

Writing the Canadian Pacific Northwest Ecocritically

The Dynamics of Local and Global in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

A regional literature takes root when writers begin rewriting antecedent place-texts, in homage and parody combined.

—Laurie Ricou, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*

While Ruth Ozeki's earlier novels *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), which have earned her the reputation of prominent locavore and slow food proponent, discuss controversial practices of the beef industry and the harmful effects of genetically modified organisms, respectively, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) embraces several broader political and cultural issues and connects them with ecological concerns. Ozeki also inserts herself more fully and intimately into her latest novel in the character of an author-figure named Ruth. She explains that in response to the catastrophe of the tsunami and nuclear disaster that followed the 2011 earthquake in Japan, "fiction didn't seem enough," and that "instead of writing a fictional character," she "almost had to step in there to intervene in [her] own fiction and to respond to the events in a way that felt more real to [her]" (Ozeki, Interview by Thomson n. pag.). Crossing the boundaries between life writing and fiction, Ozeki links the intergenerational trauma of the Japanese Canadian internment and the lingering traumatic effects of World War II on contemporary Japan with the degradation of the environment. By drawing attention to the connection between local and global ecologies and between environmental and social justice she answers Rob Nixon's call for "writer-activists" who will make the invisibility of "slow violence" visible (Nixon 5-6). Ozeki, a writer of mixed Japanese and Irish American background who calls

both the US and Canada home, also explores her personal and professional affinity for British Columbia and her position as an American Canadian author in this novel. I will show how Ozeki writes herself into the BC literary canon and enters a conversation with both earlier and contemporary environmental texts from the Canadian West Coast. In its discussion of transpacific literary, political, and ecological relations, *A Tale for the Time Being* presents ecological issues as having transnational relevance more pointedly and more effectively than in Ozeki's two previous novels.¹ As *A Tale for the Time Being* reminds us, social and environmental injustice is hardly ever contained within national borders. Moreover, while *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* are predominantly American novels in both their settings and cultural references, *A Tale for the Time Being* is decisively Canadian in its attention to coastal British Columbia and its literature, albeit in a transnational rather than a parochial way.

According to the editors of *Greening the Maple*, “literary respondents to Canadian environments have attempted to discover or invent vocabularies and literary forms appropriate to the scale and the particularities of the country” (xxv). Their assessment points to the strong connection between Canadian literature's ecocritical tradition and the country's national mythology. Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, at the geographical edge of the country, have held a special position in the Canadian environmental psyche even prior to the conflict over Clayoquot Sound in the early 1990s, which received significant international attention. Proto-environmentalist texts such as Roderick Haig-Brown's novel *On the Highest Hill* (1949), M. Wylie Blanchet's memoir *The Curve of Time* (1961), Malcolm Lowry's novel *October Ferry to Gabriola* (published posthumously in 1970), Earle Birney's play *The Damnation of Vancouver* (1952), and Jack Hodgins' novel *The Invention of the World* (1977) portray rural coastal British Columbia as what literary scholar Allan Pritchard has called “earthly paradise” (36).² In his important thematic analysis of the literature of coastal BC from 1984, Pritchard argues that “the Atwood survival thesis in its primary form, man as victim of nature, has little relevance for British Columbia writing” (38) but that “nature as victim of man,” is one of the major themes of the literature of the region (38). He claims that in addition to portraying the coastal and rural areas of the province as earthly paradises, most BC fiction—he refers mainly to the writers mentioned above—associates Indigenous people with “wilderness and an ancient rural culture” (43); condemns intrusive forces in the shape of American developers; and has a negative view of the city. I would argue that the perception that

coastal British Columbian literature differs in its relationship to the natural environment from the literature of the rest of the country goes hand in hand with the close association of coastal BC literature with magic realism as exemplified by some of the texts discussed by Pritchard.

