

# “Whose Memory You Are Asking”: Yamashita’s Narrative Voice of Human, Material, and Memory

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Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) is full of surprises: a feather to the shell of human ear that can cure all ailments, a businessman with three arms and an ornithologist with three breasts, special plastic discovered beneath the Amazon rainforest that can be processed into anything and everything, and pigeon-messages that just happen to correctly predict most things, even the end of the novel itself. Among all such eccentricities, perhaps the most curious one is the narrator “I” who tells them—a plastic ball suspended above one Kazumasa Ishimaru’s forehead, rotating like a small planet. This strange, plastic voice is further complicated by the declaration that it is already dead, only that, “[by] a strange quirk of fate, I was brought back by a memory, I have become a memory, and as such, am commissioned to become for you a memory” (3); and in such “becoming,” the ball seems to dissolve into an all-seeing, all-knowing presence capable of recounting the intricate, multitudinous history surrounding an extraordinary zone in the rainforest, the Matacão. Yet the question remains: what exactly is this disembodied but material voice, and what does its claim of “becoming a memory” entail? The ball is attached to Kazumasa’s head by a strange magnetism, a physical attachment that quickly evolves into something

more personal and emotional, to the point that the ball seems to assume an almost human voice in its relation to Kazumasa. At the same time, the ball cannot be separated from the material it is made of, later revealed to be the same Matacão plastic that draws the human characters toward the rainforest. The plastic ball bears the same history of human industry and waste that led to the plastic's production, enchantment, and eventual disintegration. When the ball—like a satellite it is so often compared to—receives and transmits each character's story to form a dramatic narrative reminiscent of the Brazilian *telenovela*, what kind of “memory” is it telling, between human and non-human? This paper would like to consider the extensive literary criticism already in place regarding *Through the Arc* and its narrator, and delineate how the ball exists both as a humanlike character and a material medium of the plastic Matacão—producing a field of vision capable of traversing the human and material, as well as compressing the intertwined history of the region into a “memory” that highlights the past that conditions the present.

When the narrator “I” begins its story, it refuses to introduce itself, only noting that “of me you will learn by and by” (3). Instead, the reader is first acquainted with Kazumasa Ishimaru, the Japanese man “to whom I was attached for many years” (3). The ball arrives to Kazumasa when he is just a child, in a burst of lightning from which a “tiny piece of flying debris had plummeted toward him and knocked him unconscious” (3). Somehow, that piece of debris happens to stay with Kazumasa after he fully recovers from the bruise left by the impact. The idea of a fiery mass, even a “tiny piece,” descending from the sky to collide with the human body is threatening enough. Caroline Rody connects the menace of this “flying mass of fire” (3) with “the atomic bombings of Japan and the mutations it bred,” identifying “a post-Hiroshima consciousness of the threats of human excess to a fragile environment” (629). Jinqi Ling,

on the other hand, draws a parallel between the falling debris and Baudrillard's idea of capitalism as "an orbiting satellite that threatens to come down to earth" (94). The ball falls out of the sky to attach itself onto Kazumasa's head, and will completely alter the course of his life, in what may be "an example of how globalized capitalist forces are able to disrupt and reconstitute" the individual and the local (95). In both of these interpretations, the ball takes on a host of foreboding social and ecological implications, compacted into a tiny but significant physical presence.

Yet it should be noted that the relationship formed between young Kazumasa and his ball remains benign, and even takes a turn for the positive throughout his childhood in Japan. His mother first discovers this "tiny impudent planet" now inseparable from her son's forehead, and considers it a threat to "the bonds of parent and child, literally setting them a world apart" (*Through the Arc* 4). The parents' apprehension, however, soon gives way to an "accept[ance] as they might a pacifier or a battered teddy bear" (5), viewing it as a harmless object of emotional attachment. Indeed, the ball becomes a source of comfort and pride for young Kazumasa, "never again in his life alone" (5). If their inseparability makes it seem "as if . . . some magnetic force [is] attaching [Kazumasa's head] to the whirling sphere" (4), their growing relationship shows that it is the ball that is affected by, and belongs to, Kazumasa.

