdated, miracle exported.

Of course, it is not emigration alone that brings Kazumasa his eventual wealth. Batista DJapan, his neighbor, discovers that his beloved pigeons can carry messages great distances, making Batista something of a local celebrity as crowds gather each weekend to await the pigeons and the increasingly cryptic messages they deliver. The message/prediction that a Japanese man with a ball will find fortune leads Kazumasa's maid Lourdes to enter him in any available lottery—and Kazumasa wins them all. Almost immediately, the immigrant finds himself the center of intense media scrutiny, as well as the target of thousands hoping for a miracle in their own lives. For those who do not stand in the long line of believers praying that Kazumasa will parcel out to them some of his fortune, the alternative—to buy a ball of their own—soon follows; friends and onlookers alike “immediately recognized the gadget as their ticket to riches. Together, they began to produce the headbands with the electronic whizzing ball by the hundreds and, soon, by the thousands. Soon the lottery shops were filled with people wearing artificial spinning satellites, circling numbers with abandon and indefatigable self-assurance” (59). That these duplicates do not work is not necessarily the point: a singular act of luck, forecasted by bizarre circumstances, leads a community to believe that, in some fashion, they can share in the same singularity, that they can participate in or buy into the miracle itself. Importantly, Kazumasa warns those who ask for financial assistance that miracles are precisely what he cannot provide, but in the wake of his own astonishing success his reasoning is ignored. The rush to buy personal spinning balls appears to gently mock a number of elements characterizing Brazil's consumer relationship with the rest of the world. On one level, the First World has, even if somewhat innocently, “exported” a product to a Third World environment where its effectiveness cannot possibly be duplicated; on another, the same spirit that helped Brazilian

inflation skyrocket in the late twentieth century has, even if somewhat unwittingly, turned the spinning ball into a market phenomenon.

That singularities cannot be transformed into commodities should seem, *prima facie*, a logical fallacy, particularly if the commodity is recognized—as it is here—as a mass-produced product. Indeed, for Igor Kopytoff this is precisely the distinction between the two:

To be saleable for money or to be exchangeable for a wide array of other things is to have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values. To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be “common”—the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale. By the same token, the perfectly decommoditized world would be one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable. (69)

This is not to say that Kopytoff allows no traffic between the two concepts: culture “ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others; and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized” (73). Additionally, in situations where regal authority designates particular objects as somehow “singular,” the effect “is to expand the visible reach of sacred power by projecting it onto additional sacralized objects” (73). But these transformations seek to remove objects from the world of consumer projects; in Yamashita’s novel something of the reverse process is taking place, as items already distinguished as singularities become earmarked for mass replication. Little wonder that the Kazumasa-esque spheres suddenly available for purchase fail to match the power of the original; the attempt to mass-produce the ball violates both the principles of magic and commodity.

One may not be able to buy a miracle, but Chico Paco’s story suggests that one may, perhaps, be able to build one. When his friend Gilberto, confined for years to a wheelchair, suddenly finds he can walk again,

Chico offers to fulfill the promise Gilberto's grandmother had made to Saint George: to walk to the Matacão, a remote locale renowned for its utter, magical flatness, and erect a shrine to commemorate the miracle. Possessing no supernatural qualities of his own, Chico's barefoot trek to the Matacão remains extraordinary, an "overnatural" feat of physical endurance. The subsequent inability of bulldozers to extricate his shrine to St. George from the Matacão's surface leads onlookers to assume that either the act or the actor has cosmic significance, and the public quickly endows him with "angel" and "saint" epithets of his own. Like Kasumasa, Chico's altruism leads him to consider a number of subsequent journeys to answer the prayers of countless believers hoping to "cure" their loved ones or their own personal tragedies. Despite Yamashita's insistence in *Tropic of Orange* that miracles must be fully experienced in person, as "there were not enough dots in the universe" (198) of television and the virtually real to accommodate the actually surreal, Chico becomes a media sensation.

