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Revisionist Narratology in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

Alexander Sarra-Davis

Recalling a game of "World War II" that she played during her childhood in the United States, author Ruth Ozeki describes an absurd advantage of her racialized facial features:

> I would draw Japanese faces, and Jane would draw American faces. . . . Only the eyes were different. Mine were just two slants, slashed quickly in the snow, but Jane had to draw whole little circles for eyes, which took her a lot longer, and since it was a race, she always lost. We'd play until it was dusk and the entire street was filled with faces and my Japan had won. It never occurred to us that we were rewriting history. (*Face* 24-25)

This humorous anecdote appears in Ozeki's non-fiction essay *The Face: A Time Code* (2015), in which the half-white, half-Japanese author reflects on the face that at the time of publication she had worn for fifty-nine years. The passage is particularly striking because it appears after Ozeki recalls the "precarious instability" that she felt as a result of her racialized identity (24) and how, at other times, she would pull at her eyes, raising her "voice and join[ing] the chorus . . . in order to align [herself] further with the hegemony" of her white peers mocking the hooded eyes of East Asians (23). Amid the racist games of her youth, Ozeki identifies the drawing of soldiers' faces in the snow as one context in which she, whose body itself represented a foreign other, won out because of her choice to represent those foreign bodies. Although her comment about rewriting history is mostly a darkly comical aside, it is also an opportunity to review the calcification of power in all acts of representation, from official histories to novelistic fictions and even in the youthful act of drawing faces in the snow. In this article, I examine Ozeki's attention to both the writing and the "rewriting of history" (25) in her most overtly autofictional novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013).

That novel presents a particularly fascinating narratological case study because its major plot point, the impending suicide of one of its two

protagonists, is resolved in a manner that violates the narrative conventions of the novelistic form. Set on opposite sides of the Pacific, the novel explores the violent histories of Japan, the United States, and Canada by following two focal characters who feel trapped by their familial and cultural histories. Split into two halves, *A Tale for the Time Being* opens with a diary penned by fictional fifteen-year-old Naoko Yasutani, or Nao, who recently moved to Japan (3), before switching to a third-person narrative about the discovery of that diary by the seemingly non-fictional Ruth who, like Ozeki herself, is a novelist living with her husband on a remote island off the coast of British Columbia (8). As a dual narrative, *A Tale for the Time Being* offers scholars continual opportunities to compare and contrast its two protagonists, whether one is examining their awareness (Beauregard), their environments (Fachinger), their pathology (Cai), their sense of worth (Hogue), or their age (Lie). Yet little has been written about the two overt moments of connection between Nao and Ruth, how these connections rely on the material traces of a diarist, or how the latter of these narratological bridges requires the suspension of basic conventions about temporality and causality that undergird much of the novelistic form. These two moments of connection are, respectively, a freezer-bag of documents and a dream. *A Tale for the Time Being* resolves the central threat of Nao's suicide by enabling Ruth to reach, through a dream and into the past, Nao's father and great-grandmother and to share a critical historical document, the translated secret diary of Nao's great-uncle, of which the two characters appear otherwise unaware. In addition to potentially stretching a reader's suspension of disbelief, this moment of dreamed intervention, when combined with the novel's continual attention to the material and emotional legacies of history, suggests that these legacies can and must be resisted and rewritten. In short, I argue that *A Tale for the Time Being* forwards a revisionist narratology that eschews adherence to records in favour of its own radical futurities.

Crucial to this alternative view of history is the novel's hybrid genre and form, made especially overt by the self-representation of the author as the character Ruth. Alternating between chapters of Nao's diary and Ruth's investigations of that diary, *A Tale for the Time Being* owes much to modernist and found literatures. Both Nao's diary and Ruth's reactions to it are presented as modernist streams of consciousness, while the presence of editorial footnotes and paratext suggests the materiality of found literature. It is difficult to think of old genres that better

represent the tension between the subjectivity of thought and the supposed objectivity of written record. Yet the novel refuses to adhere to either genre or set of conventions, instead overtly juxtaposing the two in its use of counterintuitive narrative perspective. Writing about the importance of detritus in the novel, Beverly Hogue notes that *A Tale for the Time Being* is "a [fictional] first-person diary framed within an 'autobiography' written as third-person narrative" (73). By representing its narrative of the author's self as an exemplar of (mostly) realist, third-person, limited omniscience prose, and its fictional narrative as found, first-person diary writing, the novel establishes an underlying inversion of generic expectations that both allows it to visibly undermine the barriers between fiction and fact and to call into question other supposedly factual or fictional texts. These apparent contradictions layer, rather than detract from, the novel's fascination with the dually liberating and confining effects of history on the affected individual. The novel's direct deployment of supposedly primary historical documents, in the form of a set of letters and a second, secret diary, also aligns *A Tale for the Time Being* with the genre of historical fiction, with that genre's notable growing and gendered popularity.

