Fiction as Nature Writing: Nature Strikes Back in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

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Introduction: Fiction as Nature Writing

In *Farther Afield* Patrick D. Murphy points out that there have been attempts to define nature writing as invariably pastoral with the stylistic characteristics of autobiographic, observatory, and descriptive nonfiction prose writing(19-24). According to him, in the background of such an orientation toward nature writing lies a Judeo-Christian vision that regards alienation as the necessary condition of all human cultures. Indeed, this vision eventually evolved, he states, into Enlightenment beliefs, "of which a crucial element is human alienation from the rest of nature"(82). The prevailing definition of nature writing, maintains Murphy, disregards the fact that fiction can be just "as truthful and often factual as nonfiction" in imparting a certain ecological awakening to the reader. Rather, the novel or short story, he asserts, is more appropriate for some narratives and themes than the essay(26).

Following the steps of Murphy, I am also convinced that fiction should be included in the genre of nature writing. In this light, this essay focuses on discussing how the different modes of representation of the two works—a work of conventional nature writing and a postmodernist novel—convey a similar environmental consciousness, but to a different degree of impact.

More specifically, the essay deals with the theme of environmental issues illustrated in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) by Karen Tei Yamashita in comparison with that expressed in *Epitaph for a Peach* (1995) by David Mas Masumoto. I include *Epitaph for a Peach* in my discussion of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* because I believe that the former can serve as a foil for the latter, highlighting the uniqueness of the latter. Of the two works, Masumoto's *Epitaph for a Peach* can be best described as a typical example of traditionally defined nature writing, while Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is a magic realist novel, in which the author thoroughly explores the relationship between nature and humans. Both *Epitaph for a Peach* and *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* impart an acute environmental consciousness with a uniquely postmodern view of nature, that is, regarding nature as having agency. Yet they do so to a different degree of impact, which arises from their differing modes of representation. In this essay, through the analyses of the two works, I argue that fiction should be recognized not only as a component of nature writing but also as a more appropriate mode of representation in communicating certain themes relating to environmental issues.

The Traditional Definition of Nature Writing

When one hears the word "nature writing," the single author who comes to one's mind might be Henry David Thoreau. To many who have studied American literature as a foreign literature, Thoreau seems to represent an entire genre of American nature writing. In fact, when I first read *Walden* in a survey of American literature course as an undergraduate student in

America, Thoreau strongly impressed me as a writer whose attitudes toward nature are quite different from those of writers from the east. Born and raised in Japan, I had incorporated a view of nature based on Zen Buddhism and Shinto (Japanese indigenous religion) and through the reading of Japanese literature, especially haiku poetry. In contrast to traditional Japanese conceptions, Thoreau's view of nature, as Murphy points out, clearly follows a Judeo-Christian tradition in "its postlapsarian vision of the fallen state of humanity"(52). Because of the difference between the two views, I concluded, at the time, that Thoreau typically expressed the western view of nature.

In order to comprehend Thoreau's philosophy as a representation of a western perspective of nature, it is useful to compare it to an eastern view of nature as it is expressed in selected haiku poetry. First and foremost, in the world of haiku, humans and nature coexist harmoniously without any hierarchy defining them. For example, Matsuo Basho, a seventeenth-century haiku master, describes in one of his haiku the experience of staying overnight at a country inn where he cannot sleep because he is being bitten by fleas and lice while a horse is noisily urinating not far from his pillow. Yet the poet thoroughly enjoys the hardship of his trip, celebrating his encounters with animals and insects as fellow creatures who share the earth as a home. In contrast, Thoreau holds a Judeo-Christian view of nature in that the alienated self regards nature as something that inspires awe and should be worshiped, in which the ego, wounded by the rigors of culture, can be healed. In fact, the narrator in *Walden* depicts the sacredness of Walden Pond by using various metaphors. Significantly,

Thoreau believes that the divine expresses itself to humans through the medium of nature. More important, he holds the perspective that an individual can actually even achieve divinity, once spiritual elevation is completed. In short, Thoreau maintains that the self can be the expression of the divine mind. Moreover, his highest thoughts, Thoreau declares, are divine in nature, deepened and clarified by the mind of God. Thus, when compared with the Japanese view of nature, Thoreau's view of nature is strikingly western in that the latter asserts the self as a superior being, among other entities in nature, who alone is allowed to apprehend the mind of the divine.

Thoreau's assertion of the self unmistakably indicates the characteristics of western individualism. Indeed, when I had read his essay on civil disobedience, I was quite confused by Thoreau's insistence on autonomy of an individual, for I had been acculturated into the eastern mentality in which a group goal rather than an individual will always takes a first priority. One day, therefore, I visited the professor who was teaching the course, a Benedictine nun, during her office hours and brought up my question: if everyone insists on his or her own autonomy as an individual, how, then, can society as a whole function? The professor looked quite intrigued by my question and acknowledged that it was a good question. Strangely, though, she did not attempt to answer it. Later in the day, however, when she came to class, she dramatically announced that a student in the class had saved the other students from taking a pop quiz on that day. Then she introduced my question to the entire class and encouraged us to discuss it. I do not remember what we discussed on that day; however, it seems to me

that I certainly underwent my baptism in American individualism literally through the reading of Thoreau's writing.

The self Thoreau so powerfully asserts in *Walden* is undoubtedly an abstract, immortal, and alienated self of the modern human being — in short, a western male subject. In *Walden*, the narrator describes himself as a "society-loving" man: "I love society as much as most. . . . I am naturally no hermit"(271). Nevertheless, he is quite content with having only a few visitors who come to see him to his cabin in the woods, and he seems to be rather selective in these visitors: "[F]ewer came to see me upon trivial business. . . . I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me" (274). Incidentally, the world of *Walden* is quite masculine. With the exception of the wife of an Irish immigrant in his neighborhood, all the people with whom the narrator comes in contact and writes about in the book are males. Unfortunately, these men are simply incapable of understanding the importance of the spiritual life that the narrator so earnestly emphasizes. For example, the narrator appreciates the simplicity and honest personality of a Canadian woodchopper, one of his favorite visitors; however, the narrator observes that the woodchopper has not developed himself intellectually and spiritually at all: "In him the animal man chiefly was developed. . . . But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant"(277). Consequently, the narrator comes to a blunt conclusion that they are intellectually inferior to him. Hence, the narrator takes a superior attitude toward his neighbors, and he

thinks that they, unlike him, have not come to achieve enlightenment. Thus the narrator of *Walden* isolates himself from his neighbors, which, at the same time, makes him extremely frustrated with the feelings of the impossibility of communication with them.

With his nonfiction prose, Thoreau certainly became, in Murphy's words, the father of nature writing in America(20), although, Murphy maintains, the privileging of nonfiction prose as an accepted mode of nature writing had existed even before Thoreau:

> The idea of nature writing as a self-consciously practiced literary genre of nonfiction — natural history-based and often rhetorically rather than narratively structured prose, but more imaginative, aesthetic, and subjective than scientific natural history classifications — grew up with the nation itself and was firmly established by the time of such writers as Thoreau and Susan Fenimore Cooper, with whom the genre is often initially identified. (3)

After Thoreau, the genre of nature writing, Murphy continues, has been narrowly defined by leading critics of the field as "factual, nonfictional, experiential works of observation and description" of nature(28). Nonfiction prose writing with a solitary, observant white male narrator, therefore, has been established as the norm of American nature writing.

Epitaph for a Peach as a Work of Traditional Nature Writing

Epitaph for a Peach perfectly fits into a traditional definition of nature writing. The book is a chronicle of a year of the attempts taken by the farmer and author Masumoto to keep his Sun Crest peaches alive in the

contemporary American agricultural climate which has come to be dictated by the blatantly profit-oriented, large-scaled agribusiness corporations. Critical of the mechanical, capitalist operation of such companies, Masumoto, a third-generation Japanese American fruit farmer in California, stages his solitary battle to stick to an old-fashioned, full-flavored variety of peach, while other farmers switch to newer, firmer kinds which are suited to longer storage and better display but are bland to the taste. The book is narrated in the first person by Masumoto in a Thoreauvian fashion, describing his farming and philosophizing when taking walks to observe his farm in the course of four seasons. Thus *Epitaph for a Peach* can be described as a classical example of traditionally defined nature writing.

Masumoto seems to be consciously following the style of Thoreau's *Walden*. Like *Walden*, for instance, his chapters fall into the four seasonal categories — spring bloom, summer harvest, autumn chill, and winter hope. Then Masumoto describes his life as a farmer chronologically according to his seasonal labor, thus informing the reader about raising fruit on a California farm and what a farmer's life is like. He closely describes nature in each season, which provides the reader with a structure for reading his book and also with a sense of locality of his farm, which is situated in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Like Thoreau, Masumoto habitually takes walks — by himself, with his family, and with his friend. Although his main purpose for these walks is to survey his farm as a professional farmer, Masumoto often falls into contemplation just like Thoreau. Masumoto reflects, "Farmwork provides many opportunities for contemplation"(17). Throughout the book, Masumoto, like Thoreau, narrates

each episode in detail, from which he makes a certain philosophical statement.

