Spectres of the Past: The Complexities of Nature and Culture in “Through the Arc of the Rain Forest”

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol8/iss1/4

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Karen Tei Yamashita explores a complex collection of themes within her novel, Through the Arc of the Rain Forest; Yamashita relates her fictional futuristic landscape of the Amazon to real-world issues of environmental colonization, capitalist-driven imperialism, and ecocritical queries into the relationship between nature and culture. As a work of speculative fiction, this novel draws significant connections between an excavated past and an imagined future. Yamashita asks the reader to consider, in the face of degradation and exploitation, how does nature fight back? What is the lasting impact on those forced to shoulder such effects?

Yamashita juxtaposes modernity with history, revealing traces that environmental destruction leaves behind on the human ecology of a region undergoing dramatic topographical and cultural change. Through the Arc’s primary focus is on the relationship between nature and culture—two phenomena intrinsically connected through the transformational force of ecology. A loss of nature can have a devastating effect on the indigenous communities who are exploited in the process and aftermath of environmental degradation.
From the beginning of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, there is a clear sense of tension between Brazil’s past and present. The narrator, a sentient ball of plastic orbiting a young boy’s head, conjures the concept of memory in the first chapter: “Memory is a powerful sort of thing... brought back by a memory, I have become a memory, and as such, am commissioned to become for you a memory” (Yamashita 1). Though the memory’s origin is unknown, it provides a framework to remember and recognize an obscured history. This foreshadowing, which implies a reflection of the past within the future, is relevant when examining the characters’ origins and ecosystem. Initially unblemished and free, the Amazon rainforest is soon encroached upon by an American conglomerate, GGG Enterprises, and consequent destructive capitalism.

In the beginning of the novel, Yamashita depicts life before GGG’s intrusion, representing the indigenous culture through two primary characters: Mane Pena, a poor rural farmer who heals people with magical feathers, and Chico Paco, a young boy who undertakes a religious pilgrimage to help a childhood friend. These characters are portrayed as instinctive, communal, and, to an extent, altruistic; their relationship with the biological and human ecology that surrounds them contrasts strongly with Western principles. In his article, “Pigeons, Prayers, and Pollution,” Shalini Rupesh Jain suggests that this portrayal provides a frame of ethics against which to critique the motives and decisions of GGG Enterprises. He argues that the speculative magic of Mane Pena’s feathers and Chico Paco’s pilgrimage represents not supernatural forces, but the power of the culture’s inherited traditions and their ecocentric morals: “this portrayal of a distinct ethical mode of living is manifest in the indigenous Brazilian characters’ instinctive behaviors and choices...[which] illustrate indigenous epistemologies” (Jain 69). These characters possess an altruistic understanding of their world that contrasts with the utilitarian and exploitative motives that drive GGG Enterprises, and which ultimately devastate the native ecosystem. As these Western motives migrate into the native culture, they effectively speak over the indigenous community’s value system and inherited past in an act of hegemonic violence – which is arguably more devastating to this culture and its sense of agency than the environmental degradation itself.

Jain goes on to suggest that the novel’s incorporation of magical realism predicts two disparate environmental futures that should be expected to follow human actions: “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” (75). This implies that there is a distinct before-and-after for this setting, represented respectively by the altruistic indigenous

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**MAGICAL REALISM:**

*a literary or artistic genre in which realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with surreal elements of dream or fantasy*

**EPISTEMOLOGY:**

*the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge*

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*A loss of nature can have a devastating effect on the indigenous communities who are exploited in the process of environmental degradation and aftermath.*
community, and the commercially-driven, individualistic mindset brought on by Western capitalism. However, it is vital to note that this pre-developmental world is not utopian; even as these ethical characters seem to be in harmony with the world around them, the spectres of capitalism and colonialism still loom in both their past and future. This is hinted at via the Matacao, arguably the central mystery and catalyst of the novel.