Although some of these novels have fallen off the radar of the Canadian reading public, they are still important in any assessment of BC writing, and they are particularly relevant in the discussion of *A Tale for the Time Being*, a novel much concerned with the importance of genealogy and the desire to reach out to the past. I will begin by showing how *A Tale for the Time Being* rewrites, in “homage and parody combined” (Ricou 85), some of the themes identified by Pritchard in order to question the assumptions the texts discussed by him make about the nexus between human and non-human nature, the connection between Indigenous people and the environment, and between nature and nation as well as to reassess the ecocritical potential of magical realism. I will show in the second half of this article how Ozeki’s novel has more in common with Don McKay’s *Deactivated West 100* (2005), a collection of prose poems and essays in which McKay provides a geopoetic reading of southern Vancouver Island, and even more with Rita Wong’s *forage* (2007), which explores the link between environmental degradation, social injustice, and environmental racism with a similar focus on “slow violence” as *A Tale for the Time Being*. These recent texts, including Ozeki’s novel, indicate a major shift in environmentalist BC writing away from a perception of BC as isolated and/or marginalized and away from a focus on local concerns toward a stronger sense of global interconnectedness. Ozeki’s Cortes Island is an “earthly paradise” threatened by intrusive forces as the debris of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami makes its way to the Pacific Northwest coast, and the ocean is being polluted by the fallout from the Fukushima meltdown. The novel de-romanticizes and decolonizes Indigenous reality by portraying the novel’s sole Indigenous character, Muriel, as a down-to-earth retired anthropologist who repeatedly reminds the other characters that they live on unceded Coast Salish territory.³ Two of the main characters in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth and her husband Oliver, have made Cortes Island their home after moving from New York City to BC for medical reasons.⁴ Although the island is not explicitly identified as Cortes Island, the reference to its having been named for “a famous Spanish conquistador, who overthrew the Aztec empire” (*A Tale* 141), implies its identity. Ruth and Oliver, a novelist and an environmental artist, respectively, were living in New York City when Oliver was “stricken with a mysterious flulike illness” (57).

Consequently, they decide to return to Cortes Island, where Oliver had taught permaculture before he met Ruth. In addition to offering more affordable healthcare than the US, Canada also appears to be a “safer” place (271). After the couple spends September 11, 2001, with friends in Wisconsin, where Ruth has given the keynote address for a conference on food politics, they immediately return to the island.⁵ But despite idealizing Canada as a safe haven, *A Tale for the Time Being* makes it clear that the local and the global have become interconnected to such a degree that even a secluded place like Cortes Island does not remain unaffected by acts of mass violence and by natural and human-made disasters elsewhere in the world.

On one of her walks on the island’s main beach, Ruth finds a Hello Kitty lunchbox sealed inside a Ziploc bag. Inside it she finds some letters, a kamikaze watch from World War II, and a diary that we soon learn was written by a suicidal sixteen-year-old named Nao. While Ruth’s narrative strand is set in 2013, the diary seems to have been written around 2002. West Coast critic Laurie Ricou observes that in addition to the boundary between Canada and the United States, the “land-water boundary” and the “beach-boundary” are important in writing and reading of the geography and culture of the Pacific Northwest. Quoting from Sean Kane’s *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, Ricou claims that the “land-water boundary” is where “exchanges happen, where things, good things and bad things, are given by the sea to the land” (154). The “beach-boundary,” according to Ricou, “is the site of first contact between Aboriginal dwellers and European visitors” (154). He adds that it is also “the form and metaphor of cultural exchange, of a trans-Pacific transaction where gifts are given by Asia to North America and by America to Asia” (154). Although Ruth and Oliver suspect that the lunchbox drifted to the island in the wake of the 2011 tsunami, Ruth never finds out for sure. Fortunately, she can draw upon a number of experts on the island, whose inhabitants—with the exception of Muriel—hail from different parts of the world. While Callie, a marine biologist, attempts to determine how long the box might have floated in the ocean by examining the gooseneck barnacles attached to it, French Canadian Benoit and Japanese Canadian Kimi translate into English a historical diary written in French and a stack of letters written in classical Japanese. Although these characters form a close-knit community whose members are eager to help each other out, this “earthly paradise” has experienced a twofold fall from grace: Japanese Canadian internment and the colonization of Pacific Northwest Indigenous territories.⁶