The aftermath of Chico's walk follows a similar "flattening" pattern not unlike the experiences of Kazumasa. A mass audience willing to believe finds consolation and hope in experiencing, second-hand, the singularity of a particular miracle. Thinking that a unique act can and should be replicated, requests pour in for similar "miracles," each an attempt to personally acquire part or parcel of the foregrounding event. The recipients of the original act find themselves sudden superstars; in Chico's case, the next journey becomes a media saga, complete with donations, followers and television crews taping the next several installments of the now red-hot "Living Moments in Sainthood" series. Inspired by Chico's heroism, a network of "surrogate walkers" take up missions of their own, including substitutes for those who decide to stop. Chico even becomes complicit in his own miracle-production, appropriating the network on Radio Chico and taking on-air donations to assist the travelers. Most intriguingly, while these individuals supposedly represent specific prayers, the shrine itself becomes the destination of a massive pop pilgrimage; tourists converge on the spot to seize its supernatural aura on their Polaroids, oddly amplifying specific aspects of Chico's story while "flattening" its truer nature with their collective desperation to participate:

In a miraculous moment, Chico Paco's altar became a place of worship and the destination of pilgrimages. People from everywhere, foreign tour groups and simple farmers, would come to visit the famous shrine, to hear the guides tell about Gilberto, who as the stories were embellished, was even said to have been in a coma for several years, while his grandmother, Dona Maria Creuza, had suddenly become a saint. And the youth, Chico Paco, then came to be called the angel who translated prayers into earthly realities. But this was just the beginning. (51)

A two-tiered pattern of popular investment characterizes the emerging web of walkers and wonders: first, people invest in the idea of the individual miracle, then their belief evolves into an investment in the replication of that miracle. If an individual such as Chico or Kazumasa stumbles into extraordinary circumstance, perhaps one can expect duplication. If direct access is not available, commodification in the media and the marketplace might bring the miracle to the consumer. Perhaps the best example of how this phenomenon recurs again and again in the novel is the marketing of the pigeon feather. A completely media-driven phenomenon, the fad begins in an investigative report featuring Mané de Costa Pena, a Brazilian peasant who has apparently discovered the panacea produced by rubbing one's earlobe with a feather:

The reporter herself requested that Mané demonstrate the feather on her own ear and also complained of an ache in her shoulder. Mané grinned through his missing teeth and nodded authoritatively, carefully rubbing the soft down over the tip of the reporter's ear. There, on national television, the camera got a rather titillating close-up of the reporter's diamond earring and of the feather's point between Mané's leather fingers poking lightly on her lobe. The reporter exclaimed with surprise that the ache in her shoulder was gone, completely gone! (23)

From there, the use of the feather as a medicinal alternative—able to cure addictions, relieve ailments and prevent physical disasters—be-



comes a sensation for those willing to invest (spiritually and economically) in its magic. American megaconglomerate GGG hopes to expand the market to the United States, where it will tout the feather as something as integral as Coca-Cola, “a part of American life, like coffee and orange juice at breakfast or potato chips and dip” (78). Meanwhile, on the Matacão

Some people carried feathers in their pockets or purses. Others had small feather-carrying cases. It was not unusual to see people in bars, offering each other feathers and casually stroking their ears with them while carrying on animated conversations. The tourists who came to visit the Matacão were easily drawn to the use of the feather. They spent a great deal of time selecting from feathers under glass cases, asking about the birds from which the feathers originated and the type of feather best suited for their particular ailment or temperament. (79)

Yamashita’s satiric representation of a seemingly ridiculous product suddenly cast as panacea owes a great deal to the presence of her emblem of American capitalism, J.B. Tweep. Boasting a third arm that symbolizes the desire and dominance of capitalist export, Tweep sees the feather on television and immediately senses the opportunity to will a commercial miracle, to corner a market while seeming to provide a service. Importantly, Tweep does not appear to need personal reward, claiming instead that “I want inconspicuous control!” (125). Tweep’s initial goal is simply to feed the monster of GGG, to fill the vacuum created by the company’s strategy of “pure marketing”:

GGG’s marketing strategy was pure. You will recall that before J.B. arrived, GGG had no product on which to test its strategy; therefore, GGG developed a strategy that simply created a miracle product that would bring the greatest returns if GGG could control all the markets relating to that product. GGG had wrapped up the entire marketplace; there were no inroads, no avenues that had not been foreseen. GGG simply produced, controlled and sold everything. Georgia and Geoffrey Gamble,

inspired by raw halibut, were the rare geniuses of this impeccable phenomenon. But J.B. was still not satisfied. (112)

Again, Yamashita may be mocking commodity theory's recurring fascination with "magic" properties of capital, commenting on general trends in global markets and critiquing specific aspects of contemporary Brazilian economics. In relation to Brazil's economic landscape, Yamashita finds the spreading influence of multinational corporations an especially worrying trend. The novelist notes that

