

## ECOCRITICISM AND MAGICAL REALISM IN KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S

### *THROUGH THE ARC OF THE RAINFOREST*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b></p> <p><b>Received:</b> 2018-01-17 <b>Accepted:</b> 2018-02-12</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Ecocriticism; Slow Violence; Magical Realism; Globalization; Deteritorialization</i></p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.26809/joa.2018.3</p>	<p>In her novel <i>Through the Arc of the Rainforest</i> (1990) Karen Tei Yamashita deploys magical realist narrative technique to offer a globally-embracing ecocritical criticism that unfolds global connectivity of peoples, places, and their destinies. As such, she uses a deterritorialized environmental approach, which favors eco-cosmopolitanism over bioregionalism, drawing our attention to the shortcomings of locally-based ecocritical studies that overlook the inextricable political, social, and cultural connections between the local and the global in an age of unprecedented mobility and global modernity. Another environmental issue Yamashita sheds light upon is the fact of slow violence, a violence, as Rob Nixon argues, appears out of sight, and over time. To render this invisible violence visible, she employs magical realism. The intersection between magical realism and ecocriticism in <i>Through the Arc</i> fuels a representational void by giving shape not only to the insidious workings of global capitalism masquerading as “scientific development,” and/or “progress” but also to the slow, invisible environmental violence whose long-term effects bring about human and environmental cost.</p>

In her novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) Karen Tei Yamashita deploys magical realist narrative technique to offer a globally-based ecocritical criticism that unfolds global connectivity of peoples, places, and their destinies. As such, she uses a deterritorialized environmental approach which reveals the indispensable link between the local/the national and the global that leads to the loosening of ties between culture and geography. Yamashita favors eco-cosmopolitanism over bioregionalism drawing our attention to the shortcomings of locally-based ecocritical studies, namely bioregionalism, which overlooks the inextricable political, social, and cultural connections between the local and the global in an age of unprecedented mobility and global modernity. Magical realist elements in the novel not only uncover the seamless link between the local and the global but also the slow violence, a violence, as Rob Nixon argues, appears out of sight, and over time. The intersection between magical realism and ecocriticism in *Through the Arc* fuels a representational void by giving shape not only to the insidious workings of global capitalism masquerading as “scientific development,” and/or “progress” but also to the slow, invisible environmental violence whose long-term effects bring about human and environmental cost. Furthermore, Yamashita's

magical realism specifically highlights how the local and the national are intricately bounded up with the global. As a narrative technique, magical realism addresses the most vital issues central to the contemporary literature on ecocriticism: slow violence, environmental racism, ecological and cultural globalism, deterritorialization, and global connectivity.

Ursula Heise argues that climate change “poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales” (qtd in Huggan 93). Magical realism in *Through the Arc* unfolds these casual connections that are imperceptible to us in our everyday lives. Ulrich Beck contends, “one has to *believe* in fundamentally invisible casual connections between conditions that are often substantively, temporally and geographically far removed from each other . . .” (96). In like manner, Rob Nixon states,

*imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts . . . The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)*

Magical realism in *Through the Arc* materializes anthropocenic slow violence with the magical Matacao plateau in the Amazon Basin. Matacao, the solid plastic plateau in the Amazon Basin, is actually the result of industrial wastes of First World countries. It is not, as Ursula Heise asserts, “local rock,” but “global plastic”: “The local bedrock that reveals itself to be at the same time global plastic waste functions as a striking trope for the kind of deterritorialization as a crucial consequence of globalization” (102). Magical realism, therefore, meets the spatial and temporal challenges of materializing slow environmental destruction. The magical, local bedrock of Matacao in the Amazon Basin acts as the central trope of the novel, uncovering slow environmental violence, the dialectic between the local and the global, and the deterritorializing aspects of global connectivity.

