

## Taking the I out of Being: Zen Buddhism and Postmodern (Dis)contents in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

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By internalizing Zen Buddhist teachings, the protagonists of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) resolve their conflicts with the world and within themselves. The scenario echoes current theoretical interest in the Buddhist concept of no-self as a model of self that is suited to the postmodern condition. This article argues that since the fundamental Buddhist principles conceptually accommodate the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics—the key to the novel's structure—and the metaphysical framework of postmodernity, Ozeki's novel illuminates the empowering aspects of the fractal nature of postmodern selves, while charting the possibilities for their actualization.

Keywords: Buddhism; digital cultures; empowerment; fractal subject; postmodernity

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## El Ser sin el Yo: budismo zen e (in)satisfacciones posmodernas en *A Tale for the Time Being*, de Ruth Ozeki

Mediante la interiorización de las enseñanzas del budismo zen, los personajes protagonistas de *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), de Ruth Ozeki, resuelven sus conflictos con el mundo y dentro de sí mismos. El argumento de la novela, pues, refleja el interés teórico actual por el concepto budista del no-yo como un modelo del ser que encaja con la condición posmoderna. Este artículo sostiene que, dado que los principios budistas fundamentales se ajustan conceptualmente a la interpretación de los mundos múltiples de la mecánica cuántica—la clave de la estructura de la novela—y al marco metafísico de la posmodernidad, la novela de Ozeki arroja luz sobre los aspectos empoderadores de la naturaleza fractal de los seres posmodernos, a la vez que traza las posibilidades que tienen de hacerse realidad.

Palabras clave: budismo; culturas digitales; empoderamiento; sujeto fractal; posmodernidad

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary clinical practice increasingly attributes the unprecedented rise in the incidence of anxiety disorders over the last two decades to the incompatibility of the Western dualist conception of self, which is still prevalent in contemporary societies, with the social, cultural and economic realities of postmodernity (Stolorow 2009; Levine 2013). This interpretation is corroborated by current research in theoretical psychology and the philosophy of self, which has been increasingly concerned with developing a model of self that could more effectively accommodate the challenges instigated by globalization and the omnipresence of media (Giles 1993; Ho 1995; Gaskins 1999; Hoffman et al. 2008). The Zen Buddhist principle of no-self is a non-dualist model that is frequently identified as compatible with the increasingly acknowledged view of self as a socially constructed entity and it explicitly informs some of the most influential contemporary conceptualizations of self.<sup>1</sup> The concept “denies the ontological reality of the self” (Ho 1995, 121), thus altogether evading the Cartesian dualist view of the self as simultaneously a subject and an object.

From this perspective, Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) seems to lend itself as a literary case study of how internalizing a Zen Buddhist approach to self and reality may contribute to the contentment and empowerment of individuals within familiar postmodern environments and situations. Judging by the number of languages the novel has been translated into and the unanimous critical acclaim and scholarly attention it has received worldwide, the significance of issues North American Ozeki explores is as topical as it is global. In an interview with Eleanor Ty, Ozeki explains that *A Tale for the Time Being*, her third novel, was indeed meant to convey “a sense of the way the world is now,” which resulted in an account “informed by basic Buddhist principles—of interdependence, impermanence, interconnectedness” (2013c, 161).

Ozeki had been toiling on the novel for five years when the tsunami that devastated the northeast coast of Japan on March 11, 2011 provided her with a suitable means to pursue this “sense of the way the world is now.” Due to the ensuing Fukushima nuclear meltdown and its unprecedented media coverage, the disaster reached global proportions and laid bare the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of global postindustrial capitalism (Beauregard 2015, 96, 103). Ozeki rewrote the novel, using this cataclysm as the trigger that sets the events in motion (Ozeki 2013d). Anchoring the story on what is now embedded in collective memory as 3/11 enabled Ozeki to address and explore a number of issues arising from globalization, digitalization and the transnational neoliberal market economy. *A Tale for the Time Being* became the first instance of 3/11 literature outside Japan (Usui 2015, 91) and thus an ideal ground for critical reflection on the ways in which current socioeconomic processes affect literature and vice versa. In fact, the implications arising from its status as a transnational 3/11 narrative seem to be a common denominator across existing literary

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Connie Zweig’s concept of no-self, Rollo May’s myth of self and Kirk J. Schneider’s paradoxical self (Hoffman et al. 2008, 135-73).

criticism on the novel, which invariably recognizes interdependence, impermanence and interconnectedness as the governing principles of its internal and external structure.

