

Magical Realism Cluster

**Pigeons, Prayers, and Pollution:
Recoding the Amazon Rain Forest in Karen Tei
Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest***
Shalini Rupesh Jain

Abstract: Karen Tei Yamashita's novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), represents environmental, ethical, and economic dilemmas in an age of planetary environmental crisis, depicting clashes between predatory market forces and indigenous Amazonian communities. Yamashita's use of magical realism simultaneously represents the value-laden ethos of a pre-literate society, even as it arguably portrays them as defenseless against the onslaught of capitalism's encroachments. This essay enquires if magical realism has, in the twenty-first century, exhausted itself and become reduced to an exaggerated narrative trope that caters to the perceived cultural otherness of those residing outside metropolitan borders for the benefit of cosmopolitan audiences. Analyzing Yamashita's advocacy of lesser-valORIZED modes of communication and relationships between humans that include spiritual kinship and therapeutic touch, this essay argues that Yamashita broadens the scope of magical realism by drawing attention to modes of living that by their simplicity and pure-heartedness appear to present a way of life that is infused with magic but are instead a celebration of ethical living. This reading examines the capacities and limitations of magical realism as an innovative form of literary experimentation capable of social and environmental change.

Keywords: magical realism, ecocriticism, Yamashita, environmental ethics, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

As a quintessential contact zone attracting curious foreign and local tourists, artistic and cultural aficionados, scientists and environmentalists, and avaricious multinational giants and local entrepreneurs, the fictional Amazonian Matacão in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (hereafter *Rain Forest*) is the site of a humorous but sustained critique of the continuing ecological crises in the South American rainforest. The locus of Japanese-American writer Karen Tei Yamashita's first published novel, the Matacão is initially believed to be a "divine place" (24), but soon the invidious properties of this uncannily magnetic site point toward an imminent environmental catastrophe. Although invested in raising awareness of the ongoing ecocide in the Amazon, *Rain Forest* exceeds the limitations of an allegory of ecological devastation; while highlighting flora and fauna depletion, Aimee Bahng points out that the Matacão's allure also exposes the history of colonial incursions and international migration flows. Yamashita skillfully weaves a tragi-comic postmodern narrative, suffused with magical realism, that addresses the multiple dilemmas arising from the invasion of a pre-modern society by predatory capitalist processes—one that has profound implications for the ecological, social, economic, technological, and epistemological transformations sweeping across Brazil and its environs in contemporary times.

This essay interrogates some of the means by which magical realism both successfully and problematically represents environmental, ethical, and economic issues that arise from the collision of neocolonialism and indigenous communities, not just in the rapidly shrinking Amazon basin but also beyond. As a widely popular and established literary genre, magical realism frequently facilitates the communication of a sense of continuity and belonging between humans and the natural world, challenges the hierarchies between culture and nature, and disrupts normative barriers between the living and the dead, the spiritual and material worlds, and the past and present.¹ Viewing magical realism from this perspective, this essay proposes that the genre's fundamental concerns can be read as broadly overlapping with contemporary environmental thought, and a dialogue between the two offers valuable insights that enrich the study of literature and the environment.

Yamashita employs magical realism to novel purposes, extending its range beyond that of an imaginative means of postcolonial critique and a common choice for the representation of an indigenous ethos, two of the genre's most recurring concerns.² I argue that Yamashita broadens the scope of magical realism by suggesting that certain indigenous modes of living, by their very simplicity and altruism, appear to present a way of living that is infused with "magic" to Western eyes but are in fact a celebration of life guided by an ethics of care for human and non-human inhabitants of the planet. This portrayal of a distinct ethical mode of living is manifest in the indigenous Brazilian characters' instinctive behaviors and choices: for example, it is visible when the poor farmer Mané Pena attends to his friends' and neighbors' physical ailments with his *pro bono* feather-based cure. This selfless action, along with others in the novel, illustrates indigenous epistemologies and ethical choices that contest utilitarian attitudes and praxes adopted by the American and Japanese entrepreneurs, whose profit-driven approaches sever human-nature connections. The use of magical realism in this novel, as evident in the charmed feather that cures aches and pains, thus debunks normative conceptions of what constitutes "magic" and facilitates the representation of indigenous value systems that prioritize an ethics of care that has little to do with monetary profit. This essay explores the genre's interventions and contributions to ecocritical scholarship concerned with marginalized communities whose multifaceted relationships with nature have valuable lessons for urban audiences.

In evoking the complex term ethics, I am aware of the rich debates that swirl around this concept with its multiple definitions, philosophies, beliefs, and practices. This essay, however, does not engage in-depth with a particular theoretical paradigm or form of ethics; rather, I use the terms ethics of care and altruism to refer to a broad range of themes associated with the subject. In his introduction to *Ordinary Ethics*, Michael Lambek lists these as "freedom, judgment, responsibility, dignity, self-fashioning, care, empathy, character, virtue, truth, reasoning, justice, and the good life for humanity" (6). But this is not simply an exhaustively prescriptive or descriptive list; while broadly concerned with these values, my usage of the terms ethics and altruism is also inflected by an ethical stance that

is centered on a responsibility to the call of the vulnerable other, inspired by Levinasian philosophy.³ Significantly, Levinas' philosophy cautions against the dominant tendency to thematize others into one's own view, prejudices, and judgments, thus denying their capacities and reducing them to objects.⁴ However, Barbara Davy posits a novel interpretation of Levinasian philosophy by interpreting the call of the other as potentially applicable to non-humans too (40–41), thus creating a new space for the relevance of this ethical philosophy to environmental thought. This essay attempts to find resonances between the philosophies of the indigenous community in Yamashita's narrative, particularly in its care for the vulnerable other, be it a human or a non-human. I am concerned with how this ethical response to the under-privileged plays out in the intersections between literary form, particularly magical realism, and ecological concerns.