Not dissimilar to Ozeki's recollection of her childhood play, historical fiction provides authors with an opportunity to rewrite history so as to tip balances of power, explore bygone iterations of humanity, and recover — through at least partial fabrication — otherwise marginalized histories. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn write in "Hystorical Fictions: Women (Re)Writing and (Re)Reading History," through historical fiction "contemporary women writers seek to explore . . . the present's relationship with the past and the inescapability of the historical in the contemporary" (138). Although certainly not a writer of historical fiction, Ozeki, through this novel, produces many of the same effects that Heilmann and Llewellyn describe: creating "a feeling of unease about both the past and its role in the present" (139), feeding "a desire for stories about the past, while simultaneously stressing the *fiction* . . . in history itself" (141), and manifesting history "as an inexorable influence on the present . . . [by e]mphasizing the cyclical nature of time" (147). Given the already extensive exploration of *A Tale for the Time Being*'s connections with Soto Zen Buddhist theology and practice, both in Ozeki's interviews ("Confessions") and in the impressively exhaustive analysis by Mojca Krevel, these references to cyclical tempor-

ality and the conditionality of the present moment fit exactly with the novel's own deployment of time and history.

Also central to this rejection of history's influence on its characters' futures, albeit much more counterintuitively, is the novel's formal and thematic championing of the importance of recording, researching, and recovering the historical record. *A Tale for the Time Being*'s two focal characters are, on the one hand, a novelist worried about losing her memories of her mother (as well as her ability to record them) to the ravages of dementia and, on the other, a diarist who feels compelled to transcribe the life of her most cherished relative before she takes her own life. Although wildly different in their stakes, both struggles are expressly with the dual privilege and burden of recording history, and both characters face the threat that their efforts will be undone by their inherited circumstances. Indeed, though both Nao's and Ruth's struggles are deeply personal, with the former confiding them only to the pages of a diary and the latter unwilling to do even that, they are also familial, racial, national, and cultural. Neither Nao nor Ruth has committed, for example, a great wrong or developed a hamartic flaw, yet both feel isolated and doomed by their histories, pushed to re-enact either the self-destruction of a shameful father or the gradual decline of a sick mother. Ironically, if they thus re-enacted their parents' fates, the novel's focal characters would be foreclosing their opportunity to adequately record and preserve the memories of those family histories. The central conflict of *A Tale for the Time Being*, the threat of Nao's impending suicide, is a climax that both focal characters seem eager to avoid, even as they — by writing or by reading — rush toward it. These trajectories, set out by each character's inherited circumstances, threaten to destroy their own recording.

Through the histories that they have inherited, the novel's two protagonists are defined both positively and negatively by the past, affording them advantages and identities even as it seems to determine their limitations and eventual fates. Nao has had her whole adolescent life uprooted, she understands, because her father lost his job in America (43), and now she is forced to navigate a new cultural environment that is ironically far crueller and more xenophobic about her American upbringing than her American peers were about her visible Japanese ancestry. Simultaneously, her once loving and capable father has been reduced to a depressed and suicidal shut-in whom Nao sees as a

"contemptible being" (263), unable to find secure employment after his return to Japan (41). Moreover, her father, referred to as Haruki #2, shares a given name with her great-uncle, Haruki #1, a student of philosophy supposed to have given his life heroically as a kamikaze pilot in the Second World War (63). Given this shared history, Nao reflects that "suicide and philosophy run in the family" (68) and feels pushed toward suicide as the obvious solution to her own problems. In the other half of the book, Ruth, "[u]nable to complete another novel" (31), has spent the past ten years attempting to write a memoir that will capture "her mother Masako's experience with Alzheimer's disease" (Davis 93). Ruth thus far has produced only "a tall messy stack of notes and manuscript pages, bristling with Post-Its and wound with cramped marginalia" (Ozeki, *Tale* 30), and fears that this lack of progress signals her own decline. Her discovery of Nao's diary, and her subsequent efforts to ascertain its veracity, provenance, and temporal proximity to her present, are thus legible as efforts to reassert herself as an observer and recorder of history rather than merely one of its tragic subjects.