However, while interpretations of the novel so far have duly acknowledged the relevance of Ozeki's "poetics of connectedness" (Bernard 2017, 25) for the exploration of the manifold issues arising from the shift of the sociohistorical paradigm, the fact that Ozeki self-identifies as a Zen Buddhist novelist (Ozeki 2013a) has not been sufficiently addressed.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the Zen dimension of the novel has been ignored. However, scholars have tended to mention individual Zen Buddhist elements in passing and as metaphorical renderings of the postmodern political, economic and social conditions that the novel addresses (Beauregard 2015; R. Davis 2015; Lee 2018; Lovell 2018). In contrast, taking into account Ozeki's statement that her 2010 ordination as a Zen Buddhist priest was instrumental in overcoming an extensive period of writer's block and completing the text (2013a, 39), my approach will examine postmodern (dis)contents in the light of the Zen Buddhist teachings at work in the novel. By reading the novel in this way, I hope to identify and elucidate the ways in which the Zen Buddhist metaphysical and ethical framework might reconcile the frictions between the Cartesian model and present sociohistorical conditions that underpin the ongoing crisis of the dualistic self. In addition, approaching the novel as primarily a Zen Buddhist narrative may help account for the inconsistencies and contradictions affecting Ozeki's protagonists, which current scholarship identifies and interprets as inherently postmodern. If that is the case, the novel may well be read as suggesting possible ethical guidelines for a stance that—due to its essentially nondualist nature—may lead to a more contented and empowered existence within the globalized and digitalized realities of postmodernity.

In order to situate Zen Buddhism and postmodernity within a common context, I first consider the correspondence between the metaphysical framework of postmodernity and the Zen Buddhist notions of self and the cosmos that are invoked in the novel. This is followed by a consideration of the ways in which the internalization and enactment of key Zen Buddhist principles in the novel affect how the main protagonists perceive and react to their traumas and anxieties. These observations are then discussed in terms of their relevance in the broader context of actual contemporary social, political and economic realities in order to establish the novel's capacity to productively interfere with these realities as a bona fide postmodern medium.

## 2. POSTMODERNITY: CONCEPTS OF REALITY AND SUBJECT

In charting the conceptual framework of the postmodern epoch, I will rely on concepts and terminology developed by Jean Baudrillard. My decision is prompted by three

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<sup>2</sup> The novel has been discussed in terms of its posthumanist implications (Lovell 2018), postmodern (eco) cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitics (Lee 2018; Usui 2015), trauma studies (Bernard 2017), postcolonialism (Beauregard 2015) and postmodern narratology (R. Davis 2015; Lovell 2018).

factors: the agreement between his key postulates of hyperreality and fractal subjects and the observations of other influential theoreticians of postmodernity (Krevel 2017, 123), the fundamental reliance of these postulates upon the nature and role of media in the societies of late capitalism, and the fact that both postulates structurally accommodate (to) the principles of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics that Ozeki explicitly foregrounds as the key to the novel's structure.

The shift in the reality principle signaling the advent of the postmodern epoch is conditioned by the spread and ubiquitous presence of electronic media in postindustrial societies. Their gradual digitalization, by blurring distinctions between media formats, “erases the notion of the medium itself” (Kittler 1987, 102). Hence, the reality of our sense perceptions and our ensuing understanding of the environment ultimately rely upon systems of digitally coded information. Such a reality is, according to Baudrillard, hyperreal in the sense that it is produced from “matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (2004, 366). The transmitted data defy verification of their *truthfulness* since they refer to nothing substantial; they are an algorithm, a function of the probability of a message. Hyperreality could, therefore, be described as a potential system that could be created from media-generated information, which in turn means that all hyperrealities exist as a potentiality at the same time. Due to the constant influx of new information, hyperrealities are fluid, impermanent and open to connecting and merging with each other depending on their compatibility.

The described transformation of the reality principle corresponds to the transformations observable in the concept and the structuring of the postmodern subject. These changes are the result of the late capitalist shift in production relations and the waning of the functional value of products, which came into full effect after World War II with the viral growth of the advertising and media industries and the development of information technologies. Buying becomes consumption and objects of consumption serve as signs for the purpose of consumers' self-representation. These signs connect into fluid networks that constitute the postmodern subject. What we perceive as identity is one of the possible systems constructible from available signs, a possible identity variant rendered at the moment of observation. Since we choose from a universally shared fund of these signs, the nature of our subjectivity is “not at all contradictory with mass status” and it is a priori “fractal [...], both subdivisible to infinity and indivisible” (Baudrillard 2011, 64). The postmodern subject, Baudrillard concludes, is a “subject without other” (64), an endless variation of the same subject.

Both hyperreality and fractal subjects exhibit the structural properties of quantum physics, which over the last six decades has been replacing Newtonian science as the dominant mode of (scientific) thought. Basing itself on the principles of superposition, entanglement and the measurement problem, the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics maintains that our universe is one of many possible universes,

since every choice we make causes the splitting of the world into the universe of what was selected and the universe of what was not. Each potential past and future is an actual universe, all of which coexist at the same time with all other potential universes. Reality is therefore a multiverse of all possible quantum results (Deutsch 2011, 294). The implied coexistence and interconnectedness of everything across space and time conceptually matches Baudrillard's description of postmodern realities and subjects as fluid, interchangeable and interconnected systems of media-generated information. In other words, both hyperreality and the fractal subject conceptually comprise all possible systems constructible from available data; they refer to a multiverse of states potentially rendered as a seemingly specific reality and a seemingly specific self at the moment of observation.

