

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY AND
POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY IN RUTH OZEKI'S
A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING

By

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ABSTRACT

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This project fuses personal narrative and literary criticism, as it excavates Ruth Ozeki's representations of Japanese culture in the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. I argue that her use of stereotype unsettles popular images of Japan by constructing characters who challenge the hegemonic gaze of the Western cultural imaginary. My reading connects continuing investment in these stereotypical representations to the postmodern epoch, where individuals and society as a whole have become incapable of dealing with the past. I explore the links between postmodern amnesia, the disappearance of a multiplicity of perspectives in history and the inclination of Western mass media and popular culture to reproduce stereotypes. I suggest that Ozeki's novel reveals that we continue to rely on stereotypes to understand the world around us, particularly when we seek to know other people and other cultures. Ultimately, I find that Ozeki encourages her reader to develop a historical consciousness, as locating ourselves within the complex web of time, history and politics allows us to better negotiate the narratives and images that inform particular postcolonial subjectivities.

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For Sumiko Bell

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INTRODUCTION

This project excavates Ruth Ozeki's representations of Japanese culture in the novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. I argue that her use of stereotype unsettles popular images of Japan by constructing characters who challenge the hegemonic gaze of the Western cultural imaginary. My reading also connects continuing investment in these stereotypical representations to the postmodern epoch, where individuals and society as a whole have become incapable of dealing with the past. I will explore the links between postmodern amnesia, the disappearance of a multiplicity of perspectives in history and the inclination of Western¹ mass media and popular culture to reproduce stereotypes. I am suggesting that Ozeki's novel shows how we continue to rely on stereotypes to understand the world around us, particularly when we seek to know other people and other cultures. As a means of resistance to Western hegemony in representation and cultural production, Ozeki emphasizes the importance of developing a historical consciousness. I will also argue that Ozeki shows how locating ourselves within the complex web of time, history and politics is important because it gives us the power to negotiate the narratives and images that inform our own identities.

¹ It is important to point out that what is meant by "The West" changes depending on context. Here, I am invoking Said's notion of "the Occident," which derives meaning from its oppositional relation to "the Orient." In a modern context, "the West" generally includes European and North American nations and all nations who are white, Christian and/or have inherited European culture (i.e. South Africa, Australia). Though "the West" stands in for many nations and their attitudes towards Japan, I want to note that the United States has played the most significant role in constructing images of Japan for Western consumption and continues to mediate and circulate stereotypical portrayals of Japanese people, government and culture (*Orientalism*, 1978).

This project interweaves a personal narrative with textual analysis. I use this dual narrative technique in order to represent how ambivalence about my own ethnic and cultural identity has driven this project. As I discuss in the section “Coming to this Project,” I use my own experiences with identity formation to exemplify the ways in which Ozeki guides her readers to engage with their own personal histories and with larger national and global histories. This engagement allows individuals to better understand their multiple, and sometimes conflicting, positionalities. My personal narrative also works metatextually, by taking up Ozeki’s call for historical recovery and intergenerational activism through writing. By connecting my grandmother’s story to larger histories of Western imperialism and globalization and by exploring its ramifications for my own identity, I am practicing the kind of activism-through-writing that Ozeki both practices in her writing and calls for in others.

In Chapter 1: Literature Review, I look at the existing scholarship on Ozeki’s work, which locates her within multiple discursive and disciplinary spheres. I look at what has been said about how she represents marginalized individuals, multinational politics, social and economic injustice, globalization and the environment, and then situate my own argument within these conversations. It is my assertion that while there is disagreement about whether or not Ozeki’s work escapes the totality of Western hegemony, no criticism yet has been devoted to the ways that Ozeki’s engagement with stereotypical representation through historicization might call the foundations of the cultural imaginary into question. The Literature Review defines key ideas and terms from Cultural Studies, grounding my analysis of the novel in postcolonial, poststructuralist and

postmodernist frameworks for understanding how geopolitics shape our sense of self and our sense of the world around us in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2: Entanglement in the Cultural Imaginary uses my own experiences with the intersections of representation and identity to illustrate the pervasiveness of the Western cultural imaginary. I describe my initial investment in stereotypical representations of Japanese culture, or myths which at the time appeared to be the only way I could access Japanese culture. I connect my own experiences to available representations in the larger Western cultural imaginary as a way into reading Ozeki's text. This chapter then analyzes Ozeki's engagement with myth and stereotype, arguing that she uses stereotype to call attention to and disrupt the cultural imaginary.

Chapter 3: Cultural Forgetfulness discusses my personal encounter with historical erasure as I searched for information about Japanese War Brides after my grandmother passed away. I connect my experiences to Ozeki's interest in the idea of cultural forgetfulness to demonstrate the importance of Ozeki's work. I then analyze cultural forgetfulness in the novel, arguing that Ozeki explores the ramifications of historical amnesia in the world of her novel. I also look at examples of narrative recovery that Ozeki constructs in *A Tale for the Time Being*, which reinscribe invisible histories of marginalized peoples.

In Chapter 4: Engaging with Entanglement, Developing Historical Consciousness, I connect historical amnesia to my discussion of the cultural imaginary. I argue that Ozeki offers examples of characters dealing with misrepresentation and erasure. In order to resist their being misread, Ozeki's characters must uncover the past and seek new ways

of knowing themselves and the world around them. This chapter looks at the concepts of intergenerational responsibility and representations of activism in the novel. I suggest that Ozeki's work asks readers to engage with representation, stereotype and narrative recovery in order to create a more equitable future. I will use my own revelations about identity, representation and history to illustrate this idea.

In the Conclusion, I argue that *A Tale for the Time Being* provides representations of individuals who exist in spaces both culturally and racially in-between, and who both perpetuate and resist the myths they are subjected to. I posit that *A Tale for the Time Being* urges readers to reorient ourselves towards the past in order to better navigate postcolonial subjectivity. Finally, I describe the process through which I have come to terms with my own identity. I explain how, at the start of this project, I was looking to Ozeki as cultural role model, but instead have found that she was not attempting to provide a cut-and-dried ethnic or cultural identity for her reader. Instead, I argue that Ozeki works to show that the process of identification is messy and complicated and, of course, entangled in complex histories of contact and negotiation.

Coming to This Project

My interest and investment in the politics and literatures of multiracialism, transnationalism and globalization stem from questions about my own identity and my

family's history. My grandmother was a "war bride"² from Hokkaido, Japan, who met and married a white American GI during the postwar years of American Occupation. My mother was born in Japan and lived there until my grandparents relocated to the United States. She spent much of her youth split between army bases in the American south and later in Kaiserslautern, Germany. My mother and her two sisters grew up speaking only English and (in most cases) "passing" as white. Though my grandmother was often in contact with her relatives in Japan, she only returned to Japan once in her lifetime. The last time I saw her, she could mostly only remember how to speak in Japanese.

My grandmother's death coincided with my first year of graduate school, and ignited in me the feelings of both loss and anxiety, not just for my grandmother, but because I felt that her passing severed my last legitimate tie to my "Japanese side." In all honesty, I knew very little about her life before the war, and never thought to ask what it was like for her to leave her home, move to the U.S. and raise three American daughters. Upon her death, I felt an urgent need to recover and record my family's history. I began compiling whatever photos and family artifacts I could find, scoured the internet for traces of my ancestors' activity in Japan, and started writing down a piecemeal family history that I gleaned from the stories passed down to my mother by her mother. I also did extensive research on Japanese War Brides and tried to connect with their children

² "War Bride" often refers to the women who married American GI's who were stationed abroad during and after World War II. While there are a number of French, English and Australian War Brides (amongst other nationalities), the vast majority of War Brides are Japanese. By the 1960s approximately 45,853 Japanese women married and immigrated to the United States. Their stories are more often than not left out of the larger narrative of Japanese Americans, even though it is one of the largest waves of Japanese immigration to date (Caroline Simpson Chung, *An Absent Presence*, 2001). See Appendix A for more information.

and grandchildren on social media. I wished that I could go back in time and talk to my grandmother. Not only was I finally beginning to understand how important her individual story was, but also I began to see her story as part of a larger narrative of the War Bride diaspora, which is truly just beginning to be explored in memoir, scholarship, documentaries and growing online communities.

My family history and my own issues with identification made me wary of strict boundaries of race, nation and culture at a very early age, particularly when it came to defining myself ethnically or describing my family dynamic. However, it was not until I began to study postcolonial theory and Asian American literature that I was able to articulate how my experiences were and were not reflected in these discourses. The most significant thing I learned was that what I imagined about Japanese identities relied heavily upon the representations of Japan I had seen on television and in film, popular culture and mass media, rather than from life writing and interviews by Japanese Americans telling their own stories. My imagination was influenced more by a collective Western imaginary of Japan than by the actual bits and pieces of cultural practice, language and artifacts passed down to me by my grandmother. What cultural practices I did glean from my family also challenged the idea of an “authentic” Japanese experience. The Japan that I came to know was a mash-up of trips to the Japanese supermarket in Stockton, photographs from the 1950s and stories about a Japan that certainly no longer existed. My uncertainty about my right to identify myself as Japanese or even Japanese American increased as I continued to research what those identities meant. I wasn’t culturally Japanese, I didn’t look ethnically Japanese or speak the language, and I’d never

been to Japan. I also didn't feel entirely comfortable calling myself a Japanese American, because my family had never belonged to a JA community. Japanese American identity seemed very much intertwined with the experience of Japanese internment, which did not affect my grandmother as she was still living in Japan. That my grandmother came to the United States after World War II as a first generation immigrant also meant that I couldn't locate myself in the migrational and genealogical lineage of the *issei*, *nisei*, *sansei* or *yonsei*.³

My grandmother passed away during my first semester in graduate school. I had also just returned from a year of teaching English in China. This experience added another complicated angle to the way I thought about my racial and national identity. I'd certainly never felt more white or more American than when I was living in China. As a white-looking foreigner, my ethnic and cultural identities were dissolved simply into "Westerner." To explain that I am a quarter Japanese and that I am actually ambivalent about my ethnic and cultural identification seemed like a meaningless gesture in that context. My economic and linguistic privilege as an American in China outweighed whatever marginality I might have experienced at home in the United States. Native speakers of American English are in high demand because American English has become the standard dialect for international trade. In addition to looking like a Westerner, in the classroom I was expected to act like one, too. The job seemed to require me to perform

³ "Issei, nisei, sansei, and yonsei" names generations of Japanese Americans. "Issei" refers to the first generation of Japanese Americans, who immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s, primarily as laborers. The "nisei, sansei, yonsei" and so on generally refers to their descendants.

my nationality in the classroom, to reiterate the differences between “East” and “West,” and to abandon any other cultural or ethnic identities in favor of a singular American persona. Of course, the idea that there is a singular American identity is as fraught with myth as the idea that there is a singular Japanese identity or Chinese identity.⁴

When my grandmother passed away (shortly after my return from China) my connection to that part of me--the Japanese side--felt like it was slipping away, too. I was enrolled in a graduate Cultural Studies seminar and began to use the theories I learned in that class as a jumping-off point for exploring Japanese American identity. At this time, as I mentioned before, I felt an urgent need to legitimize my connection to Japan. I began taking Japanese lessons, studying the literature, learning how to cook Japanese food, reading about Zen Buddhist traditions, even looking into study abroad programs that would put me in the center of the place to which I so wanted to belong.⁵ I joined online JA communities and started to openly identify as *hapa*.⁶ My encounter with the Hapa Movement,⁷ however, complicated the process of identification. As I studied the

⁴ For further reading on the representation of ethnic minorities in China, see <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20131215-how-china-portrays-its-minorities>.