In his review of Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Jesús Benito Sánchez observes that "Yamashita creates an antithetical relationship between the 'real'/'magical' and the 'virtual'/'televisual.' Oddly enough, the magic allies itself with the real and against the virtual" (90). In *Rain Forest*, instead of deploying magical realism to portray stereotypes of the so-called exotic and magical global South,⁵ Yamashita utilizes magical realist tropes to magnify the excesses of a market economy that preys in unsustainable ways upon the environment. This caricaturing of Western excess draws attention to the industrialized world's overindulgence and greed and can be read as a parody. Concomitantly, however, by portraying her Brazilian indigenes as possessing a remarkable ability to empathize and care for other people, plants, and animals, Yamashita exaggerates their altruism to demonstrate that their benevolence is based not on any inherent or acquired magical propensities but on simple, pure-hearted compassion for the less fortunate. As such, the crucial differentiator in the delineation between her Brazilian and neocolonialist figures appears to be the underlying altruism that distinguishes the former from the latter.

How can these multiple delineations of magical realism be reconciled in the novel? Given the plethora of criticism on the uses and abuses of magical realism in contemporary literature and literary theory, this

essay responds to the potential criticism that magical realism has, in the twenty-first century, exhausted itself—that is has been reduced to an exaggerated narrative trope that caters to the perceived cultural otherness and differences between developed and developing worlds, or urban and rural communities. In particular, it examines whether Yamashita's novel is guilty of reinforcing the residual ethnographic dogmas of the noble indigene versus the rapacious capitalist. Against this judgment, I argue instead that Yamashita provocatively rejuvenates the concept of magical realism by puncturing its excessive and hyperbolic narrative stylistics and proposing in its place that “magic” could also potentially be present in more everyday symbiotic and ethical interactions between humans and their co-inhabitants on the planet. Taking a cue from Benito Sánchez's observation that Yamashita's innovation is to reverse the polarity of magical realism, I argue that the novel's use of magical realism makes significant contributions to the burgeoning field of ecocriticism by foregrounding indigenous ecological philosophies, reintroducing and reinforcing the idea of practicing ethical behavior in everyday living, and initiating a valuable dialogue between contemporary ecological thought, ethics, and the politics of representation.

I. Magical Realism and Environmental Concerns

Discovered in a futuristic time period, the Matacão in *Rain Forest* is “an enormous impenetrable field of some unknown solid substance stretching millions of acres in all directions” (Yamashita, *Rain Forest* 16). It rapidly develops into a multifaceted symbol of touristic titillation, an instantiation of the exoticization of a primeval rainforest, and the material location of the newest and most promising venue for the exploitation of the earth's resources. Exuding a mesmeric attraction that is irresistible for devotees, the protean Matacão even functions as a quasi-religious site. But in a supreme sleight of postmodern irony, Yamashita reveals that the Matacão is composed of the refuse of the developed world that has been transferred to the Amazon. Further, the novel's key narrator is a plastic ball, one that omnisciently voices its unease about the ongoing environmental havoc caused by the ceaseless mining of the forest's

natural resources but refrains from communicating its prescience to its owner Kazumasa in the narrative.

These instances, along with the description of characters with extra appendages on their bodies, for instance, firmly situate this novel in magical realist territory. *Rain Forest* shares many thematic and formal devices with Yamashita's succeeding novels; *Tropic of Orange* (1997), for example, is explicitly concerned with issues of migration and with the major environmental concerns facing the planet today, including eco-imperialism, the asymmetries of global agriculture and trade, and the effects of pollution on the poor.⁶ In an insightful analysis of *Tropic of Orange*, Chiyo Crawford links the historical issues arising from Japanese American internment during World War II with problems associated with environmental justice and psychological trauma (86–106); one of the novel's main characters, the homeless Manzanar Murakami, is named after an internment camp in Owens Valley. Crawford's work shares resonances with Bahng's in its excavation of neglected colonial histories of imperialism and their environmental effects. *Tropic of Orange* is also infused with magical realist tropes: in a creative flourish, Yamashita describes a mystical orange literally dragging the Tropic of Cancer from Mazatlán to Los Angeles, symbolizing globalized identities in a continuous state of flux in a landscape of constant border crossing and policing.

This mode of writing, where the fantastic is accorded the same unquestioned acceptance as the real, recalls Maria Takolander's playful delineation of the overlaps between the two genres: “[M]agical realist narrative itself inhabits a peripheral space at the border that separates the two genres of fantasy and realism. With its base camp set up in the realist domain, it slips, skips or charges into fantastic territory” (12–13).⁷ While Takolander addresses the intersections between realism and magical realism, Christopher Warnes distinguishes magical realism from other related genres by noting that it “combines realism and fantasy, yet does this in such a way that the resultant mode or genre cannot be described as fantasy, science fiction, the uncanny, the fairy tale, the baroque. . . . The key defining quality of magical realism is that it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to

truth” (3). This merging of the real and the fantastic is seen in *Rain Forest*, for example, when the Matacão-made clothes are suddenly eaten away by a type of bacteria, leaving the people wearing them at that moment bereft and dismayed.