The ball displays a similar magnetic property in response to various aspects of their world, from the worn-out spots in the metal train tracks, to the Matacão plastic reserves beneath the Amazon rainforest. But more than that, the ball's gravitation and movement come to reflect Kazumasa's physical and emotional states as much as their surrounding environment. Attached to Kazumasa since childhood, the ball's "merry" movement matches "the same wandering pattern of the boy following the intuitive dance of his growing muscles" (5); the invisible, internal

states such as a child's growth, and the joy with which the child adjusts to it, are rendered visible through the ball. This is not to say that such interpretation of the ball's movement is entirely without anthropomorphic projection. When its usual rotation in place is described as "protective" during the night (5), or when Kazumasa "fe[els] weary" from his repetitive job at Tokyo and observes how "his ball, too, seemed to hang sadly over his nose" (7), he seems to be reading his own emotion from the ball rather than making an objective observation—which the ball, the omniscient narrator, simply relates back to the reader. Yet there seems to be a more direct relation between the ball and Kazumasa's emotional states, especially in their mutual reaction to Brazil and its music.

Once "the man of the moment" in his job of monitoring railways all across Japan with the "idiosyncrasies and precision of his ball" (6), Kazumasa is later replaced by an electrical device and demoted to merely circulating Tokyo subway lines. His weariness motivates him to follow an "irresistibl[e]" impulse that draws him and the ball towards Brazil (8). Immigrating to São Paulo with the help of his cousin Hiroshi, Kazumasa takes on a similar job with the city's subway system and begins monitoring tracks again—except he now discovers an unexpected difficulty with his work. The movement of his ball, once a precise marker of the state of tracks passing beneath them, is now affected by "a music other than the steady screech of metal against metal" (31):

Kazumasa noticed me bobbing to the beat of the congas and realized his own physical empathy with the events below. In fact, lately he had had trouble concentrating on his work with the São Paulo Municipal Subway System. As the months passed, he found himself more and more distracted by the pulsating beat from someone's radio or even the memory of the weekend congas on the street below his window. . . . His mind would wander from his work, and all of a sud-

den, he would be aware of me bouncing off the last measures of a popular bossa nova.

Kazumasa's empathy is something more than his growing "special intimacy" with the São Paulo neighborhood he has chosen as his new home (10). It is something distinctly "physical," the vibration and rhythm of the music affecting his body in invisible ways as had the "dance of his growing muscles" of his childhood. What is truly unexpected is that the ball not only reproduces in its movement the external music and Kazumasa's bodily reaction to it, but reflects "even the memory" of such an experience. The ball begins from simply sharing physical proximity with Kazumasa; then, acting as an extended appendage mirroring Kazumasa, it becomes so deeply involved with his emotional and psychological state, to finally become a medium of memory itself.

In this increasing entanglement between the ball and Kazumasa, the ball itself transforms from an alien, non-human entity into an almost humanlike voice with its own identifiable quirks. The ball repeatedly emphasizes its non-human qualities, attached to Kazumasa yet experiencing their surroundings differently. When they make the move to Brazil, the ball notes that it "was . . . oblivious to the heat, the humidity, the insects, and the stink of sweating humanity," all of which Kazumasa must suffer through in the course of his new job (9). Impervious to such physical conditions of the outside world, the ball instead possesses "simple clairvoyance" (13) over all the people and events that would eventually cross their path, setting it apart from the human Kazumasa who must undergo those experience without such prior knowledge. Yet the ball's voice, if began in "an enchanting but eerie monotone" claiming to be anything but human (Ling 87), turns quite charming throughout the novel, even personal. While the ball narrates the relation between its bobbing dance and Kazumasa's empathy and memory in a detached