This metafictional struggle to reassert one's self in the face of one's fate also underlies Nao's narrative. Nao writes her diary — in a repurposed edition of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* — so that she might "tell someone the fascinating life story of [her] hundred-and-four-year-old great-grandmother, who is a Zen Buddhist nun," before either of them dies (5). Her "Granny," Jiko Yasutani, "was a nun and a novelist and . . . an anarchist and a feminist who had plenty of lovers" (6). Unfortunately, Nao has great difficulty writing about Jiko, in part because Jiko does not provide Nao with much information about her past and in part because Nao, understandably, is distracted by her own circumstances and suffering. Jiko's presence within the diary is nevertheless a positive one, as Jiko begins responding slowly but thoughtfully to Nao's sporadic text messages (15, 23, *passim*), visiting to help make the family's new Tokyo apartment feel like a home (132), and inviting Nao to spend her summer at a Buddhist temple in the isolated countryside; this last episode comprises nearly a quarter of the novel (157-250). Jiko, a model of emotional resilience and Zen Buddhist teachings, becomes an anchor for Nao and, as a model of maternal wisdom and timely intervention, a reassuring presence for concerned readers such as Ruth or us. Although Ruth's efforts to write about her mother, Masoko, are not presented in the novel, Nao's efforts to write about Jiko are, and the result

is a novel that reads as a hybrid of multiple memoirs and biographies, even if only one of the characters' lives being recorded is non-fictional. Hogue observes that the "novel is constructed as an assemblage of discarded narratives" (70). I concur in the sense that its two protagonists feel as though they are isolated from their respective societies, and particularly in the sense that these narratives might be abandoned at any moment, cut short by the existential threats that their authors face or, for innumerable other reasons, left unfinished.

This threat of the incomplete makes visible the text's motivations for existing: readers want to know whether Nao, as she promises in the opening pages, will indeed commit suicide or whether, as Ruth hopes, there is still time "[t]o help the girl" (29). If, as Rocío Davis observes, Nao's diary reads "like a long suicide letter, a way for its writer to engage with the reality of time before dropping out of it altogether" (92), then the third-person narrative about Ruth reads like a desperate effort to determine whether and how Nao can be saved from that suicide, even as Ruth's narrative, progressing alongside the diary, rushes toward its and Nao's potential conclusion. Davis notes that, "if a writer's identity is realized in the process of producing texts, then something like writer's block would logically make one wonder if one is still a writer" (101), and I would push his observation further: although not as fatal as Nao's suicide, Ruth's giving up on her writing is nevertheless an existential threat, if not to her then at least to the novel that we are reading. In addition to provoking both Ruth's and our sympathy, the novel's invocation of suicide in its opening pages motivates her and our frantic reading of the text, in order that the diary narrator might be held in a safe stasis, still narrating her story, in the moments prior to her death. That stasis is critical for Nao's safety, yes, and also for the possibility of her and our escape from destinies that have already been written.

As if to highlight the impossibility of that stasis, the first Nao-narrated section of *A Tale for the Time Being* ends with her counting down to her death (7), implying that her suicide will take place the moment that she ceases to write her diary. Of course, as is obvious even to Ruth while reading the text (29), by all rights it is too late to help or hinder Nao, whose diary must have been completed, sealed in a freezer bag, deposited in the Pacific, and somehow circulated to Ruth in British Columbia during the intervening time. This temporal-spatial aspect of the novel's premise, both the setting of Nao's sections in the moments

prior to her death and the setting of Ruth's sections on the other side of an ocean, invokes the immediacy of death and the lack of a future while simultaneously forestalling it. It is crucial both that Ruth is unable to find any trace of Nao online, so that she and we as her fellow readers cannot know for certain how fictional Nao is, and that Ruth is unable to contact Nao or any of the characters in the diary via phone or email, so that she and we cannot know for certain if Nao survives, except by skipping to the diary's end — which Ruth briefly does. Through this trick of setting, the ending of *A Tale for the Time Being* is implied to be the end of its central characters' lives: Nao, whose diary attempts to explain her and her great-grandmother's life stories before her suicide, will have no reason to live after completing her project, and Ruth, whose effort to recover Nao are also an effort to write, will have failed to recover either.

