"Each of Them Thin and Barely Opaque": Ruth Ozeki's Truth Approximations

Serena Fusco

Abstract

This essay focuses on the work of Japanese American writer Ruth Ozeki (b. 1956). Mainly discussing her novels *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), I suggest that, through a sophisticated usage of paratextual, transmedial, and autofictional strategies, Ozeki claims for her work a 'truth power' that operates at the dialogical border between the textual world and the real world. Ozeki implements, in my view, a 'truth search' in which bare facts can be known, and told, only through the fictive, 'magical' power of the imagination; this collaboration between factuality and invention, in turn, makes narrative a performative object that can intervene, and foster practical intervention, in the real world.

Keywords

Narrative, Real, Paratext, Autofiction, Transmediality

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I

Born in Connecticut in 1956 to an Anglo U.S. father and a Japanese mother, Japanese American filmmaker and writer Ruth Ozeki (pseudonym of Ruth Lounsbury) gained worldwide recognition in 1998 with the publication of *My Year of Meats*. This bestselling novel was followed by two more works of fiction – *All Over Creation* (2003) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) – and by the non-fiction piece *The Face: A Time Code* (2015), in-between a meditation and an autobiographical sketch. Prior to becoming a writer, Ozeki directed two films: *Body of Correspondence* (1994) and *Halving the Bones* (1995). She has been a Zen Buddhist priest since 2010.

This essay will focus on *My Year of Meats* and *A Tale for the Time Being* – in many ways, her most original works, especially in formal/stylistic terms. The multifaceted nature of reality, the existence of many worlds, and how these worlds interact are recurring themes in Ozeki's oeuvre, and she experiments with strategies for dealing with the complexity of the real. Besides, her writing confronts a whole array of media – from film to television, from the Internet to photography, looking for creative ways to approach and understand the real at a time when various technologies substantially mediate and shape access to it.

David Palumbo-Liu has written that *My Year of Meats* «unfolds a complex and ambivalent stance toward the possibilities of truth

telling» (2005: 56). Among the stylistic and rhetorical devices that Ozeki employs are diary-like forms, second personhood, intertextuality, paratextuality, auto/biographical references, and autofictional strategies. I believe, and shall try to demonstrate, that Ozeki's narrative investment in truth telling is predicated on reconfiguring creative invention as essential to intervening in the real world, and as opposed to telling the 'truth' as a monolithic given. Her construction of an engaged, ethically charged position, one that strives for the truth while wielding the power of fiction, includes the choice, on Ozeki's part, to foreground her authorship vis-à-vis both the world of her fictive creation and the real world.

In *My Year of Meats,* Jane Takagi-Little is a Japanese American mixed-race documentarian hired to direct *My American Wife!*, a series of infomercials aired in Japan, featuring "all-American" housewives cooking their best meat recipes. *My American Wife!* is sponsored by Beef-Ex, a corporation promoting the export of American meat to Japan. As the novel unfolds, Jane increasingly violates the Beef-Ex mandate to feature white, normative families, preferring to film non-mainstream ones – immigrant, nonwhite, same-sex – in an attempt to project the image of a diverse, multicultural U.S. However, when Jane seriously starts researching the meat world, issues of multiculturalism become only part of the problem. Following the discovery of the substantial health hazards accompanying meat production and consumption, Jane takes her quest for authenticity to another level and makes a documentary film on the meat world in all its gruesomeness and unsavoriness – showing feedlots, slaughterhouses, and procedures for the growth enhancement of cattle, including the use of dangerous chemicals.

