With Chopsticks in Her Hair: Magical Realism Protests Globalized Modernism

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Scene: A non-Japanese American woman at a sushi bar, wearing chopsticks in her hair.

Woman: I happen to adore Japanese culture. What can I say? I adore different cultures. I've traveled all over the world.

Globalization is subduing the anthropological under the guise of modernism, capitalism and technological advancement; it is, in fact, a new type of imperialism. By definition, magical realism advocates for equity against this Westernized dominance through mythological and fantastical storytelling; thus, all colonized and marginalized peoples can embrace magical realism writing wherein both their heritages' fantastical and mundane are celebrated, in spite of the modernized world in which their cultures have been assimilated. Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita's magical realism novel, *Tropic of Orange*, is a socio-political parable that deeply criticizes this subjugation, specifically denouncing the globalized "Americanism" of the proclaimed-but-not-truly multicultural city of Los Angeles, and celebrates, instead, the marginalized humanity in the city. In his writing, Japanese author Murakami Haruki does not make the obvious political statements and rejection of an intruding colonial culture that Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* does. However, his short stories, "TV People" and "The Elephant

Vanishes," do reject the encroaching identity of technological capitalism and modernity, pushing against a self-imposed culture of consumerism. In both authors' works, that which is being subjugated rises up against its oppressor through the lens of magical storytelling.

Yamashita's criticism of capitalism and globalization evidences itself clearly in the above-referenced scene of conflict between Emi, a young Japanese-American Angelino, herself the most capitalistic and globalized of the primary characters, and a non-Japanese Angelino.

Sitting at a sushi bar with Gabe, her Mexican-American quasi-boyfriend, Emi is haranguing multiculturalism, when the woman, with chopsticks in her hair, finds offense in Emi's rant and takes it upon herself to declare: "I happen to adore Japanese culture. What can I say? I adore different cultures. I've traveled all over the world. I love living in L.A. because I can find anything in the world to eat, right here. It's such a meeting place for all sorts of people. A true celebration of an international world. It just makes me sick to hear people speak so sonically about something so positive and to make assumptions about people based on their color. Really, I'm sorry. I can't understand at all."

Emi responds by ordering two forks, turning to the woman, and saying, "'Would you consider using these in your hair? Or would you consider that,' Emi paused, 'unsanitary?'" (Yamashita 111)

For Yamashita, returning to L.A. after living in Brazil for almost a decade, the Los Angeles of 1984 was vastly different, it was a land with an influx of immigrants who had been forced to become economic refugees in the face of globalization in their homelands. This new Los Angeles is not the land of utopia, innocent and carefree, that it claims, but rather, it is a land marked by the selling of American culture and consumerism.

In her article, "'We Are Not the World': Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," literary critic Sue-Im Lee argues that Yamashita's *Tropic of*

Orange fights against the West's ideas of a global and universal "we," a label that is inherently incorrect and robs the East, the "Third World," of its identities. She criticizes such universalism as attempting to define all cultures by the economic, political, and cultural parameters of Western culture. Los Angeles is the epitome of globalized, modernized, Western culture. It is a land that uses the parts of cultures, the parts of people themselves, that it wants, such as chopsticks, and rejects the parts it finds undesirable, such as Emi's Japanese identity itself. In critique of such arbitrary usage, Yamashita centralizes her novel on Mexico and Mexican-Americans, but she also weaves in the stories of many marginalized Angelinos, such as Japanese American Emi, as well as other Japanese Americans, African Americans, homeless-Americans, and others. While Yamashita defies the U.S. and L.A.'s rejection of Mexico through the the central plot line's focus on the *Tropic of Orange,* a magical global border separating the West from the non-West, and its shift from Mexico into Los Angeles, she does not limit herself to the Mexican-U.S. clash of her primary story. Through minor characters, especially through the older characters of Manzanar Murakami and Buzzworm, she fiercely rejects the imposition of the West's globalized, modernized culture.

Critic Francisco Delgado vehemently argues in his article, "Trespassing the U.S.-Mexico Border in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," that *Tropic of Orange* is a political statement attempting to re-humanize non-white people and cultures who have been categorically dehumanized by colonialism and capitalism. Buzzworm and Manzanar are inherent protests to this dehumanization, but they are also examples of the re-humanization that magical realism can showcase through imaginative storytelling.