manner, it also passingly, but proudly, comments that “I could really move in those days” (*Through the Arc* 32). For something that emphasizes its distinctly unfeeling materiality, declaring “[my] clairvoyance was somewhat limited to fact; human emotions often escaped me” (148), the ball certainly notices emotions that Kazumasa does not articulate or even realize. Between the two, the ball is the first to recognize that “Lourdes liked Kazumasa very much” and Kazumasa unknowingly returned that affection (54). Nearing the end of the novel, all of Matacão plastic is consumed and disintegrated by an unidentified strain of bacteria; this catastrophic event is heralded by the “death” of the ball, also made of the same plastic. In spite of its insistence that “I felt nothing but my own disappearance, bit by bit, particle by particle” (179), the ball responds with empathy to Kazumasa’s grief, noting he “alone felt pain, and it was sad to see this” (180). The ball’s voice develops into a human-like character within this relationship—Kazumasa’s “human emotion” such as grief and pain comes to inflect the ball’s memory and narration, just as it reproduces those states in visible movement. The ball arrived in an invasive, one-sided attachment, and Kazumasa similarly treated it with a one-sided ownership as *his* ball, “his pet and friend” (5); but the relationship settles into a kind of symbiosis that places Kazumasa “and my name, ‘The Ball’” side by side (168). Yamashita later reflects that the very name of this character, Ishimaru, means “round stone or perhaps rolling stone” and connects him to this strange ball of a narrator, “his *ishi-maru*” (“Call Me Ishimaru” 64-65). The character Kazumasa Ishimaru, then, is made of two indispensable parts: Kazumasa the human and the *ishi-maru*, the ball-narrator “I.”

In her early analysis of *Through the Arc*, Rachel C. Lee notes that the novel broadens the category of Asian American literature beyond the U.S. borders by delineating the widespread impact of globalization across Japan, the U.S., and Brazil. Yamashita balances the personal

narrative of Kazumasa, who is both a reincarnation and a radical transformation of the Asian immigrant figure, and the wider scope of other characters from varied backgrounds, by entrusting the task of narrating to "a first-person narrator that has both a localized perspective and yet can panoramically detail five other 'lives' set in disparate regions" (Lee 115). Rody also observes that the "global voice" of the plastic ball offers a means for Yamashita to lead readers "across the divides between old narratives of North and South, East and West . . . to conceive a global ecological imperative" (637). But as Lee has noted, it is significant that the ball has a "localized perspective" as well as a global one; it must stay attached to Kazumasa's forehead for the most part of the novel, and in fact, separation is considered detrimental to both. When Kazumasa is recruited by the GGG, the megacorporation holding control over the Matacão plastic, he effectively disappears—forced to work in secrecy while targeted by industrial intrigue. Meanwhile, his cousin Hiroshi receives a false ransom note wherein he finds "the lifeless remains of my purported form, having spun to a dead stop" (*Through the Arc* 130). The figure strikes "horror" in Hiroshi as if he were looking at any other body part, making him fear for Kazumasa's life (130). Indeed, the ball must "die" for the separation to finally happen, alongside the complete disintegration of the Matacão. Its voice and memory up to the point of death must shuttle between the transnational clairvoyance and its physical and narrative entanglement with Kazumasa's physical and emotional states. Kandice Chuh's observation of *Brazil-Marú* (1992), Yamashita's another work written around the same time as *Through the Arc*, may also apply here: "Yamashita's interest . . . is rather in articulating the variegated sets of relations among persons and places that animate the individual narrative" ("Of Hemispheres" 629). The omniscient narrator "I" of *Through the Arc* is certainly different from *Brazil-Marú's* various narrators. Yet the "emphasis on relationality" that refuses a single,

“individual authority . . . in favour of collaborative storytelling” (629), leaves room for that omniscience to be questioned, its voice re-examined as a humanlike “character” embroiled in the events of the novel through its relationship with Kazumasa.