⁵ I want to acknowledge here that it can be problematic to claim a racial or cultural identity when one does not have to bear the burden of marginalization or oppression because of it. Some would argue that the fact that I am “white passing” and have economic mobility makes it easier to claim my Japanese heritage.

⁶ *Hapa* has become one of the most widely used terms to name mixed race Asian and Pacific Islanders and offers a collective identity for those who either feel the need to identify with a larger racial/cultural group, or are prompted by others to do so. However, *hapa*, like any racial classification, has a problematic history and, some argue, is limited in its discursive possibilities for the transformation of common conceptions of racial, cultural and national identity. See Appendix B for more information.

⁷ The Hapa Movement refers loosely to all efforts that aim to build community amongst mixed-race Asian Americans who identify as Hapa. These can include community events and mixers, online communities, art and museum installations, festivals, interviews, discussion forums, blogs, film and literature. The Hapa Movement gained momentum in the late 1990’s and continues to grow in numbers and in national recognition.

multiracial politics, postcolonial theories and the history of U.S.-Japanese relations, I began to see that I was “self-orientalizing,” or essentializing Japanese culture and tradition in ways that I already understood and could reproduce. It became apparent that what I thought I knew about Japan largely came from my consumption of depictions of Japan that had been produced “under Western eyes”⁸ and funneled into American popular culture and mass media. I was invested more in myth than in the complexities of reality. This, too, raised questions for me about the borders between individual identity and cultural myth.

The task of narrative recovery and my ambivalence about the relevance of my own voice in discourses about Asian American/Japanese American identity has been both a catalyst and a source of anxiety. My finding Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, however, has alleviated some of my apprehension. I identify with its focus on the complexities of the relationship between Japan and the U.S. and on characters that are culturally, nationally and ethnically “in between.” Ozeki’s call for historical recovery resonates with my own effort to uncover and archive the past. Moreover, Ozeki articulates the connection between identity and geopolitics in a way that helps me come to terms with my own identity. Ozeki’s characters must seek out stories that have been erased from mainstream accounts of history. They engage with stereotypes that they are boxed into, providing a framework for navigating postcolonial subjectivity in our current sociohistorical moment in a productive and meaningful way.

⁸ I am referring here to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s book *Under Western Eyes*, which discusses transnational feminist movements within colonial/postcolonial contexts. See Works Cited.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Part One: Scholarship and Criticism of Ruth Ozeki's Fiction

Ruth Ozeki's novels are incredibly complex in their exploration and representation of the intersections of identity, nation, culture, location, environment, gender and sexuality. Her work often critiques capitalism, Western hegemony, male domination, racism and environmental degradation across a variety of postcolonial contexts. It is difficult to organize the criticism of Ozeki's work because Ozeki's writing itself takes up a multiplicity of social, environmental and economic issues. The scholarship on Ozeki, therefore, is equally as intersectional, and theoretical frameworks for interpretation often overlap and inform one another.

Some scholars suggest that Ozeki constructs narratives of solidarity between women across cultures, races and nations, and deals specifically with issues facing women of color, making visible the larger systems of oppression in which they exist (Cheng, 2009; Cheryl, 2009; Beauregard, 2017; Milne, 2015; Star, 2016). *My Year of Meats* (1999), *All Over Creation* (2002) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) all feature female characters who are either biracial, multiethnic or part of a larger Japanese diaspora. Therefore, much of the existing scholarship interprets Ozeki's novels through intersectional and transnational feminist lenses, which are grounded in the socioeconomic history of relations between Japan and the U.S. Ozeki's work has been praised for making marginalized voices central to her novels and for the ways that her use of

“collaborative authorship” surrenders (a traditionally male) authorial power and gives women of color the agency to speak their own stories (Milne, 2015). Critics have also highlighted the transparency of Ozeki’s effort to show how global and national politics come to bear on the figures in her novel. Many critics suggest that her writing reveals the larger systems of oppression at work in the lives of her characters.

There is near unanimous agreement that Ozeki’s work attempts to construct a “vision of progressive, feminist global community” through the intertwined narratives of a multiplicity of female voices (Black 230). However, the ways in which these characters and their struggles are represented is still a point of contention, and there is no real consensus about whether or not Ozeki’s work is as radically progressive as it appears to be. Much of the criticism ultimately concludes that Ozeki’s novels both disrupt *and perpetuate* some of the systems of oppression that she tries to deconstruct in her writing. Some critics find Ozeki’s brand of feminism in *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* problematic at times (Black, 2004; Cheng, 2009). *My Year of Meats* can be read as grounding solidarity between women in essentialized notions of the female body, where womanhood and motherhood are enough to bring women who occupy different racial, economic, cultural and geographical places together in resistance of universal oppression. Such thinking erases the specific conditions of women’s oppression and equalizes all forms of oppression and marginalization. In transnational feminist thought, acknowledging difference and building solidarity through radical, progressive politics

rather than sameness of sex is key to dismantling patriarchal capitalism.⁹ Similarly, in *All Over Creation*, female fertility becomes the foundation of connection between female characters across time and place (Johnson, 2008). Critics have also suggested that Ozeki's earlier work upholds Western models of feminism as an ideal towards which Japanese women should strive, ignoring how this might support rather than challenge Western hegemony (Black, 2004; Cheng, 2009).

Ozeki's environmentalism has drawn even more attention than her feminist politics. Leah Milne (2015) goes so far as to attribute the "birth" of the "genre of the eco-saga focused on cross-cultural issues" to Ozeki (465). Other critics, too, have clearly made this connection. They discuss her inquiry into racialization, late capitalism, the food industry, GMO's, biotechnology, pollution, corporate greed and the degradation of the environment. Much of the environmental criticism is focused on how Ozeki links these forces and shows the ways in which they are "entangled" (Fish, 2009; Kalajahi, 2012; Huang, 2017; Poulsen, 2011). In general, these articles map the ways in which Ozeki attempts to construct narratives of intervention in human activity that endangers the natural environment. Her characters, once involved in or aware of harmful industries and political systems, attempt to resist their own "stultifying subject-positions" within capitalist hegemony (Spoth and Warner, np).

Much of the criticism of the environmental aspects of Ozeki's work also addresses her engagement with social and political issues. In particular, my project builds

⁹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2003.

upon interpretations of *A Tale for the Time Being* that examine the invisibility and historical erasure of marginalized voices. For example, Michelle Huang (2017) argues that recently Asian American writers have recuperated the “category of garbage as a metonym for decimated history” (98). She suggests that these writers, including Ozeki, foreground the erasure of Asian American narratives and history. Similarly, Petra Fachinger (2017) asserts that Ozeki’s novel not only highlights the invisible effects of pollution on the environment, but also brings to light the “sociological and psychological” legacies of the “traumatic events of World War II on contemporary Japan” (47). Asian Canadian literary critic Guy Beauregard (2016) argues a similar thesis. In his analysis of *A Tale for the Time Being*, he suggests that Ozeki attempts to fill in the narrative gaps created by the devastation of the tsunami in Sendai, Japan on March 11, 2011. Like many other writers after this catastrophic event, Ozeki participates in a kind of “urgent ethnography” that tries to record stories in an effort to counteract the loss of life (Beauregard 96). Beauregard notes that *A Tale for the Time Being* also makes visible the effects of Western colonialism on Indigenous Canadian lives. Ultimately, these critics suggest that Ozeki resists invisibility and erasure of marginalized figures and their stories through narrative recovery. There are, however, some absences in the criticism of *A Tale for the Time Being*, which this project aims to fill.

My project delves deeply into the role that historical amnesia plays in the text, particularly in terms of how it orients us towards representations and images of other cultures. I also discuss the ways in which Ozeki’s re-historicization of mainstream, hegemonic narratives explores not only Western colonialism in North America, but but

also Western Imperialism in Japan. Although Guy Beauregard insists--in an apparent critique of other criticism of Ozeki that makes similar claims--that his essay does not “suggest that the act of reading Ozeki’s novel could somehow, in and of itself, propel our critical work out of a presumably narrow frame into a more globalized mode of critical engagement,” this project explores the possibility that Ozeki’s text *does* encourage and propel exactly this kind of engagement.

Part Two: Historical and Theoretical Grounding

Defining Postcolonial Subjectivity

Though some critics feel that the term “postcolonial” serves to keep at bay more sharply political terms such as imperialism or geopolitics, for many, the term has come to invoke a more politically charged positionality. As an identifier, “postcolonial” calls to the forefront legacies of colonial and imperial domination of marginalized groups in ways that terms and categories like North American, Asian American and Japanese American do not. While there is no doubt that the people to whom these terms refer have had their own specific histories of struggle and negotiation with colonialism and Western domination, these categories are commonly used in mainstream discourses to designate a benign or even celebrated kind of difference rather than specific histories of colonization and resistance. The term “postcolonial” invokes a position of solidarity among people of color and names the political and cultural work that their writing often does.

Who is considered colonial/postcolonial is still up for debate, but for this project, I use the terms “postcoloniality” and “postcolonial subjectivity” to analyze the material and psychological experiences of individuals and communities who are still subjected to the oppression and marginalization derived from imperialist ideologies, even if they have not directly borne the burden of colonial venture. The “post-” in the term “postcolonial” is misleading within the context of identity and subjectivity. “Post” tends to imply that formerly colonized peoples and places now exist separately from the histories of colonialism and imperialism that shape their current realities. However, within the framework of Postcolonial Studies (which itself is a complex and contested field), “postcoloniality,” refers not to a subjectivity which simply exists “after” colonization, but to a “subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonizing” (Ania Loomba 33). According to Postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba, such a position “. . . allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture” (33). It is necessary to point out that writers of color or writers from formerly colonized locales do not always take up or claim to take up postcolonial issues in their work. However, many writers have been subject to colonial violence and or who identify with the need to decolonize one’s mind frequently “challenge dominant ideas of humanity, history and identity” (Loomba 3) and engage with “displacement, diaspora, exile, migration, nationhood and hybridity” (Madsen 1). Postcoloniality, then, is not only an indicator of ones’ ethnic, cultural or national heritage, but can indicate an anticolonial political position and critical perspective.

Though postcoloniality names a subjectivity which is shared by many because of their respective connections to histories of colonialism and imperialism, it is vital to keep in mind that all postcolonial subjectivities are not the same “over time or across the globe” (33). Postcoloniality can too easily “become a vague condition of people anywhere and everywhere, and the specificities of locale do not matter” (37). The point, as Ania Loomba suggests, is that

. . . anti-colonial positions are embedded in specific histories, and cannot be collapsed into some pure oppositional essence. Although the word postcolonial is useful in indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe, if uprooted from specific locations “postcoloniality” cannot be meaningfully investigated, and instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover. (35)

This project relies heavily on the understanding that postcolonial subjectivity is not a universal condition, but a unique and complex experience that is dependent upon community and individual interaction with legacies of imperialism and colonialism. At the same time, however, I do--and I argue that Ozeki does--suggest that all postcolonialities must be analyzed through New Historicist frameworks, which try to recover lost histories and make space for a multiplicity of narratives. As I will argue extensively later in the project, *A Tale for the Time Being* exemplifies the ways in which the postcolonial novel is a platform for exploring the intricacies of particular postcolonial identities and the material conditions of their subjectivities. Ozeki continually reminds her reader that any exploration of postcolonial existence and resistance must be situated

within specific locales and histories. The characters in this novel, for instance, must navigate the cultural and economic aftermath of American imperialism in Japan and the United States in order to come to terms with their respective marginalities and oppressions. *A Tale for the Time Being*, then, offers a model, or at least a starting point, from which postcolonial peoples who identify with the experience of being “in between” cultures, nations and races might grapple with their own postcoloniality.