Buried within these primary narratives in *A Tale for the Time Being* about Nao and Ruth are the stories of several other characters: Babette, a friend pushing Nao into sex work; Oliver, Ruth's omnipresent husband; Haruki #2, Nao's suicidal father; Masako, Ruth's Alzheimer's-suffering mother; and so on. But of the many side characters whom Ozeki describes, only two are given space to function as their own narrators, producing texts that add further frames to the novel's already split structure: Jiko, whose text messages Nao faithfully transcribes in her diary, and Haruki #1, whose letters and secret diary are translated, read, and included in Ruth's half of the novel. Sensing that Jiko's life, like hers, is nearing its end, Nao endeavours to memorialize her great-grandmother in a desperate attempt to exert some control over her own story, not only reimagining herself as a loving great-granddaughter who will record Jiko's story for posterity (6) but also attempting to render her ephemeral memories and knowledge of Jiko into a material tribute. Similarly, frustrated with her inability to ascertain the veracity of Nao's diary or how she can help, Ruth is driven to approach members of her community who can translate Haruki #1's letters from Japanese and his secret diary from French (255), able at least to sate her curiosity even if she cannot return those translations to Nao. It is through this writing, transcribing, or translating of the past that both characters reassert themselves in their respective presents. Crucially, both Nao's and Ruth's rewriting of themselves — if not as noble protagonists, then at least as effective witnesses to and recorders of the protagonists whom they have

chosen — is a product of their making intangible history more tangible, preserving both it and them.

The novel's showcasing of the tendency in recording history to preserve both recorder and recorded is directly connected to its concern with self-construction. Scholars have already observed how *A Tale for the Time Being* engages with the Japanese ethnonationalism at work in Nao's hostile reception by her peers, with both Andrew Kim and Daniel McKay identifying a critique of Japanese society in, for Kim, the novel's use of Japanese ideas of melancholy and, for McKay, the novel's deployment of the archetypical Japanese kamikaze pilot. Similarly, scholars have investigated Ruth's relationship with her reading subject, with Guy Beauregard arguing that the novel is metonymic of the world's response to the 3/11 tsunami disaster and Crystal Yin Lie observing Ruth's pseudo-archaeological impulse to seek information about the strange diary found washed ashore as a resistance to the loss of identity to time, a further extension of her anxiety about dementia. I add to these discussions the more surface observation that the novel is at least half about Ruth, an ambiguously fictional self-representation of Ozeki, and that both Nao and Ruth are writers attempting to modify their present moments by writing, and thus also rewriting, their pasts. It is impossible for the novel's stakes, of preventing a death, and themes, of rewriting history, to remain thus confined to the realm of fiction: the presence of Ruth suggests that the novel might just as easily be describing reality.

The engagement with reality and real methods for pursuing similar goals in *A Tale for the Time Being* is also easily observed in its deployment of historical forces such as anthropology, wartime narratives, and natural disasters, already discussed at length in the works of the scholars noted above, and how those deployments also signal that each of the novel's characters is rooted to pasts both local and global, both known and unknown. Nao is not only bullied at her new school but also dehumanized for her foreign features and upbringing, assaulted and abused for the foreign sins projected onto her, and ultimately driven to the brink of suicide because of the rigidity and apathy of Japanese society to her struggles of integration, causing Hogue to reflect that "Ozeki examines the ways cultures cut off certain people, designating them as worthless, unclean detritus" (75). Meanwhile, Ruth finds, in her search for corroboration of Nao's diary, a path through her lonely struggles with writer's block, motivated by "the search for a missing body" that

Kim argues "triply situates that body within the 3/11 disaster, Japan's contemporary suicide epidemic, and the body count of the World War II Pacific theatre" (76-77). As these scholars have articulated, every relationship between characters in *A Tale for the Time Being* evokes and relies on the shared history manifest in their personal pasts. Although even the characters representing real people are fictional and thus at some separation from our factual history, the ubiquitous mirroring of factuality within the novel's fictionality captures how identities and lives are constructed out of their connections with the past.