Aptly described by Sue-Im Lee, "Buzzworm, an African-American Vietnam War veteran, is a self-elect, one-man champion for the homeless...Through his eyes...Los Angeles...is

a den of social injustice and economic iniquity" (509). However, Buzzworm is not just an observer of and Angel of Mercy for the ugliness of American modernity, he also represents the parts of African American heritage that have been detrimentally absorbed by capitalism and globalized marketing. While the fact that Buzzworm is never without his headphones is not in and of itself magical, the music that emanates from them is often reminiscent of a bygone, almost mystical era in African American culture, when Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil to master the beauty of Blues music, when voodoo and Jazz were not capitalized in a New Orleans commercialized Mardi Gras, but when such music was an authentic representation of a people emerging from slavery and segregation and establishing a new, proud, and beautiful identity. "Once [Buzzworm] had you listening to the jazz station, then he'd be talking to you about personalities, syncopation, improvisation, blues, fusion. Pretty soon, he was piling on the details, insider stories, anecdotes, hearsay...Pretty soon, you'd find you getting yourself an education. History of jazz followed the history of a people, black oppression, race, movement of the race across the Earth, across the country. Ended up here in South Central" (Yamashita 90).

"In [Buzzworm's] assessment, the racially and culturally dispossessed share their marginalization with the city's large population of homeless people, who in the primary setting of the novel have taken refuge in abandon cars on the freeway. Instead of showcasing the human beings who have made a home (and a community) on the freeway, newscasters focus on the traffic jam on its own...as a phenomenon seemingly devoid of people" (Delgado 159). Buzzworm brings equity to the journalists' capitalistic injustice in which they prioritize things (cars) over humanity by taking over Emi's program and humanizing the homeless. By broadcasting the names and individual identities of the homeless encamped on the freeway, by showing their humanity, Buzzworm fights back against the imposing modern imperialism of capitalism, which gives no value to the monetarily unproductive.

While Buzzworm's action in this Angelino world of the disenfranchised and imperialized is a bold protest, Manzanar Marukami's dissent is less obvious, equally powerful, and more magical. Manzanar is a Japanese American man who has rejected his "Model Minority" American Dream as a reputable surgeon and family man to embrace a life of homeless simplicity and connection, directing L.A.'s traffic flow from its overpasses. "Manzanar Murakami represents the unresolved tensions that exist between ethnicity and citizenship in a context specific to the United States...and the Japanese American community that is so desperate to assimilate and quick to apologize ("profusely," we are told) on behalf of any of its members that deviate from the image that the community wishes to protect" (Delgado 162). This desperate need to maintain the image of the model minority because "it's better than being considered a national enemy and being sent to internment camps" (Delgado 162) is an image that Manzanar rejects, as it robs Japanese Americans of the freedom of having an identity outside of this label, an identity that can connect them to a Japanese past and traditions. For many WWII Japanese Americans - incarcerated en masse with no causation beyond ethnic labeling and forced to reemerge and assimilate into an American society who had stigmatized them as coercers with the Axis enemies - and their descendants, like Manzanar's granddaughter, Emi, capitalistic success has become an indelible albatross.

Manzanar, instead, embraces a life that identifies with the least model-like group of citizens in America, the least productive or capitalistic or modernized, the homeless. Even Manzanar's "name stands as a quiet protest and reminder of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two. A homeless man, his visibility poses a resistance against the public policy of enforced invisibility for the homeless" (Lee 513). The rejection of an identity imposed upon him by a government who robbed his people of their rights without just cause imbues him with a new identity that reconnects to the magical. As an orchestral traffic

conductor, Manzanar, draped with these mutinous identities, fiercely conducts the fight, broadcast across the world, between the U.S. military (the Imperial) and the homeless (the Marginal) living on the freeway, bringing visibility and a reclamation of power to both parts of his identity.