Japan: Imperial and Postcolonial?

The relationship between Japan and imperialism is a complicated topic which has, for the most part, gone unexplored by Postcolonial Studies. Postcolonial scholars have noted that contemporary postcolonial studies tends to center on the experiences of third world nations that have been colonized by Western forces and does not generally examine the role of non-Western and/or non-White empires in the global history of imperialism (Choi). Because of this, Japan is largely left out of postcolonial conceptions of who and what constitutes colonial and postcolonial subjectivity.

It is useful to consider the ways in which Japan is both an imperial power and an imperial subject. Japan established colonies across Asia and has undoubtedly been responsible for the death and oppression of hundreds of thousands of people. Japan has had significant control over many parts of Asia, and the sphere of political influence has included China, Russia, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, amongst others.¹⁰ Despite American economic power and the rise of

¹⁰ For further reading, see George Akita and Brandon Palmer’s *Japanese Colonial Legacy in Korea 1910–1945: A New Perspective* (2015), Alexis Dudden’s *Japan’s Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power*

China in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Japan is still quite politically and economically influential in the Eastern theatre. A great deal of work has emerged in the last 50 years in which the subjects of the Japanese empire describe their specific experiences as postcolonial peoples.

Thus, on the one hand, Japan has maintained significant power and influence in other Asian countries through the establishment of formal colonies, as well as informal methods of control since the late 1800s. On the other hand, since the arrival of American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, Japan has also been subjected to the economic and cultural authority of the West. Perry's voyage to Japan forcibly established American ports on the island. This was also an act of intimidation, which paraded the power and ambition of the United States in Asia. Though Japan is one of the few non-Western countries that has never been officially colonized by a Western empire, as postcolonial historian and literary critic Ania Loomba argues, "imperialism can function without formal colonies" (*Post/Colonialism* 27). Such is the case with Japan, who, after the end of World War II and the devastation of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, entered into a formal contract to help it rebuild both its economy and its society. This involved the institution of policies and government by Western democracy and the installation of military bases. Along with these changes, the flow of cultural and material commodities, as well as the flow of people, increased rapidly between Japan and the United States (Thorsten).

(2005), Louise Young's *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (1999), and *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique*, ed. Michele Mason, and Helen Lee (2012).

The United States government relied heavily on the patriarchal and capitalist rhetorics that explained the necessity of colonization in earlier eras to justify their occupation of Japan. The U.S. government framed Japan as both backwards and primitive in its cultural traditions and its economic and governmental structures. At the same time, however, Japan's people and government were described as being open to change and hardworking--in other words, suitable for American ideological molding and new American markets.¹¹ By the 1960s, Japan boasted the second largest economy in the world. The "Japanese Miracle," referring to this rapid growth, was lauded by U.S. media as a success of American occupation and exemplified American imperial pursuits in foreign lands (Miyoshi and Harootunian ix). Though Japan's sovereignty was restored in 1952, American influence and authority remained an important player in Japanese culture and the economy. There are still American military bases in Japan, the presence of which is highly contested by Japanese citizens.¹²

To examine Japan as a postcolonial or postimperial nation complicates how we define postcolonial subjectivity and postcolonial writing. It also asks us to redefine colonial power, shifting our focus from European colonialism to new and equally as

¹¹ The rhetoric of training films for U.S soldiers embarking on occupation duty in Japan provide a potent example of this belief. See "Our Job in Japan," *Youtube*, 16 May 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czW1IJ-Hd1I&t=301s>.

For an extensive examination of American and Japanese discourses about social and industrial modernity and adaptability in Japan, see Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (1995), Dale Peter's *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (1986) and Marie Thorsten's *Superhuman Japan: Knowledge, Nation and Culture in U.S.-Japanese Relations* (2012).

¹² For more information on contemporary Japanese attitudes towards U.S. military bases in Japan, see the following article: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/02/national/media-national/no-one-else-wants-okinawas-u-s-bases>.

insidious forms of imperialism that are perpetrated by the great world power of the 21st century: the United States. To imagine that because Japan is also an imperial power it is outside of the influence of the West is to reiterate the myth of Japanese exceptionalism and insularity. I am arguing that analyzing Japanese culture within postcolonial frameworks offers insight into the pervasiveness of Western hegemony (primarily U.S. hegemony) and capitalism, especially within the context of globalization. It is necessary to tease out the ways in which Japanese culture is shaped by the ideologies of the West because it sheds light on the complexities of Japanese and Japanese American identities. This is why Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is powerful and different--it investigates how legacies of colonialism and imperialism manifest in contemporary culture and economics in new and complex ways and in locations which have previously been overlooked. Ozeki's novel explores the ramifications of Western imperialism and hegemony in Japan for individual identity and the complicated process of identification. Her novel examines Japan as a postcolonial place, where racial, cultural and national identities are always contested and always at stake. She shows the connections between identity and systems of power, disrupting the strict boundaries of culture, race and nation as they are challenged in the process of contact and exchange.

Postmodernism and Historical Amnesia

In her fiction, Ruth Ozeki takes up the idea that contemporary society has lost touch with the past. In a 2012 interview about *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki describes the novel as an inquiry into "the idea of forgetting as a culture and the cultural ramifications of forgetfulness" (Ty). She continues, "So there is this idea that we forget

those kinds of histories. . . . We forget the history of the war, we forget the hidden histories of all of these things that, without memory, we are doomed to repeat.” Ozeki’s assertions about lost or disappeared histories reflect how contemporary theorists have characterized the postmodern condition. In his landmark essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as an artistic and literary moment as well as a social phenomenon. According to Jameson, the postmodern is a “periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social and a new economic order--what is often euphemistically called modernization, post industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism” (1984). Jameson notes that this “new international order (neocolonialism . . . computerization and electronic information)” makes it difficult, if not impossible, to “map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (1984). In other words, our current reality is characterized by a sense of disorientation and fragmentation, and the inability to locate ourselves temporally or otherwise due to the economics of late stage capitalism, which fuels consumer desire through rapidly changing trends, the pervasiveness of technology and the maintenance of hegemonic culture. In my project, I use Ozeki’s novel to illustrate and exemplify Jameson’s theories about postmodern amnesia and how it affects our individual and collective relationships to the reality of the present.

What is most important to my reading of *A Tale for the Time Being* is Jameson’s suggestion that in the postmodern epoch we believe we somehow exist “beyond history,”

because we are “incapable of dealing” with it (1853). The logic of consumer capitalism has catalyzed the “disappearance of a sense of history” and has made it so that the “entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve” (1860). In this project, I suggest that *A Tale for the Time Being* provides cross cultural examples of postmodern amnesia and explores how globalization, consumer capitalism, advanced and pervasive technologies and neo-colonialism have all contributed to the disarticulation of the past. What is more, Ozeki shows how the stories of certain kinds of people (i.e. marginalized positionalities such as women of color, queer people of color and postcolonial subjects) are more endangered than the stories sanctioned by dominant society. She explores the ways in which policies and practices of institutions and individuals systematically obscure histories of colonialism and imperialism in an effort to maintain Western hegemony.

Stereotype, Cultural Myth and the Cultural Imaginary

There is a link between postmodern historical amnesia, the disappearance of a multiplicity of narratives about colonialism and the inclination of Western mass media and popular culture to reproduce stereotypes. My project explores the ways in which Ruth Ozeki unsettles the reader’s existing knowledge about Japanese culture and history. I am asserting that in this postmodern moment, we continue to rely on our own stereotypes to understand the world around us, particularly when we seek to know other people and other cultures.

It is necessary to understand how representation and stereotype shape our identities and our perception of the world. Literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes argues that images and objects are “organized into meaningful relationships via narratives that expressed collective cultural values and produce a wider, cultural message and meaning about the subject(s)” (*Mythologies* 116). He suggests that in this process, “a whole new history... is implanted” into the culture through what he calls “myth” (119). Drawing on Barthes, cultural critic Stuart Hall uses the concept of myth as a framework for understanding how individuals view themselves and their place within their society. Cultural myths inform our knowledge of ourselves, each other and the systems which govern us (*Representation* 247). Though myth operates (at first) discursively by representing dominant cultural norms as supposed truth, it shapes our material practices, our access to resources and opportunity and our navigation of the world around us.

Stereotypes are one kind of myth which pervades all forms of cultural production. Stereotypes tend to withstand the passage of time, appearing in new and distorted ways in contemporary media and popular culture. Stuart Hall posits that stereotypes “get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them” (*Representation* 247). They also fix difference in a way that naturalizes stereotypical beliefs about an individual or a group.

Historian Sander Gilman argues that stereotypes “are palimpsests on which the initial bipolar representations are still vaguely legible” (278). This means that contemporary stereotypes and myths contain traces of earlier beliefs and practices, which

we as a so-called “postracial” and globalized culture often claim to have left behind. According to historian Peter Fritzsche, “myth obscures its own historical origins; it silences other social identities; and it misunderstands the opportunistic deployment of this idea by elites” in an effort to maintain and reproduce the status quo (123). The erasure of the origins of myth is dangerous because it is difficult for us to trace how stereotypes and myths are embedded in specific sociohistorical contexts and ideologies, reinforcing the sense that they are true.

Myth and stereotype are key pieces of a larger framework for understanding how individuals view themselves and their place within society. In his book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson attributes the advent of “the nation” to the ability to “imagine” oneself as part of a community, whether or not one has interacted or shares common beliefs or traits with other members. Anderson posits that we maintain “imagined communities” through storytelling. That is, we uphold beliefs about those who are and are not members of “the nation” through images, symbols, literature, media, film and other modes of cultural production in a way that concretizes and unifies the idea of the imagined community. Anderson’s seminal theories have become essential to what cultural critics and sociologists call the “cultural imaginary.” The cultural imaginary is an encompassing term for the totality of the narratives that allow us to know and navigate our social and cultural locations. The cultural imaginary grounds and legitimizes our everyday practices and is at least witnessed, if not closely held, by all who participate in and reproduce dominant culture. Implied in the term itself is the idea that the cultural imaginary is partly fictive. Stereotype and myth are tools for gatekeeping the boundaries

of the imagined nation or culture. They reiterate the outsider status of non-members in an effort to maintain the hegemonic rule of the dominant culture.