Yet the narrator is not human; its materiality is emphasized equally alongside its surprisingly human tone of voice. Preceding criticisms have made valuable observations that link the narrative voice with its plastic material and the wider region of Matacão. Focusing on the Matacão plastic from an ecological, materialist perspective, both Treasa De Loughry and Shouhei Tanaka address how *Through the Arc* delineates the neoliberal, multinational capitalist system and the industry’s process of extracting and commodifying petroleum, the source of plastic. De Loughry reads the excavation of Matacão in relation to the history of Brazil’s industrialization. The discovery of plastic linked with destruction of the rainforest, as well as the monopoly GGG holds on the material that excludes its locals, points to “the unequal displacement of plastic pollution to peripheral regions [as well as] allegory for the dispossession . . . through petro-dollar financed infrastructural projects” (335). Tanaka furthers the connection to petroleum and plastic industry from a narratological perspective, interpreting the ball and its “material composition [as] oil that is compacted and translated into a miniaturized planetary narrator . . . provid[ing] focal access to omniscient oil that speaks” (196). The mutual attachment and influence between the ball and Kazumasa is likened to “petroleum’s dual nature as subject and object,” an “ironic entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies” where the fuel that results from human industry and commodification in turn motivates and impacts the same structure it resulted from (197).

As Tanaka notes, however, the formation and extraction of Matacão plastic is not a direct reflection of the oil and plastic industry, but rather a fantastic way of “revers[ing] the sequence of extractivism’s arcs [to



reconcile] petroleum waste with resource" (197). When the source of Matacão is finally revealed in the novel, it turns out that this miraculous plastic is not a naturally-formed "new" material but created out of "landfills of nonbiodegradable material buried under virtually every populated part of the Earth," melted, pressed and transported through geological forces to its final resting place beneath the Amazon rainforest (*Through the Arc* 177). The new, stronger plastic is only a product of older plastic in disuse, accumulated and unable to decompose, to the point that the Earth itself was seemingly forced to accommodate that waste in some different form.

Resembling this inversion of the industrial process from raw material to finished product, it is notable that the reveal of Matacão's origin comes at the very *end* of the novel. Indeed, the ball, in spite of being made of the same plastic, and imbued with a narrator's omniscience that transcends space and time, does not assert the same clairvoyance when it comes to the Matacão. When the strange material of Matacão is finally revealed to be plastic, halfway through the novel in an eponymous chapter, the ball prefaces that information with a disclaimer: "I don't claim to be an expert on the Matacão, but I did gather some interesting facts" (83). And the ensuing section is exactly that—gathered facts such as a comprehensive survey, scientific reports, and a wider view of the "human life adapting itself to the vast plastic mantle . . . [that] had become a stage of life and death" (89-90). Nowhere in this significant, scene-setting chapter does the ball mention anything of its own relation to that plastic material. The discovery of its magnetism to the Matacão is strictly limited to Kazumasa's perspective, who is devastated in his anthropomorphic empathy thinking that "I [the ball] had a family of my own . . . I had been denied all these years" (94). The ball itself seems unaware of any metaphorically familial ties, but only expresses its confusion over the inexplicable pull toward the plastic ground and

its sympathy for Kazumasa, who is pulled along with it: “I felt sorry . . . but there was nothing I could do” (95). The ball’s ignorance of, and detachment from, its connection to the Matacão makes it difficult to characterize it as solely human or plastic. As Molly Wallace observes, it is still the same “charismatic anthropomorphized character with whom we might identify and sympathize,” yet is also a “representative of that larger agglomeration of waste” (144). The ball as a human-material entanglement not only points toward a global perspective past the bounds of Asian American literature, but crosses the human and non-human boundary also, to “insist[] on the elusively pervasive reach of plastic and other nonbiodegradable waste” upon all forms of life (142).

The half-human, half-plastic “I” creates a “vision of a place that is committed to both the specificities of the local and the abstractions of the global” (Heise 147). The question remains, however, of what it means for that same “I” to die before the novel can even begin—and become resurrected as a “memory.” The intimacy, even friendship, that Kazumasa and the ball share is what makes the human-material, local-global hybridity possible. If so, the ending to *Through the Arc* where the ball disappears along with all of Matacão plastic, and Kazumasa with his newfound “unobstructed view” (180) joins Lourdes and her children on a utopian farm teeming with fertile plant life, seems to regress toward a simple dichotomy of banishing artificial plastic and returning innocent humans to nature. Ursula Heise critically views this conclusion as a temporal displacement, “a somewhat futuristic story embedded in a narrative frame that refers to this story as a long past, without offering any further . . . distant future” (149), closing on a conventional, “pastoral refuge from the global” (138-39). Hee-Jung Joo takes a similar stance, but with slightly more hopeful outlook: “[t]his impossible temporality that concludes the novel signals the limitations of narrative itself to tell the story of the Anthropocene” (86-87), but the “impossibility” of narrat-

ing the futurity may also point towards voices yet to be heard, stories yet to be written.