Yamashita’s literary techniques pay homage to the traditions of the Latin American magical realist novel, evident in her pointed references to Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Mário de Andrade’s Brazilian classic *Macunaíma: O herói sem nenhum caráter*. Matacão, by alliteration and symbolism, is clearly reminiscent of García Márquez’s Macando and Andrade’s Macunaíma. Ursula Heise draws attention to several resonances between *Rain Forest* and the two canonical novels whose trajectory it follows (139–43). Matacão and Macondo, to begin with, are both (fictional) remote Latin American sites that are caught in the clutches of predatory multinational companies; second, the plastic boom is privatized by the American-based GGG company to untenable limits in *Rain Forest*, and Macondo is unable to resist the strong-arm tactics of yet another American-based banana plantation company. Third, both sites, and their societies, eventually meet a catastrophic end. Finally, Andrade’s descriptions of Brazil in *Macunaíma* are echoed in *Rain Forest*, although in a spirit of mourning for the lost beauty of the now-ravaged Brazilian landscape.

Part of literary scholars’ criticism of magical realism rests on this very turn to nostalgia. In an influential essay that analyses the various cultural critiques of the genre, Wendy Faris acknowledges the perspective of critics like Michael Valdez, who disparages magical realism as encouraging readers to “indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away” (qtd. in Faris 105–06). In a similar vein, Michael Taussig criticizes magical realism for exploiting “folk-lore, the exotic, and *indigenismo* that in oscillating between the cute and the romantic is little more than the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy life” (qtd. in Faris 104). While acknowledging that these charges are on occasion justified, Faris defends the genre’s perceived limitations by pointing out that it has evolved into an important decolonizing device, permitting new voices and traditions into the mainstream and

portraying the reconfiguration of structures of power and control in colonial contexts. Significantly, she also notes that the indigenous poor do not uniformly supply the magical elements in contemporary texts, which are increasingly used by writers from all sides of cultural divides. Faris points to novels such as Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* (1997) and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993). These novels address problems associated with contemporary sexual and cultural colonization and thus veer away from the postcolonial arena, making any return to an imagined past irrelevant.

My contribution to this debate seeks to widen the scope of magical realism through the example of Yamashita's novel. True to its postmodern approach, *Rain Forest's* magical realism works to subvert Western perspectives of the "exotic" South even as it emphasizes alternative meanings of magic to include love, care, affect, and empathy. These qualities and values form an integral part of Yamashita's characters who remain connected and committed, albeit in problematic terms, to their shared environment. Indeed, the environment itself becomes a contested ground upon which these values are endangered, embattled, and transformed but ultimately emerge triumphant.

In her research, Yamaguchi Kazuhiko interprets Yamashita's employment of magical realism as an alternative way of perceiving the world: "For Yamashita, magical realism is not just a literary technique, but our contemporary sensibility. In other words, she suggests that our manner of perceiving the world *is* magical realism, and hence that literary magical realism might be called a *mimetic* narrative technique which represents how we perceive the world" (85; emphasis in original). Thus for *Rain Forest's* American mogul J. B. Tweep, whose capitalist outlook defines his very being, the actions of a feather-curing healer who demands no monetary compensation for his work appear extraordinary or magical, while for the poor farmer Batista, who cares deeply for his pigeons and finds his sanctuary in their company, no amount of financial gain they bring him can compensate for the joy of his earlier care-free days when profit did not dictate his life. The novel presents this dichotomous view of capital as an alternative to narratives of capitalist hegemony.

While this North-South dichotomy is arguably simplistic (Yamashita perhaps tries to circumvent this charge through the portrayal of Batista's ambitious wife Tania), it nonetheless foregrounds the neglected yet crucial role of altruism and interdependency in everyday interactions between humans and the environment. This spirit of cooperation, syncretism, and philanthropy recurs persistently in Yamashita's indigenous characters, demonstrated in their quiet and conflicted yet determined outlook to preserve and perpetuate this ecosophy. By describing their inner motivations and the trials, losses, and victories they face through the commercialization and corruption of their unique talents, Yamashita posits the creation of a utopia when human relations with the natural world are in harmony, and a dystopia when this harmony is wracked by greed. While ostensibly rendering a humorous account of the complex interactions between the processes of late capitalism and its excesses that radically affect the economic, environmental, and social fabric of Brazil, Yamashita's narrative also issues an urgent call to re-think human interactions with the planet.

II. The Transformation of the Amazon into Matacão

The postmodern *Rain Forest*, with its multiple themes, resists a straightforward classification under any one genre, incorporating aspects of science fiction, narrative tropes from popular Brazilian soap operas,⁸ and a historical account of the colonization of Brazil. Although genre categories may be indefinite, the ongoing devastation of the Amazon and its communities is a distinct reality that forms the crux of this ecological narrative. Cristina Adams et al. present one view of this problem by emphasizing the long-standing ideological construction of the Amazon as "a tropical forest of continental dimensions" (1) while also recalling Candace Slater's claim that the rain forest is an archetypal "primitive other" (qtd. in Adams 1). Criticizing the popular yet narrow media portrayals of the Amazon solely in terms of an exotic and valuable forest, Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn point out that the developed world tends to see the Amazon in terms of trees rather than people and completely overlooks the tribal communities who have inhabited these regions for thousands of years. This view promotes "the romantic

vision of the Amazon that excludes man altogether and proposes a world whose lineaments reflect only the purity of natural forces, freed entirely from man's despoiling hand" (Hecht and Cockburn 14). Ironically, this has not saved the forest from rapid environmental depletion, evident in widespread oil and mineral extraction, large-scale lumbering of its ancient forests, and the hunting of its endangered flora and fauna.