When Masumoto decides to give his Sun Crest peaches another chance to compete in the American agricultural market, he also resolves to farm in a new way — working with and not against nature. In order to realize such farming, Masumoto, for example, shifts to organic composts and to biological methods of controlling pests and weeds. Through such a new way of farming, Masumoto comes to view nature differently from before and, accordingly, adjusts his relationship to it:

> During spring I competed with nature, fighting a war with the weather and pests. My strategy changed in the summer, when I accepted the fact that I will win sometimes and lose other times. The key to farming seemed to be one of compromise, and I accepted this only grudgingly. Then a simple September rain forced me to acknowledge that nature will always, in the end, dictate my work rhythms. In the autumn and winter I farm in a cooperative, collaborative relationship with nature. (228)

Masumoto becomes keenly aware that organic farming demands that he should accept a natural uncertainty such as an unseasonal June hailstorm, which destroys his fruits, and September rains, which drastically damage his raisin harvest. Though agriculture is, by definition, a manipulation of nature, Masumoto comes to realize that he can never control nature.

Masumoto's attitude toward nature becomes increasingly humble. In due time, he comes to acknowledge that nature will always and ultimately control his work. Here Masumoto regards nature as an agent, which

differs greatly from the modern notion of nature as being opposite to culture and passively existing for human discovery for exploitation or reverence. Thus his organic farming leads him to a new perspective of the non-hierarchical relationship between nature and humans. As the book progresses, Masumoto's respect for nature as an agent increasingly enhances. Just as Walden Pond was sacred for Thoreau, the land becomes increasingly sacred for Masumoto and teaches him a more spiritually satisfying way of life.

Like many nature writing authors, Masumoto writes *Epitaph for a Peach* in an autobiographical fashion. Indeed, his land becomes dearer and even more important to him when he thinks about its history — how his family came to own it, and how it was developed as a farm with the collaborative labor of all the family members, including his extended family. Masumoto recounts how his father came to purchase his farm after the Second World War against the opposition of his grandparents. In fact, the grandparents had lost everything during their internment in camps established by the United States for Japanese Americans during the war. Masumoto notes, "My Sun Crest peaches are now part of the history of this place I too call home." He then concludes, "I understand where I am because I know where I came from"(229). Thus Masumoto recognizes that where he is now is due to what his grandparents and parents endured and earned.

Masumoto emphasizes his tie with his family by positively depicting his Japanese cultural heritage. In doing so, he explains such annual events as the Japanese Bon Festival in summer, which is held in commemoration of the dead ancestors, and the Japanese New Year's Day celebration, which,

complete with traditional Japanese dishes, is an occasion for gathering of family, friends, and neighbors. Masumoto also describes such people as elderly nisei (second-generation Japanese American) men, who embrace the ethic of hard work, and his Baachan (grandmother), who is a center of the family life. His farm is thus a family farm historicized by its ethnic history and tended by family labor. The book is, therefore, a celebration of his ethnic heritage and community.

Masumoto is well aware of his social location as an elite farmer. Because of what his grandparents and parents have endured, he now occupies a position of a privileged farmer whose work does not have to be dictated only by financial concerns. Like Thoreau, who was well versed in classical studies, Masumoto is a man of learning who studied sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. After graduating from the university, he became a farmer by choice. By then, his farm had been well established through the collective labor of his family. Moreover, although Masumoto takes great pride in his vocation as a farmer, he is not financially successful and has to depend on his wife, who brings "a main source of income from *off* the farm," as a breadwinner(12). Thus Masumoto is allowed to experiment in his new, organic farming because he is situated in such a privileged social location.

Masumoto fully recognizes his privilege when he observes a neighboring Vietnamese immigrant farmer who resorts to the use of fertilizers and fungicide because he has experienced a poor harvest of small, unmarketable berries as a result of damage from bad weather:

> Vang Houa [a Vietnamese immigrant farmer] then discovers

> fertilizers and fungicides and how the established American farmers grow big berries and escape pest damage. He vows never to farm without some "protection" for his family.
>
> I cannot blame him. . . . Their dreams are built on those strawberries. I don't talk much with Vang Houa about my peaches and natural grasses and new farming practices. His future is too precious to gamble on good weather and riskier farming methods. Risk takes on new meaning when hunger and hope are factored in. (185)

Watching his Vietnamese neighbor, Masumoto imagines that his immigrant grandparents likewise had to "grapple with a new land, a new language, and a new way of farming"(185). Masumoto continues, "I'm the product of a lineage of good farmers. I've inherited their success, which was anchored in hard work. I've been born into the gentry of the landed, a class of elitists who can afford to take risks like trying to save an unwanted peach"(185-86). Thus he humbly appreciates the situation in which he can pursue the lifestyle of his choice because of what he has inherited from his parents and grandparents.

Although Masumoto believes in the merits of his new organic farming, he does not indiscriminatingly promote it to other farmers. This attitude arises from his realization that only a small group of privileged farmers can afford to try an ecologically ethical way of farming. Masumoto reflects, "Environmentalists may applaud my natural farming[,] but they have trouble believing that some of the most innovative and risky alternative farming practices are being undertaken by some of the largest and wealthiest farmers." Furthermore, he contends, "Supporters of

'environmentally friendly' agriculture encourage us farmers to talk with our neighbors and tell our story. What can I say to the Hmong refugee family if they lose both a strawberry crop and the ability to put food on the table? I refuse to become a missionary"(186). Although Masumoto comes to a keen ecological awakening from his experience of organic farming, he genuinely understands the limit of advocating a shift to such an environmentally ethical way of farming. Since he is acutely conscious of different social locations in which different people are situated, he accepts his immigrant neighbor's environmentally harmful, yet monetarily rewarding way of farming. More important, Masumoto sympathetically recognizes his neighbor as a member of the same community: "I simply want to remain friends with my neighbors as we share common ground"(186). Unlike Thoreau, who lived alone in nature and isolated himself from his neighbors, to whom he felt superior, Masumoto is closely tied not only to his family but also to his neighbors from his strong sense of belonging to the common community.

Masumoto's sense of camaraderie is extended even to nonhumans. Toward the end of the book, he recounts an episode concerning an egret. When he was a child, his cousin and he unnecessarily shot an egret just to live out the cowboy dreams "from *Bonanza* and other TV shows from the late fifties"(231). At the time, he deeply regretted this immature act of killing the bird. Now as an adult, he welcomes an egret which comes to his farm every winter: "A white egret comes to my ditch bank each winter. I believe it's an egret. I also believe it to be a spirit that comes to haunt the farm, and I hope it's the goddess of life returning to watch over me"(230).

When he sees the bird, he recognizes it as a fellow creature who shares the earth as a home with him: "The creature stands motionless. Each of us studies the other." He is proud of his farm which has become, thanks to his organic farming, an excellent habitat for the bird and other creatures: "I hope she feels the abundant life in my orchards and vineyards, from the soil full of earth-worms to the diverse clovers, vetches, and weeds. I hope she realizes I now grow grapes and peaches and a habitat for a universe of insects and small creatures"(233). Here Masumoto unmistakably demonstrates an ecofeminist perspective in that he regards the land as an organic entity and embraces the nonhierarchical relationship between humans and other entities who share this, in Carol Bigwood's words, "world-earth-home" as fellow creatures(10).

While farming with nature, Masumoto is painfully aware of the solitary nature of his battle to keep his Sun Crest peaches alive. For him, it is one thing to come to new ecological awakening, but it is another thing to be incapable of finding a market which takes his "naturally grown peaches with a wonderful taste" on a regular basis(186). Out of frustration, he proclaims, "I have lived a wonderful year of discovery only to return to where I was a year ago, looking for a home for my produce. I again begin to imagine an epitaph for my peaches"(189). Nevertheless, Masumoto decides to try for one more year to grow his Sun Crest peaches, considering them as "part of a permanence, a continuity with the past"(210).

In order to accomplish such a challenging task, Masumoto sticks to his own moral philosophies and yet does not try to influence other farmers. In

the book, he imparts the lesson he has learned: "Over and over, though, my struggles were resolved only when I included my family and neighbors as part of the solution. The greatest lesson I glean from my fields is that I cannot farm alone. . . . Farming provides me with meaningful work, a way of life that integrates family, community, and tradition"(229). In the historical landscape that defines his family farm, Masumoto is content. In spite of his awareness of the environmentally unethical practices exercised by other farmers, he finds a solace in his own family farm. He does not, for example, try to enlighten his immigrant neighbor according to his own ideals. In other words, Masumoto's world is small, self-contained, and self-completing. Therefore, he feels that his ecological awakening cannot be promoted further despite its positive praxes.