About halfway into the book, a section titled "Editing Room" provides Jane's perspective on the complex nature of truth telling:

> Truth lies in layers, each one thin and barely opaque, like skin, resisting the tug to be told. As a documentarian I think about this a lot. […]

> I wanted to make programs with documentary integrity, and at first I believed in a truth that existed – singular, empirical, absolute. But slowly, as my skills improved and I learned about editing and camera angles and the effect that music can have on meaning, I realized that truth was like race and could be measured only in ever-diminishing approximations. Still, as a documentarian, you must strive for the truth and believe in it wholeheartedly.
>
> Halved as I am, I was born doubled. By the time I wrote the pitch for *My American Wife!* my talent for speaking out of both sides of my mouth was already honed. On one hand I really did believe that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a greater Truth. On the other hand, I was broke after my divorce and desperate for a job. (Ozeki 1999: 210)[1]

Foregrounding both Jane's mixed-raceness and her awareness of the 'art' techniques that inevitably accompany the creation of a documentary, Ozeki complicates any simplistic idea of truth, but if truth it is an ever-receding horizon, she nonetheless retains and underlines the importance of going for it. In philosophical/ethical terms, this passage clearly suggests that truth does it exist as a once-and-for-all given, and that believing in the existence of truth should not equate with oversimplifying it. It also suggests that 'bare truth' is rare: truth is usually filtered through the stylistic and rhetorical choices of the teller. Finally, it suggests that it is possible for a 'lesser truth' to be sacrificed on the altar of a 'greater Truth'. The novel retains all the complexity of this ethical conundrum. One way in which Ozeki plays with this tension without dissolving or trivializing it is by linking it to Jane's identity as a hyphenated, mixed-race Japanese American. As shown in the above quotation, Jane's problematic role as an

[1] My reference text is a 1999 Pan Books edition that – I assume for the sake of grammatical hypercorrectness – drops the *s* in "Meats", so that the title of the novel becomes *My Year of Meat*. The *s* has been reinstated in subsequent editions. In this essay I stick to the original title when mentioning the novel.

intercultural figure is grounded in her 'doubled' identity. Is Jane a cultural translator, contributing to crosscultural understanding, or is she a sellout who cynically capitalizes on her position? While the book provides no easy answer to this question, we should remind that the discourse of mixed-racedness, and hyphenated identity, is central to Ozeki's work. The parallel between truth and race in *My Year of Meats* also highlights the entanglement between the investment in truth telling and the specific issues of authenticity that 'ethnic' writers are bound to confront to a much higher degree than 'non-ethnic' writers. Ozeki is aware that readers tend to mix her up with her characters, because her identity is «too specific, and too identifiable; if I wrote about half-Japanese, half American women, readers were automatically going to assume that this character was autobiographical» (Smith College Buddhist Studies 2018). 'Ethnic' writers, especially women, Ozeki remarks, do not enjoy «the benefit of sharing an identity with a literary archetype» (Smith College Buddhist Studies 2018). In this regard, the tendency, for many contemporary authors, to «deliberately [lead] readers to regard fictional texts as autobiographic» (Davis 2015: 90), assumes a quite different value in the case an 'ethnically marked' writer such as Ozeki, because it resonates against a historical and cultural background that has seen, since at least the 1970s, the simplistic, often automatic, and disparaging ascription of 'ethnic literature' to the realm of autobiography and testimony (see Palumbo-Liu 1995). This tendency has generated much controversy, and Ozeki openly plays with it. Her irony emerges, among other things, in the choice of her pen name – a (in Genette's 1987 terms) paratextual element that adds an evident touch of 'Japanness' and points in the direction of her hybrid identity, something that the last name "Lounsbury" does not convey.

Establishing complex connections among truth, skin, and race, Jane's words also resonate with what Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh has called the "transnational 'truth'" of race. Petrovich Njegosh (2015) has argued that race is neither an objective given nor merely false conscience – it is 'true' to the extent that, as a category, it has historically been, and continues to be, crucial for the construction and

perception of the real. This is not tantamount to granting a monolithic, absolute truth status to race; quite the contrary, the aim is to historicize, de-naturalize, de-mystify race as a given, examining it critically as a cultural construct, as opposed to simply stating that, in objective reality, it does not exist and hence does not matter.