The novel draws attention to the colonial history of the coast by having

Ruth point out that the unofficial name of Cortes Island is “Island of the Dead”: “Some said the name referred to the bloody intertribal wars, or the smallpox epidemic of 1862 that killed off most of the indigenous Coast Salish population. Other people said no, that the island had always been a tribal burial ground” (142). As if to assert her territorial prerogative, Muriel, an avid beachcomber herself, exclaims when examining the content of the Hello Kitty lunchbox: “I still say this should have been my find” (34). Once the other islanders hear about Ruth’s discovery, they, too, start looking for “treasures” drifted over from Japan, provoking Muriel’s obvious disapproval: “‘Scavengers,’ Muriel said. ‘Looking for stuff from Japan. On *my* turf’” (152, emphasis original). The conflicting interests of those living on the island make it clear that the local cannot be treated as a given category. As West Coast scholar/artist/environmental activist Beth Carruthers observes:

There is within Canadian settler culture a deep, pervasive ambivalence in the relationship between self and place—an ambivalence and a tension that, although significant, is for the most part backgrounded. I understand this tension as a fault line lying deep under the Canadian psyche. It makes its presence felt from time to time, as does the earth when it adjusts its skin. Perhaps this tension and deep instability lie closer to the surface of the west coast, mirroring the real instability of living in a place of seismic activity. The ground is continually shifting beneath our feet. (68)

Carruthers’s observations are particularly relevant in the context of the recent general shift in environmental BC literature with its heightened awareness of Indigenous rights to the land. The role of settler anxieties in shaping Canadians’ relationship to the natural environment was neither addressed by early literary critics such as Pritchard nor in the texts discussed by him. Moreover, early BC literature did not consider global interconnectedness to the degree that contemporary texts do. In this vein, Ozeki’s novel questions the isolation of local political and ecological phenomena by connecting the colonization of British Columbia with that of the Miyagi prefecture in the Tōhoku region of Japan, where the Buddhist temple of Nao’s great-grandmother was devastated during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami: “This area was one of the last pieces of tribal land to be taken from the indigenous Emishi, descendants of the Jōmon people, who had lived there from prehistoric times until they were defeated by the Japanese Imperial Army in the eighth century” (*A Tale* 141). Lack of governmental financial support for Buddhist monasteries, which are desperately in need of repair, and ultimately the earthquake are responsible for the demise of another kind of “earthly paradise” that is not of interest to global capitalism.

Furthermore, the novel draws attention to close connections between colonization, global capitalism, and the degradation of the environment. The intrusive forces that threaten the “earthly paradises” of this world, many of them places that have been subjected to colonial rule, have become more amorphous, and their effects are often invisible. With regard to visibility and spectacle, such effects cannot compete with a tsunami or the events of 9/11. According to Nixon,

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss due to ravaged habitats are all cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. (3)

Nixon uses the concept of “slow violence” to describe the gradual, cumulative global effects of toxic pollution, oil spills, deforestation, and climate change and claims that we do not pay sufficient attention to them as they are often invisible. Aware of the dangers of the effects of pollution and nuclear fallout, the islanders worry that flotsam from Japan will add to the Great Eastern Garbage Patch, which, as Oliver points out, is already the size of Texas (*A Tale* 36). They are also concerned that seafood has become radioactively polluted once they learn that “Tepco received permission from the Japanese government to release 11,500 tons of contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean” (197). Radiation will affect oyster farming, one of the few industries left on the island: “Oyster farming was the closest thing they had to an industry, now that the salmon run was depleted and the big trees had been cut” (187). The text’s focus on the importance of species in defining place emphasizes the interconnectedness between the local and the global. Wild salmon plays a crucial role in the local economy and the health of the local population as well as that of the forests and species living along the salmon streams. But its depletion also has an impact on planetary ecosystems. The island’s biotic community has become further unbalanced as wolves have recently killed several pets. Moreover, apart from being threatened by pollution in the wake of the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear fallout, the island is also at the mercy of logging companies. Oliver is involved in a tree-planting project:

Anticipating the effects of global warming on the native trees, he was working to create a climate-change forest on a hundred acres of clear-cut, owned by a botanist friend. He planted groves of ancient natives—metasequoia, giant sequoia, coast

redwoods, *Juglans*, *Ulmus*, and ginkgo—species that had been indigenous to the area during the Eocene Thermal Maximum, some 55 million years ago. (60)