The Matacao is an impermeable layer of mysterious plastic material that lies directly under the land which the character Mane Pena has recently repossessed. The presence of the Matacao makes the area impossible to utilize for resource growth. Unfamiliar to the indigenous community, the Matacao is revealed to be a direct consequence of first-world capitalism and environmental degradation. This proves the existence of a previous colonizer similar to GGG Enterprises: “enormous landfills of nonbiodegradable material buried under virtually every populated part of the Earth had undergone tremendous pressure... The liquid deposits of the molten mass had been squeezed through underground veins to virgin areas of the Earth” (Yamashita 202). Indeed, Yamashita presents the earth as a living force, untainted and pure, which makes the subsequent irreversible invasion of waste underneath the Amazon rainforest particularly poignant. The Matacao is a material invasion that has become part of this ecosystem through environmental degradation. The problem is invisible to those responsible yet directly affects the indigenous community. As Aimee Bahng posits in her essay, “Extrapolating Transnational Arcs, Excavating Imperial Legacies,” the symbolic significance of this mysterious plastic lies in its connection to the imperial histories of the Amazonian region that have been purposefully forgotten. Linking the novel to early colonization efforts, such as Henry Ford’s “Fordlandia” project and the rubber industry of the 1800s, Bahng suggests that the Matacao reflects the ways in which exploitation is often overlooked or disregarded. This is seen via the “government sort” that hands Mane Pena a pile of paperwork and promptly leaves him with his infertile land, taking no responsibility for the destruction that preceded this repossession (16). Furthermore, Bahng explains, “[r]ather than animating the Matacao plastic as an invasive foreigner, Yamashita insists that it is the disavowed slag of capitalist overaccumulation and hubris” (Bahng 127). The Matacao is at once foreign and familiar, a reminder of the repeated, continual degradation that this ecosystem has been forced to endure through the creation of enough plastic to form a thick, impermeable layer beneath one of the world’s largest remaining areas of biodiversity.

The mutant nature of the Matacao also points to the hybridization of nature and culture. Yamashita blurs the line between the modern world that arrives in the Amazon via capitalist imperialism and its present native culture. The Matacao is both invasive and inherent to this area, inseparable from the ecosystem. The attempts to separate and monetize the Matacao catalyze the chain effect of losses that define the indigenous peoples’ fate. To further examine this concept of hybridization and mutation, consider the rainforest parking lot: an abandoned lot of postcolonial vehicles discovered in the forest, which has undergone significant change and deterioration. Yamashita describes this place as eerily alien from the rapidly changing cul-

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The rainforest parking lot demonstrates the complex relationship between natural and human ecologies, and how both tend toward growth, adaptation, and mutation.
ture around it and draws attention to the unique flora and fauna it holds, including a new species of mouse: “[the mice] burrowed in the exhaust pipes of all the vehicles... [and] had developed suction cups on their feet that allowed them to crawl up the slippery sides and bottoms of the aircraft and cars” (Yamashita 100). In addition to these newly evolved forms of life, there are also several native species found among the abandoned vehicles. A source of biological mystery and cultural remnants, Yamashita calls it “[an] ecological experiment unparalleled in the known world” (101). Even as the ecosystem surrounding the Matacao is torn apart for resources and its inhabitants suffer the consequences of such exploitation, there exists a liminal hidden space in which nature is slowly claiming dominance over previous ecological impositions.

The rainforest parking lot demonstrates the complex relationship between natural and human ecologies, and how both tend toward growth, adaptation, and mutation. Begoña Simal discusses this relationship in his essay, “The Junkyard in the Jungle.” Simal posits that the natural forces overtaking the abandoned vehicles represent a “Cyborg ecosystem” (Simal 15). The fictional landscape of *Through the Arc* has never been completely pure, and it continues to respond to human activity. Simal considers the tension between these transformative forces through a new lens. “We are indeed living in a ‘transnatural world’ where nothing remains untouched, everything has been directly or indirectly contaminated by human actions, and culture and technology have invaded what used to be the inviolable realm of nature” (16). Significantly, Simal suggests that the opposite is also true—nature can invade and contaminate the realm of human technology. This is the duality of the rain forest parking lot: during the continual encroachment upon the Amazon’s natural resources, the ecosystem fights back to reclaim what has been taken.