### 3. A ZEN BUDDHIST APPROACH TO REALITY AND SELF

Ozeki is a priest of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, founded in Japan by Dōgen Zenji in the thirteenth century. The Sōtō school posits that enlightenment—the experiencing of the true nature of reality and being—is always already present (Gaskins 1999, 209). However, this originally enlightened state is masked by conceptualizations. These facilitate everyday discourse and functioning, but are fundamentally delusions and the source of human suffering because they objectify the self and place it in opposition to reality. Such a state entails “craving, striving or thirst” (Gaskins 1999, 206), which constitute the core of human frustrations. To experience a harmonious existence, it is therefore essential to transcend the concept of a separate, essential self and all other conceptualizations with it, and acknowledge the original, enlightened mind: the totality that is Buddha nature. According to Dōgen, Buddha nature is a mode of how entities are, not something they possess (Raud 2015, 1). Buddha nature therefore implies an absence of any referents in the dynamism of all possible particular manifestations (Raud 2015, 9). In other words, Buddha nature is simply emptiness, impermanence and unceasing manifestation (Dōgen 2002, 75-76).

The principle of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is central to the non-dualist nature of Zen Buddhism. This principle refers to what remains when all signification and all cognition are removed, which means the fullness of potentialities to be expressed. This in turn implies the inherent interfusion of all phenomena; within such a setup, all is one and one is all (Dōgen 2002, 49, 72; Raud 2015, 1). Consequently, once all conceptualizations are abandoned, one is no longer in any way directed or afflicted by the situation, since in the state of emptiness one is not separate from the situation, but actually *is* the situation: a “configuration of a potentiality at a given moment” (Gaskins 1999, 209).

Inherent to the state of emptiness is the principle of impermanence (*mujō*) which posits that everything is constantly changing and that every moment is “unique and robust with possibilities” (Gaskins 1999, 213). There is no permanent, fixed reality or self that one could define oneself in relation to, which corroborates the *śūnyatā*

connotations of universal oneness and the ensuing interfusion of all phenomena. We could perhaps describe impermanence as the realization of the (spatial) principle of emptiness on a temporal axis, especially if we take into account Dōgen's assertion that "impermanence is in itself the Buddha Nature" (Dōgen 2002, 76). This statement implies that all existence is realized as a succession of endless becomings and that being is time. *Time being* is, in fact, the central category of Dōgen's metaphysics; it is existence in a constant flux of momentary manifestations through which "every entire being in the entire world is each time an [independent] time, even while it makes a continuous series" (Dōgen's 2002, 51). The momentary realizations of potentialities attest to the all-inclusiveness of Buddha nature, which can only be comprehended by focusing on every moment and thus existing in the now. Being completely aware of each moment means being completely aware of all other moments and being (one with) the situation. One can achieve this state by clearing the mind of all thoughts through the practice of zazen meditation.

As everything is subject to constant transformation and is one with everything else, there can be no separate, essential self. Zen Buddhism maintains that what we recognize as what we *are* is an ever-changing configuration of potentiality that fully depends on the context (Gaskins 1999, 206). A permanent self is a delusion that places us in conflict with our environment. Enlightenment as the source of harmonious existence involves abandoning the concept of self altogether and realizing the no-self (*anattā*) principle as the state of emptiness after the removal of illusions about the self, which is at the same time the state of the fullness of potentialities. No-self does not, therefore, refer to self-denial; rather, Buddha nature is the lack of self in the total awareness of being the all-encompassing, ever-changing, interconnected self (Hoffman et al. 2008, 16).

The Buddhist framework described in the preceding paragraphs conceptually matches Baudrillard's notion of the postmodern hyperreal: both conceptualizations maintain that all realities exist at the same time as a possibility, the expression of which depends on momentary contexts. In Zen Buddhism, the ultimate expression of this model is the principle of no-self, which is both a momentary expression of a set of already existing qualities made compatible by a specific context and the sum total of all possibilities of expression. As such, no-self corresponds to Baudrillard's notion of the fractal self as a fluid, ever-changing system of media-generated data, which is simultaneously the sum total of all the possible systems creatable from all transferred information, and hence to the basic principles of quantum mechanics. The Zen Buddhist approach therefore indeed seems to provide a productive basis for the development of a new concept of the self, one that is better suited to the postmodern condition.

#### 4. A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING AND ITS TIME BEINGS

*A Tale for the Time Being* combines the first-person narrative of sixteen-year-old Nao from Tokyo and the third-person story of middle-aged novelist Ruth, who lives on an island in British Columbia. Their stories connect when, during a stroll on the beach, Ruth finds Nao's diary in a lunchbox that seems to be part of the flotsam washed on the shore after the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. The title of the novel, the epigraph, taken from the beginning of the eleventh chapter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, titled "For the Time Being," and the first sentence, "My name is Nao, and I am a time being" (Ozeki 2013b, 3), signal that the protagonists, the events and the worlds in the novel will be used to examine the practical implications of Dōgen's concept of time being.<sup>3</sup> Time being combines the Zen Buddhist understanding of time as a series of interconnected moments and the principle of no-self as a summation of all potential selves within all potential contexts. Hence the fundamental postulation of the concept of time being is that of the connectedness and interdependence of all beings across space and time, which in turn entails the impermanent, fluid nature of existence. In this section, I chart the ways in which these postulates are acknowledged by the main protagonists in *A Tale for the Time Being*. I also consider how their realizations that being is time and that self is a context, not an essentiality, contribute to their contentment and empowerment.