Several contradictions inform the U.S. cultural imaginary. The notion that the United States is racially and culturally “pure” (white, Protestant) is an important part of the U.S. cultural imaginary. The maintenance of this myth continues to be increasingly vital to our national identity. Though globalization, immigration, interracial marriage and cultural exchange have always been part of American history, the cultural hegemony of the West as expressed through policies, media and popular culture increasingly views these conditions as a threat to the borders and boundaries of the nation. For example, President Donald Trump’s campaign platform relied on racist and anti-immigrant sentiment. Since his election in 2016, he has implemented a ban on Muslim travellers, moved to eliminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, detained children of illegal immigrants, and made it more difficult for asylum seekers to enter the country, to name a few policies.¹³ All of the Trump administration’s actions are predicated on the maintenance of a white, Eurocentric, capitalist nation. In June of 2018, television star and comedian Roseanne Barr issued a tweet about former presidential advisor Valerie Jarrett¹⁴ that “resurrected one of the oldest and most profoundly racist

¹³ For a brief overview about the ramifications of Donald Trump’s ban on travelers to and from a selected list of Muslim countries, see Sabrina Siddiqui’s article “Trump’s Travel Ban: What Does the Supreme Court Ruling Mean?” in *The Guardian*, 26 June 2018. For coverage and updates on DACA, see <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/daca>. For updates on the detention of children of illegal immigrants, see Camila Domonoske’s NPR article “What We Know: Family Separation and ‘Zero Tolerance’ at the Border,” 19 June 2018. For more information about Trump’s stance on refugees and asylum seekers, see David Miliband’s “On Refugees, the Trump Administration is Competent and Malevolent” in the *Washington Post*, 16 April 2018.

¹⁴ Brent Staples. “The Racist Trope that Won’t Die,” *New York Times*, 17 June 2018.

slanders” (Staples). Many films and television shows continue to rely on stereotypical portrayals of marginalized people and people of color. To name a few, the animated film *Isle of Dogs* (2018), the *Hangover* comedy trilogy (2009, 2011, 2013) and the HBO series *Silicon Valley* (2014) have all been criticized for their stereotypical portrayal of Asian and Asian American characters.

Whether we are consciously aware of them or not, these beliefs and cultural associations structure the narratives we tell about ourselves and about others. Our investment in cultural myths and stereotypes also signals our inability or unwillingness to “deal with history”—partly in an effort to continue to see ourselves as purveyors of democracy, multiculturalism and equality and partly to sustain White Supremacy and market capitalism. As Fredric Jameson explains, our postmodern culture has become self-referential. He argues that “we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (1853). In other words, we look for knowledge and truth about ourselves and others in the contemporary “cultural imaginary”—in contemporary representations of the past, rather than in actual history. This is problematic because it blinds us to histories of oppression and recuperates those histories in distorted ways that maintain systems of inequality.

In some ways, this project is an exploration of how the Western cultural imaginary comes to bear on individual lives—both real and fictional. It is also an inquiry into the ways that the amnesia which characterizes this historical moment co-constitutes that same imaginary. In his essay, Beauregard urges critics responding to Ozeki and to

postcolonial fiction in general to “scrutinize the terms of which the lives of figures are imagined, both within and beyond the nation” (3). Beauregard is primarily concerned about how “acts of imagination might reinforce rather than unsettle existing relations of power” (4), but no analysis yet has deeply investigated “the terms” of which Japan is imagined in *A Tale for the Time Being*. While other criticism has connected issues of invisibility, erasure and imagination, I am arguing that postmodern frameworks for interpreting culture bring new meaning to the text--particularly in regards to how contemporary representations of other cultures are shaped by what Frederic Jameson calls historical amnesia. This project also aims to look at Ozeki’s portrayal of entanglement¹⁵ in a new way. That is, it departs from previous criticism in its investigation of the ways in which individuals *inside and outside* of the text are entangled in histories of representation. The characters in the novel show us how postmodern/postcolonial subjects both embody and bump up against stereotypical representations, therefore calling into question the terms of the Western cultural imaginary. This project bridges the personal and the literary, arguing that *A Tale for the Time Being* creates a space for its readers to think critically about the connection between identity and representation and reassess their own investment in the cultural imaginary. I argue that the novel encourages

¹⁵ In her article “Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch” (2017), Michelle Huang uses the term “entanglement” to describe the rhetorical connection to name the discursive parallels between the racialization of Asian Americans and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. According to Huang “Ecologies of Entanglement,” are “networks of circulation that diffuse the boundaries of the human by foregrounding the relationships between us and the world with which we interact...” (98). Cleo Warner and Daniel Spoth (2015) also use the term “entanglement” to describe the relationship of Ozeki’s characters in *All Over Creation* to capitalism and environmental exploitation (“Seeds of Chaos: Spontaneity as Resistance in the Work of Ruth Ozeki” np).

readers--whether or not they identify as postcolonial and whether or not they relate to the representations of postcolonial identities that Ozeki constructs--develop a historical consciousness in order to orient themselves towards history and towards current events in a more meaningful and equitable way. This project incorporates my personal narrative to illustrate how the novel might help readers who do identify with the kinds of cultural or ethnic marginalization that Ozeki's characters experience navigate their own postcolonial subjectivities.

CHAPTER 2: “ENTANGLEMENT” IN THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY

The next three chapters will offer a brief plot summary and an extended analysis of Ozeki’s novel as it grapples with Western imperialism, conceptions of Japanese culture in the Western cultural imaginary and postmodern forgetfulness which, according to Ozeki, plagues us all. *A Tale for the Time Being* is set in multiple temporalities and locations and is a story told by multiple narrators. Ruth (who is, in some ways, the author, Ruth Ozeki) and her husband, Oliver, live on a secluded island off the coast of British Columbia. Ruth often spends time beachcombing, and one day, shortly after a storm, comes across a Hello Kitty lunchbox in a large Ziploc bag that has washed up on shore. Inside, the lunchbox contains a handwritten diary between the “hacked” cover of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, faded letters in old *kanji* (Japanese characters), a notebook written in French and an inscribed Seiko watch. The diary is written by sixteen-year-old Naoko “Nao” Yasutani in an effort to record her great-grandmother’s life story, and has apparently drifted all the way from Japan on the ocean gyres. Within the first few pages, Ruth learns that Nao plans to commit suicide, and thus becomes embroiled in Nao’s account of the circumstances which led her to that decision. Though Nao wrote her diary several years earlier, as Ruth delves deeper into Nao’s story and the borders

between the present and past dissolve, she is able to intervene in Nao's narrative through a dream, shaping a new world in which a future for Nao is still a possibility.

A Tale for the Time Being takes up the politics of cultural and ethnic representation, particularly in terms of how the West has come to know modern Japanese culture. As postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak asserts, we must be aware of how we “construct others for knowing” (4). According to Spivak, knowability is always imbued with cultural meaning and framed by systems of power. The desire to know, or the idea that the “subaltern”--the cultural or ethnic Other--is knowable, already signals an imbalance of power. In an interview with Ruth Ozeki, literary critic and professor Eleanor Ty states, “I was fascinated by aspects of Japanese culture that I didn't know, the bullying, suicide . . . the hostess bar” as well as “kamikaze pilots and the tsunami” (Ty). Though Ty says she “didn't know” about these aspects of Japanese culture, I would argue that these images are prevalent in Western media and popular culture and constitute what the West already believes it knows about Japan.¹⁶ More significantly, Ty's mention of key characters and themes in Ozeki's work highlights both Ozeki's and her own “entanglement” in the Western cultural imaginary. Ty's comment calls for a critical reevaluation of Ozeki's construction of Japanese culture in *A Tale for the Time Being* and how Ozeki's work speaks to larger issues of representation and power.

¹⁶ See Naoko Shibusawa's book *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (2010), David Matsumoto's *The New Japan: Debunking Seven Cultural Stereotypes* (2002) and Sheila K. Johnson's *The Japanese Through American Eyes* (1988) for further discussion of stereotypes in Western Media.

At first glance, it appears that Ozeki simply reinforces the popular images of Japan as a center of modernity and extremity.¹⁷ A majority of the narrative takes place in Tokyo, where the character Nao is surrounded by Japanese kitsch culture. This setting relies on the absurd, reconstructing popular Western myths of Japan as a copycat culture, an almost-successful imitator of the first world, a country that has taken the principles of modernism and modernization to the extreme. The protagonist, sixteen-year-old Nao, often finds refuge from her school life in the nearby Akiba Electricity Town, which Ozeki describes as almost cartoonish. Giant manga characters loom on billboards, girls in school uniforms and platform heels beckon customers into bars, lights flash, narrow streets are filled with mechanical sounds and fast-paced pop music, robots battle on LCD screens and edgy harajuku peruse tiny shops in brightly colored fashions.

The novel's descriptions of Japan are remarkably similar to the images that permeate Western television and media. Nao moves between the metropolitan (Tokyo) and the ancient (Jiko's crumbling temple in Fukushima). For Western readers, this portrayal is familiar to the point of caricature. In fact, the novel's depiction of place seems to reiterate modern Orientalist¹⁸ conceptions of Japan, in which inherent differences and incompatibilities between the U.S. and Japan are maintained. Nao

¹⁷ See Footnote 11.

¹⁸ *Orientalism* is a cultural myth which involves the "othering" of non-Western, non-White and non-Christian peoples, primarily peoples from the "middle" and "far" East (Said, 1978). The "West (Occident)" has historically characterized "The "Orient" as "separate, passive, eccentric, backwards," inferior, irrational, desirous and corrupt, amongst other traits (Rosen, 2005). "Modern Orientalism" refers to newer stereotypes emerging from interaction and economic competition with the West, manifesting new images of Japan that contain much of the same essentialism described by Said's notion of Orientalism.

describes an email conversation with her best friend Kayla, whom she left behind when her family left Sunnyvale, California for Japan. She writes,

[Kayla] kept wanting to know what my school was like, and I wasn't going to tell her about the *ijime* . . . so instead I just tried to explain all the funny odd things about Japan to her. Japanese culture is pretty popular among young people in the United States, so mostly we just chatted about manga and J-pop and anime and fashion trends and stuff. (79)

Like Nao's censorship of her experiences to Kayla, the reality of Japanese life is often redacted from representations available to the West. Consequently, the West sees much of what Kayla does--"manga and fashion" trends.¹⁹ But Ozeki complicates Nao's reduction of Japanese culture. After Nao sends a picture of herself in her school uniform to Kayla via email, Kayla asks Nao to send her a uniform so she can dress up as a "jap skoolgrl 4 haloween" (126). Nao writes in her diary, that "to [Kayla], my new life was just cosplay, but to me it was totally real" (126). This quote points to Ozeki's intentional disruption of the Western cultural imaginary.

Here, it is useful to consider how Ozeki incorporates Fredric Jameson's assertion that the postmodern epoch has "transformed . . . reality into images" (1583). Now that Nao is not physically with Kayla, Kayla can only understand her life through the images with which she is already familiar. This exchange is complicated further by the fact that

¹⁹ See "15 Stereotypes all Japanese People Hate" (theculturetrip.com), in particular, the article's discussion of the following stereotypes: "All Japanese Girls Love 'Kawaii,'" "All Japanese People Love Manga, Anime and Cosplay" and "Japan is a High Tech Wonderland." 12 July 2017.

Japanese media often “self-Orientalizes,”²⁰ or embraces the stereotypes shaped by Western media.²¹ Nao’s assertion that her friend back home in California has reduced Nao’s real life experiences to “cosplay” and “manga” suggests that Nao is aware of misrepresentations of Japan in Western media and even begins to play into them herself so that she doesn’t have to tell her friend about the bullying she faces at school. In order to maintain her friendship with Kayla, Nao’s description of her life must meet Kayla’s narrative expectations. In doing this, Nao reinscribes stereotype. This moment in the text is also metonymic of how stereotypical representations flatten and essentialize the lives of “real” people. Ozeki shows that people who are marginalized must use stereotypes in their self-definition and self-identification to be intelligible. The West is as invested in unfavorable representations of Japanese culture as it is in the happy absurdity of Japanese kitsch and cosplay. Extreme suicide rates,²² hentai²³ and Japan’s history of violence abroad characterize representations of Japan in Western film, literature and mass media. To the U.S., in particular, Japan is a nation of binarisms and extremity. On the one hand, the cultural stereotype asserts that the Japanese are technologically sophisticated,

²⁰ Much like the notion of “self-exotification,” “self-orientalization” involves the postcolonial notion of double consciousness, where a marginalized and/or racialized individual or community purposefully enacts or embodies the the essentialized and stereotyped beliefs of the dominant culture. “Self-Orientalization” sometimes occurs in an effort to maintain cultural identity and unity or to exploit the dominant culture’s consumption of the exotic.