The multinationals are very powerful in the country, and that becomes very obvious as soon as you begin to live there. Johnson and Johnson in [the United States] is a company that provides nice products for babies—Q-tips, soft things. In Brazil, Johnson and Johnson is an all-pervasive company. Drug stores have nothing but Johnson and Johnson products. And all of a sudden you get more of a predatory vision of this company that you don't have here. The same thing would be true of chemical companies like Dow. All of a sudden these companies are bigger than life in Brazil. Car companies—Volkswagon, Fiat, Chevrolet, Ford. Big companies. Nestlé is another one. (Murashige 330)

Tweep represents a particularly insidious version of the multinational corporation, continually striving for "conspicuous control" and ever-growing profit. It is this perpetual dissatisfaction, the need resulting from conquering the feather market and seeking still further domination, that leads Tweep to another "miracle," the surface of the Matacão itself. The vast plain had intrigued scientists for many years due to its sheer, absolute flatness; Chico's immovable shrine only added to its mystery. Tweep's team of researchers eventually extract enough samples to determine the substance a type of "natural plastic," one that could revolutionize everything from audioanimatronics to space stations.

Yamashita has already begun preparing readers for the disaster that will result from the overcommodification of the Matacão, suggesting early in the region's development that it has become "a stage of life and death"

(102) and pointing to an area 72 kilometers away, where an abandoned parking lot of unknown origin has apparently, “miraculously” sprung from the rain forest. The cars on the lot are already losing their recognizability under the dense array of animals and plants that have appropriated technology as part of their own existence. Some, like the mice that develop suction cup-style feet to better burrow in exhaust pipes, even use the presence of the automobiles to mutate into something more. Nature, Yamashita consistently argues, will win out over technology, however brilliantly marketed or aggressively imposed. But what makes the Matacão so attractive to would-be exploiters such as Tweep is its miraculous ability to appropriate nature, to imitate life, being “so true to reality that, even upon touch and a lot of palpating examination, one could not tell the difference” (142). It comes as no surprise that Tweep’s new plastic products confuse the boundaries between the real and the representational, begetting credit-type “cards” that enclose human identity and machines that replicate plants and animals. Given the extraordinary promise of the Matacão, it also seems inevitable that most of the novel’s characters are attracted to the surface, as if all are pulled by the same magnetic force that gravitationally pulls Kazumasa’s ball to the ground. Most will die. A bewildering, unbelievable array of Matacão products foreshadows the imminent demise; slyly, Yamashita “flattens” or diffuses the miraculously flat nature of the area by building on top of it. Now towering over the area is Chicolândia, the amusement park built as an individual’s gesture to allow Gilberto a place to play and as a communal gesture to capitalize on the area’s tourist pull. Chicolândia appears to fuse several “miracles” together: the area is named for the new “patron saint” of the region; the park is financed largely by Kazumasa’s holdings and designed largely by the three-armed Tweep; Chicolândia consists of the “miraculous” material on top of which it is built.

It is the combination of the miracle of the Matacão and the miracle of the feather, however, that not only cause the two to collapse together but preface the end of either phenomenon individually. The deaths of the two “feather-cultists,” suffering from hallucinations attributed to excessive exposure to Matacão plastic, occur when the victims imagine themselves birds, jumping from the myriad of constructions to crash

on the surface below. “These people, said the chiefs of feather worship, had been abandoned by the very birds that must carry them in flight. It was a clear sign of revenge, a message to the human animal that the destruction of so many beautiful birds [for feather marketing] without proper ritual and payment to their spirits would no longer be tolerated” (181). If these deaths are a signal of nature’s revenge, the outbreak of a new strand of typhus represents the full act of retribution, one that no amount of feather-stroking will alleviate. Ultimately, the plague is traced to lice that travel through feathers, causing human disease via exposure to the earlobe. Mané, one of the plague’s victims, eventually pronounces the feather a “monster” (185); Tweep, barraged by lawsuits from users of the new Matacão-based feather, jumps out a window and dies on the plastic surface. Finally, bacteria in the plastic causes the Matacão to eat itself, and anything composed of that material, including Kazumasa’s ball, begins to disintegrate.