II

I shall now offer a synthetic overview of some of the textual choices and stylistic/rhetorical devices that make possible, while reading Ozeki's work, to do what Jane does in the above quotation: to reflect on the importance of the mechanisms of fiction and invention for an ethical confrontation with the real world, as well as for the possibility to go for the truth and act responsibly. I shall specifically dwell on three aspects: 1)the paratextual component at work in the novels; 2)Ozeki's confrontation with the multimedia, transmedia continuum of facts and inventions, words and images, that characterizes our post-post-modern historical moment; and 3)some implications of the autofictional strategy implemented in *A Tale for the Time Being*, which dovetails with this novel's interest for "many worlds" theories.

Ozeki's fiction evidently builds its appeal also thanks to the emotional charge generated by the topical quality of the issues it tackles. Eleanor Ty discusses Ozeki as one of the «Asian North American authors [who] manifest an attitude of "critical globality"» (2010: xiii) tackling broad concerns such as the environment, reproduction, and health hazards. Rachel Lee maintains that the scope of political interest in *My Year of Meats* «also includes the terrain of biology and ecology […] as they affect the reproduction and vitality of the population» (2014: 39-40). However, I would remark that Ozeki's novels also urge readers to move on from the emotional impact generated by the real issues around which the fictional world is built, to an exploration of factual sources and materials, such as websites, articles, or studies that have initially sparked the construction of the fictional universe. This effect is obtained by means of intertextual, as

well as paratextual, strategies, that branch both 'inwards' (into the novelistic world) and 'outwards' (into the real world), creating a transtextual, transmedial continuum wherein readers must put their discerning skills at work.

My Year of Meats incorporates a variety of textual materials: documentary interludes, letters, fax sheets, diary excerpts, and quotes from Sei Shōnagon's classic of the Heian period *Makura no Sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*). Two problematic paratexts follow the novel's bulk: 1) a short bibliography (also listing some contact information and websites) and 2) a section of four endnotes to the text.[2] The first of these two paratexts is introduced by a peculiar

> AUTHOR'S NOTE: Although this book is a novel, and therefore purely a work of my imagination, as a lapsed documentarian I feel compelled to include a bibliography of the sources I have relied on to provoke these fictions. —J.T.-L. (Ozeki 1999: 427)

As noted by Nina Cornyetz, «The very logic of narrative progression [in *My Year of Meats*] is one of disclosure or revelation of unknown or denied truths» (2001: 211). At the same time, the emphasis on truthfulness is accompanied by a typically postmodern problematization of the boundaries between fact and fiction. The paratextual "author's note" cited above is clearly ambivalent in its (in Genettian terms) inscription of enunciative responsibility: while "author" seems to point towards *the author of the novel*, "J.T.-L." and the label "lapsed documentarian" gesture not toward Ozeki, but rather toward the fictional character/narrator, Jane. Because of the ambivalent effect generated by the "author's note", the bibliography and notes also end up situated (paraphrasing Genette again) on a paratextual threshold separating/connecting intratextual and extratextual domains:

[2] The 1998 Penguin edition also includes, as an appendix, a "Conversation" with the author. This paratext is absent from my 1999 edition and, to my knowledge, from at least one more recent edition.

should the enunciative responsibility for them be ascribed to Ozeki or Jane? The author and the narrator/character here overlap and, to an extent, blend into each other.

Situated at the threshold between the fictional world and the real world, the paratextual "author's note" comes after an interesting 'slippage' occurring in the novel's final chapter. In the final pages, Jane the narrator/hero vindicates the decision to make the story of her "Year of Meat" public:

> Like Shōnagon, I have "set about filling my notebooks with odd facts, stories from the past…", or at least this past year, and "everything I have seen and felt is included". However, unlike Shōnagon, […] I live at the cusp of the new millennium. Whatever people may think of my book, I will make it public, bring it to light unflinchingly. That is the modern thing to do. (Ozeki 1999: 425-426)

This sudden 'slippage' from film to book, from a medium to another, occurs rather smoothly and is taken at face value in Jane's narrative, but the reader at this point knows well that, within the novelistic universe, Jane has (mainly) been telling her stories in the form of filmic images, not writing. Such 'confusion' can be enlightening in at least two ways. First, it reinforces, in Palumbo-Liu's terms, the sense, on the part of the reader, of another presence in the novel, «an intelligence outside Jane's» (2005: 62), possibly the author's. Indirectly confirmed by the portrayal of Jane as a character constantly grappling with, and never overcoming, her own contradictions and inconsistencies, «It is this doubling», one that superimposes the hero/narrator with the (ghost of the) author, «that gives the book its true critical edge» (ibid.). Second, the slippage bespeaks the existence of a 'transmedial continuum' of information – one that connects word-based and image-based media, fiction and factual documents, wherein the boundaries of fact and fiction are repeatedly transgressed and renegotiated in the light of ethically troubling choices, doubts, and possibly mistakes.