##### 4.1. Time Being Nao

That Nao's name echoes the word *now* is not a coincidence as she is constantly intrigued by its implications. Her account of how obsessed she was with her name as a little girl, whispering it repeatedly in an unsuccessful attempt to "catch the moment when the word was what it is: when *now* became NOW" (99; italics and capitals in the original), reflects one of the leading thematic concerns of the novel: the implications of catching (up with) the now for the time being.

Nao's misery begins when her family has to move back to Tokyo after her father is fired from a lucrative programming job in Silicon Valley. Having spent most of her childhood amidst the prosperity of Silicon Valley, Nao suddenly finds herself in a scruffy flat, where she shares a bedroom with her parents. Her command of Japanese is basic, the local customs feel foreign to her and her peers, who perceive her as a foreigner, subject her to brutal bullying. Her American friends quickly lose interest in communicating with her over the internet, while her suicidal father and distanced mother are so preoccupied with their own distress that they remain oblivious to her problems. The girl feels abandoned, vulnerable and scared, realizing, as she says, there is "nobody left in my life I could count on to keep me safe" (74). After her father's first suicide attempt, Nao is sent to her great-grandmother Jiko to spend the summer at the temple where she lives.

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<sup>3</sup> All subsequent references to the novel are by page number only.



Jiko's role in the novel is that of the traditional Zen Buddhist instructor, teaching by example and *kuans*.<sup>4</sup> The direction as well as the manner of her teaching are already implicit on the evening of the girl's arrival at the temple when Jiko suggests they take a bath together. Despite Nao's initial unease, she is soon comforted by Jiko's calming presence. The nascent feeling of connectedness with her great-grandmother is signaled by the girl's genuine interest in her. Minutely inspecting Jiko's body in the water, she realizes that the nun looks "part ghost, part child, part young girl, part sexy woman, and part [witch], all at once. All the ages and stages, combined into a single female time being" (166).

The underlying message of Nao's observation—namely, that one is all—corresponds to the main postulate of emptiness, which implies the essential connectedness and interdependence of all things across space and time. Various assertions of what Jiko calls "the not-two nature of existence" (194) permeate her teachings and coalesce in one consummate lesson on the nature of such connectedness when the two are having a picnic on the beach and Nao—under Jiko's guidance—actually experiences it.<sup>5</sup> Having just learnt about the bullying at school, Jiko asks Nao to bully a wave. No matter how hard the girl beats at the water, the waves are stronger, they pull her with them and make her part of them; she is not one with them, but also not separate from them. The experience of fighting the waves while being the waves makes her feel good (193); the power of the waves that keep knocking her over is also her power, demonstrated precisely by her attempts to fight them. After briefly considering just letting go and allowing the waves to take her out to the open sea, she decides against it and joins Jiko on the beach. Her decision may be interpreted as Ozeki's reference to the principle of no-self not constituting the denial of the self, which implies detachment and passivity, but rather the state of being everything—a sum total of infinite, ever-changing possibilities, which *in itself* entails agency.

The underlying message of the episode on the beach—that what we do is what is being done to us because of the fundamental interconnectedness of everything—is central to Ozeki's way of conveying what the world is like now. The narrative strategy of "eschew[ing] all dialectical subsumption" (Bernard 2017, 28) by drawing attention to the ambivalent character of all suppositions, which scholars identify as instrumental in conveying the modalities of existence in the globalized postmodern context, perfectly aligns with the implications of implementing the not-two nature of existence on all discursive levels.<sup>6</sup> In order to convey the full scope of these implications, however, we must first consider how the not-two nature of existence relates to the critical

<sup>4</sup> Riddles that prompt disciples to comprehend Zen Buddhist principles by themselves.

<sup>5</sup> Jiko's teachings include explaining to Nao that up and down are the same thing (194), the meaning of the Heart Sutra—"Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (106)—or asserting that washing used freezer bags and meditating are the same thing (205).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Guy Beauregard (2015), Hsiu-chuan Lee (2018) and Catherine Bernard (2017) highlight this ambivalence at the level of themes and motifs, while Rocío G. Davis (2015), the author of this article (2017) and Sue Lovell (2018) discuss it with regard to the novel's structural organization and focalization.



importance of each moment and the meaning of now, which are also an integral part of Jiko's teachings.

In Appendix A of the novel, Jiko explains that "you can't understand what it means to be alive on this earth until you understand the time being, and in order to understand the time being [...] you have to understand what a moment is. [...] *A moment is a very small particle of time*" (407; italics in the original), so small that one snap of one's fingers equals sixty-five moments. Snapping your fingers from dawn till dawn, "*you will experience the truly intimate awareness of knowing exactly how you spent every single moment of a single day of your life*" (407; italics in the original). In order to "truly live our lives" (408) we must therefore acknowledge each passing moment in the constantly changing universe, which can only be achieved by focusing on (each) now.