Yamashita’s message is almost gratuitously clear: had the original “miracles” of the text been left alone—had the feather therapy, the brave barefoot trek, the surface of the Matacão been treated for anomalies, rather than parceled into talk shows, Radio Chico, Chicolândia, plastic feathers and personal spinning balls—the subsequent disasters might not have occurred. In the novel, not only have the inherently magical qualities of individual events and people been so commercially diluted as to remove any trace of the original miracle, but nature has had to reassert itself to restore the proper balance between the sometimes possible and the always expected. Yamashita’s characters, however, continue to confuse that balance, as all feathers are banned, whether real or plastic; all birds become enemies of the human. The concept of return, natural and otherwise, extends even to Kazumasa’s spinning ball, revealed to be part of the same Matacão material and inevitably drawn back to the surface at the novel’s close. Having noted that the variety of surreal commodities in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* proliferate like the rain forest itself, Caroline Rody pays particular attention to the irony that this miraculous ball has been

an eruption of nothing other than first-world waste plastic.  
With this dazzling turn, Yamashita’s miniature globe-narra-

tor—far from escaping identity—further implicates itself in the forces of postmodernity. This voice is, finally, a postmodern paradox: a good old-fashioned narrator composed of consumer refuse; a sympathetic consciousness who nearly kills the hero by smashing him into the magnetic waste-field to which it is helplessly attracted; a cranial satellite reincarnated in a Candomblé ritual; a global omniscience stuck in orbit before a single human body; an ethnic cyborg ... these are unfixable, transgressive, postmodern performances, always beyond what we can say they are. (638)

In some ways, the ball represents the entire world, spinning toward its own destruction; at the same time, it refuses representation, pointing out the impossibility of translating singularity into commodity while remaining a unique, valuable object momentarily sprung from a vast refuse. Its fetishization as commodity echoes Yamashita's principal concerns: the confusions of magic and market, the attempt by both First and Third World characters to turn singularities (including the rain forest itself) into profit, the tendency to exalt trash while trashing the miraculous. Her infusion of magic realism into commodity debate, like the miners of Taussig's study, offers a cunning critique of global culture, international marketing and supernatural representation under its playful exterior. Yamashita does not argue against the concept of miracle itself, although specific signs often seem to become wonders of exaggeration. Rather, she pushes against the pattern of wonders translated into dollar signs, of "overinvestment" in singular miracles that cannot effectively be multiplied for profit.

Commodity discourse has historically employed rhetoric that mirrors magic, at least in mitigated forms. Sleight of marketing produces disappearing acts of individual agency; hunger artists consume and consume again only to retain an image of starvation; halls of mirrors distort needs, wants, profits and opportunity costs. That a commodity can be both "singular" and "mass-produced" is the logical fallacy Yamashita wishes to exploit: it is because Kazumasa is a special case that his sphere cannot be duplicated; it is because Chico Paco has performed an extraordinary

act of courage that the market cannot render his experience “ordinary.” But Yamashita has raised the stakes of this critique by centering her novel on the not-so-magical intentions and effects of particular transnational markets. If, in 1990s Brazil, consumers snapped up anything foreign that might, subsequently, import some quasi-magical sense of modernity, Yamashita’s Brazilian shoppers rush to buy anything suggesting a quasi-modern sense of magic. The willingness to buy on belief matches multinational corporations’ eager willingness to sell the facade of miracle, to offer shares of the extraordinary; in this sense, many First World consumers are just as eager—and just as vulnerable—in the commodification of miracle. In Yamashita’s novel, the primary question concerns the selling of signs as much as physical items. What, if anything, can be transacted in purchasing a product, aside from the physical object? Sign? Status? Magic? Modernity? And what non-physical entities are transacted in the sale of a product? Human labour? Natural resources? International agency? Common sense? The novel has provided, in many ways, a fictionalized context for Baudrillard’s criticism of the “magic” market, by imagining a market heavily reliant on the signs of supernatural singularity; in *Tropic of Orange*, a similar pattern of miracles revealed, commodified and outdated emerges in a purportedly panacea-like fruit juice industry. The temptation persists to find and exploit miracles to meet consumer demand. So strong is this impulse that Yamashita’s own verbal magic, however powerful, provides only temporary relief against the darkly magical cycles of profit, reallocation and renewed competition. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the climactic, fantastic wrestling match of *Tropic of Orange*, the death of both combatants is quickly forgotten in the rush to reap rewards: “Somewhere the profits from the ticket sales were being divided. A new champion was being groomed” (265).

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