The hyperbolic portrayal of the devastation of the Amazon in *Rain Forest* is unfortunately not far off the mark. As Luiz C. Barbosa notes, from 1978 to 1988 alone (the decade leading up to the publication of the novel), 225,300 square kilometers of Amazonian forest were cleared for industrial and agricultural purposes, causing immense damage to and the extinction of thousands of species of insects, birds, and animals and irreparable harm to the human communities dependent on them for their livelihood. Yamashita draws attention to these environmental problems, particularly by evoking the memory of those human rights activists who fought for the rights of the Brazilian peasants and indigenous peoples. Her popular evangelical character Chico Paco appears to be named after the Brazilian environmental activist Chico Mendes. Paco's murder in the narrative clearly recalls the assassinations of popular civil rights campaigners in Brazil in the 1980s, including Mendes, Wilson Pinheiro, and Jesus Mathias.⁹ All three challenged the might of political parties by insisting on the communal ownership of lands and the cooperative marketing of forest products. While widespread political repression and extermination of tribes have scarcely gained the awareness or international intervention they deserve, the destruction of natural fauna and flora have garnered more attention in the media. Unfortunately, this postcolonial ecological situation is replicated throughout the developing world, including in Asia, Africa, and other parts of South America.

While *Rain Forest* was published in 1990, prior to the much-publicized Rio Earth Summit, it clearly engages with the complex issues that were gaining importance on a global scale. The discovery that the Matacão is composed of a strong and resilient plastic substance that is really the residue of garbage from developed countries that has consolidated in the Amazon does not deter entrepreneurs like Tweep, who ironically utilizes

it for commercial products for local and foreign consumption. In an uncanny exposé in 1991, the year after the publication of *Rain Forest*, the unethical waste disposal methods of some developed countries was at the center of a controversy, as a memo written by Lawrence Summers, then Chief Economist of the World Bank, was leaked to the media. In it, he advocates the transference of garbage and pollution-causing industries from the developed to the least developed countries: “[S]houldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]? . . . The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that” (“Let Them Eat Pollution” 82).

Yamashita depicts the Matacão as a material manifestation of garbage from around the world that has made its way to the Amazon. Its material was “virtually indestructible, a substance harder than stainless steel—or diamonds, for that matter” (Yamashita, *Rain Forest* 97). This garbage-turned-solid substance is valuable for its versatility, and Tweep’s enterprise is hard at work converting this toxic substance into various products, like refrigerator magnets and credit cards, cars, furniture, buildings, jewelry, and even food and flowers. Ushering in a Plastic Age, Brazil is now viewed as a “gold mine of plastic” (144). This metaphor effectively charts the distance traversed (both diegetically and in reality) by Brazil, once endowed with the most extensive rainforest cover and now rapidly denuded of its forests by avaricious speculators.

In its protean manifestations, the trade of the plastic Matacão is clearly evocative of the rubber trade that cleared millions of acres of the Amazon forest and replaced it with plantations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A Study in Environmental History*, Darren Dean highlights how “historical accounts of tropical plantation agriculture seem customarily to be written as though the subject of study were an industrial rather than a biological process, and as though the ecological conditions of production were unimportant to historical outcomes” (6). Yamashita draws attention to this period of exploitation in her Author’s Note in *Rain Forest* by citing the canonical social science text *Tristes Tropiques*: “Claude Lévi-Strauss described it all so well so many years ago: *Tristes Tropiques*—an

idyll of striking innocence, boundless nostalgia and terrible ruthlessness” (n. pag.). Yamashita echoes a vital aspect of the text: its recurrent criticism of the environmental devastation wrought upon the tropics by colonial forces. In the chapter “Crossing the Tropic,” Lévi-Strauss poignantly lists the series of environmental crimes committed by invading forces, evident in the continuous mining for gold and diamonds, the sugar and coffee plantations, and the rubber monocultures and oil explorations: “After being yellow, then white, gold became black” (90). This phrase poetically captures the transitions in commodities and the values ascribed to it in international trading metaphors. Both *Triste Tropiques* and *Rain Forest*, to some extent, mourn for a bygone era in which communities lived in greater concord with their surroundings, before processes of colonialism and modernization changed their environments in such drastic ways.

Bahng’s interpretation of the Matacão as a site that reveals colonial and postcolonial histories of incursions into the Amazon stems from the portrayal of the theme park Chicolandia in *Rain Forest*, with its specific reference to the construction of a “Fordlandia” by the Ford Motor Company in 1927. She points out that nearly a century ago, Henry Ford bought approximately 2.5 million acres of Amazonian rainforest in Para, Brazil, with the intention of building a rubber plantation to provide raw material for his growing car manufacturing industry. Bahng points out that the commercial transaction was showcased in the colonial ideology of bringing “modernity” and “progress” into an “almost impenetrable tropical jungle” (123). *Rain Forest* evokes this long-suppressed and forgotten colonial venture in a contemporary guise and foregrounds the value of reading the novel as an example of postcolonial science fiction for its double vision in incorporating a “a forward-looking glance that is also haunted by historical retrospection,” calling attention to “imperial legacies of exclusion, exploitation, and displacement” (Bahng 24). Chicolandia, with its fake buildings, plants, and animals, is soon the site of a “bizarre ecology” (Yamashita, *Rain Forest* 168). These descriptions have clear resonances with contemporary mega-theme parks and fantasy amusement centers that have been criticized for their massive energy consumption, waste generation, and carbon emission.

As the Matacão gains its commercial stature, and Mané Pena and Tweep's feather business flourishes alongside, the losses to the Amazonian basin are increasingly evident. They include the industrial culling of birds for their feathers, the artificial propagation of favored bird species, and the rapid spurt in tourist and corresponding commercial activities, all arising from a false belief in the magical properties of the Matacão. Again, one can draw similarities between these activities and the illicit international trade in ivory, tiger organs, and rhinoceros horn, along with depleting shark and whale populations, as a result of unsubstantiated beliefs in miraculous cures afforded by animal body parts that have led to their numbers becoming endangered.