Regarding this strange temporality of "*futur antérieur*" (Heise 148), where the concluding "future" becomes the "past" for the narrator, Min Hyoung Song emphasizes the simultaneity of experience, "imagin[ing] what shifting and porous borders characterized by time-space compression might look like" (556). Similar to Rody and Lee, Song notes how *Through the Arc* moves beyond the boundary of "Asian American" literature within North America; but also observes an additional, temporal characteristic of boundary-crossing in light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming"—"[t]his sense of being in the middle, with 'neither beginning nor end'" aided by modern travel and communication technologies' ubiquity (564). He reads the novel as a work "struggling to narrate a becoming planetary," a condition that encompasses rethinking and negotiating human social and ecological relations with non-human—that is, recognizing a planetary "interrelatedness that runs along smooth surfaces, comprises multitudes, and manifests movement" (568).

This idea of temporal simultaneity, enabled by technological compression, recalls Yamashita's "Author's note" that prologues *Through the Arc* and describes the novel as "a kind of *telenovela*, a Brazilian soap opera, of the sort that occupies the imagination and national psyche of the Brazilian people" (xv). The characteristic of the *novela* is that it is always newly made, yet reminiscent of all its generic precedents containing the same "basic elements," of which Yamashita offers a few examples: "most likely, the unhappy find happiness; the bad are punished; true love reigns; a popular actor is saved from death" (xv). The genre itself seems to have merged its origin with its end—the goal to "standardize [the public] by example" of popular drama ends up coinciding with "the whims of public psyche and approval" that first gave rise to its purpose (xv). A "pervasive" reflection of the current national image of Brazil is

simultaneously altered by what the Brazilian national public demands. It is a constant, concurrent interrelation staged across the entirety of the nation, which even affects the course of the book. The ball, described as a “tiny satellite” (7), may be thought of as an *actual* communications satellite that transmits and broadcasts each character’s story from varied locations at the same time, the reader moving through each scene as if clicking from one channel to another. The manner in which the ball narrates those stories, focusing in and out of Kazumasa to pan the camera toward others that cross paths with them, is shaped much like film footages cut, edited, and fittingly arranged in post-production to create this *novela*—a memory of the past yet heavily tempered by the present time of its telling.

The narrator “I” as a TV satellite not only becomes the human-material hybrid character, but discloses the structure that creates, broadcasts and conditions each character’s story as well. Another character, an old man named Mané Pena living in the Matacão, reflects on his TV appearances first as the eyewitness to the discovery of this strange plastic mantle, and second, to demonstrate his new cure of bird feathers on ears. He likens the changes wrought in his life through these appearances on mass media, to “one of those actors on TV who slipped from soap opera to soap opera and channel to channel, being reincarnated into some new character each time” (16). Indeed, Mané would undergo even more drastic transformation as both the novel and the Matacão plastic develop with time. The camera footage of his feathers gains GGG’s attention, which leads to him being recruited by the company and conducting university lectures as the “Father of Featherology” (133). As his lectures are taped and broadcasted worldwide, the feather treatment rises into global popularity, aiding GGG’s plastic feather sales. And yet, this global influence Mané gains increasingly cuts him off from his own speech and family. Once feeling as if he were an actor freely moving through

the television network, Mané is later reduced to a passive audience to his own exploits, "these buttons on his remote control . . . bring[ing] up a whole new set of programs, as if his TV were suddenly made to pick up signals from some foreign country" (134). He misses "the old jokes, the old characters, the simple plate" of his past life, but he is "told [this] was the price one paid for progress," the industrialization and modernization of the Matacão (134). Mané's own story, as it becomes entangled with the globalized, capitalist, entertainment-purpose networks that dictates what his TV persona should tell, isolates him further from his own life.