Given this treatment of history as the novel's material substrate, the attempts by both Nao and Ruth to expand the historical record, capturing or recovering the stories of Jiko and Haruki #1, respectively, also expand the narratological roles that they serve in relation to the novel's other characters. In contradiction to their initial appearance as overtly fictional narrator and potentially non-fictional author figure, their goal of properly memorializing their subjects reverses the apparent power dynamics between Nao and Ruth. By seeking to write her great-grandmother's life story, Nao realigns herself from a passive reader of school texts to the more active role of author, and Ruth's consumption of both Nao's and Haruki #1's stories realigns Ruth from the author Ozeki, of whom she is nevertheless a representation, to the role of reader, albeit not an inactive one. Crucially, both of these acts of remembering are deeply flawed, given that Nao overestimates her ability to research and record Jiko's life and that Ruth overestimates her ability to corroborate any of the documents that she finds in the freezer bag, yet both are deeply human efforts to resist the inevitable vanishing of another character's life story. If, as I have already articulated, *A Tale for the Time Being* establishes history as a socially constructed narrative that its characters are able to transcend, then it also establishes the possibility of our altering those narratives to more just and liberatory ends outside the novel. Not to seize the opportunity to rupture the commons of history — that narrative violent and coercive in its creation and scale — by rewriting one's self would be to give up control of one's origin, identity, and potentially even future to either the callous writing of others or, perhaps worse still, the threat of being forgotten altogether.

The risk of forgetting life stories is another threat made explicit in *A Tale for the Time Being*, in which characters constantly struggle with memory, seeing information about themselves disappear or change in

the face of aging, dementia, and state censorship. At the more trivial end of that spectrum, it is revealed that Nao has difficulty remembering much of her childhood experiences prior to her family's move back to Japan from the United States, causing her to reflect on the difficulty of preserving one's own past, even as recent as a happy childhood in the face of a traumatic adolescence (97-98). This struggle prompts her to reflect that those memories seem to be both "realer than [her] real life now" and "like a memory belonging to a totally different Nao Yasutani" (97). Not only does she struggle to record her childhood memories, but also her past is being eroded by her present, to the point where her sense of self is suffering. At the other end of the novel's past-threatening spectrum, Ruth seems to be constantly preoccupied with her late mother's dementia and the anxiety that she, too, will develop memory and identity problems (57, 64, 83, *passim*), even suspecting those around her, such as Oliver, of beginning to treat her differently as his wife who may be developing Alzheimer's (203, 295). Masako, Ruth's deceased mother, presents a notable foil to Jiko, Nao's great-grandmother, insofar as the latter appears to have been empowered by her decisions to withhold information about her life, such as her magically unchanging age of 104 (18), whereas the former is rendered a dependant by gradually "Missing price tags. Missing memories. Missing parts of her life" (222). This comparison of matriarchs suggests that being forgotten by history can be an empowering choice if it is a deliberate one.

Perhaps in an effort to reveal the true dangers of having one's history written by others, *A Tale for the Time Being* also includes the example of Haruki #1, Nao's great-uncle and Jiko's son, who died after being drafted into the Second World War and whose wartime letters and secret diary are bound up with Nao's diary in the washed-up freezer bag. For two-thirds of the novel, Nao, Jiko, and even Ruth believe that Haruki #1 died in an act of violent, supposedly heroic, nationalistic suicide: a kamikaze attack on a troop transport (68-69). Although Nao herself observes the strangeness of his death, given his passion for learning and background as a university student (68), and Jiko denies that he went through with the attack willingly (68), the characters nevertheless appear to accept this version of events, eventually prompting Nao to lash out at her father for his repeated failure to take his own life:

> Jiko Obaachama gave me his letters. You should read them, too, and maybe you'll stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Your uncle

> Haruki Number One was brave. He didn't want to fight in a war but when the time came, he faced his fate. . . . He was a kamikaze pilot, only his suicide was totally different. He wasn't a coward. He flew his plane into the enemy's battleship to protect his homeland. You should really be more like him! (264)