The 'dressing up' of truth amounts to accompanying 'bare facts' with «the formal properties needed to make truth attractive, persuasive, and affective» (Palumbo-Liu 2005: 61): embellishment, if not downright fictionality. This is reiterated at the novel's closure, when Jane offers some reflections on the events that have occurred during the year that has changed her life:

> In the Year of Meats, truth wasn't stranger than fiction; it *was* fiction. Ma says I'm neither here nor there, and if that's the case, so be it. Half documentarian, half fabulist … Maybe sometimes you have to make things up, to tell truths that alter outcomes. (Ozeki 1999: 425)

While, on the one hand, we can see this as the mark of a fundamental undecidability and overall blurring of any distinction between fact and fiction, we can also discern a practical, productive aspect to this blend. In the quotation above, the text underlines the matter of praxis: *what to do* in order to produce, hinder, or alter certain outcomes? On the one hand, this question pertains to an ethical sphere. On the other, it must be addressed in the artistic domain: the passage clearly comments on the power of fiction to shape, *re-create* reality by telling "truths that alter outcomes". Nicholas Frangipane maintains that, in the context of an epistemological shift from postmodernism to "post-postmodernism", a number of recent literary texts seem to suggest that «while stories cannot tell the truth of an event, they are still a viable and important way to *know*, and we must tell them, because, although they are faulty tools, they are essential for understanding» (2016: 528, emphasis in the original). Despite the impossibility to establish the "truth" once and for all, stories still serve a «practical function», tapping into «the productive power of narrative when the facts are not enough» […] (Frangipane 2016: 529). This echoes Rocío Davis's discussion of the strategy employed by Ozeki in her 1995 film *Halving the Bones* (released under the name of Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury), in which she blends fact and fiction to tell the interconnected stories of her mother and grandmother: «[Ozeki]

justifies her creative strategy by explaining that she needed stories, even if they had to be invented, to understand her family» (Davis 2015: 100). In other words, creative storytelling can be regarded, to paraphrase Jane, as an ever-diminishing truth approximation that will bring us, nevertheless, as close to the truth as possible.

III

Ozeki's most recent novel to date, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), transposes onto a more markedly metaliterary level much of the thematic and stylistic tension between fact and fiction already present in the author's previous work, while at the same time embarking on an autofictional turn and openly confronting the possibility of 'many worlds', in theoretical and narrative terms.

A Tale for the Time Being presents a structure that alternates two voices/storylines. (This alternation also makes room, at certain points, for other materials.) In such bipartite mode, the book follows two protagonists, Nao and Ruth. Naoko "Nao" Yasutani is a Japanese American teenager whose family, who had moved to the Silicon Valley soon after her birth, has been forced to move back to Japan after the burst of the so-called "dot-com" financial bubble, because the father has lost his job as a computer programmer. Nao's story is narrated in her diary, in which she recounts – in a surprisingly ironic, even light-hearted tone – her tough life in Tokyo: a discriminated "transfer student", she is relentlessly bullied and sexually harassed in school, lives in a disreputable neighborhood, and her unemployed father repeatedly attempts suicide. At the beginning of her narrative, Nao suggests that she also intends to end her life. Prior to this, however, she will write the remarkable story of her paternal great-grandmother, one-hundred-and-four-year-old Jiko Yasutani – a writer, a feminist, an anarchist, and a Buddhist nun. However, while Nao narrates about "old Jiko", she becomes distracted by the events in her own life, events that trickle into the narrative and soon become the main part of it.