But one day, without warning, the site where he plants his climate-change forest was clear-cut by a logging company because they considered his trees as exotic. Subsequent reforestation would be limited to species that were native to the geoclimatic zone (120).⁷ This violent incident not only demonstrates the power of logging companies, but it also draws attention to misinformed ideas about “invasive” species. As Jenny Kerber observes,

[w]hile members of plant and animal communities cross borders in ways ranging from the dispersal of seeds using wind and water to animal migration for feeding and reproduction, humans profoundly shape the movements of such biota in the form of trade agreements, restrictions, and state policies that outline the acceptability or unacceptability of different species. (210)

Trade agreements and conflicts over local and global resources are intimately linked to the commercial and technological exploitation of nature and to consumerism, a point that Oliver makes at several moments in the text.

While there is no reference to Vancouver as the site of corporate greed and environmental degradation in the name of development as in earlier BC fiction—Birney’s *The Damnation of Vancouver* is likely the most prominent example—Silicon Valley and Tokyo, where Nao’s family returns after her father loses his computer programming job in the dot-com bubble burst, are portrayed as the epitome of consumerist culture or “liquid life” (Bauman 2). According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, “liquid life is consuming life. It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: that is, objects that lose their usefulness (and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used” (9). Both Nao’s father and Nao herself lose their “lustre” in Japan and feel that they have become disposable. Because Nao’s father is unable to find employment, the family moves into a small, run-down apartment on the outskirts of Tokyo. In her own diary, Nao describes how she acts and feels more American than Japanese because she has lived most of her life in California. She also details how she is bullied physically and emotionally by her classmates, who stage a funeral for her, rape her, and auction off her underwear on the Internet. As a consequence of their bullying and her own depression, she drops out of school and ends up as a sex worker in a maid café. Her father, who feels responsible for his daughter’s suffering, attempts to commit suicide, twice. In the diary Nao is not aware that her father lost his job because he refused to apply game interfaces to the design of military

weapons (*A Tale* 387). As he explains to her later, he did not want young American pilots to use his interfaces to kill Afghani and Iraqi civilians and to suffer from lifelong trauma as a result (388). The novel here draws attention to the often forgotten or hidden global history of technological innovations, or natural resources like uranium or asbestos for that matter, and the moral responsibility of scientists and decision makers in dealing with these issues.

One of the many connections that Ozeki makes in this novel is that between pernicious long-term ecological effects and the effects of social phenomena like bullying and intergenerational trauma, which, from a sociological and psychological perspective, can also be perceived as effects of “slow violence.” We learn from the secret diary of Nao’s great-uncle Haruki (which he kept while serving as a kamikaze pilot and which he wrote in French to avoid the fatal consequences of disclosing his treasonous thoughts about the war) that he decided to fly his plane into the ocean instead of crashing it into the enemy aircraft carrier (*A Tale* 386). Here, the novel makes visible the connection between bullying and suicide in contemporary Japan as social and cultural behaviours that can be traced back to the torture of kamikaze pilots, Japanese amnesia, and the culture of shame. Nao’s father explains:

They say we Japanese are a culture of shame, so maybe we are not so good at conscience? Shame comes from outside, but conscience must be a natural feeling that comes from a deep place inside an individual person. They say we Japanese people have lived so long under the feudal system that maybe we do not have an individual self in the same way Westerners do. Maybe we cannot have a conscience without an individual self. (308-09)

These observations reflect one of the novel’s major concerns: individual and communal responsibility for social and environmental injustice. By making connections between Fukushima and Chernobyl, bullying in the Imperial Army and in a contemporary Japanese high school, Japanese Canadian internment and anti-Islamism in the wake of 9/11, the genocide of Indigenous people, the senseless killing of civilians during times of war, and the brutal slaughter of whales, *A Tale for the Time Being* promotes environmentally inflected global citizenship.