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest as a Brazilian Telenovela

Unlike *Epitaph for a Peach*, a work of nonfiction prose, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is a fictional narrative; however, it is just as good as a classical work of nature writing like *Epitaph for a Peach* in communicating the author's ecological awakening to the reader. In fact, a fiction like *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* can be a better mode of representation than a nonfiction prose work like *Epitaph for a Peach* in raising certain environmental issues on a global scale. Set in Brazil, the main plot of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* involves the story of the immigrant Kazumasa Ishimaru, a Japanese railroad maintenance worker, and it recounts how he has come to immigrate to and settle down in Brazil. In an Author's Note at the beginning of the novel, Yamashita indicates her

intention to parody "novela," the Brazilian term for soap opera. In fact, Kazumasa's story of immigration takes an unexpected turn, becoming hilariously involved with the stories of other characters from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, including indigenous peoples, an international businessman, and an ecologically conscious ornithologist. Yamashita weaves these stories together in the context of, in Caroline Rody's words, "global networks of commerce, communications, science, and religion"(628). After a massive exploitation of Brazilian natural resources by a multinational corporation and other domestic companies, the fate of not only those characters but also the rain forest itself becomes a focal point in this heteroglossic Brazilian telenovela. Yamashita puts five different narratives together in a magical realist way, relating the stories of those who have been drawn to the mysterious plastic landmass called the Matacao in the Amazon rain forest. Significantly, the narrator of the novel is a small ball that hovers near Kazumasa's forehead.

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest can be described as Yamashita's memoir of the country Brazil, where she had lived for nine years before she moved back to the United States with her "immigrant" family in 1984. In an interview with Michael S. Murashige, Yamashita herself explains her intentions in writing this novel: "It was also my way of trying to pull that experience [her sojourn in Brazil] together in my own fashion." In addition, she says, "Every now and then I meet people who lived in Brazil who read my book and say, 'There's something you *can't* describe that is *here*. And this is how it feels to be in Brazil.' And that *is*. That's why the whole idea of the book being any sort of magic realism is on the edge of

making no sense." What is, then, Yamashita's observation of Brazil? She continues, "Brazil has a very middle-class structure that involves international technology that comes from this country [America] and from Japan, yet next door you have people who have no relationship to that technology or who use that technology in a manner that has nothing to do with it." To illustrate such an example, Yamashita describes an anecdote of a rural resident who goes to a lot of trouble to buy a refrigerator only to use it as a cupboard because of the unavailability of electricity in the area. Yamashita declares, "And that's the kind of thing *Through the Arc* is trying to convey about living in a country that's both developing and developed — and has an Indian and aboriginal culture that is undiscovered and dying" (Murashige 328). In *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest,* Yamashita, then, wants to depict the contradictions that exist in the country of Brazil.

In the novel, Yamashita emphasizes how naturally these strange features coexist in Brazil by narrating the stories of Brazilian characters from diverse backgrounds. These characters include old Mané Pena — an Amazonian peasant, Chico Paco — a young fisherman from the northern coastal town of Ceara, and Batista Djapan and Tania Aparecida — a young couple living in the center of Sao Paulo. In addition, Yamashita creates a Japanese character and an American one whose cultures she is certainly familiar with. One of the characters is Kazumasa Ishimaru, a recent Japanese immigrant to Brazil who settles in Sao Paulo, and the other is Jonathan B. Tweep, an American company executive who heads the Brazilian branch office of GGG, a multinational corporation. Hilariously,

Yamashita creates Kazumasa as a man who has a golf-ball sized sphere rotating around his forehead. In the same way, she gives Tweep a third arm. By doing so, Yamashita indicates an endearing quality about the country Brazil: "[T]here is a very generous and gracious acceptance of strangers and people who come to visit Brazil. . . . I wanted that to be there — the man with three arms or a man who had a ball in front of his head would be accepted. Without question" (qtd. in Murashige 329). Yamashita considers Brazil's openness to strangers as an engaging, attractive, and inspiring quality, and in this novel she tries to depict that quality by juxtaposing the five narratives of these characters from extremely different backgrounds.

In tackling such a task, Yamashita's strategy is to parody the most popular mode of representation in Brazil — "novela," the Brazilian soap opera. Yamashita talks about the reason why she decided to use the form of the soap opera in *Through the Arc*: "The soap opera is sort of the common consciousness — part of the national identity — because the television has become so prevalent in that country. . . . I thought the soap opera would be a good way to talk about Brazil because it's so much a part of the psyche of the country" (qtd. in Murashige 329). In the Author's Note, Yamashita further explains the enormous impact the soap opera has on Brazilian people:

> The prime time *novela* in Brazilian life . . . reach[es] every Brazilian in some form or manner regardless of class, status, education or profession, . . . to define and standardize by example the national dress, music, humor, political state, economic malaise, the national dream,

despite the fact that Brazil is immense and variegated. (n. p.)

At the same time, Yamashita observes, the novela is, more often than not, quite flexible. In the same prefatory note, she continues, "Yet even as it standardizes by example, the *novela*'s story is completely changeable according to the whims of public psyche and approval, although most likely, the unhappy find happiness; the bad are punished; true love reigns; a popular actor is saved from death"(n. p.). In writing *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita thus departs from the realistic mode of representation by the use of the form of the soap opera in that the plots of the novel completely disregard plausibility and progress toward the unexpected and amazing course of events.

Of the five narratives of the novel, Yamashita treats a plot concerning Kazumasa, a maintenance worker for Japan National Railways, as the main plot which gives the sense of a structure to *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. In presenting a complete picture of the world she aims to depict, Yamashita does so because all the other narratives, except Mane's, eventually come to be connected with the narrative in which Kazumasa's story is recounted. Early in the novel, Yamashita relates how Kazumasa is stuck by a thunderstorm as a child and, as a result, acquires a persistent, golf-size ball that rotates around his head constantly. Next, she recounts how Kazumasa, as a young adult, can sense, with the assistance of his ball, how the railway system is deteriorating as he travels across the country, surveying the network's tracks, ties, and bridges. In this, Yamashita immediately asks the reader to accept these extraordinary anecdotes and subsequently follow a series of fantastic stories in the narrative. As such,

her novel differs completely in tone from conventional works that employ realistic modes of representation.

Kazumasa is a new type of immigrant because his journey to Brazil is not motivated by economic considerations. He leaves his home country and goes to Brazil just for a change. In fact, Kazumasa suffered terrific boredom while in Japan. He felt that way because, after the privatization of the Japanese national railways, instead of holding an interesting nation-wide maintenance job, Kazumasa found himself relegated to surveying Tokyo's busiest loop line. Soon he becomes completely tired of the routine work, intensely desiring change. Noticing his boredom, his mother advises him to visit his cousin, Hiroshi, who has settled in Brazil: "Kazumasa's mother kept in touch with her nephew in Brazil because Brazil seemed to be the sort of place that might absorb someone who was different." His mother instinctively comprehends the openness and generosity of Brazil for a person like her son, who is so different from others, which is a grave sin in a country like Japan: "Not that her son Kazumasa had not done extremely well for himself in Japan. . . . But Kazumasa's mother worried about her son's happiness . . . about the future and the nature of true happiness." Among the family members, his mother was the only one who privately praised her nephew's courage to abandon his studies at Keio, a prestigious university in Tokyo, and turn instead to an uncertain future in Brazil. It was she, therefore, who noticed the ball "hanging sadly over Kazumasa's nose and realized that her son's possibilities for happiness in Japan had exhausted the limits of those tiny islands" (*Through the Arc* 10). Here, through Kazumasa's mother's words and actions, Yamashita

expresses her view of Japanese culture as dull and constraining in comparison with Brazilian culture, which is generous and hospitable.

Kazumasa's story in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is about finding a new home in a new landscape. The postmodern immigrant Kazumasa relocates from Japan, a First World lender nation, to Brazil, which is, according to Rachel Lee, "a country in virtual bondage to the International Monetary Fund"(117). There, Kazumasa starts working as a freelance maintenance technician for various Brazilian railways. Meanwhile, he unexpectedly comes into an enormous fortune, generated by income won from Brazilian lotteries. Without hesitation, Kazumasa gives away his money to individuals who flock to his house, asking for money for an assortment of reasons. He does not want anything for himself other than a specially built karaoke shower at home where he can sing out all his emotions alone. Naïve and generous, he survives the final destruction of the Matacao, the plastic landmass that draws other monetarily motivated characters. At the end, Kazumasa finds happiness by marrying Lourdes, his former maid and his true love, and by raising children and tropical produce on a farm in the rain forest. Kazumasa becomes happy because he is open to change. As he is exposed to new neighbors and new cultures with the help of Lourdes, he flexibly adapts to his new homeland, modifying his language, views, and lifestyle. Thus, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest,* Yamashita portrays a successful immigration by recounting a story of the postmodern immigrant Kazumasa.