The inescapability of the past and nature’s ability to transform and be transformed are also evident in the way the indigenous culture interacts with and is altered by GGG’s imported Western modernity. Characters’ lives change and begin to spiral out of control, getting lost within the rapidly developing capitalist culture that they suddenly inhabit. Glimpses of indigenous memory appear to be over-written, transforming the Amazon. This is evident in Chico Paco choosing to open his synthetic amusement park, Chicolandia, the same day Carnaval begins (a traditional Brazilian festival), believing it will increase the authenticity of his park.

**FORDLANDIA:**

a district and adjacent area in Aveiro, Brazil. It was established by American industrialist Henry Ford in the Amazon Rainforest in 1928 as a prefabricated industrial town intended to secure a source of cultivated rubber for the automobile manufacturing operations of the Ford Motor Company in the United States.
“[Chicolandia would] provide the people with a genuine experience of surfeit and intense celebration, something to release...the dismal atmosphere of gloom which had settled everywhere” (Yamashita 189). This mission statement is ironic given that Chicolandia is made entirely of Matacao plastic, its construction fueled by capitalist interests and the destruction of everything that is genuine about the area – flora, fauna, and the indigenous people. Choosing to open the first day of Carnaval is significant given the context of Carnaval in Brazil: a hybridized assemblage of Catholic, pagan, and Afro-Latinx rituals and traditions. Social conventions are turned inside out as celebrants let loose and playfully inhabit others’ lives and appearances. In her ethnography, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes the holiday’s subversion of societal norms: “Carnaval players spin on an axis of inversions and reversals of high and low, order and disorder, male and female, inside and outside, public and private, freedom and repression, life and death” (481). This concept of role reversals and the inversion of power mirrors the novel’s arc: every character undergoes a dramatic reversal of fate and finds their once-static position disturbed as the world they know is transformed.

Juxtaposed with Chicolandia’s commercialism, *Carnaval* serves to further highlight the complicated relationship between tradition and modernity. Despite the holiday’s appropriation, its original significance ultimately rises to the surface. *Carnaval* has mutated in a fashion reminiscent of the rain forest parking lot, with each defying imperialist impositions and evolving through memory. The parking lot memory is ecological, whereas the memory of *Carnaval* is cultural. As Scheper-Hughes notes in her ethnography, “nothing is ever really forgotten in *Carnaval*... Death’s presence...hovers in the background of the seductive, mesmerizing steps of the samba and the great bounding leaps of the *Nordestino frevo* are played to, and against, death” (482). Such is the case in the *Carnaval* on the Matacao, which signals the end for the transplanted culture of Western modernity built on its surface. This is hinted at amidst the festival: “Chico Paco...would often see a funeral procession solemnly passing the *trio elétrico* in the opposite direction” (190). Despite Chico Paco’s desire to cover up the difficulties his community faces through an artificial re-imagination of their *Carnaval* celebrations, death is omnipresent, and brings a reversal of power that will soon bring GGG’s plastic empire to the ground.