²¹ In his study, Peter Dale argues that Japan reiterates notions of difference between themselves and the rest of the world in order to maintain their belief in the cultural and racial superiority of Japanese people (*The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1986. Print).

²² *Aokigahara*, the Japanese “Suicide Forest” appears often in both Western and Japanese popular culture. The American films *The Forest of the Living Dead* (2010), *Grave Halloween* (2013), *47 Ronin* (2013), *The Sea of Trees* (2010), *The Forest* (2016), the Canadian film *The People Garden* (2016) and the Portuguese film *The Forest of Lost Souls* (2017) all contain a plot that connects in some way to *Aokigahara*.

²³ *Hentai* can refer to both a person with sexually deviant desires or to animated pornography. It is often associated with school girl fetishes or the infantilization of women.

achievement oriented and dedicated to hard work. On the other hand, they are violent, immoral and deviant. Calling attention to the Western reader's existing knowledge of Japan, Nao writes, "You've probably heard horror stories about Japanese corporate culture and the long working hours and salarymen who never have time to hang out with their families or hug their children and who drop dead from working too hard. . ." (82). Though Nao is by no means negating the existence of "corporate culture" in Japan, the fact that she prefaces her statement with "You've probably heard horror stories" asks the reader to reassess "what they've heard" at the same time that the phrase "horror stories" draws attention to the ways that reality has become distorted or fictionalized in media and popular culture.

Early in the novel, the character Nao finds herself sitting next to an *otaku*²⁴ in the cafe in which she often writes. She feels "creeped out" by him and imagines that he has a "major schoolgirl fetish" (4). Nao's fantasy of the man's "true inner nature" continues in great detail, where she daydreams about him taking her on a date and then murdering her in a "love hotel" (5). After she explains this graphic, make-believe scenario she then addresses her reader, stating, "Or maybe none of these things will happen except in my mind and yours. . ." (5). This moment in the text is another example of Ozeki's calling on her reader to pause and reassess their own investment in stereotypes, noting that even Nao who is likely more a part of Japanese culture than her reader, is susceptible to imagining others through stereotypes.

²⁴ Ozeki defines *otaku* in the following way: "obsessive fan or fanatic, a computer geek, a nerd" (4). *Otaku* seems to refer primarily to eccentric, antisocial men who also have sexually deviant tendencies (*hentai*).

The cultural imaginary is so potent because it reveals the way that fictional narratives about race, culture and history shape how individuals experience their surroundings and form their identity. The boundaries between representation and identity are blurry, and it is difficult to tease out where exactly one ends and the other begins. At one point in the novel, the character Jiko tells her granddaughter Nao that “*Life is full of stories, or maybe life is only stories*” (246). In the novel, those stories often contain cultural and political meaning. The character Nao occupies a complex cultural space because she is influenced by both Western and Japanese cultural narratives. She was raised in California and so her perception of the world is largely informed by Western representations of Japan. For instance, one of the most prevalent forms of Japanese popular culture that has diffused into Western consciousness is Japanese animation. Particularly popular with young people, Japanese comics and animated movies have become a mainstream staple in both Japanese and Western consumption of film, media and literature. At one point in the novel, Nao travels by bus to visit Jiko at her home in an old temple in the mountains of Fukushima. She writes that her trip was “like being in an anime movie, with our little bus chugging up and down, winding around the mountains and hugging the cliffs” (156). Nao’s own life in Japan seems to merge with the ones created for the silver screen. And while it is true that anime is created by Japanese artists and incorporates Japanese traditions, culture and landscape, this quote suggests that Nao originally understood Japan from a Western perspective. Except for her parents’ “Japaneseness,” which is maintained only through language and food during their time in the U.S., Nao comes to know Japan through reductive images and representations (43).

Nao's description of the anime bus reveals a "real" moment, which has been mediated by a Western translation of Japanese experience.

Nao's statement also represents how individuals incorporate more politically charged stereotypes into their own identities and belief systems. Literary critic and anthropologist Aleida Assmann suggests that "Representations of the past can create an appeal for respective groups to absorb them into their self-image not only as historical knowledge but also as a 'memory' of the past and incorporate them into one's transbiographical identity" (223). Further, Assmann argues that in many cases, we cannot know "whether something that we remember is an experiential memory or an episode that has been told us by others and was incorporated into our fund of memories" (222). Petra Fachinger makes a similar point in her discussion of the novel, characterizing Nao's bullying as "intergenerational trauma" (54). Though her "anime moment" appears somewhat neutral, there are other images which Nao encounters that contain older and more complicated histories of hegemony and violence. One example is that Ozeki links Nao's *ijime* (bullying) to earlier instances of American imperialism in Japan. Nao's classmates taunt her for being American, telling her that she "stinks" like a foreigner and refusing to use her name, addressing her instead as "Transfer Student Yasutani" (48). Unaware that their prejudices have been passed down from earlier generations, Nao's classmates echo Japanese anti-Western sentiment that has existed in Japanese culture since the West's first efforts to colonize Japan (encyclopedia.com).

On one hand, myths about Japanese culture that resonate with a Western audience appear throughout the text and comprise much of Nao's personal narrative, thus

having the potential to reestablish their validity. On the other hand, Ozeki pokes holes in these cultural myths through Nao's commentary, asking the reader of Nao's diary within the novel (and, simultaneously, Ozeki's reader) to reassess our existing knowledge about Japan and about how it is we come to know other cultures. I am not arguing that all representations of Japanese culture and people exist in the novel solely to be deconstructed, especially since some cultural myths are left almost entirely untouched. What is clear, however, is Ozeki's desire to engage with and expose the cultural imaginary and to show how pervasive myths can be. Ozeki's intervention is especially salient in an era where the West seems to have lost track of its own involvement in shaping the systemic inequities that structure global interaction.

Filmmaker/teacher/poet Trinh T. Minh-ha makes a provocative point about the nature of stereotypes, which sheds light on Ozeki's use of them in *A Tale for the Time Being*. Trinh states,

The stereotyped is not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality. So to avoid merely falling into this pervasive world of the stereotyped and the cliché'd, filmmaking has all to gain when conceived as a performance that engages as well as questions (its own) language . . . Sometimes, it is strategically important to reappropriate the stereotypes and to juxtapose them next to one another so that they may cancel each other out. (89)

According to Trinh, stereotypes do, in fact, represent reality in some ways. Indeed, they are not fictionalized representations, but rather images that represent mainstream hegemonic discourses and beliefs from one particular moment in history. Though these

images are “arrested,” they still have the power to carry the imperial culture’s past ideologies into new periods and into postimperial/postcolonial spaces. Ruth Ozeki’s novel displays this kind of performativity as it contains a process of representational construction and deconstruction. A majority of the characters at one point or another embody and then overturn stereotypically Japanese beliefs and behavior. Jiko, for instance, is a Buddhist nun, whose religious devotion mirrors Western notions of the Japanese as being dedicated to cultural tradition and ancient practices. While the character Jiko often makes profound and ambiguous statements about the nature of life and death (while Nao is simply “trying to watch some cute guys surfing” 194), she also has the uncanny ability to engage with modern technology and popular culture. Though she is 104, Jiko can text message, and through this form of communication, she discusses current events and news headlines with Nao with a surprising understanding of the problems of contemporary society.

While it is true that Japan has relatively high rates of suicide,²⁵ I would argue that this is a phenomenon with which the West has become fascinated. American film and media platforms have started creating their own stories about Japanese suicide, decontextualizing and perpetuating a number of different, yet interconnected stereotypical assumptions about Japanese culture. Ozeki juxtaposes the stories of Nao’s, her father’s and her great uncle’s desires to commit suicide in an effort to disrupt these

²⁵ A study by the World Health Organization in 2015 ranked Japan at 25 in a list of countries by suicide per 100,000 people. However, since 2013, suicide rates have begun to decline rapidly. <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.MHSUICIDEASDR?lang=en>.

stereotypical representations. Ozeki historicizes suicide in Japanese culture by constructing a suicide story that spans three generations as well as remarks that throughout history the Japanese “have always appreciated suicide” (87). In the novel, Nao explains that suicide “runs in the family,” but as the novel progresses the reader sees that their decisions to commit suicide were in resistance to larger systems of power and control (68). For example, Nao’s father quits his job in Silicon Valley when he learns that the technology he developed is going to be used by the American military for drone interfaces. Unlike the typical *otaku* stereotype, Haruki places morality above success in the corporate world. In a more violent version of the stereotype that the Japanese are blind followers of government and corporate rule, Ozeki also includes the stereotype of the kamikaze pilot. Nao learns that her great-uncle Haruki, a kamikaze pilot, purposely crashed his plane into the ocean rather than into his target, saving many innocent lives. At the end of the novel, when Nao discovers the truth, she reconsiders her own decision to commit suicide. Through this narrative arc, Ozeki complicates stereotypes about Japanese suicide at the same time that she historicizes and contextualizes them. In doing so, Ozeki also resists erasing complex historical realities and intergenerational trauma.

In another example of Ozeki’s efforts to revisit stereotypical representations of Japan, Nao writes that she is going to dedicate her blank diary to the recording of her great grandmother’s remarkable life. Nao states:

[Jiko] was a nun and a novelist and New Woman of the Taisho era. She was also an anarchist and a feminist who had plenty of lovers, both males and females, but she was never kinky or nasty. And even though I may end up mentioning some of

her love affairs, everything I write will be historically true and empowering to women, and not a lot of foolish geisha crap. (6)

Ozeki's desire to rewrite history so that it includes marginalized figures is explicitly stated in this passage. Through Nao's voice, Ozeki is able to openly critique popular stereotypes of Japanese women as subservient to men, docile and ineffective--most notably epitomized in the image of the geisha.²⁶ In this quote, Ozeki transparently condemns heteronormative and patriarchal Western historical traditions, which have erased the political organization and movement building of women of color. At the same time (though some might argue that Ozeki is "kink-shaming" here), Nao works to undo the representations of Japanese women as sexually deviant. This is interesting, considering Nao's extensive discussion of *otaku*, her short time as an escort in a fetish cafe, and her own participation in gender-bending later in the novel. It seems that Nao simply desires to protect her great-grandmother from criticism over her "lovers" who, according to Nao, were both "male and female," and wishes to disassociate sexual exploitation from non-heterosexual desire. What is most important is the fact that Ozeki positions "truth"--political, historical and sexual--as empowering to women, and rejects "foolish geisha crap" as disempowering popular representations of Japanese women. In summary, Ruth Ozeki engages with the idea of knowability by creating characters who embody myths about Japan. Through characters' actions and personalities and,

²⁶ See Naoko Shibusawa's *America's Geisha Ally* (2010) and Sheila Johnson's chapter "The Sexuality Nexus" in *The Japanese Through American Eyes* (1988) for further discussion of the representation of Japanese women in American media.

occasionally, by careful historicizing, Ozeki disrupts these myths. *A Tale for the Time Being* illustrates Trinh's assertion that "the knowable and unknowable are never presented as being mutually exclusive of one another"(89). In the context of the novel, stereotypes--the "knowable"--are a necessary step in addressing the complex realities behind "the unknowable." What we (the West) know about Japan is first called into question, before Ozeki shows us that the real lives and experiences, which lie somewhere in between these caricatures and traditions, are much more complicated than they appear.