This "progress" of industry, and the communication technology that facilitates and narrativizes it, comes to define other major characters as well—who are first simply affected by the popular *novela* form, but later entangled with both the plastic industry and broadcasting technology. Batista, who seems to fit the role of the "popular actor" of a *novela* with his good looks and kind character—"the sort . . . every Brazilian knew and sensed in their hearts" (10)—becomes a media business himself with his messenger pigeons. Kazumasa and his ball are turned "a household name, like a character in a nightly soap opera" (51) when they begin to offer charity from their lottery windfall; this, in turn, transforms their residence into a "vision of suffering . . . eternal," an endless screening of stories of people in need (76). Chico Paco, who is interviewed on TV as a miraculous pilgrim, and whose popularity over media helps him begin his own radio station, transmits and mediates stories of pilgrimages across the country of Brazil, all heading towards the miraculous Matacão. When Chico Paco is interviewed for his first arrival at Matacão, his friend Gilberto and Maria Creuza, for whom Chico had undertaken the journey, watch him on TV—all the while they themselves are "in turn watched by other TV cameras" (44). This recursive loop extends to the relationship between the text and the reader, where the reader, too, metaphorically "watches" these characters and their scenes delivered

through the voice of the “tiny satellite.”

But if the human characters—and even the ball—are caught up in increasingly isolating structures arranged by the plastic industry and narrativized through commercial TV networks, Yamashita’s presentation of that technology does not solely describe it as a modern “progress,” but bends the seemingly linear course of time to connect it back to a prehistoric temporality. One of Mané Pena’s feather-related lecture reads (70):

“There’s a guy I heard about says we got sensibilities from way back before we were ever born. I mean back generations and generations. So take this other theory I heard about the dinosaurs, that these dinosaurs been changing and changing every generation until now they’re birds. Think about it. Bird sensibilities coming from way back millions of years. . . . Look at TV—they say the pictures are sent through the air by invisible waves.” Mané pointed at the feather. “Principle’s the same here—invisible waves, a force you can’t see.”

In his “science in the guise of folklore” (71), Mané connects the mysterious capacity of feathers with a prehistoric human sensibility, and with the modern, invisible power of radio waves that transmit images to television across the world. In Kandice Chuh’s overview of Yamashita’s works and their temporality, she makes a critical observation that Yamashita’s understanding of “Asian America” is as a “potent fiction, organized by . . . spatial and temporal logics, and that are luminously elucidated by imaginative articulations” (536). Ruth Hsu refers to Yamashita’s later work, *Tropic of Orange* (1997), to identify that where multiple characters’ stories converge to form the novel as a whole, there emerges a “nonlinear model of chaos and complexity”—“the present is impossible without narratives, without the artifice that is history” (94). Chuh identifies such attempts to articulate the complex layers of history that form the present, as a “thicken[ing] time and space” in a way that material,

historical conditions that form everyday life are put to the foreground, into a present "embedded in a geologic, epochal temporality" (537).

And if the space that *Through the Arc* covers, from the western coasts of Japan to the rainforests of Brazil, may be called "thick space," the history as "thickened time" reveals itself in the invisible forces that enable and condition the narrative. To return to Mané's lecture, the satellite's communication technology is linked to the invisible power of feathers, inherited from prehistoric "bird sensibilities." What first seems to be Mané's wild theory, makes sense within the novel when involvement with the Matacão brings a great shift in the communicative technology itself. The "invisible" airwaves are replaced by the Djapan messenger pigeons bred by Batista and commercialized by his wife Tania, turning feathers and the prehistoric memories they carry into a literal means of communication. The simultaneity and ubiquity of technology that precipitates "becoming planetary" (Song 557), also works to compress the course of planetary history into an arc of technological development that proceeds only to reverse back to its beginning. The plastic ball, stating from the start that the characters will converge at the Matacão by the end of its tale (12-13), shares with the birds and their feathers not only its strange "invisible" force of magnetism, but also the predictive power that lands the story where it started. The artificial history of plastic and the natural history of the rainforest and its birds, and the human stories that produce and affect both, all converge onto this liminal satellite "I" that can be both waste and resource as Matacão plastic, both human and non-human in its narration.