Nao learns what a moment, a now, is when she plays the drum at the annual Obon ceremony: "When you're beating a drum, [...] your whole attention is focused on the razor edge between silence and noise" (238). By drumming, she experiences the creation of now, the oneness of time and being. Existence is revealed to her as a series of connected, yet separate, moments which are "the time being. Sound and no-sound" (238). Now is, then, a state which comprises all potentialities and paying attention to it makes us realize that each moment of whatever we do contains all the possible alternatives of that particular action. Due to the not-two nature of existence, our every action affects the entire universe, which means that at any given moment we define the fate of the cosmos. Nao—and her father—are able to truly acknowledge that fact at the end of the book, after reading the secret diary of Jiko's son Haruki, who was forcibly enlisted as a kamikaze pilot and died towards the end of World War II. From the diary, they learn that he consciously steered his plane into the waves instead of crashing into an enemy ship as ordered. Haruki's momentary change of course not only spared enemy soldiers but also their families and friends. His action affected all of their pasts and all of their futures, as well as those of Nao and her father. After reading about it, they acknowledge the crucial importance of each moment and realize that the position they are in is precisely where they need to be in order to make productive use of their existence and thereby affect the entire universe—Nao by writing and her father by using his programming skills to develop programs that remove unwanted contents from the internet.

Mastering zazen is also instrumental in Nao's path towards the comprehension of the importance of each moment. The practice requires assuming a correct posture, which forces one to acknowledge one's physicality. Concentrating on breathing, one gradually abandons all thought and reaches the state of emptiness. By "enter[ing] time completely" (183), one captures the now and becomes aware of the utter interconnectedness of everything and of oneself with everything. In the novel, this is clearly conveyed through Nao's realization that, after mastering zazen, she is no longer bothered by aggressive mosquitoes, realizing that "my skin [is] no longer a wall that separate[s] us, and my blood [is] their blood" (204).

Later, when she returns to school, the ability to let go of all thoughts at will proves useful when a group of students attempt to rape her, and when, after she quits school and starts prostituting herself, she is with an exceptionally brutal customer. However, the full implications of the state of interconnectedness and interdependence that one becomes aware of via cognitive withdrawal—which does not cure one of all afflictions but teaches one “how not to be so obsessed with them” (162)—are, at this point, still to be comprehended. Their comprehension—namely, that at any given moment one is precisely where one needs to be in order to affect the cosmos in any given way, as the development of the story shows—is conditioned precisely by a series of violent and painful events that make Nao decide to commit suicide.<sup>7</sup> First, however, she decides to document Jiko’s life in a specially crafted diary where empty pages are inserted between the covers of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Nao’s account of the lost time in order to ensure that her great-grandmother is remembered is interrupted by the news of Jiko’s dying. She rushes home to get her father, but he is just leaving the flat, evidently about to attempt suicide again. She says nothing and boards a train alone. While waiting for the bus to take her the last leg of her journey to the temple, Nao realizes she is all alone and that all the people she loves are dying. She is ashamed of herself, and sees no point in writing the diary or living anymore. “I guess this is it,” she says. “This is what now feels like” (341).

#### 4.2. Time Being Ruth

Ruth, like Nao, is acutely aware of the symbolism of her name: of its etymological connection to *regret*, as well as of the meaning of the Japanese pronunciation of it, *rutsumu*, denoting “absent” or “not at home” (59). It is worth noting that immediately after reflecting on the connotations of her name, she explains that “home-leaving is a Buddhist euphemism for leaving the secular world and entering the monastic path” (61). But how can Ruth be on a path to enlightenment? When she finds Nao’s diary, she is existentially stuck. She cannot get used to life on the remote Canadian island where she moved with her husband from New York due to his health problems. She avoids direct contact with the islanders and spends most of her time surfing the internet. As she keeps forgetting things, she is afraid she has Alzheimer’s, like her deceased mother, whose memoir she has been unsuccessfully struggling to write for years.

The answer to the question above may be suggested by Nao’s father’s whispering “‘Tadaima,’ which is what you say when you arrive home” (163), when he reaches Jiko’s temple later in the story. The seeming contradiction—that leaving home, and hence being absent, is at the same time arriving home, and so being present—is resolved if we consider it in terms of the not-two nature of existence. At this point, however, Ruth is

<sup>7</sup> Instrumental in that decision is her torturers’ posting of the video of the attempted rape on the internet and putting her panties up for sale in an online auction. These events also lead to her father’s subsequent suicide attempts.

still far from acknowledging the not-two state of “relief [of] just hang[ing] out happily as part of an open-ended quantum array,” of “*forget[ting] the self [...] to be enlightened by all myriad of things*” (398; italics in the original) and be able to write again (Krevel 2017, 120; Lee 2018, 39).

The crucial moment in the process of that realization is when, the first time she holds Nao’s diary in her hands, she becomes “aware of an odd and lingering sense of urgency to [...] help her” (29).<sup>8</sup> Her interest in Nao breaks the stasis of her life; she starts searching for the girl and her family and familiarizing herself with Dōgen’s teachings. At first, her research is limited to the internet, but the nature of the information she seeks forces her to start establishing personal contacts, each of which is shown to be critical to the course of events. Physical interconnectedness is hence revealed as inherent in acknowledging the universality of mind, which is also suggested by Nao’s feeling of physical oneness with the mosquitoes when sitting zazen or her observation of Jiko’s body in the bathtub.<sup>9</sup>