In a section immediately following Nao's first, the diary is found by Ruth, a Japanese American writer living with husband Oliver and a

cat named Schrödinger on an isle off the coast of British Columbia. Besides her given name, this fictional character shares a number of traits with real-life Ozeki: a husband named Oliver, a residence in British Columbia, a friend who is a professor at Stanford, a late mother named Masako who had Alzheimer's, a double Japanese and U.S. American background – and, or course, her profession. Ruth finds Nao's diary washed upon the beach, inside a Hello Kitty lunchbox wrapped in plastic, together with an old military watch, a package of letters handwritten in Japanese, and another diary written in French. The last item will turn out to be written by Haruki #1, Nao's great-uncle and Jiko's son, who died in WWII. Nao's diary has been hidden in a faded red book cover bearing the Proustian title *À la recherche du temps perdu*. From this moment on, the text alternates portions of Nao's diary with sections about Ruth reading Nao's diary and becoming engrossed in the girl's story.

In a recent essay on the contemporary rise of autofiction and the narrative effects generated by this genre, Marjorie Worthington stresses its "truth power". Paradoxically, yet perhaps not surprisingly, the main "truth claim" that is made by – and through – the autofictional texts analyzed by Worthington is a claim on the powers of fiction, «the gesture toward abstract truth that we typically associate with the novel» (Worthington 2017: 481). At the same time, elaborating on Timothy Dow Adams, Worthington remarks that autofiction keeps readers in a state of continuous interrogation as to the precise degree of fictionality vs. factuality in the texts. How much of what is told in an autofiction is fact, albeit within a mainly fictional universe?

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth is suffering from a writer's block. While many contemporary autofictions follow a main character – bearing the same name as the author – in the process of writing a novel, or dealing with the implications of his work as a writer, Ruth's role in *A Tale for the Time Being*, despite her profession, is not mainly that of a writer, but, instead, that of a *reader*. This choice evokes what Ozeki has called the "collaboration" that involves writers and their readers in co-dependence:

> I sit in my little cabin in the woods and think up things and write them down, and eventually, several years down the road, you, for whatever reasons, pick up my novel and apply your eyes and minds and imaginations to it, and, through that process, which is a kind of magic or alchemy, really, the novel realizes itself. (Ozeki 2008: 13-14).

The relationship between Nao and Ruth is one between a writer (Nao) and a reader (Ruth) evoked through an explicit address. As reader and writer, Ruth and Nao are entangled and bring each other into existence:

> Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I will tell you. A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be. As for me, right now I am sitting in a French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad chanson that is playing sometime in your past, which is also my present, writing this and wondering about you, somewhere in my future. And if you're reading this, then maybe by now you're wondering about me, too. (Ozeki 2013: 3)

Despite the obvious spatial and temporal distance separating her from Nao, and despite her doubts about the diary's authenticity, Ruth feels the urge to read on, to find out more about Nao, and the more she reads, the more she feels the need to intervene in the girl's troubled life. Fulvia Sarnelli has stressed the highly subjective, emotional, even intimate connection that Ruth develops with «both Nao's story and the diary as a text-object» (2017: 398). Sarnelli claims that «Ruth's interaction with the diary is primarily and most importantly aimed at getting to know Nao "personally"» (2017: 404). In contrast with the rational approach displayed by Oliver and her friends and acquaintances on the island, who seem bent on learning about, and relying on, provable facts, both regarding the long journey of the diary across the sea and Nao's narrative, Ruth's «attitude, instead, is much more engaged, emotional, and urgent to the point of becoming