In her review of the novel, Caroline Rody draws attention to the Brazilians' selfless activities as they come in contact with capitalist ventures: "In *Rain Forest*, a feather, a pilgrimage, a love for pigeons, and other simplicities go through processes of absurd, then poignant, then grotesque transformation as global commodity capitalism seizes upon tropical nature" (628). What Rody terms "simplicities," I view as the essence of an ethical and phenomenological relationship between humans and the ecosystems they inhabit. This lies at the heart of what Yamashita, perhaps inadequately, alludes to when she states that the book incorporates a certain indescribable Brazilian "aura" (qtd. in Murashige 49).¹⁰ The avowal of a specific social, cultural, and ethical milieu that instinctively understands, accepts, and promotes a willingness to connect with the disadvantaged other, and the concomitant reluctance to term this innate conduct as attributable to magical realism, clearly gestures to Yamashita's endeavor to expand the normative definitions and understandings of magical realism and link these instead to everyday ethical behaviors that are sensitive to the needs of the planet.

III. Do All Magical Objects Offer Magical Solutions?

While Yamashita uses various magical realist tropes in her novel—for example the third arm that Tweep sports and the third breast that his wife Michelle has—it is worthwhile to examine the role of the omniscient ball more closely. The sole agent who sees through the widespread technological excess and ecological degradation is interestingly not a

human but a plastic ball. Orbiting above Japanese immigrant-turned-corporate tycoon-turned philanthropist Kazumasa's head, it performs the role of an omniscient narrator, thus forming a chief focalizing point in the narrative. But it also serves a more important function: the ball assumes the guardianship of the collective memory of the neocolonial invasions of land and communities that continue to threaten to denude Brazil of its natural assets. Coerced by Tweep to discover new deposits of this wonder plastic substance, Kazumasa and the ball

map[ped] out entire areas—every road, every railway, every waterway, every path through, by, under and over we must walk, swim, ride, float or hover—leaving no piece of that portions of Earth unknown to me, the ball. . . . [Kazumasa was] oblivious to any obstacles in our path: acres of flooded forest—dolphins leaping into the canopy, giant *pirarucu* waiting in the shallows for dropping fruit; great government hydroelectric dam projects—hundreds of species of plant and animal life bulldozed under, rotting and stinking for miles in every direction; Indian homelands, their populations decimated by influenza. Kazumasa saw, smelled, felt and tasted everything. He saw the beauty of the land, smelled the stink of its decomposition, felt the heat of the great forest, tasted the sweat of human labor. And still we moved on, searching for plastic. (144–45; emphasis in original)

In this eloquent description, Yamashita mourns the relentless plundering of the Amazon. At the same time, she recognizes capital as a force that not only inexorably transforms the physical manifestations of nature but also spurs its inhabitants to greater ambitions and transformations. Remarking that Kazumasa could have played an ethical part by halting this environmental annihilation if he had wished to do so, the ball wryly admits that “[c]ontrary to what you might imagine, I had no way of enlightening Kazumasa. It was one of those situations often described in children’s television dramas where the pet is obviously more perceptive than the master. But who was I—a ball—to say?” (24). The ball’s concession reinforces Warnes’ definition of magical realism as a

genre that conflates the real with the fantastic without according either a stronger truth claim.

Despite his physical and emotional alliance with Kazumasa in sharing a relationship “unmatched by human or animal counterparts” (59), the ball does not play the role of an ethical interrogator who challenges his master to rethink his active role in the destruction of the rainforest. Yamashita’s narrative, in fact, exerts little pressure on the characters to undertake any form of ethical awakening to the dangers of environmental degradation. Like Kazumasa, Mané Pena and Chico, despite their misgivings, fail to perceive the full danger represented by their cooptation into a business vortex that plunders the environment and denies them the pleasures and responsibilities of a family and community life. Likewise, while eliciting extreme reactions of wonder and faith, the Matacão neither offers moral guidance nor facilitates any symbiotic relationship between humans and other life forms. These instances suggest that Yamashita deliberately refrains from offering facile solutions to the environmental crisis through the use of magical realistic tropes, even as she utilizes them to critique capitalist over-consumption.

In my interpretation, the Matacão reflects human ambition and desire in an opaque manner that is true to its unnatural nature. The narrative ultimately reveals it to be a false and misleading symbol of the fecundity of the earth, and the ball-narrator, in the Matacão’s image, and despite its quasi-omniscience and self-proclaimed clairvoyance, is incapable of offering any ethical or ecological guidance to Kazumasa. The miracle of faith thus turns out to be a mirage. In this unexpected twist, the ostensibly “magical” is deliberately negated. The virtual Matacão and the ball can thus be interpreted as symbols of the constructedness of magical realism in Western literary discourse; this simulated magical realism functions as a virtual idiom whose relevance lies in its deconstruction.

While the ball opens the narrative by claiming to be brought forth by a memory and proceeds to recount the happenings on the Matacão for most of the narrative, it ends by directly addressing the book’s readers: “Whose memory you are asking? Whose indeed” (212). In the last lines of the novel, the onus of the task of colonial excavation and neocolonial resistance, of responsibility to the planet’s wellbeing, shifts swiftly and

emphatically onto the readers, who are ultimately actively caught up in these processes. In an interview with Noelle Brada-Williams, Yamashita reflects on the role of the writer within the context of environmental crisis by acknowledging that an artist may “conjure possibility or another way to see or hear, but shouldn’t this be the creative role of every thinking citizen?” (4). This direct address to readers on the last page is echoed in *Tropic of Orange* when the narrator asks: “What are these . . . lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?” (268), posing epistemological and ethical questions that are of central concern to the narrative and by extension to the author and her readers. Both novels exemplify this belief, as evident when the first and third person narrators merge to address the second person, the reader, thus forming a chain of responsibility and awareness.