The "thick" time that ranges from the prehistoric to the modern, compressed into a simultaneous story regarding the Matacão, leads to an "inherently future oriented" conclusion, "end[ing] in its own rhetorical ambivalence" (Ling 110-11). The ball marks its own memory as "complete," then addresses the reader "you" to pose a question: "Whose

memory you are asking? Whose indeed” (185). The fitting answer to this “whose” seems to be the reader; “the sphere and its story have now become part of the reader’s memory” (Heise 148), and as something that is theirs to keep, it propels an “implicit invitation to articulate new conditions for progressive social change,” a next step in the “cycle of . . . destruction and regeneration” (Ling 111). Perhaps, then, it is more than that the memory simply comes to belong to the reader, forming a “past” vision of history from varied, simultaneous perspectives, but the memory actively draws the reader in to think of themselves as another narrator “I,” brought back by this memory and tasked with “suspend[ing] and expand[ing] her beliefs” to think beyond the ball, to “imagine what else the Matacão is and what else will or can happen to it” (Joo 86). The final scene that *Through the Arc* leaves the readers with is a view of decomposing human buildings in the wake of the old rainforest’s return, “pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same” (185). The following statement that “it will never be the same again” (185) sounds quite disheartening; the perfection is lost, as shown by the still-remaining “crumbling remains of once modern high-rises and office buildings” despite the forest’s process of “slowly breaking everything into edible absorbent components” (185). Yet in spite of these bleaker implications, the “digestion and excretion” converge in the plastic ball’s voice—freely vacillating between affecting human movement and being affected by human sentiments, between raw material and post-production waste. From processing this simultaneity of the narrator, which offers a model of “thickened time” that narrows the distance between past and present, origin and future, *Through the Arc* propels a different memory to take the narrator’s place of “becoming” and continue the story, a cycle “as expected as the great decaying and rejuvenating ecology of the Amazon forest itself” (89).



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ABSTRACT

“Whose Memory You Are Asking”:  
Yamashita’s Narrative Voice of Human, Material,  
and Memory

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This paper considers the strange first-person, supposedly omniscient narrator of Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, through the varied and sometimes contradictory aspects of its human-like voice, distinctly non-human materiality, and role as a narrative “satellite” that mediates human and non-human histories. The plastic “ball” that is attached to Kazumasa Ishimaru’s head narrates the entirety of the novel, claiming a clairvoyance over events happening across different times and localities that exceed the bounds of a human being. Yet this same narrator, in its close attachment to Kazumasa, comes to bear not only a physical but emotional relationship with the man, to the point that it affects a distinctly humanlike persona within its supposedly inhuman narration. This entanglement of human and material, local and global, has been interpreted in terms of Yamashita’s expansion of “Asian American” literature towards a broader view at the global relations that compose an individual narrative. At the same time, the ball is distinctly made of plastic, and more specifically, the Matacão plastic that becomes the focus of each character’s journey to the region. From a more ecological, materialist perspective, *Through the Arc*’s plastic narrator points to a personification of the plastic and petroleum industry itself, revealing the impact of industrialization and waste upon both hu-

man and non-human environment. Taking both sides into consideration, this paper finally takes note of the narrator as a “satellite”—not only mediating the global and local, human and plastic sides of the story, but also embodying the very communication technology that frames the narrative. Likened to a TV satellite transmitting the *telenovela* surrounding Matacão, the ball’s materiality shows how a seeming progress in industry and technology is rather a reversal, arcing back to converge with a prehistoric time of the rainforest. The narrator’s particular position as a “memory,” an already dead entity brought back to retell its narrative, reveals a “thick time” that compresses the history it tells to emphasize a continuity between the past and the present.

*Key Words* narrator; human-material entanglement; global and local; history; Karen Tei Yamashita; *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*