

## Making (Non) Sense: On Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

*By Yana Ya-chu Chang*

In the editor's introduction to the inaugural volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*, Noelle Brada-Williams, following Elaine Kim's foundational account of Asian American literature, states that the mission of the journal is to provide teachers and students accessible scholarship so that "works of Asian American literature can be understood in their cultural, sociohistorical, and artistic contexts" (i). Underscoring this aim to elevate the teaching of Asian American literature, Brada-Williams expresses concerns about a survey she conducted with her co-editor Rowena Tomaneng about the teaching of Asian American texts in high schools in Santa Clara County, California. Despite the density of population with an Asian background in the area, the survey showed a limited selection of works of Asian American literature and the inclusion of Asian philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism, in the curriculum. Without dismissing the merits of teaching Asian philosophy, Brada-Williams nevertheless notes that "the tendency for both students and teachers to break apart the term 'Asian American' into separate and seemingly unrelated words was disturbing" (ii). In underlining the need to understand Asian American literary texts in their contexts and the difficulty of defining *Asian American*, Brada-Williams's observations remind us of the significance of and risks in contextualizing Asian American literature. While placing Asian American texts in their contexts enables us to avoid potential misreadings, such attempts of contextualization also push us to ask what it means to contextualize Asian American literature. In other words, if contextualization helps us better understand Asian American literature, what are some of the implications and presumptions of our attempts to make sense of Asian American texts?

In this essay, I investigate this fundamental epistemological question about reading Asian American literary texts by examining Ruth Ozeki's 2013 Man Booker-shortlisted novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. Ozeki's novel illustrates a story of attempting to read stories of the other through a character named Ruth — a writer living on an island in British Columbia, where she finds a freezer bag washed ashore containing a diary along with other materials presumed to be debris from the tsunami on March 11, 2011. The novel interweaves two narrative frameworks: one features the figure Ruth trying to make sense of a diary presumably written by a Japanese returnee named Nao; the other focuses on Nao's narratives of her life in

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**Yana Ya-chu Chang** is a Ph.D. student in American Studies at University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Her research interests include inter-Asian labor migration and the Cold War in Asia.

California and Japan. Through representing Ruth's inability to make sense of Nao's narratives despite her various efforts to contextualize the diary, Ozeki's novel presents intriguing textual complexities that challenge us to ask what it means to contextualize the stories of the other — a question readers of this journal and critics in Asian American studies have long been aware of. In order to complicate this question of reading the other, I wish to further examine the knowledge produced around Ozeki's novel, with a focus on the marketing strategies and initial reception of Ozeki's text. In doing so, I hope to show how the textual complexities of Ozeki's novel create a space for critics of Asian North American texts to consider the potential and stakes involved in our attempts to make sense of stories of others.

Critical responses to this novel produced so far have discussed how Ozeki's text complicates the paradigms of Asian American studies by offering transpacific readings that challenge analyses centered on nation-states and human subjects. In "On Not Knowing: *A Tale for the Time Being* and the Politics of Imagining Lives After March 11," for example, Guy Beauregard offers a reading that foregrounds the transpacific linkages among sites such as the US, Canada, and Japan represented in Ozeki's text. Underscoring the stakes involved in imagining figures — including Indigenous Coast Salish peoples — that gesture to imperial and colonial histories in Ozeki's narratives, Beauregard argues that Ozeki's text offers a form of politics of imagining that enables readers to imagine lives of others in otherwise scattered and seemingly disconnected sites, encouraging critics to develop forms of Asian Canadian critique to address subjects that are rendered difficult to know in historical accounts. Addressing the limits of deploying nation-states and individuals as primary analytical categories in Asian American studies, Michelle N. Huang examines *A Tale for the Time Being* through what she terms "ecologies of entanglement," an approach that "focuses on the emergence of subjects and objects as effects of epistemological cuts, which shifts the 'object of study' from objects in themselves onto the phenomena that create and bind them" (98). By reading the great pacific garbage patch in Ozeki's text as interconnected Asian and American relations, Huang argues that such a reading method challenges us to conceive Asian American racial formation even without the explicit presence of national boundaries and racialized subjects as well as extending ethical concerns to seemingly unrelated individual human and nonhuman lives.