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Recent trends in ecocritical studies have also concerned themselves with the unsettling of boundaries especially with regard to globalization and “the logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 3). Postcolonial criticism has come to understand the relation between “nature” and colonialism as inextricable arguing that environmental issues are “not only central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also . . . inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically -and persistently- depend” (Huggan and Tiffin 6). Pippa Marland, in her comprehensive study on ecocriticism, writes that “[t]his sense of the continuation of colonial practices in new guises has had an important impact on ecocriticism, demonstrating the need to reappraise environmentalism itself” (853). Magical realism in the novel, therefore, offers entries into the layered intersectionality of globalism, capitalism, and environmental destruction, conjures these invisible presences and translates them into a narrative form.

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon, like Pippa Marland, draws attention to an immediate reconsideration of what ecocriticism entails by opening his introduction with a leaked World Bank memo:

*I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that . . . I have always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles. . . Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries? (1)*

What Lawrence Summers, one of the chief economists of the World Bank in 1991, suggests in the memo above not only captures the threats and calamities posed by “slow violence” but also exposes the inextricable power relations between the local and the global, the effects of which are “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2). Rob Nixon’s theory of “slow violence,” refers to a violence “that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Nixon’s basic question concerning “slow violence” is its representation while it “remain[s] outside our flickering attention spans—and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media” (6). According to Nixon, “slow violence” can be made perceptible and visible in the works of authors whose writing “can help the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses” (15).

Some postcolonial ecocritics such as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee have proposed that what is invisible in the process of “slow violence” can be made visible through the use of the narrative device of magic realism. Likewise, Michael Niblett draws attention to the widespread use of magical realism across world literatures “to express aspects of the catastrophic upheavals in ecologies brought about by the expansion of global capital that would otherwise defy representation” (qtd. in Marland 853, 54). Sharae Deckard, the editor of the scholarly journal *Green Letters*, emphasizes the importance of postcolonial literary criticism in contemporary ecological studies for its offering variegated literary responses “to the uneven development projects of global capital and their impact on local environments and subjects (10-11).

In the light of these discussions in late ecocritical agendas, it becomes all the more important to work with an ecological paradigm “more globally embracing—in other words, one in which, while sensitive to environmental justice issues at a local level, is also able to register the temporal and planetary implications of anthropogenic\* environmental destruction in a world where no act or result of damage can be seen as purely local” (Marland 854). This is the ecological paradigm, I would argue, with which Karen Tei Yamashita discloses material practices inherent in globalization and “the logic of late capitalism” that are closely intertwined with slow violence and environmental racism.

Through incorporation of magical realist elements in *Through the Arc*, borders between nature/culture, local /global, organic/inorganic are dissolved and become fluid, disclosing usually obscured, even indiscernible links between environmental crisis and global corporate capitalism visible. As Jesus Benito and his associates aptly argue,

*It is the inclusive nature of magical realism . . . that makes possible the intimation that everything is interrelated. The complicity between received, commonly accepted perceptions of realities and interconnected, pernicious human constructions is dismantled by the world-creating mimetic approach exhibited by magical realism, which allows such interconnections to be fully disclosed. (221)*

This intricate grid of threads is anticipated at the very beginning of the novel by the omniscient narrator, a tiny plastic ball:

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\*As defined by Pippa Marland, *antropogene* is the unofficial name for the current geological epoch, suggested by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000. It signifies the extent of human (or anthropogenic) impact on environmental change since the industrial revolution. The period since the 1950s has seen a rapid intensification of those anthropogenic effects and has been called the ‘Great Acceleration.’ (860)

*These things I knew with simple clairvoyance. I also knew that strange events far to our north and deep in the Amazon Basin, events as insignificant as those in a tiny north-eastern coastal town wedged tightly between multicolored dunes, and events as prestigious as those of the great economic capital of the world, New York, would each cast forth an invisible line, shall I say, leading us to a place they would all call the Matacão. (15)*

*Through the Arc* has an international cast of characters who, with their seemingly separate journeys and stories, finally end up on the Matacão, the mysterious, magical white plastic plateau in the midst of the Amazon Rain Forest. Through the incorporation of magical realist elements, *Through the Arc* not only reveals the intricate web of relations between characters from countries as far as Brazil, Japan, France and the United States, but also discloses the connections between consumerist capitalism, trans-national corporations and global environmental destruction. It is the spinning tiny plastic ball magically attached to Kazumasa's head who assumes the role of the narrator throughout the novel, and thereby tells us how the stories of these multifarious characters intersect and converge in the central metaphor of the novel, the Matacão.