Kazumasa survives the final destruction of the Matacao later in the novel because he does not, like the other characters in the novel, believe in

the virtue of progress as a given. Indeed, his decision to immigrate to Brazil itself indicates his lack of interest in the material affluence and comfort he could have enjoyed in Japan, which he abandoned in order to seek spiritual freedom and well-being in his new homeland of Brazil. Unlike Kazumasa, however, the lives of the other characters are drastically changed because they espouse the notion of progress and linear development, which originated during the Enlightenment and has been further cultivated in modernism. Human alienation from nature, a key element of the Enlightenment, has also been manifested in both modernism and postmodernism. Significantly, as Murphy points out, "[D]esire in both modernity and postmodernity is bound with the alienated objectification of the natural world as a commodity, and the concept of the commodity is the foundation of consumer societies"(83). Capitalism evolved, based in many ways upon this concept, which most people in contemporary postmodernist society consider as a sign of positive progress. Hence, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, embracing the concept of progress, the characters other than Kazumasa live dramatically changed lives due to their involvement with highly capitalist enterprises that are based upon the commodification of everything, including nature.

One character who embodies the concept of material progress is old Mané Pena, who represents innocent indigenous people in the Amazon forest. While various parties, including the government and a multinational trading company, attempt to help improve the lives of local inhabitants like him, Mané becomes, indeed, a victim of whimsical government policies concerning the use of the land in the Amazon Basin. Originally,

Mané was making a living by rubber tapping, fishing, and collecting Brazilian nuts. Then the government came to clear the forest, allocated him a portion of the cleared land, and told him to farm it. Yet torrential rains washed away the tillable earth, eventually leaving "an enormous impenetrable field of some unknown solid substance stretching for millions of acres in all directions"(16). This land is called the Matacao, and the reporters came to cover the damage of the area caused by the rains. They interviewed Mané, putting him and his family on national television as "illiterate, backward and superstitious people," filing the videotape "under *fantastico*"(17). Mané and his family have no other choice than making a living working at odd jobs in the tourism of the Matacao, which the government has sold to a private company. Meanwhile, Mané finds great benefit in using a feather, that is, rubbing behind his earlobe with it. It works wonders by bringing relaxing and soothing effects, which are better than drinking and smoking, and which can be applied for various purposes, including calming sleepless children. Years after the first broadcast, the reporters come again to do some geographical and historical footage on the area. They portray old Mané again as "a poor, barefoot regional type on national television with another uncredited statement, this time about the feather"(18). After this, Mané becomes a kind of feather guru to teach what feathers of what birds are good for what purposes. He starts lecturing about "featherology" at a local university, publishes books and articles, and appears in many videos concerning the use of feathers. Most important, provided with his own office and beeper, he becomes a consultant to GGG to promote the sales and merchandizing of feathers. Thus

Mané's life changes dramatically, and he seems to represent, for the time being, successful local inhabitants who have improved their lives materially through their involvement with highly capitalist operations that commodify nature.

The lives of Batista Djapan and Tania Aparecida also become better in terms of their financial status because a series of their innocent projects unexpectedly lead them to a capitalist operation of a pigeon message courier business, making them a pair of successful entrepreneurs. While Mané Pena represents indigenous people living in the Amazon forest, Batista and Tania are working-class people who are urban dwellers. Living in the same Sao Paulo neighborhood as Kazumasa, Batista originally worked in "a document processing service as a clerk runner" for lawyers, small companies, and individuals. He "caught buses and subways and scurried all over the city with a vinyl briefcase filled with documents needing signatures on as many as ten pages of their forms"(11). Batista is "a mellow and handsome mixture of African, Indian and Portuguese" who passionately loves his wife Tania, becoming extremely possessive and uncontrollably jealous at times. One day Batista found an injured pigeon on the street and took it home to nurse it, which awakened his love for pigeons. He built pigeon houses and began to breed the birds on the balcony of his apartment. Eventually, he began to use his pigeons for pigeon racing, and in this they soon became champions. In addition, it occurs to him to use his pigeons to carry messages that he spontaneously writes on pieces of paper. The messages, which are delivered randomly, come to signify something relevant to their recipients, often seeming to be

predictions. In an age in which electronic communication is prevalent, Batista and Tania begin a pigeon message courier service, encouraging people to send messages by pigeon on special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries. Batista ceases to be a clerk runner. Yet it is Tania who demonstrates her talent and skills in business. She develops the pigeon message courier business by expanding the network of franchised operation points not only in Brazil but also in other South American countries. She also negotiates a contract with a soap company executive to use pigeon messages in their advertisements. Thus Batista and Tania are another example of people who improve their lives materially because of their involvement with commodification, in this case, of pigeon message courier service, which is a most unlikely, unimaginable commodity for many ordinary people.

Chico Paco is another character who seemingly improves his life exceedingly because of his accidental involvement with massive operations of commodification of a unique commodity, unthinkable to people without a devout Christian background, that is, substitute pilgrim walks. Living in the northern coastal town of Ceara, he is described as having green iridescent eyes; hence, he represents another stratum of the Brazilian population, that is, Brazilian people with ethnically European backgrounds. Chico Paco was leading a simple life as a young fisherman, and he was cherishing the companionship of Gilberto, his childhood friend. It happens that innocent and childlike Gilberto contracted a strange disease, became an invalid, and was confined to a wheelchair. Seeing Mané Pena on television when he spoke about his discovery of the feather, Gilberto's grandmother

comes to believe in the sacredness of the Matacao. While holding a rosary in one hand, she "placed her other hand on her television and prayed to the small saddled figure of Saint George"(26). She prayed for a miracle, that is to say, that her grandson, Gilberto, might walk again. Her prayer was answered, and Gilberto was able to walk again. She promised Saint George that if her prayers were granted, she would walk barefoot to the Matacao and build a small shrine in his honor. The pilgrimage seemed, however, too difficult for the old woman, so Chico Paco took over the mission in her place. Upon his arrival at the Matacao, Chico Paco managed to erect a small shrine in honor of St. George, which received a great deal of media attention. Eventually, people from different regions across the country started to ask Chico Paco to perform the pilgrimage to the Matacao on their behalf and to present their prayers and pay their gratitude in case the prayers were answered. In the end, Chico Paco comes to own his own radio station and broadcasts reports on the progress of the substitute pilgrim walks which are now being conducted by groups of volunteer walkers he has organized. When Chico Paco left his coastal town of the multicolored sands, he was merely a nineteen-year-old fisherman, but his life improved tremendously over a relatively short period of time. Through the portrayal of Chico Paco's material success by commodification of religious acts themselves, Yamashita sharply satirizes absurd, capitalistic operations involving the Brazilian way of spiritual life.

The one character who consciously avoided climbing up the social ladder yet inevitably improves his life materially because of his involvement with commodification of Brazilian nature is Jonathan B. Tweep or J. B. for

short. Through the depiction of Tweep, Yamashita deconstructs a stereotyped image of Americans as people who are aggressively success-oriented. When Tweep obtained a job with GGG, a multinational trading company, Yamashita depicts, he "had resumés that presented him with the qualifications for every sort of job imaginable," but he carefully handed in the one which was coded SCWP (secretarial, clerical, and word processor) and did not include "any extraneous skills like 'supervisor' or 'manager'"(29). "He was what might be called second-best in obscurity or unrecognized talent," Yamashita describes, "but more often, he was stamped 'overqualified'"(30). Like Kazumasa, Tweep is physically different from others in that he has a third arm, which makes him an effective and well-organized worker. At GGG, despite his obscurity and unassuming manner, he eventually found himself in a very powerful managerial position. Meanwhile, he came across a video in which Mané Pena was talking about "the medicinal attributes of his wonderful feather" on national television. Tweep immediately sensed a great business opportunity in the merchandizing of the feather. With his leadership and management skills, therefore, GGG started operating in Brazil, locating its office building right beside the Matacao. The feather guru Mané Pena is hired as a consultant to GGG and given his own office. Thus Tweep comes to manage the Brazilian operation of GGG as a virtual CEO: "J. B. Tweep became nothing less than a king and nothing more than a CEO"(76). Despite his intention to remain obscure and unrecognized, this is unmistakably a great improvement for Tweep, who is obsessed with efficiency at work, indicating his Anglo-Saxon work ethic that is very different from the more relaxed Brazilian attitudes toward work.

If *Epitaph for a Peach* is a celebration of an ethnic American family, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* portrays the collapse of the family among the characters coming from various ethnicities, nationalities, and social backgrounds. One thing in common among Mané Pena, Batista and Tania, Chico Paco, and Tweep is that they unexpectedly become involved with the overwhelmingly dynamic processes of the commodification of things that are, indeed, most unlikely to be commodified, such as pigeon messages and substitutes to make pilgrimages. As they "improve" their lives materially, however, they become isolated from their loved ones. Mané Pena, for instance, was content with his humble life, enjoying having coffee and small talk with his local friends at an open-air café in the town, making fun of the technological invention of a beeper. In due course, however, Mané Pena becomes the father of "featherology," being granted an honorary doctorate, lecturing, publishing, and being given an office and secretary at GGG. As a result, he suffers from the constant stress and tension of this new life. More important, his wife grows tired of his new, celebrity lifestyle. It seems to her that Mané Pena has stepped into another, strange world where she cannot follow, and she can no longer send their youngsters to the open café to fetch him for dinner. Therefore, she takes the younger of their many children with her and moves back to the small town where she was born. Since the older children have already left home one by one, Mané Pena, after his wife's departure, is left alone, absently toying with the remote control for his color TV. He stoically accepts this loneliness as the price for progress.