IV. The Magic of Love and Ethical Singularities

Rody argues that the ball’s “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 rainforest itself) into profit, the tendency to exalt trash while trashing the miraculous” (638). Rody interprets Yamashita’s exaggeration of purported miracles as a caution against “overinvestment” in singular miracles for profit. I propose that Yamashita subtly juxtaposes *two* kinds of miracles: first, the literary magical realism tropes like exaggerated body parts and talents; and second, a subtle but more valuable one, the miracle of altruism that arises when humans engage in an ethics of philosophy that accords a greater sense of respect, love, and obligation toward the other. How Yamashita’s portrayal of Brazilian indigenes and city folk offers an affective, and effective, motor of transformation toward an environmentally sensitive way of life is the central concern of this section. In *Rain Forest*, Yamashita valorizes under-privileged notions of communication that include dreams, visions, and physical intimacies, celebrating the close-knit relationships between the pre-industrial peasantry and their environment in rural Brazil. The narrative captures the strong community ties between neighbours and friends, their connections to the sea and the forest that surrounds them, and the spirits that

guide them in their daily life. *Rain Forest* celebrates a less materialistic worldview that is centered on an altruistic lifestyle, even as it highlights the dangers that threaten such ways of life.

In contrast to the hyper-energetic Tweep, Batista embodies the poor yet content local who lives in harmony with his world, filled with a *joie de vivre* that has no direct correlation with material wealth. Unperturbed by financial or social ambition, his greatest joy revolves around the care he bestows on his pet pigeon after rescuing it from the pavement. Likewise, Chico Paco's devotion to his friend Gilberto is evident when he sets out on the long trip to the Matacão on bare feet to erect a shrine in gratitude to Saint George for his friend's miraculous recovery, thought to be brought about by his grandmother's prayers. Mané Pena displays the same kind of altruism toward his fellow beings: discovering that certain feathers have healing properties, he treats ailments afflicting not only his own family but also his friends and neighbors. All three characters engage in non-commercial work, which enables them to discover meaning in service that brings ease and comfort to others. These initial depictions of Batista's, Chico's, and Mané Pena's selfless endeavors demonstrate how individuals find contentment and happiness in their everyday lives, particularly when their activities and attitudes are premised upon an ethical relationship with others.

Yet in the portrayal of the apparent "magic" of altruism, characters like Mané Pena and Chico refuse to label such ethical interactions with others as extraordinary. The belief in Chico's magical abilities is punctured when he himself laughs at people's conviction of these purported miraculous powers. In this denial of a sense of aggrandizement from individual power, and a concomitant faith in the religious beliefs of his community, Chico both poses and displaces the power of magical realism; his characterization conveys the differing values of urban and indigenous attitudes toward communities that form the admittedly dichotomous world of the narrative.

The novel consistently draws to the forefront the philanthropic impulse that motivates such selfless endeavors. Mané Pena's free therapeutic service soon attracts the attention of the American corporate mogul Tweep, whose research into this phenomenon reveals the scientific and

utilitarian bias of his investigation: “He [Tweep] wanted to know everything; names of birds, feather size and color, methods of use, positioning of the feather on the ear, how long a feather was effective, historic use of the feather, how to use the feather in conjunction with other remedies and apparatus, feather power in Indian and local folklore” (73). Completely overlooking the values, effort, and compassion involved in Mané Pena’s act of healing, Tweep attempts to duplicate this service into a commercial process and ultimately sets the stage for an environmental apocalypse at the end of the novel.

Linking the use of magical realism techniques to the exposition of manipulative capitalist discourses, Edward Mallot contends that “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” (115). While I agree in the main with this view, my analysis emphasizes the subtler suggestion that it is valuable to rethink the “magical.” Mané Pena’s conviction of the efficacy of the feather cure is grounded in some knowledge of the human body but more importantly in good will and empathy for the suffering of others, so much so that it appears magical to people like Tweep, who cannot relate to such an outlook. Chico Paco’s evangelical radio station is a result of his belief in the power of altruistic prayer, based on his spiritual faith in Saint George. His relationship with Gilberto, while suggestive of sexual attraction, stems from a long childhood friendship filled with love, laughter, and an indomitable spirit of resilience. Through these different portrayals, Yamashita challenges normative conceptions of the magical as simply the fantastic that can be made financially productive and instead celebrates the power of spiritual beliefs, physical intimacies, and love. The novel’s sympathies lie in this gesture, one that requires a greater understanding of human bonds that exist between people and their surroundings.

In a similar vein, Patrick Murphy avers that many of Yamashita’s characters “resist their total absorption by capital through the emphasis of their lives on love, empathy, generosity, and other personal attributes,

that is, on those qualities that define subject-to-subject relationships rather than subject-to-object domination” (187). However, this resistance is not as successful or complete as Murphy’s reading suggests; on the contrary, while the Brazilian characters are motivated by a traditional ecological vision of human society as an interdependent one that thrives best on symbiosis, they fail to recognize the magic *within* themselves and are unsuccessful in retaining their beliefs and strengths. Caught up in the frenzied cycle of commodification and profit, they are unable to resist the lure of fame, fortune, or the fantasy of the free market system that promises instant gratification but results in increasing alienation from their families, community, and the environment.

The altruism that confers a special “magic” of distinction on Yamashita’s native characters is ultimately unable to stand alone and is defeated by the forces of modernization in the form of capitalist ventures and intrusive media presence. Yamashita’s denouement comes in the form of yet another unexpected literary trope: a *deus ex machina*. The event that satisfactorily puts an end to the ceaseless ecocide in the Amazon comes in the form of nature’s own unbridled agency: a bacteria voraciously eats up the rubber and thus saves the planet. Such a volte-face is certainly significant, implying Yamashita’s pessimism about human ethics or agency in remedying ecological disaster even as it suggests her optimism that nature will eventually triumph over humans’ atrocities. The novel’s conclusion, with the destruction of the Matacão, gives no indication that the surviving characters are any wiser for their experiences or regret their role in the devastation of nature that eventually destroys their own homes. Without nature’s intervention, the plastic world takes over nearly all aspects of life with no resistance except from some environmental groups.