Not only is Haruki #1's memory transformed from a peaceful scholar to a heroic soldier, but that transformed memory is also weaponized against his depressed nephew by his own, admittedly deeply traumatized, grand-niece. McKay deconstructs this image of the kamikaze in reference to Ozeki's novel as well as Kerri Sakamoto's *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003), noting that the image of the fanatically devoted Japanese aviator is at least as much a product of concerted Japanese propaganda as American projection (7). Just as the memorialization of Jiko by Nao is an effort to construct them both, so too does the version of Haruki #1 that his Japanese letters create serve to construct the glory of wartime Japan, serving to maintain its value of devotion and imperial concepts of social order. However, this version of Haruki #1 does not sit well in his grave, and *A Tale for the Time Being* repeatedly foreshadows its revelation as a fabrication. As Jiko herself notes, while explaining her decision to keep the small wooden box of Haruki #1's remains, occupied by only a small piece of paper saying "remains," out of the family grave, "I could never bring myself to [inter it.] That last word was not his, after all. It was the government's" (248).

In order to recover Haruki #1's voice, Ruth asks two of her local acquaintances, people to whom she has access largely because of her security in a multilingual country, for help translating his letters from Japanese and his diary from French. This help comes from first- and second-generation Japanese immigrants Kimi and her son Tosh (234-35), as well as Benoit LeBec, a Québecois man who runs the island's dump (219-24, 315-16). The letters, originally written in Japanese and delivered by wartime post, appear to confirm the memory of Haruki #1 that persists among his family. Dated from December 1943 to March 1945 and addressed to Jiko, the letters provide a stoic tale of soldiers instructed to "switch off [their] hearts and minds completely," to "cut off [their] love and sever [their] attachment" to their families, and to place their trust and loyalty solely with their emperor and their homeland (252), aligning with the propaganda visions of kamikaze pilots and the Japanese military that McKay critiques. In the diary, the

translation of which is made possible only because of Ruth's community connections, Haruki #1 reveals that his experience in the military is defined by violent bullying (317), sexual coercion (318), and the murder of fellow draftees (319); that his mother has become a target of the military police (321-22); that the military has been engaging in horrific war crimes since its early invasion of China (326-27); and that he has been forced into military service and a pageant of false letters so that he does not jeopardize the potential financial compensation that his family so desperately needs (328). These revelations pale in comparison to the last one, that Haruki #1 has decided to end his life in an act of peaceful resistance: "I am determined to do my utmost to steer my plane away from my target and into the sea" (328). In a single line, the inclusion of Haruki #1's voice in *A Tale for the Time Being* recasts his heroic self-sacrifice in the name of his country into a coerced, desperate attempt to prevent that supposedly heroic act. In addition to foreshadowing the revelation of Haruki #2's own reasons for attempting suicide, Ruth's research efforts recover a past otherwise obliterated by state forces, recontextualizing the beliefs and identities of Haruki #1's family members, and her position as authorial self-representation suggests that this cause and its effect are metonymic of Ozeki's and the novel's work more broadly.

One example of this recovery is Ruth's reflections on Jap Ranch, a formerly expropriated property on whose adjoining beach Ruth discovers the freezer bag containing Nao's diary. When explaining to her friend Muriel where she found the bag, Ruth locates her discovery in relation to Jap Ranch as a landmark: "No one on the island called it by that name anymore, but Muriel was an old-timer and knew the reference" (32). The ranch, as it turns out, "had once belonged to a Japanese family" before being sold as part of their internment during the Second World War and "had changed hands several times since then" (32). Although not directly responsible for or related to the unjust seizure of the property, the "elderly Germans" who now live on it (32) are not whom Ruth prioritizes when she refers to the place by its politically incorrect, wartime nickname. Instead, she recovers and preserves the history of the land and the injustice of its seizure by "stubbornly persist[ing]" (32) in the use of that nickname. It is hinted that this acknowledgement puts a strain on her relationships with the other islanders, who perhaps are not as able as Muriel to parse the reference.

This strain includes Ruth's husband, Oliver, whom the novel characterizes as German and who resists her labelling of the ranch on those grounds, with Ruth reflecting that "Their marriage was like this, an axial alliance — her people interned, his firebombed in Stuttgart" (32). This brief digression about a property's name thus highlights the novel's use of history to ground its characters, settings, and events; explores the sympathies and antipathies that those histories produce; and establishes the novel, its narrator, and its author as passionate about recovering, preserving, and acknowledging histories even at a cost to themselves.