The first signal that the reading of the diary will interfere with Ruth’s reality, making Nao part of that context and vice versa, is Ruth’s dream on the night of the diary’s discovery. In the dream, she finds herself in Jiko’s temple. The old nun is writing an e-mail explaining that up and down are the same thing, because “when up looks up, up is down. When down looks down, down is up” (39). These are the same words that Jiko says to Nao when observing the surfers during their picnic on the beach. Ruth, to no small surprise, realizes this when she reads the diary a week later. In the course of the story, Ruth’s dreams turn out to be the medium through which she enters Nao’s plane of reality, where Jiko also becomes her teacher. The first dream strengthens Ruth’s feeling of involvement and connectedness with Nao through space and time to the point where she needs to be reminded of the temporal gap between them (312). The dream also contributes to Ruth’s eventual comprehension that what she interprets as signs that she is losing her mind may very well make perfect sense if considered from a different perspective (398-99).<sup>10</sup>

In her second dream, Ruth puts on Jiko’s glasses and is absorbed into an unformed blur. There she experiences the feeling of “nonbeing, [...] of vast and empty ruthlessness” (122). She panics, initially, but when she gives in to it, she experiences “a sense of utter calm and well-being.” In the morning, she feels “oddly at peace and well rested” (123).

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<sup>8</sup> Beauregard’s reading of Ruth’s impulse to help as a trope of a discourse of dominance that is, however, like all other such tropes in the novel, immediately relativized (2015, 99), illuminates the ways in which the not-two principle is at work at the narrative level. In Zen terms, Ruth’s impulse is simply what it is, since its interpretation relies on the context. Due to the interconnectedness of everything, it is indeed a consequence of all the moments which have led to that particular moment and which allow us to consider Ruth’s urge (also) as a display of dominance.

<sup>9</sup> For the importance of objects and physicality in Ozeki’s poetics, see Bernard (2017, 29-31).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, the disappearance and reappearance of text in Nao’s diary, the vanishing of an article on Jiko that Ruth has found on the internet or her possession of Jiko’s son’s secret notebook, which he had on him when he crashed his plane.

Ruth feeling *ruthlessness* may be interpreted along the same lines as Nao's fight with the waves: both moments reveal the not-two nature of existence inherent to the principle of emptiness. Ruth's description of the "blissful state" (123) of experiencing various sensations despite complete dispersal is also very similar to the "blissful state" of the "focused but vast" attention she had "when she'd been writing well" (92). In order to recall this state and force her mind to "wake up" (185), she starts sitting *zazen*, which Nao describes as "a home that you can't ever lose" (183). Ruth's early attempts at *zazen*, however, are not really successful.

When Ruth reaches the part of the diary where Nao is sitting at the bus stop, she discovers that the rest of the pages have descended into blankness. That night, the dream first brings her to a state in which "sounds merge and separate [...], turning meaning into cacophony" (348). She feels the time swell with events and people from the diary; she sees a reflection that is her and not her. Then the word *crow* forms into an actual bird and takes her to a park in Tokyo, where Nao's father is waiting for some companions he has arranged to commit suicide with.<sup>11</sup> She explains to him that Jiko is dying and urges him to help Nao. The crow then takes Ruth to Jiko's temple, where she places Jiko's son's secret diary in a box for Nao to find.

In the morning, the pages in the diary are once again full. Apparently, Ruth's dream-state intervention not only prevented the suicides of both Nao and her father, it also enabled them to learn from Haruki's secret diary, which ensures the happy ending of the story in Nao's diary. This, combined with Jiko's teachings and her husband's explanation of the seemingly illogical events via quantum mechanics, makes Ruth realize that since each event is a matter of perspective and context at a given moment, she should focus on each moment as it is. When her husband asks her whether she is happy in the world they are in, she replies with what are her last words in the novel: "Yes, I suppose I am. At least for now" (401).

## 5. ZEN BUDDHISM AND POSTMODERNITY

From the perspective of Zen Buddhist principles, the suggested path to the main protagonists' contentment is the result of their apprehension that all beings—everything that *is*—are interrelated across space and time. This insight dissipates their perception of self as a separated, self-contained entity that is defined in opposition to the environment and makes them realize that at any given moment their actions—or lack thereof—affect that environment and their existence in it.

This outcome is precipitated by Nao's decision to recount her great-grandmother's story in her diary. Prompted by her love for Jiko, the writing connects the girl with her reader, thus creating the world of the Ruth that finds the diary. Ruth's decision to read

<sup>11</sup> The bird is the Japanese jungle crow that Ruth and her husband have been spotting in the trees surrounding their house since the discovery of the diary.

the diary and her involvement with it make that world part of Nao's context and vice versa. When Nao reaches her now at the bus stop and the pages in the diary disappear, Ruth's existence within that particular context is in jeopardy as well. As her husband observes, "if she stops writing to us, then maybe we stop being too" (344). If Ruth has so far been a comparatively passive recipient of Nao's story and Jiko's wisdom, she is now at a point where she has to actively interfere with that context if she is to preserve it. Since she accesses Nao's world through dreams, her interference is only possible in a dream. Moreover, in order to affect the situation she must become the situation by entering the state of emptiness, which is what happens at the beginning of her final dream. Her subsequent agency in the dream is directed by the crow, which, as Lovell observes, connects "all worlds on one plane of possibility" (2018, 68) and may be interpreted as a symbol of the principle of emptiness. Ruth's agency in the dream is hence revealed as inherent to the state she is in. Since, as Jiko points out, "our original nature is to be good and kind" (181), because anger and hate suggest separateness from our environment (which is a delusion), Ruth's agency is necessarily good and kind and creates contexts that are good and kind—in this particular case, a happy ending for Nao and Ruth.