V. Environmental and Oriental Exoticization

Yamashita’s indictment of human hubris is, in a postmodern turn, disturbed by the fantasy of a revived Eden at the end of the narrative, making the novel’s eco-politics appear at odds with its thematic concerns. The novel’s ending also draws criticism from Heise, who points out that the urgent ecological questions animating the narrative are

ultimately answered only in cultural terms, even as she concedes that a work of fiction cannot be charged for failing to solve complex theoretical and practical problems (152). My criticism, however, centers not so much on the implausible Edenic ending as on the problematic homogenization of gullible natives and the perpetuation of the noble native versus the ruthless capitalist binary, which the narrative fails to contest in any meaningful manner. Despite the accelerated rate of exploitation and commodification that transforms a sleepy Brazilian village into an international religious, tourist, and commercial center, *Rain Forest* is marked by an absence of resistance from any of the characters as foreign forces destroy their way of life. Arguably, Yamashita's juxtaposition of the noble natives vis-à-vis the corrupt neocolonialists signals the pessimism with which she views the resistance of local communities to foreign hegemonies.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on affective relationships between the novel's many characters, these figures are oddly one-dimensional. Apart from Kazumasa's rebellion and heroism in the end, when he risks his life to save Lourdes' children from kidnappers, none of the other characters, local or foreign, are either cognizant of being usurped by the capitalist machinery or aware of becoming perpetrators of the system they are inherently at odds with. This delineation of a futuristic, post-capitalist society that measures success in monetary terms juxtaposed with a pre-modern one that struggles to maintain the values of connection to family and the environment remains less nuanced for the implausible simplicity of the novel's characters. These arguably render the work in a simplistic black and white binary that runs the risk of further exoticizing the naiveté of the locals or the greed of foreigners.

This charge of exoticization is especially relevant when brought up in relation to the narrative's second focalizer, Kazumasa. The novel charts his growth from childhood to maturity, emphasizing his unique endowment of a magic ball that helps him personally and professionally. Interestingly, his mother's confidence that "Brazil seemed to be the sort of place that might absorb someone who was different" (Yamashita, *Rain Forest* 9–10), even as Kazumasa appears to have been socially and professionally accepted at home despite his unusual rotating sphere,

raises questions about the representation of Brazil as a land of exotica and romance. His mother expresses cynicism “about her son’s happiness, about arranging a happy marriage, about the future and the nature of true happiness” (10) were he to remain in Japan and encourages him to travel to Brazil, confident that this move will offer him the love and companionship he seeks. This construction of an industrialized nation incapable of offering the sought-after happiness that is apparently available in lesser-developed countries perpetuates a form of exoticization that echoes clichés about the spiritual and emotive global South. The narrative endorses the mother’s hopes by ending on a note of bliss, with Kazumasa falling in love with the native Lourdes and pursuing a pastoral life on a farm.

The problems engendered in large part by Kazumasa’s skill in detecting Matacão material, which spur unchecked human avarice and indifference to the environment, are now overlooked; the narrative concludes by portraying the magically revived environment, which he now enjoys with his wife. However, from an ecological perspective, this resolution does not augur well for the advancement of an environmental vision since it is predicated upon a continued indifference to the devastation caused by human activity. Rather, the romantic, *telenovela*-inspired story of boy meets girl, overcomes several obstacles, and lives happily ever after detracts from the seemingly irreverent, yet serious, engagements with questions of human culpability and responsibility toward the well-being of the ecosystem that the text otherwise highlights throughout. Indeed, the novel pays scant attention to a renewal of an ecological vision that could bode well for a sustainable future. This interpretation qualifies Heise’s criticism that the resolution of the novel is only addressed through cultural and not ecological terms by demonstrating that even Yamashita’s approach is marked by the deployment of literary tropes like fantasy that conceal the racial, gender, and class imbalances the text perpetuates to some measure. In this regard the deployment of magical realism in this text can be faulted; whereas its tropes productively criticize excessive (Western and urban) consumption and valorize indigenous ethical modes of living, it simultaneously portrays indigenes as a community with lower agency and social capital, ultimately turning

to the economically powerful Kazumasa to save the day for Lourdes and her children.

While the resolution of the narrative may be criticized along these lines, its abiding deference and respect for the creative and resilient forces of nature enrich its flippant tone and stylistics. Structurally, thematically, and affectively, *Rain Forest* engages its readers in a journey that not only revolves around environmental concerns but also on a larger scale celebrates indigenous epistemologies. It brings to the forefront the fragility and importance of diverse cosmologies in a world that increasingly sees value purely in material products and processes. The narrative describes a vibrant and constantly evolving nature that refuses to be completely subdued by human forces. In the climax, Yamashita collapses realist and magical realist tropes and exposes the poetic construct of the rainbow as a form of beauty and perfection by transforming it into a hiding place for kidnappers. This disrupts the anthropocentric notion of nature as one of eternal sanctuary for the embattled human and punctures popular literary stylistics that stereotype and constrain the natural world according to human desires.