Though *A Tale for the Time Being* primarily engages with Western beliefs about Japan, there is one scene in particular which invokes non-Western cultural imaginaries. The character Nao writes the majority of her diary in the quiet of Fifi's Lovely French Apron, a "maid" cafe with a "French salon theme" (3). According to Nao, the interior of the cafe mimics French decor, and is decorated with ostentatious furniture, a glowing cupid fountain, and crystal chandeliers. The hostesses wear French maid uniforms and feed omelets by the spoonful to customers for an extra charge. Nao describes Fifi's Lovely Apron as having a "depressing ambience," but she enjoys it because "nobody is trying too hard . . . and actually thinking they are making it" (17). Nao is quite aware that Fifi's has missed the mark when it comes to creating a "French experience." She says, "I don't know if this decor is authentic or not as I've never visited France, but I'm going to guess that probably there aren't many French maid cafes like this in Paris" (15). Fifi's (mis)appropriation of its French theme exposes the impossibility of authentic representation of other cultures. Fifi's (like many of the other themed restaurants in Akiba Electricity Town) draws its inspiration from "pop images and stereotypes" about

the West (Jameson 1865). In this way, Fifi's Lovely Apron exemplifies Jameson's description of the postmodern aesthetic, which is characterized by pastiche and kitsch. The cafe employs both postcolonial²⁷ and postmodern mimicry. In the postmodern sense, Fifi's mimicry of an antiquated French sensibility is practiced without any political consciousness or "satirical impulse" (Jameson 1849). Fifi's, therefore, embodies the "blank irony" of postmodernity, which exists because, in our efforts to recreate the past, we have lost track of the actual referents which inform our artistic production. The cafe works as a metonym for the postmodern "incapacity of our minds . . . to map the great global multinational and decentered communication network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (Jameson 1853). Instead, Fifi's patrons find themselves in the simulacrum of a place, time and culture that never existed.

In the postcolonial sense, the scene at Fifi's Lovely Apron transforms into an even more potent image when the reader sees that Westerners become a primary clientele for the cafe as its popularity with Japanese people begins to decline. The Westerners voluntarily consume a stereotype of France. But it is this absurdity, not the authenticity of experience that seems to draw Westerners into Fifi's, since they are not looking for an authentic French experience, but a fantasy of the West. In this way, for a moment, the West becomes the imagined "Other," the exoticized and foreign, as Ozeki subjects the reader to fictionalized Japanese perceptions and stereotypes of the West. The

²⁷ For further explanation and discussion of postcolonial mimicry, see Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

French/Western experience is translated through Japanese interpretation, thereby destabilizing notions of Western cultural authority and domination upon which imperialism itself is predicated. The novel subjects the West to the kind of mythification that Ozeki works to problematize, balancing the scales of representational power. In this way, the West becomes the Other which is constructed for knowing, reversing the terms of postcolonial subjectivity.

CHAPTER 3: CULTURAL FORGETFULNESS AND NEOCOLONIALISM/NEOIMPERIALISM

The power of storytelling and the importance of representation became most clear to me after my grandmother's death. Because my interest and investment in recovering my grandmother's story ignited shortly after her passing, I began researching the Japanese War Brides throughout my next two semesters of graduate school as a bridge back to her. However, I soon realized that information about them--especially in the form of testimonials--was incredibly scarce. They were invisible in the vast majority of the popular narratives and historical studies by and about Japanese Americans. How could this be? More than 40,000 women had immigrated to the US at a pivotal moment in the nation's racial and political history. Where were their stories?

When I finally did find them, I realized that until very recently, they had disappeared.²⁸ This was partly due to their interracial marriages, which were largely to white American servicemen.²⁹ Some scholars suggest that because the majority married

²⁸ See Appendix A for scholarship and resources on Japanese War Brides.

²⁹ According to Regina Lark, approximately 75% of all U.S. GI's who married Japanese women were white. Nisei men (second generation Japanese Americans) comprised 33% of all Japanese/GI marriages. Although approximately 6,000 Black GIs married Japanese women, percentage-wise we do not know how this compares to white/Japanese and Nisei/Japanese marriages. See *They Challenged Two Nations: Marriages between Japanese Women and American GIs: 1945 to the Present* (1999). See also an early demographic study of Japanese War Bride marriages by Anselm Strauss, "Strain and Harmony in American Japanese War-Bride Marriages," *Marriage and Family Living* (1954) and Paul Spickard's study of Asian American settlement and assimilation, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth Century America* (1989).

white Americans, Japanese War Brides assimilated into mainstream American culture more successfully than second generation Japanese Americans.³⁰ Their absence was also partly due to existing prejudice from Japanese Americans themselves, who, in many cases, refused to acknowledge War Brides as part of their community. Not only had I already been confronted by the effects of individual forgetting (my grandmother's Alzheimer's and the loss of the history of our family "on the other side of the Pacific"), but also I saw firsthand how stories could fall out of national and cultural memory, how the legacies of imperialism as well as of love and resistance that resound in the twenty-first century could be forgotten.

For Ruth Ozeki, forgetting is both an individual and a collective social issue. In an interview, Ozeki states that she is "intrigued by the idea of forgetting as a culture and the cultural ramifications of forgetfulness" (Ty). She suggests that *A Tale for the Time Being* explores two different types of forgetting: the intentional and the unintentional. Giving a slightly different meaning to the term *agnotology*, Ozeki states that the first kind of forgetting involves "the willful construction of ignorance" and is "created by political will." The second kind of forgetfulness occurs simply by "neglecting to tell the tale" (Ty). Ozeki reminds us that history and cultural consciousness are shaped as much by what is remembered as by what is forgotten.

Early in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki suggests that forgetting is a privilege-- a disassociation from histories of exploitation and violence. She reveals that forgetting is

³⁰ See Masako Nakamura's "Families Precede Nation and Race?: Marriage, Migration, and Integration of Japanese War Brides After World War II" (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).

also a consequence of larger national discourses that refuse responsibility for the destruction of peoples and the places they inhabit. One of the characters in *A Tale for the Time Being* who explicitly vocalizes this notion is Nao's 104-year-old great-grandmother, Jiko. Through the voice of Nao, Ozeki writes, "Old Jiko says that nowadays we young Japanese people are *heiwaboke*, or "stupefied with peace; 'peace + addled'" (180). Nao then goes on to explain her grandmother's observation:

I don't know how to translate it, but basically it means that we're spaced out and careless because we don't understand about war. She says we think Japan is a peaceful nation because we were born after the war ended and peace is all we can remember, and we like it that way, but actually our whole lives are shaped by the war and the past and we should understand that. (180)

Ozeki frames "peace" as both a kind of willful ignorance and an imposed one. In this sense, peace is a state associated with being able to conceptualize our lives as separate from histories of violence, death, corruption, poverty and war. But Ozeki's explanation of the Japanese *kanji*, which breaks down *heiwaboke* into the words "peace" and "addled," presents this notion as a disease of the privileged.

Ozeki also explores the ways that certain historical narratives are sanctioned by government entities in order to maintain cultural and political hegemony and domination. These myths are then transmitted to new generations as "history." As discussed in Chapter 2, Jiko's son Haruki (often referred to by Nao as "Haruki #1," because Nao's father is also named Haruki) was a kamikaze pilot in World War II. Both Jiko and her son were staunch believers in antiviolence and protested Japanese

involvement in the war. While spending the summer with her grandmother at the temple where she lives, Nao learns from her grandmother that the Japanese refer to World War II as the “Greater East Asian War” (179). That Ozeki includes this fact is important because it decenters the West and relocates the narrative center of the novel in Asia. Unlike Western versions of World War II, the title “Greater East Asian War” restores military power and influence to Asian participants.

The character Nao also finds out from her grandmother that Japan and the United States have “totally different versions” of the causes and the outcomes of the war. Nao explains:

Most Americans think it was all Japan’s fault, because Japan invaded China in order to steal their oil and natural resources, and America had to jump in and stop them. But a lot of Japanese believe that America started it by making all these unreasonable sanctions against Japan and cutting off oil and food, and like, ooooh, we’re just a poor little island country that needs to import stuff in order to survive, etc. (179)

In the American version of the war, the U.S. positions itself as a savior that had to punish Japan for the crimes they committed both abroad and on U.S. soil. This, of course, is narratively cohesive with the myth that America is the purveyor of democracy and justice. However, the Japanese version of the story, as Nao discovers, portrays Japan’s participation in the war as largely reactionary to American aggression. In other words, they were provoked into entering the war. Her tongue-in-cheek description of the Japanese government's attitude towards the U.S. in that moment also reveals that Japan

reacted to a threat against their national identity. In this interaction between Nao and Jiko, Ozeki decenters the United States as the sole producer of historical truth. She also reminds her reader that history is dialogic.

At the same time, Nao is also wary of characterizing Japan as a peaceful nation. She counters, “if you ask me, Japan is not so peaceful” (180). Her father, Haruki, expresses a similar sentiment in a conversation with an American professor-friend during the Yasutanis’ stay in the United States. Haruki approaches the psychology professor in hopes that he might help him answer some questions regarding the nature of the “human conscience.” Haruki was “involved in interface development for the gaming market, [and] the U.S military had an interest in the enormous potential his research might have for applications in semi-autonomous weapons technology” (307-308). Haruki feels that if he understood the human conscience, then he could build something into the interface that would “trigger” its operators’ “ethical sense of right and wrong” (308). The professor reassures him that “the fact he was asking these questions . . . demonstrated his conscience was in working order” (308). But Haruki disagrees, replying:

That is not conscience. That is only shame from my history and history can easily be changed . . . [for example] when we study about a terrible Japanese atrocity like Manchu. In this case, we Japanese people committed genocide and torture of the Chinese people, and so we learn we must feel great shame to the world. But shame is not a pleasant feeling, and some Japanese politicians are always trying to change our children’s history textbooks so that these genocides and tortures are

not taught to the next generation. By changing our history and our memory, they try to erase all our shame.

Ozeki implies that a historical consciousness is important because, as Haruki demonstrates, it is necessary to forming the foundations of a moral conscience. In this sense, morality, or at least the ability to see “right and wrong,” if not to choose correctly between them, is teachable through histories that include multiple perspectives, not just the dominant ones. The alteration of textbooks (i.e. collective cultural knowledge) is dangerous, then, because it interferes with the development of a human conscience. Haruki’s conversation with the professor also foregrounds historical erasure, which is not enacted to protect future generations from violence, but rather to perpetuate a new narrative that looks upon the nation’s actions more favorably. The manipulation of collective memory is a highly political move, which is aimed at maintaining the security of national identity through the allegiance of its subject/citizens. In his study, historian Peter Fritzsche looks at the ways that memory has been deployed as a tool of the state to develop unified national identity and allegiance. He suggests that “memory is regarded [by political leaders] as a problem because it is in need of readjustment in order to create or sustain particular political possibilities” (90). Similarly, Haruki’s assessment of the alteration of textbooks reveals that “forgetfulness,” on both collective and individual levels, is not accidental, but intentional--a mechanism of neoliberalism and neoimperialism.