Ruth explicitly associates dreaming with writing, suggesting that both activities involve the summoning up and exploration of potential realities and selves (392). They both entail letting go of a clearly delineated notion of self within a particular environment and an opening up to other options and contexts. It is in this state that Ruth is able to create—*write*—the context, in which she gradually acknowledges that the self and corresponding reality are a matter of perspective and are governed by the principles of interdependence, impermanence and interconnectedness. When she reaches her own now and the story within this novel's particular context ends, she is aware she is precisely where and what she needs to be and she is happy. The epilogue, written as Ruth's letter to Nao, suggests that Ruth indeed concentrated on the moments to come and started writing what may very well be the novel in front of us.<sup>12</sup> By choosing to read it, we—like Ruth upon finding the diary—become an interconnected and interdependent part of its context. Nao's decision to become a writer at the end of her last diary entry attests to the same. It symbolizes the importance of internalizing the principles of interdependence, impermanence and interconnectedness for the enhancement of contentment and empowerment. Due to the nature of these principles, their internalization not only affects individuals but whole societies across space and time.

Ozeki's proposal that literary acts (can) crucially affect reality is a convenient vantage point from which to consider the relevance of Zen Buddhist metaphysics in the context

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<sup>12</sup> The autobiographical dimension has been extensively discussed with regard to the interchangeability and interdependence of the narrative agents in this novel being symptomatic of the dispersal of subjectivity and agency in current socioeconomic conditions (R. Davis 2015; Krevel 2017; Lovell 2018). In Zen Buddhist terms, the fluidity and intangibility of the protagonists in Ozeki's literary act simply attests to the not-two nature of existence.

of contemporary consumerist societies and digital cultures. Much like contemporary research on the concept of self and its postmodern (clinical) discontents, Ozeki foregrounds the Cartesian dualist perception of self as the main cause of dissatisfaction with one's position in the world. Ruth's initial struggling with *zazen*, for instance, is symptomatic of the dualistic concept of self and Protestant utilitarian ethics, in the context of which contentment is equated with the achievement of clearly demarcated goals as a way of defining oneself in society. In contemporary hyperproductive consumerist cultures, however, the achievement of each goal automatically increases our aspirations. Therefore, the search for goals, motivated by the promise of contentment, paradoxically enhances the degree of restlessness and anxiety (Gaskins 1999, 204). Dōgen's understanding of *zazen* as a practice of *just sitting*, unconcerned with any goals or gains (Dallmayr 1996, 179), is therefore utterly foreign to such a mindset. In Zen terms, the effort of gaining something is part of the delusion that there is something to gain, which is the cause of suffering. In contrast, the interconnectedness of everything entails absolute presence, which is the feeling of being at peace and at home that Nao refers to with regard to *zazen*. For Ruth, the *zazen*-induced feeling of being at home paradoxically equals the feeling of not being Ruth and losing her self means losing her mind, which is why she abandons the practice. At the end of the novel, having experienced the contentment of letting go of the self and living in the moment, *zazen* is no longer problematic for Ruth (398) since *self* is a home one can never be absent from as it embraces the totality of all potentialities, one of which is Ruth.

Ozeki's recipe for empowerment, that is, abandoning the concept of the self defined through its otherness vis-à-vis the environment by establishing connections, seems simple enough to actualize in an age governed by globalization and digital media. Networked connectedness and connectivity are, indeed, the defining features of the internet, the medium that has for the last few decades been decisively shaping contemporary notions of reality and its agents. So much so, that we are intimately affected by such global events as, for instance, 3/11. In addition, the ubiquity of digital media and the specifics of their connectivity have instigated the phenomenon of electronic sociality, which effectively disperses the boundaries between the virtual and the real to the point where the objective reality of the interlocutors is merely an assumption.

The actual effects of connectedness established by postmodern digital media are, however, a far cry from those suggested by either Zen Buddhist principles or postmodern philosophy and quantum physics. The initial theoretical enthusiasm over the internet's potential to transcend the bod(il)y, and with it the concept of otherness, seems naïve at best in an age of cyberterrorism, online child pornography and fake news. Governed by the interests of global corporate capitalism, postmodern media are primarily directed towards massive production and dissemination of needs that steadily sustain the culture of consumerism. The barrage of data on what to do and what to be and constant exposure to global traumatic events relayed through a plethora of "alternative facts" are



utterly confusing, devastating and paralyzing in terms of the traditional positioning of self within a knowable objective reality.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, they paradoxically reinforce the need for such a positioning precisely because the reality they create is unpredictable, unknowable and threatening. The more information that is received, the greater the confusion, frustration and threat, which may lead to isolation from the world and its threatening otherness while simultaneously enhancing the need to gather more information. The growing numbers of *bikikomori* and the global intensification of extreme right-wing tendencies may serve as cases in point.