The magical ball's attachment to Kazumasa Ishimaru from the Sado Island in Japan Sea comes as a result of a supernatural "enormous crack of thunder" and "flying mass of fire plowed into the waves, scattering debris in every direction" (4). From then on, Kazumasa and his "tiny impudent planet" "whirling a few inches from the center of his forehead" never separated (7, 6). No sooner does Kazumasa obtain a job in a railway company than he discovers his ball's inexplicable powers to detect any problem in railroad tracks. Before long Kazumasa becomes "the man of the moment," "indispensable to the safety of Japan's national rail system" (7). Kazumasa's fortunes in Japan come to an end when his ball is replaced by a newly invented electronic device with a LCD screen. So, "Kazumasa stepped away from all his years with the Japanese railroads and took the first flight out of Haneda for what he believed might be a distant but familiar place, São Paulo, Brazil," where his new life with his maid and housekeeper Lourdes and her lame boy Rubens is forever changed by Batista and Tania Aparecida DJapan's bizarre, local pigeon message business (9).

Batista sends home messages via pigeons, meanwhile his wife and mother wait on their back porch for the arrival of the pigeon with the prophesying message. "Every now and then . . . one of Batista's messages was a prophecy," as was the case with the one message which read, "The Japanese with the ball will find friendship and fortune in Brazil" (39, 40). Kazumasa wins all the national lotteries and becomes the sole owner of an unprecedented fortune. And when Hiroshi, Kazumaru's niece living in São Paulo, secretly invests his money in the stocks of the US transnational corporation GGG, Kazumaru becomes the major stockholder of the GGG Enterprises, the embodiment of global corporate capitalism. "That's how," as the ball narrates, "Kazumasa and I left São Paulo for the Matacão" (90).

Meanwhile on the Matacao, global "free" market capitalism, represented by GGG, is capitalizing on any profit promising local phenomenon. J.B. Tweep, the CEO of GGG, the embodiment of global corporate capitalism, with his three arms, and his "trialectics" policy of "efficiency" (56) represents "the logic of late capitalism," in its blind exploitation of natural resources as well as human beings, especially those in Third World countries. Through the motif of J. B. Tweep's three arms, we are introduced to rampant capitalist greed: Tweep's "grabbing" third arm, his "trialectic efficiency" (75), which denote the preference for Third World countries for easy exploitation; his triple motto "Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité" (123), a discourse used to disguise the exploitation and greed underlying transnational capitalism with its "corporate business sense" (53). In this sense, the American J.B. Tweep's three arms are but the tentacles of an octopus ready to grasp and exploit any opportunity, whether it be

natural resources or human beings. Given the European and US imperialist ventures into the Amazon throughout history, the three-breasted Michelle Mabelle, the French bird professor, “who happened to be doing her thesis on the rare Brazilian tanager,” and who comes “from a long line of bird lovers,” (74) represents the “discourse of tropical science held over from the earliest European imperialist ventures into the jungle” (Bahng 125). Therefore, the marriage of Tweep and Michelle Mabelle, their excessive sex adventures with their magical, mutant bodies reveling in “insatiable lust” denote the greed of the European and US colonial and neocolonial enterprises in the Amazon. “J.B. and Michelle attempted to exhaust the possibilities of unmitigated pleasure” in love-making (123), just like the GGG exhausted the labor, culture, and land of the Amazon Basin to satisfy its capitalist “lust” for the rich natural resources in Third World countries. With their mutated bodies, Michelle Mabelle with her three breasts, and J.B. Tweep, with his three arms, represent respectively the insatiable lust and the greed of early US and European incursions into the Amazon in an era of global corporate capitalism.