Yamashita stresses the deterioration of personal happiness as one's social and financial situations improve through the portrayal of the

collapse of the family among the other characters because of their financial successes. In the case of Batista and Tania, for example, the larger their pigeon message business grows, the longer they must be separated from each other. While Batista sets up the operating bases on the front, building pigeon houses and taking care of them, Tania negotiates contracts with business corporations to use pigeon messages in their advertisements. Finding new freedom and self-confidence in herself as a business woman, she has the idea of franchising the pigeon message courier business not only domestically but also internationally, recruiting housewives to create networks of pigeon message service areas by utilizing their balconies. The separation of Batista and Tania thus stretches from what was initially expected to be several weeks to more than a year, which makes Batista both agonizingly jealous and painfully lonely. Only when disentangled from their monetary projects are some of the characters reunited, including Batista and Tania, and Kazumasa and Lourdes.

While raising their monetary status to the standards of the First World does not really make these characters happy, the improvement erodes the quality of their personal happiness, which proves to be deeply rooted in the physical and cultural environment of their respective communities. When highly capitalistic operations infiltrate into the communities of developing countries, the physical and cultural environments of the regions are inevitably damaged. In *Farther Afield* Murphy maintains that the deterioration of the environment occurs because the development of consumer societies "depends on the myth of unlimited natural resources and the master narrative of human domination over the rest of nature"(83-84).

The exploitation of natural resources necessarily causes the destruction of the environment in the region, which further leads to the collapse of a community. As Murphy contends, the advancement of highly capitalistic operations entirely ignores "the experiential reality of community as a basic unit for human life, the production of human necessities, the conservation and evolution of cultural values and practices" for the local inhabitants(81). Mané Pena's local community thus disintegrates when GGG occupies the region and begins to vigorously merchandize the feather goods in the Matacao. Through the portrayal of Mané Pena, Yamashita stresses a value similar to Murphy's, that is to say, the viewpoint that emphasizes the importance of "maintaining communities and the conservation of culturally and environmentally relational identity"(Murphy 79).

A Postmodern Concept of Nature: Nature as an Agent

In *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita depicts how the capitalist mechanism powerfully proceeds to appropriate nature as object, and more specifically, as a commodity. For example, because of Mané Pena's discovery of the medicinal attributes of the feather, there grows a great demand for bird feathers. GGG and other small business corporations start to rip "the feathers off every sort of bird imaginable," merchandising them in numerous sizes and for various prices, which eventually brings some of the Amazon's rare birds to the point of becoming extinct(156). Indeed, as Michelle Mabelle, a French professor of ornithology and later the wife of Tweep, proclaims, half of the world's species of birds live in the Amazon Forest. They are threatened with extinction because GGG and

other companies callously enter into massive operations involving the commodification of the feathers for the physical and emotional well-being of urban dwellers in the First World. Like the other characters in the novel, Mané Pena haplessly becomes involved with violent processes of commodification of these materials. More importantly, though, he unknowingly acts as a trigger for business corporations to conduct the massive operations involving the commercialization of nature.

Yamashita emphasizes the aggressive appropriation of nature by humans through the portrayal of commodification of Matacao plastic and the scramble after Kazumasa and his ball by all the interested parties. The exploitation of nature accelerates when it is found that the plastic-like substance of the Matacao itself can be made into an artificial feather which functions just as well as a real one. Further, the tremendous usefulness of Matacao plastic for other purposes is realized: it is learned, for example, that the plastic is capable of assuming a wide range of forms for both hard and soft products. In the next few years, therefore, "Matacao plastic would infiltrate every niche of modern life — plants, facial and physical remakes and appendages, shoes, clothing, jewelry, toys, cars, every sort of machine from electro-domestic to high-tech, buildings, furniture — in short, the myriad of commercial products with which the civilized world adorns itself" (143). Learning of the utility of Matacao plastic, Tweep takes the initiative of not only developing a new technology for utilizing Matacao plastic in better ways, but also finding new deposits of Matacao plastic in other areas in and outside of Brazil. Cleverly, he discovers that the ball that hovers around Kazumasa's head can detect the new deposits. Finding the new

deposits and mining them become the most urgent and important matters for GGG, and the company virtually captures Kazumasa with his ball and sends them to various regions in Brazil as "prospectors." Yet other parties somehow also learn about Kazumasa and his ball and the key role they play in the discovery of new deposits of Matacao plastic. These include "spies of every description — a motley and shady crew of CIA, KGB, international and industrial spies — in every corner of the forest, every Bromeliad, every Indian outpost or missionary's home, every public place, restaurant, men's room and hotel lobby" that Kazumasa and the ball visit (145). Thus describing commodification of Matacao plastic and the subsequent hunt for Kazumasa and his ball by variously motivated parties, Yamashita stresses the ruthless appropriation of nature by humans to an extent that can figuratively be called the rape of Nature.

While the modes of representation of *Epitaph for a Peach* and *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* are completely different, interestingly, the view of nature narrated in both works is quite similar. In *Epitaph for a Peach,* Masumoto's attitude toward nature becomes increasingly humble as he takes up organic farming. Eventually, he comes to acknowledge that nature ultimately controls his work rhythms. Masumoto, in other words, comes to consider nature as an agent that demonstrates its own will. This is really a postmodern concept of nature, which differs completely from the modern notion of nature as a static entity, that is to say, an object of exploitation or worship by humans. Much in the same way, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* Yamashita depicts nature as expressing its own will. When global commodity capitalism culminates its exploitation of tropical

nature, nature no longer remains passive. It rebounds, in effect, imposing its own will upon the profoundly arrogant exploiters in ways that are unpredictable and horrifying, bringing about apocalyptic ruin.

In depicting nature's "revenge" on humans, Yamashita gradually builds the suspense up to the climax of the violent explosion of nature's reaction to the despoliation caused by humans. At first, she drops subtle hints here and there to indicate that something is not quite going well. The first omen of a disaster comes in the mysterious, suicidal flight of two feather worshipers onto the steel-like surface of the Matacao. It is revealed that the feather can cause its users some kind of hallucinations that resemble LSD trips. Strangely, all the witnesses "[assert] that flight could only be accomplished by birds whose forms they [the suicidal feather worshipers] [have] naturally taken." Here Yamashita inserts the scene in which the chiefs of feather worship speak for her in terms of her opposition to human arrogance toward nature: "These people . . . [were] abandoned by the very birds that must carry them in flight. It was a clear sign of revenge, a message to the human animal that the destruction of so many beautiful birds without proper ritual and payment to their spirits would no longer be tolerated"(181). Many more people who are not necessarily feather cultists follow those two in their flight. Later, it turns out that the artificial feather, which is made out of Matacao plastic, also has the same hallucinatory effects. Thus Yamashita creates an ominous tone while drawing the reader toward the apex of the profound revenge nature takes upon humans.

The ultimate form of the revenge of nature comes as a sudden epidemic of typhus. The disease indiscriminately afflicts rich and poor as well as

young and old, killing nine out of ten people. No cure can be found. The typical vaccines and antibiotics are of no avail, and "[e]pidemiologists were dumbfounded by this tide of horror, the prospect of burying hundreds of new victims every day, limited hospital facilities, dying people lying . . . on the cold floors . . . of all the hospitals, incinerators burning day and night to destroy the old clothes and bedclothes of the dead" (182). The disease also quickly spreads to the areas outside the Matacao, becoming a national disaster. It is estimated that the epidemic can reach "as far south as Patagonia and as far north as Canada in three months" (184). In the midst of the epidemic, Mané Pena loses his two youngest children. He weeps and cries out against "the deception of his dubious fortune" (185). In less than a week, the "father of Featherology" joins his buried children; the cause of his death is this nightmarish new typhus.

Eventually, the cause of the typhus is found: rickettsia. Yamashita explains rickettsia as "microorganisms that traveled via a minute species of lice, which in turn traveled via feathers, which, of course, traveled via birds and, of late, humans." Immediately, people start dumping feathers into incinerators, which is followed by the government's decision to apply a particularly strong solution of DDT to the birds in order to eradicate the tenacious lice that are parasitizing them. Thus Batista, "exhausted and dejected by his inability to save not only his own prize Djapan pigeons, but any and all birds," hears hundreds of "the small biplanes and the camouflaged bombers flown by the Air Force, flooding the air with their drumming propellers," dropping their poison bombs all day and all night over the Matacao, the town, and the surrounding forest (201). The result is

disastrous: “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. . . . The Matacao was soon covered, knee-deep with the lifeless bodies of poisoned birds. Indeed, for countless days and nights, it rained feathers”(202). Yamashita thus vividly illustrates how environmental disaster is caused by human arrogance and the ruthless exploitation of nature, which are the progeny of the mindset that assumes it possible to control natural processes completely.