Ozeki uses “magical realist moments” (Sandín 1) not only to make apparent connections between the local and the global, but also to acknowledge the responsibility of the “writer-activist” who faces the representational challenges that “slow violence” poses.⁸ As of yet, not much research has been devoted to exploring promising links between

environmental writing and magic realism. Arguably, magic realism, with its inherent tensions between the real and the magical and the spatial and the temporal, is a mode prominently suitable to making visible “the often hidden effects of climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” (Nixon 2). Marxist critic Fredric Jameson’s argument that “the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present” (Jameson 311) is equally relevant here. Jameson is referring to the inherent tensions in the historical realities that magical realist novels (or films) attempt to portray, such as the violent conflicts between Indigenous populations and European colonizers. The “magical” elements in those narratives are usually read as subversive and anti-colonial in contrast to the historical reality described in realist fashion. Magical realism is thus often seen as providing a means for writers to express a non-dominant or marginal position. In his 1980 introduction to the fiction anthology *Magic Realism*, Geoff Hancock goes as far as to claim that “Canada is an invisible country in the same way that Colombia, Peru, Argentina, and Paraguay are invisible, and the art of the magic realist is to make it real for us on their [writers who use magic realism] terms” (11) in order to give Canada’s West Coast a voice. In somewhat hyperbolic fashion, he refers here to Canada’s marginalization vis-à-vis its powerful neighbour to the south as well as the marginalization of British Columbia by Canada’s “heartland,” Ontario. His observation ties in with literary scholar Jennifer Andrews’ claim that the alliance with the Latin American literary movement also gave Canadian writers of the 1970s and 1980s the opportunity to liberate themselves from British narrative traditions and to set their writing apart from American literary modes (Andrews 3). While Hancock’s observations about Canada’s and BC’s marginalization are still valid in some political contexts and Andrews’ insights shed light on the transnational links of magical realism, Ozeki gives this literary mode new relevance by connecting it to the role of the “writer-activist,” by drawing attention to the intergenerational consequences of “slow violence,” and by emphasizing that Cortes Island is equally as important as Manhattan when it comes to resolving globally relevant issues.

In its exploration of “the process of fiction writing itself, and what happens when an imaginary character reaches out to you” (Ozeki, “A Universe” 162), Ozeki uses a literary strategy that Jon Thiem, in his discussion of magic

realist fiction, refers to as “textualization of the reader” (235). As Thiem explains: “A textualization usually occurs in one of two ways. First, a reader or sometimes an author, or even a non-reader, will be literally, and therefore magically, transported into the world of a text” (235). A second type of textualization takes place “when the world of a text literally intrudes into the extratextual or reader’s world” (236). Ozeki’s novel predominantly uses the first type of textualization. Ruth loses the detachment “that keeps her out of the world of the text” (Thiem 239) and ultimately becomes an “agent in the fictional world” (239). She magically intervenes to save the life of Nao’s father by telling him that his daughter is waiting for him at the bus stop in Sendai on her way to say her final goodbye to Jiko, her 104-year-old grandmother, who is lying on her deathbed at the temple. Ruth also returns the French diary of Nao’s great-uncle to the temple, so that Nao can learn about his heroic act of responsibility. In a similar way, the “writer-activist” is asked to step up to the challenge of finding adequate literary strategies to represent the elusive violence of delayed harmful effects. Furthermore, the world of Jiko’s temple is described in magical realist terms, where things often appear to be what they are not. For example, what seems to be “a ghostly monster climbing toward” Nao in the shape of an ancient dragon or a “caterpillar monster” turns out to be “a long line of very old people from the danka,” whose “round humped backs and wobbling white heads looked like the caterpillar’s body” (*A Tale* 237). However, as Nao’s meeting with the ghost of her great-uncle shows, ghosts have the power of intervention in this novel. Seeking a second encounter with him the following day, she discovers his letters in a box on the family altar. As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes with respect to the meaning of ghosts in magical realist fiction:

Their presence in magical realist fiction is inherently oppositional because they represent an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable. They dissent, furthermore, from modernity’s (and the novel’s) psychological assumptions about autonomous consciousness and self-constituted identity and propose instead a model of the self that is collective . . . Magical realist apparitions also unsettle modernity’s (and the novel’s) basis in progressive, linear history. . . . (498)

Nao’s discovery of Haruki’s diary (after Ruth has time-travelled and placed it in Jiko’s sanctuary) both propels the plot forward and, by allowing Nao to make this personal connection with her ancestor, places emphasis on the importance of the past and of family genealogy for Ozeki’s characters as well as for Ozeki as a writer. Both Ruth’s magical “transportation” into the world of the text and the presence of Nao’s great-uncle’s ghost question the

hegemonic construction of everyday reality as it hides colonial histories and trauma and their intergenerational effects.