VI. Nature's Resurgence

Imitating its title, the narrative of *Rain Forest* traces a trajectory of natural evolution that takes into account not only environmental pollution but also environmental regeneration. The epigraph celebrates the imagination of innocent children while highlighting the intrinsic hybridity and the constant evolution that is characteristic of nature: "I have heard Brazilian children say that whatever passes through the arc of a rainbow becomes its opposite. But what is the opposite of a bird? Or for that matter, a human being? And what then, in the great rain forest, where, in its season, the rain never ceases, and the rainbows are myriad?" (n. pag.). The underlying critique of the scientific and rational notions of a human being separated from nature is evident in Yamashita's positing of a pluralistic vision that encompasses the interdependence of humans and non-humans in multiple life cycles. Structuring the narrative in sections entitled "The Beginning," "The Developing World," "More Development," "Loss of Innocence," "More Loss," and finally

“Return,” the arc from the introduction of modernization processes centered around a palpably misguided sense of development is clear, as is the yearning for a return from such a destructive path.

If Yamashita views the human ability to understand and resist the processes of environmental destruction with considerable doubt, there is no such lack of conviction in her understanding of nature’s inherent powers of regeneration, mutation, and interdependence. An illustration of this adaptability is evident in the description of a metal cemetery where the remains of foreign aircrafts and cars are left to rust in the depths of the Amazon jungle, hidden from the public eye but raising important questions about the ethics of waste disposal in the novel. Even in this bleak scenario, the narrative celebrates the mutability of organic life by describing the emergence of rare butterflies, their color derived from the presence of hydrated ferric oxide in the vehicles’ seats.

Yet the evolution of new species in response to environmental changes is certainly not unproblematic when the organisms in question are infused with dangerous chemicals from the disintegrating metal around them. Such disturbing transformations engendered by biological, capitalist, and imperial processes are also reflected in the transformations the Matacão appears to trigger in the people who throng to it, enchanted by its ostensible status as a wonder. Gilberto’s recovery turns out to be a mixed blessing when arriving on the Matacão as his mental and emotional development cannot keep pace with his new physical abilities. As the exhausted Chico Paco realizes, “[t]hat’s the problem. Gilberto can walk, climb, jump, run, crawl. He’s like a baby—no, more like a monkey” (152).

However, the novel ultimately deals with human excesses punitively through the forest’s retaliation. Yamashita’s narrative evokes the trope of wronged but avenging nature, investing the rainforest with its own agency and power to oppose its annihilation. By concluding the narrative with an image of Edenic bliss amongst the regenerated fruit trees, peopled by families who have deep affection for one another, the novel evokes the possibility of living an enriched life that is premised upon syncretic and regenerative habits in harmony with one’s environment.

Rain Forest's engagement with magical realism ultimately yields a complex text where questions of environmental responsibility and agency, avian extinction and rainforest decimation, and religious faith and romantic love are all addressed within the context of colonial and neocolonial ventures that are frenetically driven by corporate profits and commodification. Whereas the themes of migration, urban development, minority issues, and environmental issues have received insightful commentary from several critics, this essay pays particular attention to the ramifications of Yamashita's flamboyant use of language and literary techniques. Using form as a springboard, it initiates a cross-disciplinary approach that foregrounds the role of environmental ethics in ordinary life by identifying the opportunities presented to ordinary people to achieve extraordinary success and calls attention to the quotidian acts of kindness and care that bind all forms of life on earth.

While the scope of this essay is limited to a narrow conception of an ethical mode of living as it relates to altruistic behavior in everyday life, current and future research could profit from more in-depth analysis of how literature works to portray, suggest, advance, manipulate, and strengthen human relationships with the non-human planet. These critical interventions are salutary to ecological thought, and this essay contributes by examining how literary forms work in both productive and reductive ways in advancing and deconstructing these stereotypes, respectively. In calling for a reconsideration of magical realism's contribution to ecocriticism, this essay attempts to open up new spaces for a cross-disciplinary dialogue that includes indigenous representations of ecological perspectives and the role of art in environmental preservation.

Notes

- 1 For instance, canonical magical realist works like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Morrison's *Beloved* all disrupt the human and more-than-human boundary, unsettling notions of human identities being discrete from their surrounding environments. For a more ecological perspective, see Hogan's *People of the Whale* and Mda's *Heart of Redness*, novels that destabilize the human-animal boundary.
- 2 For an insightful exposition of various definitions, workings, and critiques of magical realism, see Faris 101–09.

- 3 See Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*.
- 4 For a provocative and varied discussion on the contributions of Levinas' philosophy in regard to environmental practice, see *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought*.
- 5 For an insightful account of the construction and rendition of such an "exotic" South, see Pratt.
- 6 Issues related to transnationalism, minority ethnicity and assimilation, urban development, and increasing pollution are central to Yamashita's other works. In *Brazil-Marú*, she describes the early twentieth-century emigration of Japanese farmers to Brazil and their attempts at retaining their ethnic culture, even as they struggle to adapt to a foreign one. In a historical reversal, *Circle K Cycles* follows the trajectory of Japanese Brazilians who return to Japan to work in manual jobs disdained by the affluent Japanese. Pursuing the complex issues faced by minority communities, *I Hotel* strings together ten loosely connected novellas that foreground the experiences of the Asian American community of San Francisco in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in an era in which they struggle for equality and dignity in the volatile American social and political landscape.
- 7 For different points of view on the status of reality and fantasy in magical realism, see Zamora and Faris.
- 8 This is evident in the *telenovela*-inspired ending of the narrative with good Samaritans like Kazumasa and Batista fulfilling their romantic love and desires and with the regeneration of the Amazon forest through the destruction of the plastic Matacáo.
- 9 For a historical account of the lives of Brazilian environmental activists, see Revkin.
- 10 In an interview with Murashige, Yamashita explains that "[e]very now and then I meet people who lived in Brazil who read my book and say 'There's something you *can't* describe that's *here*. And this is how it feels to be in Brazil.' And that *is*" (49; emphasis in original).

On the other hand, one can make the argument that the happy ending in Yamashita's novel is inspired by the happy endings of the *telenovelas* that have inspired her.

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