After the sudden epidemic of typhus, the ultimate revenge of nature comes in the form of a propagation of bacteria that eat any material made out of Matacao plastic. These bacteria eventually disintegrate The Matacao itself, completing an environmental destruction following the annihilation of the birds and other living creatures in the Amazonian forest:

> As for the Matacao itself, so-called Matacao plastic conservationists ran all over it, tearfully trying to find a solution for the preservation of this contemporary geological and, many insisted, spiritual miracle. But every day, more and more of the Matacao disappeared. . . . [T]he last vestiges of the Matacao were but a fine powder drawn up in the sigh of an indecisive whirlwind. . . . (207-09)

Toward the end of the novel, after much time has passed since the horrifying environmental disaster, the Amazon forest ostensibly has returned to normal. Yamashita emphasizes, however, that despite the seemingly normal, vigorous appearance of the old forest, nature’s organism will, nevertheless, never truly be the same again. No matter how the forest, “secreting its digestive juices, slowly breaking everything into edible

absorbent components, pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same," seems to have returned to its normal state of being, that perfection simply cannot be obtained again (212). This is something beyond human capacity, and thinking that humans can manipulate nature, including restoring the damaged organism, is merely human folly and vanity, Yamashita indicates.

Thus in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita, as Masumoto does in his *Epitaph for a Peach*, depicts nature as showing its own will. Yamashita's nature takes a kind of revenge on humans by propagating an environmental disaster. Here Yamashita's representation of nature is, as Stacy Alaimo points out, "consonant with 'postmodern' natures that possess agency, transgress the divide between nature and culture, and dwell in an already politicized space" (156-57). Her postmodernist conception of nature becomes more distinct when it is disclosed that the Matacao is not only comprised of the industrial waste of the First World but also constructed by the natural forces of the earth. Thus, as Molly Wallace notes, the Matacao is both natural and artificial (148), confusing the clear-cut binary distinction between nature and culture, which is decisively a postmodern notion of nature.

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest as an Environmental Novel

Unlike *Epitaph for a Peach*, which finishes with a peaceful, all-embracing tone, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* ends with a disquieting note. When the narrator, the ball, has completed recounting the fates of all the characters, it then asks the reader: "Now the memory is complete, and

I bid you farewell. Whose memory you are asking? Whose indeed"(212). As Rody notes, when the reader is addressed directly in this manner, she is left with the question of who this speaker is(628). Earlier, the reader is told that the ball is made of the same industrial waste that comprises the Matacao. As Wallace maintains, "Yamashita ties this image of the Matacao as a 'natural' resource to the history of colonial exploitation of Brazilian resources"(150). The ball is, then, deeply connected to the repressed. Indeed, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita luridly describes the commodification of the feathers and Matacao plastic by GGG, which embodies merely one of the countless instances of massive exploitation of Brazil's natural resources by the First World. By depicting the ultimate revenge of nature, Yamashita unmistakably criticizes the colonial appropriation of Brazilian resources by the First World countries.

While this postmodern narrative thus champions the repressed, it also represents a kind of objectivity, which is indispensable in order to address environmental issues on a global scale. As Rody points out, "Yamashita and her hero Kazumasa Ishimaru may have evident ethnic origins, but the ball appears origin-free, and its bouncy conduct of the plot around the globe manages to transform an ethnic perspective into a credibly global historical witness." Directly addressing the reader as an historical witness is, Rody asserts, an effective way "to engage us in a global community of concern"(638). Unlike *Epitaph for a Peach*, which celebrates "environmentally friendly" farming in a family farm within an ethnic community, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* directly brings up the environmental issues on the earth to readers who are presumed to be positioned in the global

community. Illustrating the effects of globalization on Brazilian people and nature, Yamashita thus urges us to engage in the complex environmental issues of what Bigwood calls the "world-earth-home."

In contrast to the ending of *Epitaph for a Peach*, which presents a certain sense of serenity, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* ends with an evocative tone by the direct address of the narrator to the reader. Although Masumoto's book expresses his keen ecological awakening, it is mainly about his organic farming in a family farm within a particular ethnic community in a certain area of California. At the end of the book, therefore, Masumoto's world is small, self-contained, and self-completing. Masumoto's environmental awakening does not go far, for he accepts that his organic farming remains merely a personal belief and practice no matter how strongly he feels about it. Since he is well aware that there are differences in people's social locations, he understands that not everyone can afford to choose environmentally friendly farming. In sharp contrast, the unconventional narrator of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* directly asks us to engage in the environmental issues of the globe. Earlier in the novel, Yamashita plausibly illustrates a potential environmental disaster which was caused by human folly and profanity in terms of insatiable greed and the ruthless exploitation of nature. The reader is confronted, therefore, with what actions he or she should take in order to prevent such environmental crisis from happening. Thus, though the novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* does not really fit into a traditional definition of nature writing, it can also raise environmental consciousness on the part of the reader just as well as does a typical work of nature writing such as

Epitaph for a Peach. In fact, compared to a classical work of nature writing such as *Epitaph for a Peach, Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* does that on a much larger scale, creating much more impact.

Yamashita's Postmodern Literary Techniques and Sensibility

While *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is a narrative fiction serving as a work of nature writing, it is particularly important to note that the work can be categorized as a postmodern novel. When considering defining features of the postmodern, one of the most striking characteristics is its lack of agency. Discussing differences between feminism and postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon stresses that while feminism is politically oriented in terms of establishing the female as subject, "the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political action"(3). Coming to the ending of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, the reader immediately notices that the author Yamashita is denying the possibility of human agency when she writes, "Whose memory are you asking? Whose indeed"(212). From this alone, as Murphy points out, this novel can be classified as a postmodern novel: "*Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* does cast doubt on the intentional possibilities of human agency, and it is on this basis more than on the basis of its stylistic experimentation that I label it postmodernist"(36). Being a postmodern novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* inevitably aspires to, in Hutcheon's words, "'dedoxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import"(3). Yamashita vigorously takes up such tasks by using the unconventional narrator and other postmodern literary techniques of parody, satire, and excess throughout the novel.

The postmodern wants to deconstruct Eurocentric universals which originally come from the Enlightenment and were incorporated into modernism later. In the mindset of Eurocentric universals, there are always the conflicting positions of subject and object, that is, "I" and "the other." Postmodernism, in fact, attempts to de-doxify such binarism of western metaphysical thinking, and Yamashita playfully sets to undertake this task in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. For example, she creates a character who has a third arm. With his third arm, J. B. Tweep is an extremely efficient and well-organized worker who has become involved in "a new method of thought which he referred to as 'trialectics,' sorting problems into three options and always opting for the solution in the middle." Soon he begins to think that "trialectics would eventually revolutionize modern thought and philosophy, and he envisioned, when the time came, backing up his decision by a firm handhold in the Theory of Trialectics"(56). Thus describing Tweep's unique ability coming from the excess of his extra arm, Yamashita wryly describes his new method of thinking and openly makes fun of the binarism of western metaphysical thinking.

Yamashita raises her tone of satire further by portraying Tweep's marriage to Michelle Mabelle, an environmental protectionist scholar he encounters on his job. Michelle happens to have three breasts. After they marry, they have triplets, Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité, whom Michelle can breast feed all at once. The union of an international business executive and a French professor of ornithology attracts great media attention, which creates a tremendous impact on society. Seeing the successful couple

who have an extra arm and an extra breast respectively, the people with extra fingers, toes, tails, and so on come into the public light and proclaim their rights, coining the term "the trialectics movement" or "the freak movement" for short. Yamashita concludes her joke by stating coolly that Tweep has always felt comfortable and confident with his extra arm and actually considers it only a matter of time before other human beings start feeling inadequate in lacking a third arm.

Using parody, satire, and excess, Yamashita incisively illustrates the process of globalization in the Third World. While describing a particular case of the establishment of the GGG office building beside the Matacao, Yamashita cautions against other, general cases of transplanting the product and the method of the First World directly in the Third World, regardless of the environment and culture of the region and the life-style of the local inhabitants:

> Anxious to duplicate GGG's New York offices on the Matacao, J. B. made a trialectic decision to import an entire building, all twenty-three floors, to the luxurious Matacao Row, overlooking the Matacao itself. J. B. had no time for the handmade mortar-and-block construction, which would have provided jobs for and fed hundreds of people for several years. He wanted GGG's presence to be felt immediately. After all, he reflected, there were historic precedents for such a grandiose move: the grand opera house imported in every detail from the iron fixtures to the parquet floors from England to Manaus on the Amazon River; or Ludwig's ship, which sailed from Japan down the Amazon River to dock as a great factory in the dense tropical forest

> for the purpose of churning everything into tons of useful paper. 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. (76)

For the training of its employees, GGG also organizes various special seminars such as "Controlling Emotions in Dysfunctional Elevators and/or Dark Copy Rooms," "What to Do When the Air Conditioning Fails," and "Sexism in a Friendly Country"(76). Thus the First World, Yamashita points out, provides its employees with artful stratagem to survive in the Third World without essentially changing their mentality.