Mané Da Costa Pena, a regional healer indigenous to the Amazon Valley who cures people of their afflictions and ailments using magical feathers, is soon discovered by Tweep, who wants to make it world-wide phenomenon “akin to Coca-Cola.” GGG public relations people were promoting their product as one of those projected to become a part of American life, like coffee and orange-juice at breakfast or potato chips and dip”. The pricing policy of the feathers, as Tweep sees to it, would depend “on the availability of the source”: The rarer the bird the higher the price. Tweep wants to make the best out of this local folklore; what he aims is to “close a series of five-year deals to beat the rising prices,” but feather distributors are never for long-term deals for they “could see that the future heaped in gold feathers, speculating that it could be the biggest rush on Brazilian resources since gold was discovered in Serra Pelada back in the eighties” (78). While Tweep’s tentacles pull any string in Washington, New York and Brazil to enable the entry of feathers into the American marketplace, the GGG’ New York headquarters are duplicated on the Matacão: “J.B. simply had a twenty-three-floor office building constructed in Florida and flown in piece by piece, office by office, secretary by secretary, manager by manager, “because “[h]e wanted GGG’s presence to be felt immediately” (76) in the Amazon Rain Forest. Soon, not only the local folklore is commodified by transnational corporate capitalism, but also the indigenous Mane Pena himself becomes a commodity in the hands of Tweep and global media. The buzzing watch around his wrist which buzzes all the time so he knows he has got to go somewhere, whether it be a press conference, a TV talk show, TV lecture, a seminar, classes or lectures at the local college, an interview or posing for the photographers. “But every day, they had something else for him to do” (120), therefore “very rarely now could Mane Pena be found at his favorite spot at the old cafe” (121) where he used to “banter with his cronies” (77). As GGG’s “feather guru,” Mane Pena has been incorporated into the ever-expanding frontier of global capitalism in Amazônia.

Once, Mane Pena, like other Indians living in the Amazon Forest, “wandered the forest . . . fishing, tapping rubber and collecting Brazil nuts” (16). Then, he was “a simple farmer on infertile soil” (121), where there were once rubber trees. Clearing the forest ground by bulldozing or torching it to the ground was one of the “models of *development* devised by Brazilian technocrats as a rational way of incorporating Amazônia into Brazil’s capitalist economy (Barbosa 15, emphasis mine). When “the rains . . . the wind and the harsh uncompromising tropical sun” hit the region, “[e]ven Mané’s mud-and-thatch house was eventually washed away,” leaving uncertain the fate of indigenous people, who do not typically have formal title to the forestlands on which they subsist. “The primeval forest was not primeval” any longer; tilling the earth, “tapping underground water sources” was

impossible. What was left behind of the “primeval forest” was “an enormous impenetrable field of some unknown solid substance stretching for millions of acres in all directions,” namely the plastic Matacão plateau, which with its magical, inexplicable features, attracted “[s]cientists, supernaturalists and ET enthusiasts . . . from every corner of the world” (16). As Mané puts it, “We thought when we came here that we’d farm virgin soil, more fertile than this piece of land. Twenty-six children.” Now it was impossible to till the earth, farm the land, grow “manioc or tomatoes” but this strange place is “fertile in a different way;” “it grows buildings” (77). Having no choice over the fate of his family, Mané had to yield to “the government’s offer to live in low-cost, riverside condominiums built on the edges of the Matacão,” which were later bulldozed by a private real estate agency, and replaced by “American franchises wedged between and under exclusive penthouses, with heliports and hotels. Tourists stomped over the Matacão, billed as one of the wonders of the world, and it was considered chic to get a tan on the field” (17).