sometimes hysterical, since she partakes in the events as if she had a specific role in them» (Sarnelli 2017: 407). I would suggest that *A Tale for the Time Being* reprises, in modified form and content but also on a different scale, the urge to *search for the truth* that was already present in *My Year of Meats*. The truth-search in *A Tale for the Time Being* is, evidently, more 'private' than the one occurring in *My Year of Meats*;[3] it must be noted, however, that this privacy begets concerns that enlarge the novel's frame of reference way beyond a one-to-one exchange between Nao and Ruth: among such matters – once again, of 'global' scope and relevance – are broad environmental issues, such as oceanic gyres and the causes of the tsunami, and the Buddhist doctrine of interconnectedness of all beings. Moreover, granted all her personal investment in the diary, a collective reading space becomes crucial for Ruth to make sense of it and the other materials found in the Hello Kitty lunchbox. For instance, she must rely on friends to translate for her both Haruki #1's letters and his secret diary. In my view, *A Tale for the Time Being* problematizes, even satirizes an idea of 'the public' as a space of expertise ownership, exclusive readings, and recognized, once-and-for-all established truths. Ozeki re-opens 'the public' as a space of shared readership. The community in which Ruth finds her place again, with a renewed sense of belonging, at the end of the novel, is one where others can share the act of reading with her (Sarnelli 2017: 412).

A Tale for the Time Being also expands the paratextual strategy already at work in *My Year of Meats*. The 2013 novel is provided with a long final section of 165 endnotes; six appendixes, from A to F; and a final bibliography listing 19 reference titles. The endnotes mainly function like reader's notes, containing Ruth's comments on specific

[3] Jane unearths disturbing information on the correlation between meat consumption, the spread of diseases, including lethal ones, and human infertility rates. If the denouement of the truth search has more evidently 'public' tones in *My Year of Meats*, Jane's motivations for carrying it forward include a very private and personal aspect: namely, the fact that she is reproductively challenged.

parts of Nao's diary and clarifying many of the Japanese terms used by the girl in the middle of her predominantly English-language writing. These notes reinforce Ruth's role as reader, while also, inevitably, contributing to blurring the separation between Ruth (the character) and Ozeki (the author). The situation is further complicated by a discrepancy: Ruth is a character in a story(line) told in the third person by a heterodiegetic narrator, whereas the notes are written in the first person. This choice of narrative person further problematizes the issue of their enunciative responsibility.[4]

Her emotional, apparently non-rational attitude notwithstanding, Ruth researches the Internet for clues that may corroborate the truthfulness/authenticity of Nao's story, and/or provide hints as to the girl's current whereabouts. The web searches she launches yield no results, with two exceptions. About one-third into the book, Ruth finds a link to an article in a scholarly database, which, from the limited preview, looks like a study of the literary work of Jiko Yasutani. Ruth is elated by the discovery: «Ruth hadn't realized just how keenly she'd been waiting for this corroboration from the outside world that the nun of her dreams existed, and that Nao and her diary were real and therefore traceable» (Ozeki 2013: 150). However, to her frustration, the attempts to retrieve the article end up in nothing: initially, a blackout prevents her from accessing the database; finally, she learns that the essay has, for unspecified reasons, been removed.

This episode looks to me like an ironic intratextual version of what Ozeki's readers can feel tempted to do when reading her work: i.e., search – via the Internet – for elements that may corroborate the authenticity/reliability of her sources. On the other hand, the novel suggests that factual sources must be supplemented by the re-creative powers of the imagination, which comprise acts of both reading and writing.

[4] There are also Ruth's notes to her own sections, mainly used to explain references to quantum computing and quantum mechanics in the last part of the novel.

At the same time, the book repeatedly reflects on the fragility of memory – for instance, through the figure of a mother suffering from Alzheimer's, a recurring presence in Ozeki's oeuvre.[5] In her anxiety about developing the same illness, Ruth worriedly records her own memory slippages. If the whole novel is an attempt at fostering memory and reconnecting with 'lost time' – as reinforced by the Proustian reference – Ozeki simultaneously makes it clear that the loss or cancellation of memory can also be blessings. Evidence of this are the Internet videos, uploaded by her schoolmates, that record Nao's bullying and shaming. Nao's father and Ruth discuss this when they meet in a dream of Ruth's (I shall return to this dream sequence shortly):

> "[…] She was getting bullied. They were posting horrible things about her on the Internet."
>
> He sighs and hangs his head. "I'm a programmer, but there was nothing I could do. Once stuff is up there, it sticks around, you know? Follows you and it won't go away."
>
> "Actually, I've been having the opposite experience," she says. "Sometimes I'll search for something, and the information I'm looking for is there one minute, and then the next minute, poof!" (Ozeki 2013: 351-352)

Nao's father, Haruki #2, will later claim to have created two software bugs able to remove materials from the web or make them irretrievable, thus removing the stigma attached to his daughter's name and possibly allowing a fresh start for her.