The one-sided implantation of the high-tech devices of the First World in the Third World is also demonstrated to be completely useless and irrelevant to the life-style of the local inhabitants. In the newly constructed GGG office building, Tweep assigns a room complete with a secretary and a pager to Mané Pena, a feather specialist and consultant to GGG. Yet Mané Pena does not like to venture much inside the GGG offices. Indeed, he does not even like to ride the elevators for fear of getting his bare toes stuck in the automatic doors. He is usually found, therefore, at an outdoor café table in the old section of town with a group of his local friends. As for the pager, it is a complete joke for them: "For a while, Mané's cronies in the bar put money in a jar and passed around the pager everyday, wearing it conspicuously on the belts of their pants. If the pager went off while a crony was wearing it, he got the winnings in the jar"(77). Thus, at first, Yamashita brilliantly depicts the incongruity of the First World and the Third World. Then she gradually develops her five narratives in order to

elucidate the effects of globalization, including the destruction of the environment and culture of the local community and the relational identity of the local inhabitants, which is deeply rooted in that local community. The most evident case of the negative effects of globalization on an individual life is undoubtedly the story of Mané Pena, which has been examined in the previous paragraphs.

Yamashita's postmodern inclination to subvert the master narrative is clearly traced in the characterization of certain characters such as J. B. Tweep and Kazumasa Ishimaru. Both of them are portrayed to contradict the stereotyped image of Americans and that of Japanese respectively. As discussed above, Tweep wants to remain inconspicuous and manipulate things behind the scene, which obviously goes against one of the most important American values of asserting oneself in a group and taking an initiative among other members of the group. Much in the same way, Kazumasa is depicted against the stereotype of the Japanese as "an economic animal." Contrary to the image of the economic animal, Kazumasa is described to be "the Japanese Santa Claus" who generously gives away the money he amassed from winning Brazilian lotteries to people who flock to his apartment and entreat him for money(147). As a Japanese American who studied in Japan prior to moving to Brazil, Yamashita seems to be particularly interested in deconstructing the widely spread image of a Japanese as an economic animal through her portrayal of Kazumasa.

Yamashita cleverly characterizes Kazumasa in an attempt to deconstruct a stereotyped image of Japanese people and, as its extension, Asian Americans. To begin with, she creates an interesting job for Kazumasa,

that is, a railway maintenance technician. Because of his ball's unique ability to detect distortions in the railroad tracks, Kazumasa travels all over Japan as a railway maintenance worker. Later, when he immigrates to Brazil, he continues to work at the same job as a freelance maintenance technician. As Elaine Kim repeatedly points out in *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context,* the central issues of scholarship in Asian American Studies have long been the construction of transcontinental railroads and internment. Indeed, two major topics in Asian American history have been the misery of Chinese American railroad workers and the tragedy of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. As Lee contends, when Yamashita created the character of Kazumasa as being a railway worker, she should have been fully conscious of Kim's observation that one of the two major issues of scholarship in Asian American Studies concerns the suffering of Chinese American railroad workers. Lee points out, "Yamashita both resuscitates this familiar communal 'hero' and brings him 'beyond' his original meanings by updating him for her twenty-first-century setting. . . . Instead of doing backbreaking work laying rails, Kazumasa . . . renders travel more efficient by proleptically remedying breakdowns before they occur" (114). Creating her character as a railway worker, yet as a technologically advanced engineer, Yamashita is thus playing with the stereotyped image of Asian Americans, apparently subverting the master narrative.

Demonstrating her postmodern literary playfulness, Yamashita communicates her hidden message to the reader through a pun she plays with Kazumasa's name. His last name, Ishimaru, can be divided into two parts

in Japanese, that is to say, "ishi" and "maru." "Ishi" in Japanese means stone, which shows the origin of the small ball that moves around Kazumasa's head, for the ball is one of the pieces of debris which was scattered from a flying mass of fire that struck Kazumasa as a child while he was playing on the shore of Sado Island on the Japan Sea. Moreover, "maru" in Japanese means ball. Together, "ishimaru" literally means a stone ball, which playfully indicates the ball hovering around Kazumasa's head and the unconventional narrator of the novel. His first name, Kazumasa, can also be broken down into two parts, that is, "kazu" and "masa." Unlike his last name, for which the choice of Chinese characters can be fixed, for his first name, there is no fixed way of choosing certain Chinese characters.[1] In fact, there are numerous Chinese characters which can be used and pronounced for Kazumasa. My intuition as a cultural insider, however, tells me that the most suitable and sensible choices of Chinese characters for "Kazumasa" might be the character meaning "harmony" for "kazu" and the character meaning "right" or "just" for "masa." Hence, the two Chinese characters together, "Kazumasa" might mean "The harmony is right" in Japanese. And this is the message, I believe, that Yamashita attempts to communicate to the reader in this novel.

Yamashita's Multicultural Perspective for a Postmodern Immigrant

In *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Yamashita imparts her multicultural perspective for successfully making a home in a new homeland for an immigrant, especially in this case, a postmodern one. In doing so, Yamashita's experiences of both living in Japan and settling down in Brazil

are reflected in the creation of the character Kazumasa. Speaking of the characterization of Kazumasa, she describes him as a character who is open to changes:

> One of our mutual friends is a painter and actor in Brazil who emigrated to Brazil from Japan after the war. In many ways I based Kazumasa on him, although Kazumasa is probably a much later immigrant. There were things about this person that were open to the changes that he might encounter in Brazil, and I like that in him. (Murashige 326)

Kazumasa is not blindly nationalistic about his own cultural heritage. On the contrary, he is willing to adopt things he likes from his new homeland of Brazil. In the end of the novel, Kazumasa happily establishes himself in Brazil because of his flexibility and his openness to changes, that is, differences. The happy end of Kazumasa makes a sharp contrast to the tragic end of J. B. Tweep. Unlike Kazumasa, Tweep has stuck to his "more advanced, more efficient" American ways, and when they can no longer function in the new circumstances of Brazil, he resorts to committing suicide by throwing himself over the edge of the twenty-three-floor plexiglass corporate building.

Yamashita is critical of globalization that incorporates only the one-sided, thoughtless dissemination of Western culture. What she envisions, instead, is the dynamic encountering of differences and the mutual interaction among them. Unlike Tweep's kind of cultural imperialism, what Yamashita hopes to see is a unique fusion of different cultures on an equal basis. Indeed, she talks to Murashige about how she likes to see the

Japanese culture and the Brazilian one fuse into each other: "I also enjoyed seeing how the Japanese culture could move into the Brazilian one, and absorb it, but continue to hold its own, and how the stodgy things about Japanese culture could be molded or torn away"(Murashige 326). As an example of such a cultural fusion, Yamashita illustrates how karaoke, upon its arrival in Brazil, takes a different form from its original practice in Japan. In fact, Japanese people usually go to a karaoke bar with a small group of friends, and each group enjoys karaoke in one of many compartments at the bar. When he arrives in Brazil, shy Kazumasa, however, has his bathroom equipped with a specially built karaoke shower where he can sing alone without worrying about other people's reactions. Yet karaoke has taken a quite different form for Brazilians. For example, Batista, who often becomes melancholic during a long separation from his wife due to their business, enjoys karaoke, singing all his emotions out to other patrons at a local bar. Clearly, it is completely different from the way Kazumasa enjoys karaoke alone at home. Thus, unlike "superior" Western culture enforced upon Brazil by Tweep, karaoke smoothly takes hold in a new landscape, being enjoyed by its people in their own ways.

Much in the same way as karaoke successfully fuses into the Brazilian way of life, Kazumasa Ishimaru, a postmodern Japanese immigrant, smoothly settles down in Brazil because he is open to different peoples and cultures while keeping his own characteristic traits from Japanese culture such as modesty and shyness. He differs greatly from the typical image of an immigrant who comes to a new homeland for an economically better life. When he leaves the First World country Japan for the Third World country

Brazil, he has no intention of availing himself of his "technological advancement" and gaining economic profit; rather, he attempts to expose himself to change. Upon his arrival in Brazil, Kazumasa's identity flexibly changes, the process of which can be best explained by postpositivist realists such as Paula Moya. In her theory of identity formation, Moya contends that identities can change when individuals face a series of encounters with different social values and practices from the ones they were born into. Through interaction with new values and practices, they sometimes keep their own values and practices and at other times adopt other values and practices (41). Indeed, Kazumasa's identity does change, with the help of Lourdes, through his interaction with local Brazilian people on the street and through his learning from them. Just as karaoke is a case of positive cultural fusion between the Japanese culture and the Brazilian one, Kazumasa retains some of his innate goodness and generosity coming from his Japanese upbringing on Sado Island in the Sea of Japan, yet at the same time, he adopts Brazilian ways and becomes ardent enough to express his love to Lourdes at the end of the novel. Being open to change and continuously interactive with differences, Kazumasa finds happiness in a new homeland, which is completely different from Tweep's way of cultural invasion, a form of globalization, which is commonly taking place in the Third World. Needless to say, Yamashita is strongly opposed to this kind of globalization. She wants to see, instead, that both the First World and the Third World encounter and interact with each other on an equal basis, just as Kazumasa meets local Brazilian peoples and cultures and interacts with them positively.