The novel's deployment of history as a shared narrative and of memorialization as a deliberately multi-purpose construction, whether that construction is coercive or resistant, has the effect of collapsing time in much the same way that the novel's bipartite structure collapses space. I concur with Kim that Ruth's fear of Nao's death, when combined with the other deaths that potentially or definitely occurred in the Second World War and the 3/11 tsunami in Japan, "engenders transhistorical time loops that foreground the ongoing presences of past death and state culpability" (77). The "culpability" of the Japanese state to which Kim refers is more obvious in the stories of Nao and Haruki #1 than in those of Ruth and Jiko, but I extend Kim's observation about transhistorical time loops to the type and scale of challenges faced by all of the characters in *A Tale for the Time Being*. During her research on Nao's great-grandmother, for example, Ruth discovers that one Yasutani Jiko was a pioneer of *shishōsetsu*, "a genre of Japanese autobiographical fiction, commonly translated into English as [the] 'I-novel'" (149). Although obviously a passage reflecting on Jiko and her characterization as an accomplished and outspoken woman for her time, the inclusion of a real genre of Japanese autobiographical fiction also allows readers to extend observations of *shishōsetsu* to Nao, Ruth, and beyond. After all, both Nao's diary and Ruth's inner monologue are filled with the "issues of truthfulness and fabrication" that define the *shishōsetsu* genre, and its "tension between self-revelatory, self-concealing, and self-effacing acts" (149) is what drives the novel's plot given the focus on research, recording, and the struggle to write. It is through the introduction of these and other connections across time, which produce Kim's transhistorical loops, that the novel suggests how factual people such as Ozeki might be observed through the fictional struggles of Nao and Ruth. Moreover,

these temporal linkages within a broader historical context provide the text with ample excuses for one of its other strategies for drawing the reader's attention to how history is written toward an end: the digressive footnote.

Digressive footnotes are found throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, in both Nao's and Ruth's sections, though their presence in each signifies different things. In the case of Nao's sections, it is not unusual to find footnotes translating the occasional Japanese term, idiom, or exchange that Nao includes into English (4, 43, 80, 104, *passim*) or providing context by explaining the historical significance of what she only cursorily mentions (6, 26, 50, 106, *passim*). In a few key moments, these footnotes reveal their provenance as Ruth's annotations of Nao's diary, written at least in some cases as Ruth reads the text. When Nao's recording of a conversation with her mother mentions Jiko's "temple in Miyagi," Ruth, who thus far has been baffled in her attempts to locate the mysterious temple in Sendai, exclaims in footnote 88 "Miyagi. . . . Sendai is in Miyagi!" (139), a revelation that she then acts on in her subsequent narrative section. Her apparent role as editor of Nao's diary is noted by several scholars (Davis 93; Hausler 159) and is not out of place in the genres of found or framed literature, but footnotes also appear in Ruth's sections (62, 150), prompting at least one reader to observe that "it is not immediately clear who is responsible for the footnotes" therein (Hogue 73). Thus, though the presence of digressive footnotes in Nao's section serves both to supplement the diary's information and to introduce and maintain Ruth's voice within it, the presence of similar footnotes in Ruth's sections suggests either a third voice, perhaps her own text's finder and editor, or at least the definite materiality of the text, with a future Ruth narrating and annotating the experience of her past self. Such implications of materiality are important because elsewhere the narration of Ruth's story appears to be an ethereal, limited omniscient, third-person narration. Once again, I argue, the attention of readers is drawn through these footnotes to the construction of the novel's text, that text's location in more than just the obvious past, and the resulting collapse of temporal barriers among *A Tale for the Time Being*'s past, present, and future, as well as the many potential moments of its reception.