In her novel, Ozeki criticizes not only Japanese forgetfulness, but also Western *heiwaboke*. While Ruth and Oliver’s home on Cortes Island in British Columbia is now

quiet and sanctuary-like, even their rural seaside town has a long history of exploitation by European colonials. Ozeki represents the island as an “earthly paradise” and also highlights its “twofold fall from grace” (Fachinger 50). Their home in Whaletown is sometimes referred to as “The Island of the Dead.” The island earns its namesake for a string of atrocities. In the early 1900s, Whaletown became the site of a booming whaling industry. Whales were hunted for their oil until almost all of the animals were gone. The population dwindled so profoundly that Whaletown, which pays homage to the industry, is both tragic and ironic. The most costly “fall from grace” that Ozeki recounts is the near genocide of the Coast Salish. A majority of the Salish people were killed in either “bloody intertribal wars” or the “smallpox epidemic of 1862,” which was imported by Western settlers (142). Ozeki often refers to Salish traditions and language throughout the novel in an effort to memorialize their existence and their genocide, and the only Indigenous character, Muriel, “a down-to-earth retired anthropologist . . . repeatedly reminds the other characters that they live on unceded Coast Salish territory” (Fachinger 49).

The second “fall from grace” was the internment of Japanese Canadians.³¹ The character Ruth explains that during World War II, a large homestead in Whaletown that was owned by a Japanese family was taken from them during their internment and never returned. The locals know the farm as “Jap Ranch,” but many refuse to use the name

³¹ In 1942, the BC Security Commission carried out Order-in-Council 365, which expelled “all persons of Japanese racial origin” and relocated them to internment centers. Many Japanese lost their property and personal belongings, were separated from family and friends, and suffered from terrible living conditions in the internment centers (National Association of Japanese Canadians).

because it would certainly be thought of by the rest of the newly liberal township as offensive. However, Ruth argues against this logic: “As a person of Japanese ancestry, she said, she had the right and it was important not to let New Age correctness erase the history of the island” (30). Ruth believes that intentionally re-naming the farm avoids a history of oppression, and she prefers to call it back into existence. Her insistence on using the term “Jap Ranch” makes her neighbors uncomfortable, of course, but it is a discomfort that she sees as necessary. The name “Jap Ranch” requires residents of Whaletown to acknowledge their own positionalities and, for most of the townsfolk, their privileges. At the same time, the fact that the character Ruth uses the term allows her to embrace her own connectedness to a legacy of injustice. Ozeki’s novel reinforces the idea that memories and stories do disappear due to neglect (which some might argue is also a deliberate political act) and the passage of time, leaving an absence in historical accounts of marginalized peoples. As I will examine further in the next chapter, in resistance to erasure and neglect, Ozeki is advocating for an activism which requires present and future generations to question mainstream accounts of history and to actively listen for lost stories.

CHAPTER 4: ENGAGING WITH POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY, DEVELOPING HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As I discussed in the introduction, this project is an exploration of how the Western cultural imaginary comes to bear on individual lives--both real and fictional. It is also an inquiry into the ways the forgetfulness that characterizes our current historical moment co-constitutes that same imaginary. Contemporary representations *contain* histories which we either are no longer interested in or have become invisible to us or have been erased in an effort to maintain the boundaries and inequities maintained by hierarchies of gender, race, culture and nation. It is essential to historicize the myths and stereotypes that inform our realities because we cannot learn to navigate them *without* considering their history. *A Tale for the Time Being* offers a variety of postcolonial situations, or circumstances which were constituted by legacies of American imperialism and cultural domination, where subjects must confront the “breakdown of the so-called ‘grand narratives’” (i.e. cultural myths) or must break them down themselves (Assmann 210). The character Nao, for instance, decides she must recover her great-grandmother’s story, since she cannot seem to find anything that resembles her grandmother’s story in mainstream Japanese or American versions of history. The story of Nao’s kamikaze uncle, Haruki, who crashes his plane into the ocean rather than into its American target is also subsumed by more a violent version until the character Ruth helps recover it at the end of the novel. When Nao learns the truth about her great-uncle’s heroic actions, she realizes her current understanding of her family’s history and of larger histories of

resistance to imperialism is inadequate. Ultimately, I am arguing that Ozeki's characters must seek new "frameworks for the interpretation of the past" and orient themselves towards the future in ways that consider and incorporate a multiplicity of narratives (Assmann 210).

The novel posits that one way that we might work towards a more equitable future is by grappling with the notion of "intergenerational responsibility." Intergenerational responsibility refers to the intersection of artistic activism and historical awareness. The idea calls for present and future generations to work against systems of oppression through their artistic productions. In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), critic Jonathan Crary describes how artists and writers have responded to postmodern amnesia. According to Crary, their productions elicit a consideration of the ways that the actions and beliefs of previous generations come to bear on our current reality as well as a consideration of the ways in which the current generation will shape the future. *A Tale for the Time Being* reveals the importance of developing a historical consciousness in order to carry out our "intergenerational responsibilities." As I discussed in Chapter 3, Ozeki's asserts that "we forget wars" and therefore are "doomed to repeat them" (Ty). Ozeki's novel, I argue, goes further--complicating our understanding of what it is we are doomed to repeat. Not only does *A Tale for the Time Being* explore the local and global ramifications of postmodern amnesia and historical erasure, but also the ways in which misrepresentations, stereotypes and cultural myths come to bear on individual and collective psyches, shaping the way future generations will understand themselves and the world around them. Misrepresentation and erasure, too, create a kind of "slow

violence,”³² which invisibly and slowly perpetuates cultural hegemony and racism of marginalized peoples. Building on Petra Fachinger’s observations, I am arguing that Ozeki suggests slow violence can be resisted through an excavation of the past (Fachinger 52, 54). In the case of the characters in *A Tale for the Time Being*, this knowledge requires situating oneself within the complex discursive relationships between the West and Japan.

The character Nao begins to grasp the idea of intergenerational responsibility early in the novel. As she writes to her future reader, she states:

How cool is that? It feels like I’m reaching forward through time toward you and now that you’ve found it, you’re reaching back to touch me! If you ask me, it’s fantastically cool and beautiful. It’s like a message in a bottle cast out onto the ocean of time and space. Totally personal and real, too. (25)

Nao has clearly put forth the physical, emotional and intellectual effort of making sure a complex, historically accurate (rather than stereotypical) narrative is available to her future reader, but she also suggests that the reader must reciprocate the energy if the exchange is to be successful. She continues, “Or here is another scary thought, what if you’re not reading this at all? Then old Jiko’s stories truly will be lost forever” (27).

Here, Ozeki positions listening as an act of resistance: you must listen to hear. In other

³² “Slow violence” describes the “gradual, cumulative effects” of environmental degradation and highlights the invisibility of these issues. “Slow violence” is a term used by Petra Fachinger to describe Ozeki’s portrayals of ecological destruction and environmental pollution. Fachinger borrows the concept from Canadian eco-writer Rob Nixon. For further information, see Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

words, part of our “intergenerational responsibility” is to make ourselves receptive to narratives that disrupt or undo our current ways of thinking about the past.

Though the character Ruth is more concerned with the social and political aspects of historical consciousness, in his desire to sustain the flora and fauna of Whaletown, her husband Oliver also embodies the notion of intergenerational responsibility. His project, the “NeoEocene,” is part artistic endeavor, part environmental activism. On their large plot of land, Oliver is planting a forest that will one day be able to survive human-caused climate change. What he plants will be able to withstand an increase in temperature long after he or any of the islanders are gone, in preparation for the death of the vegetation that currently surrounds them. Oliver “described [his project] as a collaboration with time and place, whose outcome neither he nor any of his contemporaries would live to witness, but he was okay with not knowing” (61). Ozeki provides a character who embraces ephemerality and moves in anticipation of a future that is predicated on our actions now. Oliver shows us not only the far reaching consequences of imperialism and colonialism in terms of the environment, but also demonstrates a historical consciousness that considers past and future.

A Tale for the Time Being is an effort to locate individuals within time and space, to encourage readers to tie themselves to specific histories and events and ground themselves in specific locations and paradigms, offering us a blueprint for understanding ourselves and others and encouraging us to abandon ahistorical notions of the individual and the rest of the world. In talking about the novel, Ruth Ozeki compares the character Nao’s understanding of the “time being” to the definition proposed by Zen Master

Dogen.³³ Ozeki often directly quotes Dogen in the novel. One such quote explains, “*Time itself is being, he wrote, and all being is time . . . in essence, everything in the entire universe is intimately linked with each other as moments in time, continuous and separate*” (30). Ozeki suggests that Nao’s explanation of the “time being” “misinterprets” the concept “a little bit” (Ty). Ozeki explains that “whereas the Dogen text” is a more “abstract” understanding of the nature of time and interconnectivity, Nao equates the “time being” with a “human being” (Ty). Nao’s understanding of the “time being,” then, is an individual who is situated within a larger historical context--any being who is shaped by events and simultaneously shapes events. In this way, Nao’s literal interpretation of Dogen exemplifies one of Ozeki’s overarching themes: the need for individuals to develop historical consciousness. Even Nao’s name is metonymic. “Nao,” pronounced to sound like the English word *now*, is the conglomeration of historical events, the present moment which is built upon many other moments, both remembered and forgotten.

As noted by the novel’s title, the concept of the “time being” plays an integral role in the novel. Critics have certainly touched upon the notion that Ozeki’s writing incorporates characters who are products of globalization or embody the idea that with the spread of technology and cross-cultural contact the world is getting smaller. Guy Beauregard, in particular, looks closely at Ozeki’s inclusion of the legacy of European

³³ Dogen Zenji was a Zen Buddhist monk who wrote *Shobogenzo* in the 13th century. This text is quoted extensively throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*. His theories about the interconnected nature of all beings and temporalities thematically structures the novel.

colonialism in Canada. However, no criticism so far looks at how Ozeki speaks directly to her readers about their own connection to histories of imperialism. Through Nao's voice, Ozeki encourages her readers to question their own temporal and historical location. The novel opens with Nao's self-introduction. She writes in her diary, "My name is Nao and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is? . . . 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" (4). Though the concept of the "time being" appears to have several meanings in the novel, I would argue Ozeki encourages her readers to think about ourselves as "time beings." Ozeki shows that all identities are diachronistic and historically contingent, but her novel goes further by asking readers to cultivate a critical perspective towards mainstream narratives and to explore how they simultaneously are subjected to and perpetuate hegemonic ideologies.

While the novel suggests that we are all an amalgamation of histories of contact and negotiation, Ozeki's main characters embody a very specific kind of marginality. The narratives of the protagonists, Ruth and Nao, are contingent upon the material and discursive relationship between Japan and the West. Both women are caught up in the interstices of ethnicity, gender, culture and nation and exemplify subjectivities that are both marked and unmarked. This "inbetweenness" is a crucial part of their worldviews and provides the basis for their ambivalence about power and politics of representation. The character Ruth (much like the author, Ruth Ozeki, on whom the character is loosely based) lives on a small island in British Columbia and has an environmentalist-artist husband named Oliver. She spent much of her life between New York City and Tokyo,

Japan. Ruth is Japanese and half white (*A Tale for the Time Being* 41) and often expresses that she has felt like an outsider, no matter where she is. In Canada, it is obvious that she is not simply white; in Japan, she is an American and in her rural community in Whaletown, she is obviously from the city (61). Her inability to completely belong to any one place or one social category strengthens her connection to Nao and heightens Ruth's desire to move in solidarity with her.