As the Matacao’s artificial ecosystem collapses, GGG’s refusal to heed the warnings of other failed conquests (such as the parking lot) leads to their own destruction as well as that of the indigenous people whose home they have invaded. Their downfall is the result of natural and cultural mutation; a bacterial infection spreads alongside a typhus epidemic, co-morbidly wreaking havoc upon the human population. Yamashita foreshadows this deterioration of environmental and human ecosystems with fleeting yet poignant glimpses into the past and ongoing struggle for dominance. Furthermore, the dramatic changes to the Amazon brought by capitalism grow at such an alarming...
rate that its collapse becomes a question not of if, but when. This is evident to the native inhabitants and eventually to the Westerners: “Tourists soon discovered for themselves what Mane Pena and his family had felt in their guts, that the Amazon Forest was a great decaying hothouse where all sustenance was sucked up immediately by the voracious flora and fauna” (99). As capitalism continues to assert its power, the novel’s tone becomes urgent and its pace increases - finally, during *Carnaval*, the collapse arrives. The ubiquity of this story’s climax is significant: as Yamashita points out, “This disease, like other diseases, was indiscriminate in its choices; it afflicted rich and poor, young and old, good and evil, beautiful and ugly” (182). Despite the implemented social hierarchy of this population, no one is immune to nature, which speaks to the persistence of ecology and its ability to evolve. Not even the monolithic power of GGG Enterprises can stop evolution from taking its course. The ecosystem of the Amazon re-appropriates the rain forest parking lot and the Matacao itself, also gaining control of the artificial landscape that GGG has planted. Thus, technological advancement and environmental destruction are hazardous not only in a surface-level ecological sense, but in natural order and harmony. A natural and entropic retaliation is provoked, with the power to cripple both the original inhabitants and the colonizers.

Where, then, does this loss leave the novel’s remaining characters? Despite the cataclysm of GGG’s downfall, the bacteria and typhus epidemics are not the end of the story. Once it is understood that there is no way to salvage what has been lost, Yamashita interrogates the role of privilege regarding environmental degradation and how it shapes the impacted communities’ responses. For the tourists who came to visit the Matacao’s splendor and the corporations who carefully engineered its attractions, the devastation of the region simply means that they must move on to other ventures. They can afford the luxury of distance and of starting fresh elsewhere, evidenced by the departure of GGG’s employees: “The dense tropical humidity had begun to replace the artificially fresh air-conditioned atmosphere. When the air con-

**TRIO ELETRICO:**
a kind of truck or float equipped with a sound system and a stage for music performance on the top

**ENTROPIC:**
having a tendency to change from a state of order to a state of disorder
ditioning began to fail, most GGG employees photocopied their resumes and left" (208). This description of commercial workers calmly packing up their belongings juxtaposes with the native community below the deteriorating high-rise offices. Unlike the foreigners who can leave without being held accountable for their actions, the indigenous people who have always depended on this environment must remain and deal with the aftermath of everything to which their habitat and culture have been subjected. Just as Mane Pena is given a plot of infertile land and left to his own devices in the first section of the novel, the final section leaves the entire indigenous community with an almost unrecognizable ecosystem, which they must somehow restore themselves. While the corporate employees photocopy their resumes, the native people lead a metaphorically resonant funeral procession:

[They] marched on, day and night, sleeping briefly on the roadside and nourished by the human poverty it encroached upon, continuing for weeks through the festering gash of a highway, through a forest that had once been, for perhaps 100 million years, a precious secret (209).

Here, Yamashita captures the disparity between those with privilege and those without. When capitalist and colonial systems fail, the restoration of the environment falls almost exclusively on the people whose culture and lives have been equally exploited. These people have lost their environmental self-determination and ability to define the human-nature relationship, left only with a collective cultural memory of what has been lost.

In examining arcs of destruction and rebirth through the lens of memory, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* forewarns the consequences of environmental degradation upon both biological and human ecologies. Yamashita constructs a speculative future for the ecosystem, with the complexity and mutability of nature as an oppositional force to technological conquest. Fictional locales, including the rain forest parking lot and the Matacao, serve as high-stakes backdrops that illustrate the ongoing impacts of imposed modernity. Cultural memories of earth-based spirituality and the celebration of Carnaval complicate notions of progress and material expansion, as well as periodic glimpses into the past which also serve to highlight the complex relationship between nature and culture. Ultimately, Yamashita argues that when environmental self-determination is lost, it impacts not only natural resources, but the indigenous culture. This causes a cycle of mutation that perpetually alters the community in its present devastation and in the uncertain, ever-shifting future.

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