In addition to “textualization” and references to ghosts, the novel uses coincidence as a trope to further explore the relationship between the past and the present. Ruth’s discovery of the lunchbox and Nao’s father’s finding out about Nao being bullied because she forgot to clear the cache in their shared computer’s web browser disrupt the narrative chronology of events and serve to probe the nature of time and reality. As Ozeki explains in an interview with Eleanor Ty:

With this new book, it wasn’t a single issue, per se, that interested me; it was more a sense of the way the world is now; it was sort of everything. It was everything that has happened in the past decade, personally as well as globally, in the post-9/11 period and since the turn of the millennium. But as I worked, this material kept expanding and looping back further in time, which makes sense because it is a tale for the time being. Time itself became the issue that I was exploring. (“A Universe” 161)

Ruth and the reader receive crucial information about Nao’s life before she records it in her diary. This temporal paradox is created by the fact that Ruth does not read the diary in one sitting. Moreover, she learns why Nao’s father quit his job in an email exchange with a professor in California before she reaches the point in the diary where Nao’s father shares this information with his daughter. Ruth also continues to think about Nao as a suicidal teenager, despite the fact that she would be in her late twenties by the time Ruth reads the diary (313). She becomes so obsessed with attempting to prevent Nao from harming herself that she has no time to continue working on the memoir of her mother that has occupied her for the previous years.

Another, more playful, magical realist moment in the text is the sudden appearance of a Jungle Crow which seems to have travelled along with the lunchbox. Ruth is skeptical when Oliver, who observes the crow being harassed by the local ravens, suggests that it rode over from Japan to the BC coast on the flotsam (*A Tale* 55). She believes that the crow is a messenger from Nao’s world. Their differing responses to the crow emphasize the validity of different ways of perceiving the human relationship with the non-human natural environment, including Buddhist and Indigenous knowledges. As magical realist moments interrupt realities that are taken for granted, the crow remains a curious presence at the periphery of the couple’s property and eventually assists in rescuing their pet cat, which was hiding under the deck after being wounded by a larger predator. Once the crow has fulfilled its rescue mission, of both the cat and of Ruth, it disappears. In addition to being an “invasive species,” the crow is yet another “gift” from

Asia, to borrow Ricou's metaphor for cultural exchange between Asia and North America (Ricou 154), that connects Ruth with Nao's life, as it appears to have been sent by Jiko to draw Ruth into Nao's world. The intrusion of unexplainable phenomena questions temporal and spatial logic as well as the boundaries of the text. By ending her novel with Ruth's letter to Nao, Ruth calls Nao into life as much as Nao called her into life at the beginning of the novel. All of these "magical realist moments" serve to challenge and revision Western epistemological paradigms, which Nixon (and Ozeki) view as contributing to social and environmental injustice.

Other texts by West Coast writers like Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2001), Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō/Métis) *Ravensong* (1993), and Eden Robinson's (Haisla/Heiltsuk) *Monkey Beach* (2000)—novels with which Ozeki might be familiar—have also been associated with both environmental writing and magical realism. While *A Tale for the Time Being* shares a decolonizing and anti-racist position with the novels of Goto, Lai, Maracle, and Robinson, it has in its attention to "slow violence" more in common with McKay's *Deactivated West 100*. McKay's speaker's musings about the slow catastrophe of the last few billion years, his use of the fault line as a metaphor for the clash between colliding perceptions, his definition of place as "a function of wilderness" (McKay 17) and of "memory [as] the momentary domestication of time" (30) are all echoed in Ozeki's text. As Susan McCaslin puts it: "McKay's form of natural contemplation, even in the face of the collision of tectonic plates as big as Iceland, does not end in nihilism or despair, where human consciousness comes to seem meaningless, but in an acceptance of our place in the unfolding of mysterious powers within both us and in nature" (70). The speaker's suggestion that we ask "what am I to the beach?" rather than "what's the beach to me?" (17) sets his perspective of "wilderness" apart from that of the earlier BC writers discussed by Pritchard. In McKay's view, "place is wilderness to which history has happened" (17). In paying "poetic attention" to "the unfolding of mysterious powers," he creates his own moments of magic realism through his trademark "outlandish comparison" and "outré juxtaposition" (Bradley 171). Like Ozeki, McKay is interested in finding an adequate literary mode to represent the Canadian ambivalent relationship to place, the "fault line lying deep under the Canadian psyche" and a little closer to the surface at the BC coast (Carruthers 68).