Mané’s third life began when he and his feathers were discovered by Tweep, who provided him with an office in the GGG headquarters on the Matacão, which replaced his old “mud-thatch” in the Amazon forest. Like the forest, Mané had been tamed, “civilized,” and rendered “efficient” by Tweep’s trialectics. Yet, in the meantime, familial and communal ties had been broken; as the title of part five of the novel, “More Loss,” aptly signifies:

*One day, Dona Angustia got tired of feather talk, the buzzer on Mane’s fancy watch, autograph parties for books she could not read, photographs of old Mane on the Matacao at sunset and the constant crowd of pushy interviews and researches . . . Mane Pena had stepped, barefoot, into a world where Angustia could not follow. She wondered where the old Mane Pena had disappeared to, longed for the old days when she could send one of their youngsters to the open cafe to fetch her husband for dinner. She took the embroidered lace towels off the tables and the TV, hauled off the sofa she had brought with her from her first marriage, packed the young ones up and left.*

*The older children had already slipped off one by one to a variety of jobs in distant cities in Brazil. Mane Pena rarely saw his family anymore. . . It was not the same, not the same full house of poor but generous people who shared everything they had. (150-51)*

Another local type whose story intersects with the GGG on the Matacão is Chico Paco, a religious pilgrim turned radio evangelist after he walks barefooted to the Matacão to carry out the promises made by his invalid friend Gilberto’s grandmother Dona Maria Creuza, who had prayed to Saint George for a miracle: that Gilberto, her grandson and Chico Paco’s best friend, “might once walk again” (26). “Maria Creuza had promised Saint George that if her prayers were granted, she herself would walk barefooted to the Matacão and erect a shrine in his honor” (27). Miraculously, Gilberto walks again, and Paco volunteers to make the trip to the Matacão on bare feet. From then on, Chico Paco’s simple life changes forever. Never again does Chico Paco see “the beautiful multi-colored sands, the rainbow of changing layers strewn before the azure waves, the salty wind at his back as his jangada—a flat raft with sail-thrust itself out to sea” (26). The coverage of Chico Paco’s pilgrimage to the Matacão by the media makes him a religious cult worshipped by his “New Disciples. “Long before, pilgrimages and people’s prayers from all over the world are gradually transformed into a profit-making business with Chico Paco’s own radio station and “the new parent institution, the Foundation for Votive Pilgrimages” (130). “Radio Chico was now a bustling entity with new and popular programs, eager sponsors, and thousands of new listeners every day. There were bills to be paid, accounting to oversee, meeting to attend . . . plans to develop.” Radio

Chico becomes a profit-oriented “operation . . . bursting at the seams, expanding in every direction without control” (163). It is now the epitome of a new evangelist era brought about by the media, capitalizing upon religion, money, and fanaticism.

The incursion of global corporate business into the Amazon forest also deterritorializes Batista and Tania Aperecida's simple tenement life after Tania turns the local pigeon breeding into an international phenomenon. Djapan Pigeons first carried greeting messages all over Brazil, then they were used for advertising consumer goods such as “the pompa soap,” or political candidates. Next, “there came the idea of using pigeons as votive messengers”. “Every day, dozens of new callers telephoned in with donations and requests for pigeon pilgrims” (133). Finally, when one of Batista's birds sent from the Matacão “arrived in New York at the revolving doors of GGG Enterprises, carrying one of Batista's cryptic notes, which simply read, ‘Feather,’” not only did the Djapan Communications go international, but also a speculative earthquake hit the Wall Street, skyrocketing GGG stocks in the global market (135). From now onwards, Batista's prophetic messages would forever change his life, just like Mane Pena's magical feathers had forever changed his:

*Overnight, the fame of the Djapan pigeons had spread around the globe, and Batista was suddenly accosted by business proposals, pigeon enthusiasts, and reporters from all over the world. A market astrologer from New York, anxious to propose regular pigeon flights carrying Batista's messages directly to his Wall Street office, called daily, trying to develop a proposal that would appeal to Batista. ‘Just start something up for me. Anything,’ the market astrologer pleaded on the phone . . . ‘This is Wall Street! You name your deal!’ (136)*

When Batista's prophetic message, which was never intended for the Wall Street, miraculously finds its way to New York, Tweep loses no time to exploit Batista's magical prophecies and his world record breaking pigeons to justify “GGG's inroads into the *science and development* of the feather” (135, emphasis mine). If Mane Pena's use of feathers, which he intended for the health and good of community, had been turned into “the destruction of thousands of beautiful and often extremely rare birds,” Batista's enthusiasm for pigeons had been turned into a global business, rendering him, like Mena Pena, all alone, hopelessly missing his wife Tania, who is now afflicted with the global disease of movement, constantly moving between cities as far as New York, Roma, and Paris to close new deals.

Kazumasa's rotating magical ball's mysterious attraction to the Matacão never misses Tweep's attention. GGG Enterprises, “a great functioning miracle, a living, breathing organism that fell to the Matacão from the sky,” now directs its corporate tentacles toward the Matacão plateau, which has been discovered to be composed of some sort of magic plastic, some incredible, magical stuff, “stronger than steel,” “totally moldable,” and “extremely resistant” (112,13). For Tweep, Matacão plastic was more precious than gold for its flexible nature and its magical feature to imitate the form, color and texture of anything would start the “Plastics Age”: people would even be eating plastic food (143). Therefore, Kazumasa and his ball become instrumental in Tweep's “insatiable lust” for new deposits of the magical plastic. Kazumasa and his ball are virtually kidnapped to be travelled “up and down and all over the state of Pará to find the very spot where [the ball] had been pulled, presumably by another deposit of Matacão plastic. These arrangements were steeped in secrecy . . . GGG Enterprises would have Matacão plastic, or nobody would” (131). Naturally, for GGG, as the epitome of global corporate capitalism, money had no frontiers: J.B. Tweep would not be satisfied with the extraction of every deposit of magic plastic in “every pocket of virgin tropical forest within 20 degrees' latitude of the equator;” he “had plans to send [Kazumasa and his ball] to Greenland, to central Australia, and Antarctica” (149). GGG's corporate greed

for natural sources all over the world exposes the inextricable connections between global corporate capitalism, and environmental as well as cultural destruction.

GGG Enterprises conducts its capitalist, exploitative maneuvers in the Amazon under the guise of “scientific, non-profit research,” “committed to environmental conservation” (113). Despite these fictions of “benevolence” and environmental responsibility, the connivance of governments, IMF, the World Bank, and transnational corporations to exploit the earth’s resources, and their undeniable role in the ecological crisis are unveiled by the magical ball narrator: the unprecedented amounts of money “pour[ing] from the U.S. GGG Enterprises into its Brazilian counterpart on the Matacão” because of Brazil’s debtor-nation IMF agreements” (75, 76); “acres of flooded forest,” “great government hydro-electric dam projects; hundreds of species of plant and animal life bulldozed under” (144); the chemical runoff from GGG’s secret mining of the Matacão (160), deforestation (16), “mining projects tirelessly exhausting the treasures of iron, manganese and bauxite,” “burning and charred fields recently cleared and parted for frantic zebu cattle; ”excavators, tractors and power saws of every description;” “drought-ridden terrain, the sun-baked earth spreading out from smoldering asphalt, weaving erosion through the landscape” (210). Lawrence Buell’s contention that human history is implicated in natural history (8) finds its narrative voice in the magical ball-narrator, who disrupts taken-for-granted realities, which, in turn, provides us with a deeper understanding of a violence otherwise covered, or dismissed.