In attending to the interconnected transpacific linkages represented in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Beauregard and Huang underscore that Asian American/Canadian texts cannot be easily contextualized by national boundaries or approached with essentialist reading practices. As Beauregard points out, *A Tale for the Time Being* challenges readers to

imagine the lives of others not simply to recognize a plurality of narratives but to consider “how, and toward what ends, such lives might be imagined” (108). Following such concerns about frameworks of knowing Asian American texts, this essay draws attention to how the textual complexities of *A Tale for the Time Being* offer a form of Asian American critique that foregrounds the risks involved in reading the other. In order to foreground the significance of reading the textual complexities of Ozeki’s text, this essay reads the novel in conjunction with the knowledge produced around the reception of the text. Although the novel has been praised for its interwoven storylines, most reviews have focused on Nao’s storyline. As I will discuss, such a reading conflicts with the reviewers’ initial acclaim and runs the risk of reducing the double storylines in Ozeki’s text to a single narrative frame, turning the novel into a story about reading Nao. Furthermore, this particular mode of reading risks rendering Ruth’s narrative absent and assumes that readers can somehow read Nao without obstruction. It is this downplaying of Ruth’s narrative and emphasis on Nao’s narrative that I wish to investigate in this essay. Such a differentiated emphasis on Ruth’s and Nao’s narratives echoes Sau-ling Wong’s observations about the problem of a US-centric referential framework in the internationalization of Asian American studies, a problem also visible in the marketing of *A Tale for the Time Being*. To investigate this problem, I will explore the novel’s marketing strategies, including the book trailer and covers of the UK edition and the US/Canada edition. Next, I will examine how book reviews and selected readers’ responses show an at-times incoherent process of making sense of Ozeki’s text. Making sense, as the reviews and selected readers’ responses reveal, is both the process of understanding Ozeki’s text and attempts to place an Asian other in a state of being knowable. The latter part of this paper will analyze the novel’s juxtaposed depictions of Cortes Island and Fukushima, Ruth’s dreams, and Haruki #1’s diary. In doing so, I will argue that Ozeki’s text represents a certain form of indeterminacy that challenges simple readings of the text as a story about an Asian other — as suggested by the marketing strategies and some readers’ responses and reviews — and instead enables us to scrutinize the contexts in which we place and understand Asian American texts.

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When Robert Macfarlane, the chair of the judges of the 2013 Man Booker Prize, announced the winner, he briefly commented on each of the shortlisted novels. In commenting on *A Tale for the Time Being*, he praised Ozeki’s clever narrative technique, concluding: “We loved its spirit, in several senses, and we are all Hello Kitty fans now” (Macfarlane). What is

worth noting in Macfarlane's comment is that it marks Hello Kitty as a symbol that could potentially represent Ozeki's work. What makes this comment interesting is that despite the fact that Macfarlane notes the novel is "a turbulent story of two parts, told in counterpoint, and preoccupied with doublenesses [*sic*] and simultaneities," his final impression of the book reduces the doubleness to a single Japanese popular icon (Macfarlane). While Macfarlane recognizes the two storylines in Ozeki's novel, his focus on Hello Kitty overlooks that such an impression comes from Ruth's reading of Nao's narrative. In this reading, Ruth's narrative is rendered absent, an absence which allows Macfarlane to see through Ruth and read Nao's narrative in an ostensibly direct manner. This erasure of Ruth's narrative frame and the apparently direct access to Nao's story suggest that Macfarlane assumes the novel is about reading and knowing the Japanese schoolgirl Nao.

Macfarlane's reading of Ozeki's novel — however brief — may be related to broader problems posed by the internationalization of Asian American studies, in this case concerning how an Asian American literary text was received by the British-based Man Booker Prize committee. In an essay that revisits her earlier intervention in what came to be known as the "denationalization debates" in Asian American cultural criticism, Sau-ling Wong proposes several analytical terms that are useful for analyzing some of the problems with teaching and learning about Asian American literary texts at locales outside of the US.<sup>1</sup> Among these terms, Wong discusses "decontextualization" as a major problem Asian American texts encounter when they are taught outside of the US (32). The concept of decontextualization reflects to the way that non-American students are assumed to be "too remote from the natural/original cultural context to fully understand literary works — and that part of the teacher's job is to fill in the missing information" (Wong 32). It is this presumption of a putatively singular context — often the US — that produces a "contextual hole," that is, "a knowledge deficit amenable to positivist pedagogical intervention" (Wong 32). This presumption results in two problems. The first one is that non-domestic readers are assumed to misread Asian American literary texts and are required to make the "contextual hole," the foreign unknown, knowable (Wong 32). This assumption suggests that an Asian American literary text removed from its original context is seen as a foreign other that arguably needs to be domesticated. The other problem of the concept of a contextual hole is that it assumes the "implied final arbiter is the 'native' as the undisputed master of cultural competence" (Wong 32). In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> For Wong's discussion of the risks involved in the transnational turn in Asian American cultural criticism, see her well-known essay "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads" (1995).

this concept assumes that a US-based context is the one true context and that only by resorting to US perspectives can foreign readers properly understand an Asian American literary text.