With less political and cultural undertones, writer Murakami Haruki expands Manazar Murakami's subplot protest, in which magical realism is used to push against a culture of consumerism and Westernization, on the people of Manzanar's country of origin, Japan. In critic Matthew Stretcher's analysis of Murakami's work, "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Haruki Murakami," Stretcher identifies that in almost all of Murakami's writing, "a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or the magical," which would halfway cause "Murakami's work to fall into the general category of 'magical realism'" (267). For the second half of the magical realism definition, while his writings do not have undertones of indigenous repression and colonial evil, his disassembling of individual identity comments on the changing of Japanese cultural identity post-WW2, which became one of ignoring the past and embracing a capitalistic and consumer present and future. As Strecher iterates, "[The Japanese] identity has become jeopardize by a determined attempt on the one hand to assimilate all contemporary Japanese into a system of consumerism and on the other to eliminate, or at least gloss over, the events of history that make the Japanese who they are." (293)

These undertones are obvious in Murakami's short story, "TV People," with his protagonist's lifeless existence being revealed through the imposition of television sets in his home and workplace, and the miniature, almost mechanical people responsible for placing them there. The TV people are seemingly ignored by everyone in the protagonist's life as they continue about their daily routines of building the consumer lifestyle. The one person, the main

character's friend-coworker, who shows even a glimmer of recognition that these mini-people exist does so with shame and fear. The protagonist tries to reject his technology-based, lifeless existence by walking instead of taking the elevator, and not purchasing a TV or VCR like everyone insists he do, and yet, the TV comes into his life anyway. Technology imposes on him. In protesting this consumption-based colonization, Murakami's work adheres to the definition of magical realism, despite lacking a specifically indigenous political resistance.

While "The Elephant Vanishes" isn't as obvious in its dissent as "TV People," the title itself has protest embedded in it. The protagonist's Tokyo suburb loses its small zoo, leaving behind only an aged elephant and its equally aged keeper. The protagonist becomes almost obsessed with the elephant and its keeper, and, more truthfully, with the deep connection the two seem to have. When they both vanish before his eyes, the elephant shrinking as the keeper grows, the protagonist is very disturbed. The fantastical physical shifting of matter, elephant to man, metaphorically illustrates how, while Tokyo has become a hub of technology and modernity, this Westernized "advancement" has come at the cost of a loss of connection to nature. Nature has diminished, while consumption has increased.

Murakami confronts the realities of modern Japanese culture and disentangles the nuances of it by making magical elements within the real world a way of protesting the culture's loss of identity. In his dissertation, "From postmodern to post Bildungsroman from the ashes: An alternative reading of Murakami Haruki and postwar Japanese culture," PhD student Chiaki Takagi illuminates how Murakami is the voice of a postwar generation, protesting the Japanese government and society's rejection of its historical identity in its embrace of its consumer present. "In postwar Japan, the State-system has been keeping people from their modern history, and suppressing their subjectivity. Instead, the State-system provides them with ready-made

identities of hard-working middle-class and westernized high standards of living. The State-system's control makes Japan's modernity unreal and grotesque" (Takagi 1).

While "TV People" and "The Elephant Vanishes" do not oppose the European cultural imperialism that most works of magical realism tend to protest, there is an aura of dissent and objection in Marukami's work, but the revolution seems to be against a postwar Japanese self-colonization, a need to imperialize itself with a new postwar identity, one that can compete with and possibly win against its Ally conquerors. "Murakami uses the image of the West as a mirror of Japan, and in fact, he illustrates how Japan's urban space such as Tokyo is simulated by American cultural logos, suggesting that Japan must be the west in order to be Japan" (Takagi 12). By re-identifying in this way, Japan sloughs off its past, embracing modernity, commercialism, capitalism, and all things Westernized - this is what the protagonists in "TV People" and 'The Elephant Vanishes" are unwittingly protesting.

"For me the dreamlike is very real." - Murakami Haruki. Magical realism allows the dreams of the past - the beliefs, the heritage, the culture - to exist on an equal plane with a present that has rejected and is rejecting all cultures that do not comply with a Westernized vision of globalization and modernity, encapsulated by capitalistic consumerism and technological advancement. Murakami and Yamashita's writings protest this vision, while at the same time giving voice to the rejected cultures. Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* Buzzworm and Manzanar characters are paragons of what it means not only to embrace rejected cultures, both the ethnic ones of the African and Japanese Americans and the economic one of the homeless, but also to fight for the re-humanization of such cultures. Murakami's "TV People" and "The Elephant Vanishes" protagonists protest a cultural self-marginalization, in which Japan has succeeded in replacing its historical significance with Westernized consumerism and

technological dominance. The magical elements in these stories serve to validate and even celebrate the beauty of cultures fighting not to die out.

> **Scene**: a young Japanese American woman speaking to a non-Japanese American woman with chopsticks in her hair.
>
> **Japanese American Woman**: Would you consider using these in your hair? Or would you consider that unsanitary?

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