As the title of chapter V, “More Loss,” indicates, the more GGG enterprises exploit the resources, culture, and labor of the region under the banner of “scientific research and progress,” the more devastation and loss plague the land and its inhabitants. The invisible toxic runoffs from the Matacão mining process by the GGG Enterprises cause genetic mutations in rats that “were found to develop fangs and tiny horns and an eager appetite for blood” (160). The typhus endemic transmitted by real bird feathers kills thousands of people. To stop the endemic, insecticides are used only to exterminate all bird species in the Amazon. “The authorities were adamant: no birds could be spared if the disease were to be completely eradicated” (199). DDT bombing the forest left “a dense fog over everything—the town, the Matacão, the farms and plantations, and the beautiful and still-mysterious forest.” (201-2). Poison –bombing not only annihilates birds but also human beings:

*Not only birds died, but every sort of small animal, livestock, insects and even small children who had run out to greet the planes unknowingly . . . Millions of birds of every color and species . . . filled the skies, pressing the upward altitudes for the pure air, but the lethal cloud spread odiously with sinister invisibility. The Matacão was soon covered, knee-deep with the lifeless bodies of poisoned birds. Indeed, for countless days and nights, it rained feathers. (202)*

The indiscriminate choice of victims by the typhus endemic points to a larger problem in terms of environmental destruction. What started as a local epidemic now targets the whole globe. “For the moment, most people assumed that [the epidemic] would confine itself to the Third World, sparing Europeans, Asians and Americans.” The endemic does not “remain with the poor and destitute,” which would otherwise be disregarded by the government authorities but when the statistics “counted more rich people with the disease than poor,” it becomes apparent that environment-blind technological and industrial procedures carried out by transnational corporations in Third World countries have lethal consequences on a global scale (184,82).

When, by the end of the novel, the true nature of the mysterious, enigmatic Matacão plastic is discovered by the GGG researchers and scientists, all the borders between the local/global, human/non-human, natural/artificial, nature/culture, animate/inanimate are



dissolved. In Ursula Heise's words "the native soil itself is deterritorialized . . . turning into a product of human industry and long-distance connections as much as of geological processes in the immediate vicinity" (102). What seems to be local has long been encroached upon by the global:

*The Matacão, scientists asserted, had been formed for the most part within the last century, paralleling the development of the more common forms of plastic, polyurethane and styrofoam. Enormous landfills of non-biodegradable material buried under virtually every populated part of the Earth had undergone tremendous pressure, pushed ever farther into the lower layer of the Earth's mantle. The liquid deposits of the molten mass had been squeezed through underground veins to virgin areas of the Earth. The Amazon Forest, being one of the last virgin areas on Earth, got plenty. (202)*

Matacão is the global dumping ground of world's toxic waste, most notably that of the so-called First World countries. It is but the almost apocalyptic representation of Rob Nixon's "slow violence," which captures environmental racism with all its intricate, invisible power relations. In this case, the targeting of less developed countries for the dumping of the toxic waste of more affluent entails the interdependency of the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of human beings. As Robert Bullard incisively argues,

*Consumption and production patterns, especially in nations with wasteful 'throw-away' life styles as the United States, and the interest of transnational corporations create and maintain unequal and unjust waste burdens within and between affluent and poor communities, states, and regions of the world. Shipping hazardous wastes from rich countries to poor communities is not a solution to the growing global waste problem . . . The practice is a manifestation of power arrangements and a larger stratification system where some people and some places are assigned greater value than others. (165)*

When the dire consequences of global corporate capitalism come to plague the lands as well as the people in less developed regions of the world, as is the case with the Amazon Rainforest, the borders between the local and the global are dissolved, exposing the intricate power relations between the local and the global, the results of which are difficult to discern and quantify. Therefore, Matacão in the novel becomes the very metaphor, with which Karen Tei Yamashita gives symbolic shape to the sinister workings of "slow violence," that is the invisible, amorphous threats "whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 14). The "sinister invisibility" of the poisonous gas hovering above Matacão and its environs, "the insidious dread," which "permeated the social fabric" (188), the typhus endemic caused by invisible lice which transmitted the invisible rickettsia through feathers, the "devouring bacteria," which now invaded and destroyed everything made up of the Matacão plastic, from Chicolandia, bridges, credits cards, computers, roads to "people who had, on a daily basis, eaten Matacao plastic hamburgers and French fries" (207); all these calamities point to the fact that Matacão plastic has slowly and insidiously penetrated into every single aspect of the human life.