The assumption of a proper way to comprehend Asian American literary texts suggests that Asian American literary texts can be read as indexes to putatively foreign cultures and that Asian American studies can provide the necessary interpretive tools to produce such comprehension. However, as Wong points out, the space “between true cultural affinity and easily identifiable foreignness is a vast zone of complex cultural negotiations that is the very terrain of Asian American literature” (32). In other words, the meanings produced around Asian American literary texts are not simply the product of a transparent process of making the unknown knowable, but rather a complex process of negotiations between different cultures. Another problem with the concept of decontextualization is that it assumes that US and foreign readers are “disparate groups bound to each other by some vague commitment to the enhancement of intercultural understanding, and native-like cultural competency the unstated goal of learning” (Wong 32-33). In the face of such problems, decontextualization is not an adequate analytical term to understand Asian American literary texts. Instead, Wong proposes “recontextualization” (35). Whereas decontextualization assumes a pre-existing authentic context and ignores the existence of non-domestic contexts, the concept of recontextualization recognizes that the text is not “wrenched out of its ‘home’ and set adrift in the ether, but inevitably replaced into another context” (Wong 36).

This recognition of other contexts leads to two key concepts developed in Wong’s essay. The first one is *Asian nationalist recuperation*, which is “the downplaying of the elements in an Asian American text that trouble a master narrative of the Asian nation to which it has putatively ‘natural’ ties . . . and the narrative” (Wong 35). This reading approach makes the text a mirror reflecting a presumably coherent Asian identity. In contrast, *US nationalist recuperation* takes on “hegemonic characteristics, to become a face of, or a synecdoche for, or even an unwitting apologist for, the US nation” (Wong 37). This approach brackets Asian and other non-US elements and turns Asian American texts into a mirror reflecting a presumably coherent US identity. Like the concept of decontextualization, both *Asian nationalist recuperation* and *US nationalist recuperation* are trapped in a one-sided view that attempts to pin down a presumably coherent narrative instead of investigating how Asian American literary texts may provide a space where the overlapping of and negotiations between the US and Asia, as well as other sites, are potentially visible.

Drawing upon Wong’s powerful analytical tools, I would like to analyze how the marketing process of *A Tale for the Time Being* also deploys a one-sided approach in a manner not unlike Asian and US recuperative modes.

What makes Wong's work especially helpful is her attention to how certain forms of reading situate Asian American texts as the voice of an other we presume to know thereby reinforcing a presumably coherent Asian or American identity. Although the topic Wong addresses is the internationalization of teaching Asian American texts, a topic that is beyond the scope of this essay, I contend that the marketing strategy of *A Tale for the Time Being* shares similar issues insofar as it reveals the problem of decontextualizing and recontextualizing an Asian American literary text during the process of an internationalized marketing campaign.

The first example I wish to turn to is the book trailer for the US/Canada Viking edition of Ozeki's novel.<sup>2</sup> In the trailer, Ozeki plays the role of Ruth and narrates the beginning of Nao's diary. This arrangement recontextualizes the novel by aligning Ozeki the author with Ruth the character. This recontextualization also renders Nao absent in this new context, one in which Ruth speaks for Nao and one which presents a realistic scenario that promises a referential frame in line with the author's biography. The next scene in the trailer features Ruth finding a freezer bag on the shore. Without any scenes to show how this bag ended up on the shore, material objects in the bag such as Nao's diary are presented as things apparently removed from their context. In this way, Nao's diary becomes a "contextual hole" that calls for Ruth and the trailer's target audience to fill. In other words, Ruth and the target audience are assigned the role of contextualizing Nao's diary and attempting to formulate knowledge about it. Following the discovery scene is Ruth's searching scene where she tries to contextualize and make sense of Nao's diary by searching online. The images displayed on her screen — provocative Japanese girls — are aligned with intertitles which run "a troubled schoolgirl in Tokyo" (Viking Books). In this scene, Nao's diary, the knowledge hole, is recontextualized twice. The first time is through Ruth's search online for information about Japanese schoolgirls and Japanese pop culture in order to fill what Wong identifies as a "contextual hole" by turning to representations of its native context. Here, Nao's diary is seen as a decontextualized text that needs to be placed in its original context so that Ruth can comprehend it. However, by editing the searching scene where the audience views the images from Ruth's point of view with the intertitles, this image arrangement positions the Japanese girls and Nao as troubled schoolgirls in Tokyo and as objects to be searched, to be gazed at, and to be potentially made comprehensible by Ruth. Here, the diary is again recontextualized but this time in a new context where it represents a troubled Japanese girl and the arbiter of its meaning falls in Ruth's hands. In this context, agency is on the side of Ruth, a mixed-race Asian American author residing in Canada. She is assigned