In addition to sharing thoughts about place and time with *Deactivated West 100*, Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* explores the relationship between

environmental degradation, social justice, and decolonization in similar ways as Wong's poetry collection *forage*. Through her foraging and recycling poetics, Wong draws attention to the connections between environmental and social injustice. As she explains:

forage arises from the process of exploring everyday life and perceiving what's overlooked within it. For example, when you examine something as common as a personal computer, its life cycle reveals a path of destructive mining and exploitative labour practices, and toxic pollution as electronic waste is shipped to places like China and Nigeria, where its dismantling poisons the air and water that eventually circulate globally. ("Rita Wong" n. pag.)

By framing some of the poems in the collection with handwritten marginalia, Chinese characters, and photographs, *forage* addresses various forms of violence with the intention of making the invisible visible. One of the photos in *forage*, for example, shows the factory worker Agnes Wong of Whitecourt, Alberta, assembling a gun produced for China by the Ontario-based Small Arms Plant in 1944. The photo reveals the complex global networks of violence and warfare, and how Asian labour has often been used for hidden purposes. That Nao's father was fired in Ozeki's novel because he refused to support the American war industry is another example of how such networks operate.

In addition, both *forage* and *A Tale for the Time Being* are concerned with foraging and recycling, literally and metaphorically. Wong's poem "perverse subsidies," for example, which opens with the line "will pay for you to take my garbage away so I never have to look at it" (21), questions waste production and the consumer's complicity in creating social inequality and contributing to increasing the body burden, the total amount of a toxic or radioactive substance in a person's body. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the weekly trip to the local dump is a social event for the islanders, and many of the discarded objects are recycled and put on display at the Free Store: "They liked to come to the dump to dispose of their waste personally. They liked to haul their sodden boxes of cans and plastic bottles to the recycling table, sort their paper from their cardboard, and hurl glass into the crusher" (219). Unfortunately, these local efforts seem to be a drop in the bucket in light of the ocean's considerable contamination by plastic which Ozeki is also careful to point out. The novel also humorously discusses creative ways of ridding the Internet of personal "waste." Once Nao's father recovers from his depression, he invents Mu-Mu the Obliterator to remove his daughter's name from the search engine databases:

I began to research and was able to develop a neat little spider that could crawl up search engine databases and sanitize all instances of my daughter's name and personal information, as well as all the pictures and nasty videos, until there was not even one trace of her shame left. It was all clean again. "Super squeaky clean!" Naoko said, and she was very happy to make fresh start in her new life in Montreal, Canada. (382)

The ability to obliterate hurtful information virtually thus renders the actual act of suicide in response to Internet bullying redundant, so to speak.