The character Nao's cultural, national and gender identity is also complex. In the United States, Nao is occasionally marginalized for her ethnicity. As I discussed earlier in this project, Nao's family relocated to the U.S because of her father's employment with an American tech company, and Nao's family returned to Japan when her father refused to participate in the development of American military weapons. At one point, Nao recalls that her best friend from California remarks to a group of their peers that Nao doesn't need to take vitamins because she is Japanese (121). Nao and her family's ethnic and cultural difference is often pointed out, as her father's American coworkers and her mother's American friends must "teach" Nao's parents how to be American (136). In Japan, Nao is ostracized for being too American. Nao is a *kikokushijo* (repatriated child). She was born in Japan but relocated with her family to the U.S. when she was an infant. When Nao and her family must return to Japan after her father loses his job in Silicon Valley, she struggles to blend into Japanese culture. Nao writes in her diary that "[I] was totally fucked, because I identified as American" (43). Nao describes herself as feeling like an "ordinary California girl adopted by Japanese parents" (136). She also states, "I was totally clueless about how you're supposed to act in a Japanese classroom and my

Japanese sucked, and at the time I was almost fifteen and older than the other kids and big for my age, too, from eating so much American food” (44). Because of her inability to assimilate, Nao is “tortured” by her classmates, who violently bully her. In addition to Nao’s ambivalence about her ethnic, cultural and national identity, near the end of the novel she questions her gender, as well. Nao writes, “it’s not such a big deal, anyway, male, female. As far as I’m concerned, sometimes I feel more like one, and sometimes I feel more like the other, and mostly I feel somewhere in between, especially when my hair was first growing back after I’d shaved it” (299). Nao’s status as an outsider in multiple contexts gives her insight into the politics of identification, which are always entangled with the politics of the nation. Despite the fact that she says she feels American, Nao resists identification in many ways. Through this character, Ozeki offers her readers a fictional model of one particular postcolonial subjectivity, as Nao pushes the boundaries of culture, nation and gender throughout the novel. In terms of this project, what is most important about Nao’s struggle with identification is that the identities available to her are all circumscribed by dominant Western ideologies and by her material world, which is shaped by past and current American imperialist ventures. Still, Nao finds a way to grapple with her subjectivity meaningfully.

Nao and Ruth both have a keen sense of the consequences of historic events because of their positions as postcolonial subjects and cultural and/or ethnic outsiders, but Ruth’s husband Oliver, who is a white Canadian of German descent, is also aware of his historical positionality. In the novel, the character Ruth describes her relationship with her husband, Oliver. She writes that, “Their marriage was like this, an axial alliance--her

people interned, his firebombed in Stuttgart--a small accidental consequence of a war fought before either of them was born” (32). Shortly after, Oliver says, “We’re by-products of the mid-twentieth century,” to which Ruth replies “Who isn’t?” (32). The novel ultimately posits that we have history with us all the time. That is, we carry the past with us despite our (postmodern) inability to engage with or at times, even see it. Oliver, then, is the white hegemonic character with whom readers who do not identify as postcolonial may relate. Ozeki offers Oliver as a model that engages ethically and self-reflexively with his own positionality and with legacies of colonialism and cultural domination.

In the novel, the characters Nao and Ruth negotiate their identities by explaining their personal histories, including their entanglement in other narratives and others’ histories. Literary critic Petra Fachinger describes Ruth Ozeki as a “writer/activist”³⁴ because her novel emphasizes the importance of “individual and communal responsibility for social and environmental justice” and because she has taken on the “challenges” of representing the consequences of “slow violence” (54). Fachinger argues, quoting Jennifer Andrews,³⁵ that Ozeki’s inclusion of herself in the novel is an example of a “textualization of the reader” in which the author will literally be transported into the text” (Andrews 235). Andrews argues that there is another kind of “textualization” in which “the world of a text literally intrudes into the extratextual or reader’s world (236).

³⁴ Fachinger borrows Rob Nixon’s term “writer/activist,” to describe authors who draw attention to environmental causes and therefore promote environmental justice in their work.

³⁵Fachinger quotes Jennifer Andrews’ essay “Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*.” *Studies in Canadian Literature / Etudes en littérature canadienne*. 24.1. (1999): 1-19. Web.

Ruth's near obsession with finding and reaching out to Nao is an example of this second kind of textualization. Nao calls the activist in Ruth into being, by catalyzing her excavation of buried histories that connect them both. By inserting herself into the novel as the character Ruth, Ozeki finds a way to intervene magically in Nao's story. Through a dream, Ruth uncovers and restores to Nao the lost history of Haruki #1 as well as exposes the truth about Haruki #2's job in Silicon Valley, which ultimately works against mainstream narratives about kamikaze pilots and *otaku*. Ruth's intertextual intervention also demonstrates that we have the agency to negotiate or intervene in the stories that make us.

In some ways, Nao is also a writer/activist. In her diary, she asks, "The past is weird. I mean, does it really exist? It feels like it exists, but where is it? And if it did exist but doesn't now, then where did it go?" (97). Though she ultimately tells the tale of her own life as it intersects with Jiko's, her father's and her deceased uncle's, Nao attempts to rewrite history in a way that does justice to her great-grandmother, who is marginalized for her sexuality, her gender and her political beliefs. The character Nao embodies activism by "searching for lost time" or looking for histories which have, for various reasons, become invisible (21). The character Nao's diary is written in a "hacked" copy of Marcel Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdue* (20). The pages of the novel have been removed and replaced by blank ones, on which Nao records her story. Ozeki's novel draws on Modernist author Marcel Proust's interest in metaphysics, memory and memory politics, bringing another layer of meaning to hers. The title of Proust's novel has two translations. The first was "In Remembrance of Things Past,"

which has since been translated to “In Search of Lost Time.”³⁶ Both titles are indicative of Nao’s investment in narrative recovery and metaphorically offer Nao the opportunity to rewrite history in a way that represents her and her family more accurately.

Early in the novel, in a desperate internet search for any evidence of Nao’s existence, Ruth stumbles across an article published in *The Journal of Oriental Metaphysics* that she believes may have been written by the adult Naoko. The article focuses on the exclusion of female writers in *watakushi shosetsu*, or autobiographical fiction. In particular, the essay describes the influence of the writer Yasutani Jiko, who was a “pioneer of the ‘I-novel’” and who “used the form in a way that was groundbreaking, energetic and radical” (149-150). The article mysteriously disappears from the web before Ruth can access more than just the abstract, but Ruth (and, therefore, Ozeki’s reader) can conclude that this was likely Nao’s work. Though Ruth never truly finds out what happens to Nao and her family, at the end of the novel, she feels she has some insight into Nao’s present. Through an email correspondence with a friend of Haruki’s, Ruth discovers that Nao has likely gone on to college in Canada (382). In the epilogue, Ruth writes a short passage in which she addresses her reader as “you.” In doing so, the reader becomes Nao. Ruth states, “I picture you now, a young woman of . . . twenty six? . . . I suspect you might be in graduate school, studying history, writing your dissertation on women anarchists in the Taisho Democracy or the Instability of the Female ‘I’” (402). If Ozeki’s reader is also to believe that this was Nao’s fate, then her

³⁶ For further reading see Roger Shattuck’s *Marcel Proust*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

“writer-activism” eventually found a much larger, and perhaps more consequential audience than just Ruth, whose life was changed dramatically because she stumbled upon a seemingly inconsequential diary.

The novel itself seeks to “intrude into the... reader’s world” (just as other famous texts intrude on the world of the novel) and to make the reader a kind of “activist” herself (Andrews 235). Ozeki’s efforts to make visible the “slow violence” of colonialism, of misrepresentation and stereotyping also require the reader to reevaluate her own investment in the Western imaginary and locate herself in relation to colonialism and geopolitics. The novel has certainly intruded into my world. Encountering the novel empowered me to do the kind of recovery work that Ozeki and her characters have done. In pursuing this project, which I hope will shed light on the nature of power, knowledge and the politics of representation, I too have become the writer/activist. I have taken on Ozeki’s call for future generations to make ourselves receptive to narratives which disrupt or undo our current ways of thinking about the past. The inclusion of my grandmother’s story is my attempt to rewrite history in a way that includes her and the other Japanese War Brides whose stories have been forgotten. The connection between my family’s history and my own story works to illustrate how developing a historical consciousness has helped me “find lost time” and come to terms with my ethnic and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

After the loss of my grandmother and my growing ambivalence about my own cultural and racial identity, I became invested in an idea of Japan which I now realize only existed in representations of Japan that I had imbibed. At one point, I even went so far as to inquire into study abroad programs, thinking this would allow me to authentically experience Japan and Japanese culture. I now realize that those efforts were rather misguided, and that the way I was imagining Japan was rendered it static and ahistorical. Like the character Nao's reliance upon stereotype in her emails to her best friend Kayla, my own desire to live in Japan seemed, at first, a way to be intelligible as Japanese here in the United States. I believed that having firsthand knowledge of Japanese culture and language would allow me to appear more authentically Japanese in the United States, since my whiteness and the cultural whitewashing my mother and her sisters underwent over the years suggest otherwise. Since starting this project, I have stopped searching for ways to "know" Japan. Instead, I have come to understand that I do not need to claim any one ethnic or racial identity to be able to hold onto my family and our history. In the novel, the character Nao plans to narrate her great-grandmother's story as a way to reconcile with the past, to remember the forgotten and to move towards a more equitable future. But it seems to me that it was also an effort to locate herself, and I deeply identify with this. This is perhaps the most important thing I've taken away from working with the novel and with these theoretical frameworks: it is easier to come to

terms with yourself when you have a more complex picture of what constitutes the identity you seek to claim and the histories that inform the world around you.

At the beginning of this project, I was looking to Ozeki as a cultural role model. Through a deeper exploration of Ozeki's novel within the context of postcolonial criticism and postmodern amnesia, I instead found that she is not attempting to provide clear-cut ethnic or cultural identities for her reader. Rather, she works to show that the process of identification is messy and complicated and, of course, entangled in complex histories of contact and negotiation. Now that I am at the end of this project, I would argue that *A Tale for the Time Being* provides representations of individuals who exist in spaces both culturally and racially "in-between" and temporally and geographically postcolonial. Ozeki's characters are all, in one way or the other, connected to legacies of imperialism and crosscultural exchange. All of the characters must negotiate their entanglement in the Western cultural imaginary and must reconcile the ways that they, at times, perpetuate the stereotypes that have come to define their marginality. Ozeki's characters also find ways to resist the mythification and hegemony that they are subjected to. They do this primarily through writing, storytelling and the recovery of subsumed histories. Ultimately, Ozeki's novel guides all readers to reevaluate their own investment in stereotypes and in the dominant narratives of the Western cultural imaginary. Ozeki's novel also offers readers who identify with the ethnic and cultural marginality that her characters face models of how they can navigate their own postcolonial subjectivities and orient themselves to the present and the future in new and meaningful ways.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Resources for Further Reading about Japanese War Brides

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Appendix B: Resources for Further Reading about Hapa Identity and the Hapa Movement

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