Ozeki's novel significantly reflects on the internet and its alleged capacity for establishing connections. Ruth spends her days on the internet and the more she pursues information there, the greater her frustration with the unstable, disappearing contents and failing connection becomes. For Nao, the internet initially seems to be a channel through which she can stay connected to her old life, but she soon realizes that "[o]n email, it's never now" (124), which means that those who communicate are never part of the same context and the connection between them is only a medium-induced illusion.

Not only is internet communication presented as an illusion that instigates frustration and aloneness, the medium, despite—or perhaps due to—its fundamentally democratic and accommodating nature, even becomes the site of the violence and humiliation that push Nao and her father towards suicide. They are, however, saved by Ruth's dream intervention, which is, as has been shown, essentially literary. The episode may therefore be read as a key to what I consider one of the central points that the novel is making, namely, that literature can function as a means of empowerment within contemporary conditions precisely because it functions on the basis of the Zen Buddhist principles of interdependence, impermanence and interconnectedness. Ozeki's narrative practice makes clear, as Lovell claims in her posthumanist reading of the novel, that "narrative discourse [is an] actant constructing subject positions that, when adopted by readers, enable them to experience the new actual world" (2018, 60). Literary texts are therefore a "catalyst, generating and distributing agency across the material networks of literature" (Lovell 2018, 59). As such, they enact the main premises of emptiness, the implications of which are rendered in Ruth's last dream. By its very nature, literature connects across space and time by making us participate in various potential contexts and enabling us to embody and experience various instances of Otherness, thus rendering the notion irrelevant altogether. Our identification with the stories and the protagonists corroborates our sense of empathy, which is inherent in the epistemology of Zen (B. Davis 2018). Empathy in itself provides us with the agency to direct our actions with regard to that which is Other precisely because it is founded on the realization that the Other is a potentiality of ourselves. The actions

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase "alternative facts" was used by Trump's counsellor Kellyanne Conway in 2017 to refer to the disputes regarding the number of people attending Trump's inauguration.



of the main protagonists in the novel, which eventually create the context of a happy ending, are all grounded in compassion and care. Moreover, the implications of the state of empathy as a condition of being aware of the relativity of all (pre)suppositions are also at the heart of Ozeki's poetics of connectedness and "heeding" (Bernard 2017), which she arguably puts forward as the basis for a constructive ethical framework.

Empathy may therefore be seen as the state in which the frictions between the self and the environment disappear and subjectivity does indeed become fractal in the sense that it actively participates in the creation of realities that are inherent to it. Empathy is thus revealed as the fundamental ethical position from which individuals in the globalized and digitalized societies can pursue a more harmonious time being. In that respect, *A Tale for the Time Being* chimes in with Jeremy Rifkin's argument that, in the currently existing socioeconomic conditions, the development of empathic consciousness is crucial for the survival of the global economy and the preservation of the biosphere (2009). In an age where the perception of reality is conditioned by the media, the capacity of literature to catalyze empathy renders story-telling instrumental in configuring that perception in terms of compassion, attention and care. In fact, the functioning of the literary medium itself may serve as a model of how such an ethical stance can be implemented in the present day and age.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Due to the reality-forming potential of literature in the context of the postmodern paradigm, Ozeki's propositions may be summed up as follows: at the core of the functioning of the literary machine are the principles of Zen Buddhist understanding of existence. As these conceptually correspond to the metaphysical structuring of the postmodern globalized and digitalized realities, conceptualizing the self in terms of these principles may have a greater potential for ensuring a productive and contented existence within such realities than the dualist model. Since literature is a medium, it participates in the formation of postmodern hyperrealities in the same way as other media, that is, it generates information that may be incorporated into what postmodern individuals perceive as their respective realities. Hence, it is an ideal means of planting the implications of Zen Buddhist principles into the experiential scope of contemporary individuals.

On a broader scale, this means that the key to contentment and empowerment within the present circumstances lies in establishing communication on the basis of the same impulses that make us read, namely, interest, attention and care. In so doing, we call others into existence within what, by the act of connecting, becomes a shared context. Experiencing other contexts changes the concept of Otherness into an intertwined not-sameness that suggests essential oneness. The global consequences of 9/11, 3/11 or the war in Syria attest to the fact that we are indeed an integral part of global processes. Acknowledging that fact on a personal and communal level might very well lead to the

dissolution of the notion of Otherness on all levels, as well as to the comprehension of the critical importance of connectivity and connectedness and to the resulting awareness of the fundamental agency of being. Such a scenario is, after all, not only enacted in Ozeki's third novel. The possibilities and implications of its implementation are central to the research conducted by those distinctly postmodern disciplines that acknowledge the necessity for a new mapping of existence, from posthumanism, ecocriticism or queer theory to quantum physics. What Ozeki's example suggests is that perhaps there is no particular need to invent new ethical concepts for the current social and historical circumstances, since all the components of a suitable ethical system, one founded on empathy and care, already exist. In the words of the author and Zen Buddhist priest, delivered via Skype transcontinentally at what was simultaneously 6:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., "The world that the Zen story describes does seem to map very nicely on the world as we experience it now."<sup>14</sup>

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