In addition, Ozeki uses literary foraging practices that have much in common with Wong's copious references to other texts and extensive borrowing from them. When reading Nao's diary, "Ruth found herself logging on to the Internet to investigate and verify the girl's references, and before long, she had dragged out her old kanji dictionary, and was translating and annotating and scribbling notes about Akiba and maid cafés, otaku and hentai" (29). As with Wong's use of marginalia, Ozeki "frames" the page with Ruth's copious footnotes that provide translations from Japanese into English and explain Japanese cultural phenomena. Like Wong's insertion of Chinese words in *forage*, the Japanese words in Ozeki's text serve to slow down the reading process, to disrupt perceptual logic, and to make connections across languages and cultures in an attempt to undermine capitalist and consumerist objectives. Nao's diary itself, which is bound between covers of an old copy of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is a product of creative global recycling practices. As Nao explains: "The girl who makes these diaries is a superfamous crafter, who buys container loads of old books from all over the world, and then neatly cuts out all the printed pages and puts in blank paper instead. She does it so authentically you don't even notice the hack" (20). The two texts require a foraging reading practice as they both use textual mediation and intertextual references to challenge readers' assumptions about reality, language, literature, temporal logic, and sense of place. Moreover, Wong's reference to herself as an "interbeing" (5), a Buddhist concept that recognizes the idea of an independent self as an illusion and emphasizes human interdependence, is echoed in Ozeki's notion of the "time being." The definition of a time being as "someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be" (*A Tale* 3) entails the vision of a creative symbiosis between writer and reader as exemplified in the relationship between Nao and Ruth. As Ozeki explains, "Nao is the writer. She writes her book and sends it into the world, and in so doing, she calls Ruth, her reader, into being" ("A Conversation" n. pag.).

Apart from creating what Ozeki calls “a place within a lineage that is bigger than [herself]” (Interview by Thomson n. pag.), she demonstrates how the past continues to shape the present. By reworking some of the prevalent themes of earlier and entering into a creative dialogue with more recent coastal BC literature, Ozeki writes herself into “place” while retaining an acute awareness of the dynamics between the local and the global. The “magical realist moments” in *A Tale for the Time Being* do not celebrate the perceived magical difference and subversive potential of British Columbia vis-à-vis the nation, but they connect the province historically, politically, and ecologically with Japan, the US, and the rest of the world. As a literary mode that is characterized by its disruption of time, space, identity, and perception, magical realism is able to make the invisible forces that lurk in our daily environments visible. Ozeki seems to concur with Carruthers that “Canada is a nexus where important questions and issues of self and world, of place and belonging, of colonialism, resourcism, empire, and industry—and, in particular, a clash of differing world views—are visible and foregrounded” (68). British Columbia needs to play a major role in both decolonizing Canada and promoting environmental justice “because it is the location of some of the last intact wild and functioning habitats in the world” (Carruthers 68). *A Tale for the Time Being* thus captures the unique spirit of the BC coast and its literature while suggesting at the same time an ecologically inflected transnational trajectory.

NOTES

- 1 Ursula Heise has criticized Ozeki, Barbara Kingsolver, and Karen Tei Yamashita for creating “multicultural and transnational family romances to function as narrative solutions to environmental problems” (“Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn” 394) and she suggests that “ecocriticism . . . needs a more nuanced engagement with theories of transnationalism” (387).
- 2 I use the term “proto-environmentalist” to indicate that these texts were written prior to the environmental movement and the coming of age of ecocriticism as an academic discipline.
- 3 Although Muriel is not explicitly identified as an Indigenous character, clues in the text suggest that she is.
- 4 Ozeki modelled the relationship of Ruth and Oliver on her own marriage with German Canadian husband Oliver Kellhammer. Like the fictional couple, Ozeki and her husband have made this Gulf island their second home.
- 5 As Scott Slovic observes, environmental justice ecocriticism emerged almost contemporaneously with the occurrence of the 9/11 attacks (94).
- 6 In the novel, “Jap Ranch,” an old homestead on the island that once belonged to a Japanese

family “who were forced to sell when they were interned during the war” (*A Tale* 32) is now owned by an elderly German couple.

- 7 The portrayal of the power of the logging companies is reminiscent of the conflict between a logging company and a group of activists defending the old growth forest on Vancouver Island represented in Ann Eriksson’s *Falling from Grace* (2010). Ozeki’s comment on the book’s cover reads as follows: “Ann Eriksson evokes the awesome beauty and complexity of the Canadian Pacific Northwest landscape, from the perfect symbiosis of flora and fauna to the conflicts, sometimes noble, often tragic, between nature’s ecologies and our powerful human desires” (n. pag.).
- 8 Sandín and Perez coined the term magical realist “moment” to draw attention to “how magical moments appear episodically in the otherwise realist fiction of contemporary US authors of so-called ethnic derivation” (1).

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