In the end, the novel points to the inevitable, yet welcome incompleteness that accompanies all narratives and processes of knowledge. In Ruth's own words (finally in the first person and directly addressed to Nao):

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[5] Momoko, the protagonist's mother in Ozeki's second novel *All Over Creation*, also suffers from Alzheimer's.

> In your diary, you quoted old Jiko saying something about not-knowing, how not-knowing is the most intimate way, or did I just dream that? Anyway, I've been thinking about this a lot, and I think maybe it's true, even though I don't really like uncertainty. I'd much rather know, but then again, not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive. (Ozeki 2013: 402)

IV

The most evident transgression of both verisimilitude and the boundaries between narrative worlds in *A Tale for the Time Being* is Ruth's intervention in Nao's story via a dream. In an oneiric sequence, Ruth finds herself by a pond, where Nao's father, Haruki #2, is sitting on a bench. Following their conversation, Haruki #2 relinquishes his suicidal plans, pledges to help his daughter, and departs. Later in the same dream sequence, Ruth places Haruki #1's secret French diary in a box on an altar in Jiko's monastery. Outside the dream, Nao and Haruki #2 eventually find the diary and realize that, instead of killing war enemies and being killed in a kamikaze attack during WWII, Haruki #1 had preferred to die by flying his plane into the sea and away from its target, so as to spare lives. This 'unpatriotic' act is told in the secret diary addressed to his mother Jiko. Haruki #1's diary is a key plot element – one that performs what Marie-Laure Ryan (2011, 2006) would call a "transworld" travel, from Ruth's here and now to Nao's, altering Nao's story as a consequence of Ruth reading it. Ozeki enacts, in other words, «a merging of paths» between worlds, «despite the logical contradiction inherent in the phenomenon» (Ryan 2006: 655).

Ruth's dream is also followed by the reappearance of Nao's writing on the final pages of her diary, that had mysteriously gone blank. When Ruth and Oliver discuss this rationally inexplicable network of events, the novel openly evokes "possible world" theories, from Erwin Schrödinger's famous imaginary experiment involving a cat and a box to the so-called "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics usually associated with Hugh Everett III. Starting from quantum mechanics, Appendixes B and E further articulate the

topics of entanglement, indeterminacy and co-possibility by linking them to the novel's Zen Buddhist theme and frame of reference:

> The many-worlds interpretation […] challenges [the] theory of wave function collapse, positing instead that the superposed quantum system persists and branches.
>
> At every juncture – in every Zen moment when possibilities arise – a schism occurs, worlds branch, and multiplicity ensues.
>
> Every instance of *either/or* is replaced by an *and*. And an *and*, and an *and*, and an *and*, and another *and* … adding up to an infinitely all-inclusive, and yet mutually unknowable, web of many worlds. (Ozeki 2013: 415)

On the occasion of a recent lecture given at Smith College, Ozeki has offered a remarkable explanation for her choice to "step into" the novelistic universe. At the beginning of 2011, Ozeki had completed a first draft of *A Tale for the Time Being*. Before she could submit it, though, on March 11, 2011 the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, and the Fukushima nuclear meltdown followed suit. In the wake of these terrible events, Ozeki continues,

> It hit me that the novel I'd written was no longer relevant. Certain catastrophic events create a rift, dividing time into before and after. […] So I couldn't go forward with the book. […] Months passed, but Nao's voice just kept coming back and wouldn't leave me alone. I talked this over with my husband, Oliver, and he made a suggestion. He pointed out that the devastating reality of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown had broken the world, and it had certainly broken the fictional world of my novel. The only way forward, then, was to acknowledge this brokenness, and the way to do this was to step into the novel myself, as a character – a 'real person' in a fiction – and this would break down the seamless illusion of a fictional world, and allow it to stay broken. So Nao's reader *had* to be me – and the earthquake, and tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, these awful catastrophic but