A Call for a Reconsideration of the Definition of Nature Writing

As discussed earlier, the privileging of nonfiction prose as an accepted mode of nature writing, according to Murphy, had existed even before David Henry Thoreau, although his prose work *Walden* established him as the father of nature writing in America. Increasingly, after Thoreau, Murphy maintains, the genre of nature writing has been narrowly defined by leading critics of the field as factual, nonfictional, and experiential works of observation and description. Following this definition, nonfiction prose with a solitary, observant white male narrator has been established as the norm of American nature writing. Traditionally, such works are often read, Murphy points out, "in opposition to modernist and postmodernist sensibilities and aesthetics, since they are frequently perceived as addressing the real and the organic in the world rather than the simulated and the artificial"(4). Ultimately, a typical work of nature writing employs realism, or rather, what Murphy calls enlightenment realism, that is, "a strategy of representation that treats the Western, secular, observable conception of everyday reality as a universal truth"(29). Not surprisingly, according to this traditional definition of nature writing as nonfictional prose using enlightenment realism, among the works which have been included in various anthologies of American nature writing literature, works by male authors overwhelmingly exceed works by female writers in number.

Epitaph for a Peach by David Mas Masumoto fits perfectly into the traditional definition of nature writing. The book is about Masumoto's lonely battle to keep his Sun Crest peaches alive in the contemporary

American agricultural setting that has come to be dominated by the unashamedly profit-oriented, large-scale agribusiness corporations. Critical of the mechanical, capitalistic operating methods of such companies, Masumoto, a third-generation Japanese American fruit farmer in California, stages a solitary battle in order to save his old-fashioned, full-flavored variety of peach. At the same time, he also resolves to farm not against but with nature. More specifically, he attempts to farm in a new, environmentally-friendly way, that is, organic farming. The book, narrated in the first person by the author and farmer Masumoto in a Thoreauvian fashion, chronicles his keen ecological awakening through his farming and philosophizing, closely following his seasonal farm labors.

Through the Arc of the Rain Forest, on the other hand, is a fictional work in which Yamashita illustrates the effects of globalization on Brazilian land and people. More importantly, this is a work which should be categorized as a postmodern novel in its sensibility and techniques. Being free from enlightenment realism, Yamashita weaves five different narratives in which the lives of various characters from diverse backgrounds in ethnicity, class, and locality are recounted in order to present a complete picture of Brazil. In addition to the Brazilian characters, Yamashita brings her own cultural backgrounds into the novel by creating Japanese and American characters. As the story progresses, all of the characters in the novel inevitably become involved in the massive operations of monstrous capitalism in which indiscriminate commodifications take place. Indeed, anything, it seems, is subject to commodifications, including a pigeon message courier service and substitute pilgrim walkers. Most

significant, however, is the rampant commodification of nature in the form of the feathers of the birds and Matacao plastic in the Amazon forest. Ironically, though, as the characters' lives improve materially, their personal relationships with their significant others suffer, for they must be separated from their loved ones for the sake of their monetary projects. When disentangled from such projects, some of the characters are reunited with their loved ones.

While the mode of representation of the two works is completely different, interestingly, the view of nature narrated in both works is quite similar. In *Epitaph for a Peach,* as Masumoto begins organic farming, he becomes increasingly humble toward nature. Experiencing considerable crop damage from natural phenomena such as unseasonable hail storms and rains, he comes to see how absurd and profane the human ambition of controlling and manipulating nature truly is. Eventually, he comes to accept the fact that nature always dictates his work rhythms in the end. Much in the same way, Yamashita, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest,* depicts nature as demonstrating its own will. When global commodity capitalism culminates its exploitation of tropical nature, nature responds by a sudden epidemic of typhus and the disintegration of the Matacao by a propagation of bacteria. Furthermore, Yamashita's postmodernist conception of nature becomes more distinct when it is disclosed that the Matacao is comprised of the industrial waste of the First World but transformed by the natural forces of the earth. As Wallace points out, the Matacao is thus both natural and artificial, confusing the clear-cut binary distinction between nature and culture.

While both works address environmental issues, the degree of impact they intend to exert upon the reader is quite different. In the case of *Epitaph for a Peach,* in addition to the environmental concerns, the book also emphasizes Masumoto's celebration of his Japanese American cultural heritage. In fact, Masumoto stresses that his farm is a family farm run by the collective labor of his family, including his extended family. In particular, he describes how his father came to purchase the farm against the opposition of his grandparents, who had lost everything because of the internment during World War II. Thus his farm is historicized land tended by family labor. Depicting his ethnic cultural heritage, Masumoto demonstrates a strong sense of belonging to a Japanese American community in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Hence, *Epitaph for a Peach* can be described as a work of celebration of an ethnic community. In the end, Masumoto, acknowledging his privileged social location, accepts organic farming as his personal belief and practice and does not attempt to influence other farmers in the community with his environmental awakening. Thus the book ends with a tone of serenity. Masumoto's world is self-contained and self-completing.

The environmental consciousness *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* raises, in contrast, goes beyond an individual's concern in an ethnic community. Using the unconventional narrator of the ball which hovers around Kazumasa's head, Yamashita ends the novel with a disquieting note. In the final passage, the ball finishes telling the fates of all the characters and then indicates that the memory is now complete. Bidding farewell, in the next moment, the ball asks the reader whose memory he or

she is asking. As Rody points out, the ball, unlike the Japanese immigrant Kazumasa or the author Yamashita, does not have any ethnic origins. Therefore, it represents a kind of objectivity. Hence, the direct address to the reader by this origin-free narrator is, Rody maintains, an effective way to engage us in a global community of concern. Thus, using postmodern literary techniques, Yamashita thoroughly elucidates the effects of globalization on Brazilian nature and people, urging each reader to become involved in the environmental issues of the world-earth-home.

On the whole, in spite of the traditional definition of nature writing as factual, nonfictional, and experiential works of observation and description, a nature-oriented fiction such as *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* can definitely serve to draw attention to environmental issues just as effectively as can a conventional work of nature writing such as *Epitaph for a Peach*. In terms of raising our consciousness for the environmental issues on a global scale, on the contrary, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest,* a novel employing postmodern narrative techniques, may actually be a better mode of representation than *Epitaph for a Peach,* a work of nonfiction written in enlightenment realism. It is, then, apparent that fiction can be seen as a completely valid and effective approach to nature writing. Therefore, I insist, as did Patrick D. Murphy before me, that fiction should be included in the genre of nature writing. Murphy advocates departing from mere descriptive nonfiction prose and moving forward to environmental literature. Of the significance of establishing the new category of environmental literature, he explains, "Environmental literature allows us to consider works of any time period that demonstrate an environmental

consciousness within the cultural, historical, religious, and philosophical particularities of the time" (55). When taking "an ethically engaged literary criticism," in Murphy's words, a fiction with the author's particular point of view — rather than a work of merely descriptive, observant nonfiction prose — should be a better form of representation for raising environmental consciousness on the part of the reader.

Among such fiction works, I believe that a postmodern novel — rather than the conventional novel written in enlightenment realism — has a powerful potential for raising the reader's environmental consciousness. I think so because, while the novel written in enlightenment realism tends to treat the Western, secular, observable conception of everyday reality as a universal truth, a postmodern novel inclines to deconstruct such Eurocentric universals that are often the backbone of globalization of the Third World by the First World. Magic realism, a subset of postmodernism, is particularly useful in the regions where writers must practice their art under strict government censorship of overtly political works of literature. As Murphy explains, "[M]agic realism, as part of the postmodernist literary movement, foregrounds the unreality, the absurdity of their magical devices in order to emphasize their figurative and allusive signification" (35). This literary practice has been found often among Latin American writers. In her interview with Murashige, when talking about her use of the form of the Brazilian soap opera for *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest,* Yamashita also comments, "[S]oap operas have been a way for people to criticize society and the government in a hidden manner" (Murashige 329). In conclusion, for "an ethically engaged literary

criticism" and a more politically oriented literary criticism, a postmodern novel can serve as the best mode of representation in terms of raising the reader's environmental consciousness on a global scale.

Notes

1. The Japanese language employs four kinds of script — Chinese characters, hiragana and katakana syllabary, and roman letters. Japanese lacked its own original writing system, and most Japanese linguists, according to Jinzo Ikeda, hold the view that Chinese characters were adopted by the fourth century. While Chinese characters are originally ideograms, hiragana and katakana, which were created in Japan from certain Chinese characters, are phonograms. Although all four kinds of letters can be mixed and used within the same sentence in Japanese, Chinese characters are actually principal letters; therefore, they are used extensively in official and academic writings. As for people's names, Chinese characters predominate, although the use of hiragana and katakana for girls' names is increasing these days. Family names in Japan are written almost exclusively in Chinese characters.

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