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Fictions and Fragments: Autobiographical Inclusions in Ruth Ozeki's Work

by Audrey Staron

(English 1102)

Ruth Ozeki is a Japanese-Canadian filmmaker and novelist who explores a range of topics in her work, predominantly cultural intersections, environmental justice, and the responsibilities and relationships between storytellers and audiences. Many of her works are semi-autobiographical, and these metatextual references serve to enhance understanding of and engagement with the complexity of postcolonial identity, for both the creator of each work – Ruth Ozeki – and for her audience. In this paper, focus will be primarily on her second documentary, *Halving the Bones*, and her first three novels, with some references to her less prominent works as well. Though one of the works discussed is a documentary, Ozeki will be referred to as the “author” or “writer” of all her works, and the audience will be referred to as the “reader.”

Halving the Bones (1995) tells the story of Ozeki's Japanese grandparents: her grandmother was a "picture bride" who was sent to Hawaii to marry; her grandfather was an artistic soul who lived through a Japanese internment camp. Partway through the film, Ozeki, (who narrates throughout), admits to having made up parts of the story she just told: she explains that she barely knew her grandparents, and though she knows some facts of their lives, she feels no connection with them. By adding fictional elements to their stories, she feels emotionally closer. By extension, though she is half Japanese, she feels estranged from the culture because she was born and raised in the United States.

In her debut novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), one of the novel's protagonists, Jane Takagi-Little, is a Japanese-American documentarian who takes a job directing episodes of a Japanese TV show meant to stimulate meat sales and consumption. Throughout the novel, Jane struggles with how to reckon her job promoting meat with her growing convictions regarding the dangers of the meat industry. Jane bears several significant similarities to Ozeki, such as in race and occupation – in interviews, Ozeki explains that much of *My Year of Meats* was based on her own experiences working in television. Interested since high school in the ways the world is represented in media, and the corporate influences on that representation, Ozeki was often bothered by the things she was required to do in her television job to satisfy corporate sponsors. In the process of writing *My Year of Meats*, she researched the meat industry to investigate the saying “you are what you eat,” exploring questions of identity, feminism, and capitalism.

Like Jane and Ozeki herself, the protagonist in Ozeki's 2003 novel *All Over Creation* is also half-Japanese, and continues to explore the themes of *My Year of Meats*. Yumi Fuller grew up on a potato farm in Idaho, and from childhood has been considered a “bad seed.” She returns to the farm 25 years after running away from home to be with her dying parents, and falls into the middle of a boiling controversy surrounding genetically-modified potatoes. Like Yumi, Ozeki returned to her parents' home in adulthood to care for them at the end of their lives, and cites this as a significant influence on her works; her mother, like Yumi's, experienced dementia.

In 2013, Ozeki published her third novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, which is the most explicitly autobiographical of her novels. 16-year-old Nao writes a series of journal entries in Japan, and the journal is later found, washed up on a Canadian island, by struggling author Ruth. Ruth is trying to write a biography of her mother, recently passed away from Alzheimer's disease. Nao is bullied at school because, though she is Japanese, she lived most of her life in California and is thus different from her Japan-born classmates. Over the summer, she visits with her Buddhist nun great-

grandma, who teaches her about the nature of time. Three years prior to its publication, Ozeki had become an ordained Zen Buddhist priest, and in addition to her usual motifs, Buddhism has a large influence on this novel.

Ozeki's autobiographical fiction is partly the result of a literary trend in recent decades: in the postcolonial era, there has been a growing audience for authors with marginalized identities. For the first time, the stories of racial, ethnic, and other minority members are given space to be told, and audiences are interested in hearing those stories. In her book *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson discusses the influence of postcolonial analysis on identity and autobiography. She posits that for many postcolonial writers, identity is based in dynamic movement and a constant need to reinvent one's self and story. Because one's origins may not always be clear, the self is "assembled from fragments": bits of rumored history and stories passed down through generations, in conjunction with one's own subjective experiences and observations. Identity is never complete, but is constantly being modified: "Within the language of dispersal there is a need, according to Stuart Hall, for 'arbitrary closures,' points at which the infinite flux of differences is brought to a halt temporarily. Hall sees these 'arbitrary closures' which are 'not the end' as necessary fictions which make both identity and politics possible" (Anderson 115). In a sense, each of Ozeki's works can be seen as one of those "arbitrary closures": they are a product of her experiences up to a certain point in her life, and are influenced by her beliefs and motivations at the time of creation. The characters of Jane, Yumi, and Ruth are very different from one another, yet all are unmistakably versions of their creator; each is a "necessary fiction" created to explore various questions that weigh on Ozeki's mind.