Matacão is deterritorialized, which, in turn, problematizes the nature/culture dichotomy. Local calamities wrought by the conspiracies of global corporate capitalism now threaten the whole globe, rendering it "a 'world risk society' of impalpable, ubiquitous material threats" (Garrard 12). The oxymorons, "the once healthy plastic flesh," namely the Matacão, which now exposed "the mechanical entrails of everything" beneath it, the plastic food, and the relation between the inorganic plastic and living organisms problematize the divide between organic/inorganic, natural/artificial and animate/inanimate in the novel.

Kazumasa's magical spinning ball, which is later discovered to be made of the Matacão plastic, further complicates the divide between human/non-human, animate/inanimate. If we read the ball's "undeniable attraction to the large slab," the Matacão, as a confirmation of its inorganic nature (plastic), then the relation between Kazumasa and the ball can be interpreted as the interrelatedness of the natural and the artificial, which is central to environmental critics. If, on the other hand, we read the narrator-ball, described as the "tiny impudent planet" (5), as the metaphor for the planet Earth, "the closest earthly relation" between Kazumasa and the tiny spinning ball can be interpreted as an ecological consciousness forging "a new relationship between human beings and the Earth as a whole," marked by a "deeper involvement in planetary, environmental issues" (Benito, Manzanar, and Simal 227). So, when by the end of the novel, the tiny spinning ball disintegrates because of the plastic-eating bacteria, we are forewarned of an apocalyptic end wrought by environmental injustices on a global scale. "I felt nothing but my own disappearance, bit by bit, particle by particle . . . Within, I had been completely hollowed out by something, by some invisible, voracious and now-gorged thing" (206). The death of the planet Earth is imminent unless environmentally-blind processes of global corporate capitalism are replaced by an ecologically-sensitive consciousness questioning how "we interact and interfere with nature on a global scale" (231).

Magical realist literary technique meets a representational void that ecocritical criticism is interested in. In terms of ecocriticism, magical realism in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* materializes the slow environmental destruction on a global scale through the central metaphor of the Matacao. The fact that the native soil is not native any longer but a cumulative result of First World countries industrial garbage makes it apparent that there is no local/ national ecosystem untouched by global connectivity. The narrative and symbolic techniques of magical realism enables us to transgress temporal and spatial boundaries; it tears at the intricate, global web of land and human exploitation; it implies how the burdens of environmental destruction fall disproportionately on the poor, less developed regions of the world, namely environmental racism; it unlocks unspoken histories and invisible destructions both on ecological and individual levels; it lays bare the intricate relations between environmental destruction and global corporate capitalism. By way of incorporating magical elements into her narrative structure, Yamashita disrupts assumed, normative divisions between human/nonhuman, nature/culture, organic/inorganic, which is central to ecocritical studies. Cathy Brogan argues that the work of fiction is to translate these magical effects into a knowledge-producing form of fiction (10,11). And Lyn Di Iorio and Richard Perez write about "terrible colonial truths underlying the nature of the New World realities and appearing in unexpected moments and locations" (4). The magical Matacao in the heart of the Amazon stands out as the epitome of "New World realities" marked by the insidious connectivity of systems of domination and exploitation: global corporate capitalism, slow violence, and environmental racism. Magical realism, as a narrative medium in *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, calls for significant shifts in place-based, regional environmental discourses, favoring a globally-based environmental consciousness capable of demonstrating the hidden environmental risks and violences otherwise covered or dismissed.

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