Not only are the narrating characters of Nao and Ruth concerned with recording and memorializing their subjects, but also the novel

uses paratext to present itself as an effort to record and memorialize a real episode of interconnected stories and historical events. For example, in the research article in which Ruth discovers the mention of Yasutani Jiko, a fictional article entitled "Japanese Shishōsetsu and the Instability of the Female '*I*,'" which of necessity must have been written by Ozeki, there is a quotation from the actually extant text *The Rhetoric of Confession* by Edward Fowler (1988), appropriately cited in a footnote directing readers to "See Bibliography" (149). Hausler suggests that these paratextual elements, including the "footnotes, appendices, and a bibliography[,] . . . suggest a heightened authenticity for the novel" (159), but I assert that authenticity is not the only effect. Although similar paratextual elements are present in other examples of literature purporting to have been found, or in other cases literally comprise the frames of framed literature, the presence of Ruth in the text of *A Tale for the Time Being*, as a fictionalized representation of the author, forces the novel's appendices to rupture the barriers between Ruth the character and Ozeki the author, resignifying the escape not only of the text into its paratext but also of its reality into our own. Not only is the "authenticity" of the novel's fictional past being "heightened," as Hausler suggests, but also the diegetic barriers between fictional world and factual context are being dramatically eroded. This observation of a deliberate breach, when paired with the novel's portrayal of Ruth's anxieties about writing and authenticity, prompts me to conclude that the metafictional paratext of *A Tale for the Time Being* also pushes the reader to consider how all history is fictionalized and how the barriers between the facts that capture its readers' pasts and the stories that construct its readers' identities are inherently permeable.

Within the context of a novel that represents, however directly or indirectly, the cruelty imposed on young women because of their appearance, the malice directed at immigrants by the xenophobic, and the violence perpetrated by nation-states on their enemies, both without and within their borders, the view of history in *A Tale for the Time Being* must be connected with a shared ethical imperative toward creating more honest and just narratives about the historically marginalized. Whereas "revisionist history" as such has always been rightly demonized as a perversion of the record, often for violent political ends, Ozeki's novel articulates the less popular observation that such perversions of the record escape scrutiny when occurring in the past. *A Tale for the*

Time Being, like much modern historical fiction, is no more dangerously revisionist than the accounts penned under imperial Japan, while being considerably more compassionate. As Heilmann and Llewellyn write about *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison was "reclaiming an experience that had hitherto been written by . . . 'official' history" and, by fabricating interstitial fiction around those scarce and stripped details, "us[ed] the evidence provided by a partial and partisan history even as she undermined its right of narrative and cultural supremacy" (142). The same narrative and cultural supremacy is responsible for Haruki #1's compelled suicide, Haruki #2's several attempts at suicide, and Nao's premeditations of suicide. Ozeki's novel presents an alternative: the recovery and reclamation, no matter how implausible or necessarily fictional, of histories that are less violent, less unjust, and less damning of the futures that they foretell. As Adrienne Rich writes of re-vision, it is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," and it "is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18).

Through its deployment of history and its investigation of history-creating processes, I argue, *A Tale for the Time Being* champions the need for writers and readers to participate actively in the creation, reception, and revision of the past: a revisionist narratology. Whether in the form of historical records, family traumas, or personal identities, Ozeki's novel advances a position that narratives of the past inform, motivate, and even constrain the present moment, using its narrators' efforts to capture the lives of others as an opportunity for those narrators to explore and uncover more about themselves. This interweaving of historical, non-fictional, and fictional genres also collapses time and space, serving both to illuminate the connections between characters in radically different contexts and to suggest connections beyond the confines of genre or discipline. Regardless of whether one keeps an unfinished biographical manuscript or an untranslated diary, the novel outlines how necessary these historical objects and their recreation are for remembering and reinscribing the experiences and lessons of the past in the present, even and especially where those lessons have been forgotten or suppressed. As a materialization of these stories and histories, *A Tale for the Time Being* itself serves to memorialize the narratives of its characters, including the full range of fictional, historically conjectured, and factual experiences. The novel makes all three types of narrative

more tangible to its readers, who are then better able to perceive and reflect on how those narratives affect the constructions of their own selves, much as a war memorial or cenotaph might prompt reflection in its visitors. Intriguingly, without Ruth's presence as a fellow character, her repeated editorial and research interventions, and her uncovering of lost information, this concretization of the past would be confined entirely to the realm of fiction, in which its stakes would remain wholly invented. Instead, through its use of authorial self-representation, *A Tale for the Time Being* and its reflections spill over the boundaries of the novel, perhaps not literally rewriting history, but certainly providing a model for how characters, readers, and writers might be able to do so.

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