> very *real* factors, had to become part of the story. (Smith College Buddhist Studies 2018)

What Ozeki suggests here is that the historical rift caused by the Tōhoku earthquake and its awful consequences could be (at least partly) tackled, in narrative terms, through an encounter between worlds with different ontological statuses, thus allowing for the power of the imagination to 'make sense' of these "very *real*", tragic factors. Seen from the perspective of Ozeki the writer, these time-splitting events had created a diverging line in historical time, and in that diverging world Ozeki's book had become a relic prior to its completion. This divergence has been both acknowledged and recuperated by means of an encounter between factual and fictional worlds, and perhaps through the creation of an in-between world of possibility with tendrils going in both directions.

Life and identity, Ozeki has suggested in an interview, are nothing but stories people tell themselves (Ty 2013: 162). Rocío Davis proposes to «[consider] narrative as a defining feature» (2015: 90) of contemporary fictional texts that make overt autobiographical gestures, among which *A Tale for the Time Being*. Davis argues that genre distinctions matter less than we tend to think: «So, perhaps, we can conclude […] with the words Jiko tells Nao at the end of their story: "Life is full of stories. Or maybe life is only stories"» (Davis 2015: 102). I would like to second Davis's reading while reiterating a point that I hope has already emerged in the course of this essay. Both *A Tale for the Time Being* and *My Year of Meats* certainly suggest that life, stories, and the different media, codes, and genres through which we tell stories, real and/or invented, are part of a 'continuum'. Simultaneously, I believe that Ozeki's oeuvre neither discards nor trivializes the impulse to discriminate between truth and falsehood: to the contrary, the truth is valorized inasmuch as it can be accessed not by relying on 'bare facts', but instead through the indispensable aid of the imagination. After all, Ruth's 'magical' intervention in Nao's world makes it possible for Nao and Haruki #2 to learn the truth about Haruki #1 – a truth on compassion and nonviolence that had been

obscured by the official narrative of state militarism. And this discovery does make a difference: by relying on the transformative, performative power of Haruki #1's narrative, Nao and Haruki #2 will radically alter their own courses, and decide to live on instead of dying. Narrative spurs praxis – possible answers to the question *what to do now?*

To conclude, I maintain that Ozeki claims a (quoting Worthington) "truth power" for her writing that does not merely operate within the textual realm, but also at the dialogical border between the textual realm and the real world. As the author has stated, discussing *A Tale for the Time Being*:

> By proposing a fictionalized autobiography like this, especially in a day and age of the Internet where information is ubiquitous—and certainly Ruth is obsessed with researching things—there is a kind of invitation to the reader to research and find out. The book could be a treasure hunt—or better yet, a scavenger hunt—if someone wanted to take it that way, because a lot of stuff in the book has tendrils reaching out into the real world. (Ty 2013: 165)

Then again, what are the most apt strategies for learning the truth, and/or telling the truth, at a time when information surfaces on, plunges under, and resurfaces on the waves of various technologies – and also, inevitably, blends and blurs not only writing genres, but also various languages and media codes? «Information is a lot like water; it's hard to hold on to, and hard to keep from leaking away» (Ozeki 2013: 197). Perhaps, in line with the Buddhist framework pervading the novel, limiting the struggle, being able to let go, and not becoming obsessively attached to one's one-directional efforts, may actually be the most apt strategies.

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The Author

Serena Fusco

Serena Fusco teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her most recent book is *Confini porosi. Pelle e rappresentazione in quattro narrazioni della modernità* [*Porous Borders: Skin and Representation in Four Narratives of Modernity*] (Scripta, 2018). Her research is multilingual and transcultural in scope and includes Chineseness in the transnational space, Asian American literature, visual culture and photography, and the internationalization of education.

Email: sfusco@unior.it; serenafusco@gmail.com

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