Additionally, Ozeki, like many postcolonial autobiographers, is compelled to seek out fragments of her identity by turning to her ancestors. In her book *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*, Jill Ker Conway points out similarities across postcolonial autobiographies, noting that there is a common theme of "craving to reconstruct a parent's life in order to negotiate the identity issue of their own adulthood... [which] tells us something about the difficulty of life transitions when directions are obscured by unusual patterns of race and religion, or by myth and silences about the past" (Ker Conway 163). This can be seen in each of Ozeki's works: in *Halving the Bones*, she is working to understand her grandmother's life; *My Year of Meats* places importance on the relationship between Jane and her Japanese mother; *All Over Creation* closely follows Yumi's changing understanding of her parents as they age; the protagonist Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being* is struggling to write a memoir of her mother, and Nao is attempting to write a biography of her Japanese grandmother just as Ozeki did in *Halving the Bones*. Ozeki repeatedly engages with the (fictionalized) stories of her parents and grandparents throughout her body of work, continually re-negotiating her own identity in each creation.

However, one might ask, "Why choose fiction?" If Ozeki is interested in exploring these questions of her personal history and identity, writing a clear-cut autobiography seems a more traditional, and perhaps more sensible, route to take. Ozeki herself talks about how the narratives one tells about their experiences are often considered to be more "real" (perceived by the audience to be more truthful or valid) than the sorts of stories put into a novel. However, she believes these fictional stories are no more or less real than any others (Nixon). To Ozeki, identity is a collection of stories that one chooses to tell about oneself. The tone of each story, its plot points and important characters, change over time, and are informed by both experience and conscious reflection. Rather than writing nonfiction, she chooses to write fictionally, saying that her years making documentaries and television revealed to her the challenges in claiming to represent "the truth." "It seemed to me that it is more interesting to... not boil down a complex network of truths into one definitive statement that claims to be true. And I think fiction is in many ways truer... it allows you to perform a different kind of truth-telling," Ozeki explains (Wong). She points out that unlike in other genres of art and media, writers still tend to adhere to strict distinctions between fiction and nonfiction; though self-

portraiture is an established convention in visual arts, it is strange for a fiction reader to come across a “self-portrait” of the author in a novel. Often, it may feel uncomfortable to confront the idea that one’s identity is less a matter of fact and more one of interpretation. For Ozeki, however, openness to interpretation is not only “more interesting”, but truer to reality, especially from her perspective as a postcolonial multi-racial author whose origins often appear clouded and whose identity feels to be constantly moving.

In a sense, Ozeki’s books are very personal; they are very much about herself and her experiences. However, as an author, Ozeki is also very aware of and interested in the writer-reader relationship that exists when any of her work is made public. The writer’s experiences and intentions when writing is not the only dynamic worth exploring: the reader’s experiences and intentions when reading matter, too. In her article “Hybrid Vigor”, Leah Milne examines the manifestations of author-reader power dynamics in *My Year of Meats* by examining the ways in which the two protagonists, Jane and Akiko, relate to Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*, the character of Joichi Ueno, and their own authorial power. Milne frequently references Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” which argues that the authorial figure in a text is tyrannical and limits the agency of the reader, and should therefore be overthrown. He also believes that modern authors do not create original works, but assemble and blend pieces of other writings. Across her works, Ozeki displays a rich understanding of the value of collaborative authorship: she frequently incorporates “found objects” into her cinematography, and the texts of other authors into her books (such as using *The Pillow Book* as a framework for *My Year of Meats*, as Milne observes). Incorporating fragments of her personal history is another means of blending old stories into a new creation.

In her essay, Milne argues that throughout *My Year of Meats*, both Jane and Akiko learn from Shōnagon “what it means to be a modern, cosmopolitan author.” Jane comes to realize that it’s not simply a matter of renouncing authority to “free” the audience, but of channeling one’s power as an author in a way that encourages the audience to draw their own conclusions. Jane’s revelation at the end of the novel is likely reflective of Ozeki’s own views of authorial responsibility in media; as such, Ozeki, too, is driven to encourage the audience to make their own interpretations of the information and themes presented in her works. When she incorporates details from her own life, Ozeki prompts in her readers an interest in the truthfulness of these details. The reader may search for information about Ozeki outside of the text. As Rocio Davis puts it in her article “Fictional Transits and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*”, “The writers’ self-awareness and need for readership generates the readers’ participation in the textual validation and construction, a metanarrative gesture that limns the possibilities for narrative experimentation” (Davis). Ozeki’s autobiographical details inspire her readers to participate in making meaning of her works, fulfilling her own desire to be a responsible and ethical author. Additionally, because the fictive elements of her autobiographical characters can be seen as a reflection or result of the instability of her identity, the reader is drawn into Ozeki’s own difficulty in establishing the “truth” about her life story.

Additionally, Ozeki points out that once she enters a book as a semi-fictional character, she is able to disrupt readers’ expectations about the novel’s reality (Ozeki). In *A Tale for the Time Being*, there are several sequences in which the “real” diary that Ruth finds washed-up on the beach inexplicably loses or gains pages. Toward the end of the novel, and as Ruth nears the end of Nao’s diary, Nao sees her father about to commit suicide, and decides to do the same. The remaining journal pages are blank. Distraught, Ruth goes to sleep and has a “dream” in which she meets Nao’s father and convinces him to live, to stay alive and be with Nao. When Ruth awakens, she finds that the diary has more entries – despite the fact that it was written years ago, and is of course an ordinary book. Understandably taken aback, Ruth questions whether she, too, is perhaps a fictional character in someone else’s story. With reactions paralleling Ruth’s, the reader is left surprised by this unexpected introduction of magic in what appeared to be a nearly-nonfictional book, satisfied that Nao’s story did not end on such a hopeless note, and perhaps wondering to what degree they, as a

reader, can affect “Ruth’s” story, and if they, too, are part of a fictional story. By further blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction, Ozeki encourages her reader to engage more deeply in questioning what makes a person or story “real.”

Ozeki believes that everyone is making political choices each day, in choosing what they consume both nutritionally and in media, but does not write her books with the intention to spread an agenda of any sort (Wong), in keeping with her convictions about ethical authorship. Rather, she is undertaking a personal journey to explore questions that bother her. However, she is pleased when her readers are moved to make changes because of her books, because she believes books ought to change the way both readers and writers see the world. Readers of Ozeki’s novels are quickly drawn in to her dilemmas about truth and fiction about postcolonial identity, in a way that can be more effective than simply reading about the theory, since they experience her own difficulty with discerning truthfulness as they read. This idea of “embodiment,” that an intangible idea can be personally experienced, is a concept borrowed from Buddhism, and one that inspires Ozeki in her work. In personally experiencing the difficulty in establishing identity, readers are allowed to come to their own conclusions and invited into the conversation surrounding the topic. Ozeki believes fiction is a wonderful, if nontraditional, means of practicing embodiment of ideas, and her works are testament to the validity of her belief.

In conclusion, Ozeki’s autobiographical fictions are not only a means of understanding complex aspects of her own life, but a powerful method of engaging her reader in discussions of postcolonial identity. As she says in a 2016 interview with Melody Nixon, “Literature is a kind of mirror. We read it to find out about the world, but we also read to find out about ourselves” (Nixon). Ozeki writes to find out about herself and about the world; her readers read to find out about the world and themselves. In Ozeki’s works, both writer and reader are engaged in a quest toward better understanding, and her metanarrative references are an effective means of pursuing that goal.

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