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, this trailer is available at: <https://youtu.be/kAPeWSHdEWg>.

the role of saving the troubled Tokyo girl who is recontextualized as an exotic distant idea on the screen through the point-of-view shot. The representation of an exotic other implies that the target audience consists of Western readers who are unfamiliar with Japanese culture and may be attracted by this element in the novel. The Western lens through which Nao's diary and the Japanese girls' images are understood is rendered implicit by the positioning of the target audience with Ruth's role of making sense of a Japanese girl.

This recontextualization — enacted by highlighting the foreign Asian other and simultaneously erasing the Western gaze — echoes Wong's concept of "US nationalist recuperation" discussed above, a critical mode that places the US as the ultimate referential framework in understanding and producing knowledge about Asian American literary texts, but with an interesting twist: Ruth's role of making sense occurs in Canada, not in the US. Indeed, following the searching, the intertitle in the trailer introduces Ruth as "a novelist on a remote Canadian island" (Viking Books). The nameless setting which appears from the beginning of the trailer remains anonymous except being marked by a national referent "Canadian" and the adjective "remote." Similar to the recontextualization of Nao's diary by pinpointing its Japanese referents, Cortes Island is recontextualized through a national signifier for the target audience to understand it as a foreign island. Both recontextualizations render Nao and Cortes Island as representatives of Japan and Canada. This recontextualization also divides the target audience — actual or potential North American readers of Ozeki's novel — and the subjects represented into disparate groups as those who make sense and those who are presumed to be comprehensible others. Such a division in turn positions potential or actual North American readers of Ozeki's text and the Asian subjects represented as subjects from presumably unrelated sites. In this way, potential or actual readers are encouraged to view Canada and Japan as presumably disconnected sites whose linkages are based solely on a desire to comprehend a foreign culture.

Through such recontextualization, the trailer makes understanding Cortes Island and the figure of Nao a seemingly transparent process where meaning is produced by identifying foreign others. The apparent transparency of this process is further strengthened by the introduction of the character Jiko. In the introduction scene, the trailer presents her as a nameless nun framed by a black and white photo of her with the intertitle running "a 104-year-old Buddhist nun" (Viking Books). Next to the photo is a Buddha statue signifying a religion that is mostly, but of course not exclusively, practiced in Asia. This composition creates a context for a Western audience to make sense. What is visible in this scene corresponds seamlessly to the intertitles. In other words, the signifiers — the mise-en-scene and the intertitles — assist potential or actual North American

audiences to decipher the meanings of the black and white photo and the Buddha statue: an other located in a remote site. Moreover, the following intertitle runs, “What happens when the right book falls into the right reader’s hands?” (Viking Books). The “right reader” and the “right book” have double meanings. First, Ruth is the right reader and the right book is Nao’s diary over which she has the power to read it right. Second, the target audience is the right reader and the right book is the novel which they have the power to respond to and interpret. In both situations, the “right” reader is the one who makes the book work most effectively. Either way, “US nationalist recuperation” occurs insofar as the right book is presented as a window to an Asian other waiting to be deciphered and the right potential or actual North American readers’ presence is erased. The erasure of the presence of potential or actual North American audiences culminates near the end of the trailer in a scene in which the novel is montaged with images of waves as if it were washed ashore. Without Ruth’s presence, this shot aligns the audience with the finder and as potentially right readers to fill up this “contextual hole” with their responses and interpretations. The trailer thus represents the novel as an epistemological blind spot by highlighting its exotic differences and downplaying the Western presence.

Reading the novel “right” becomes a presumably transparent process of deciphering an Asian other. This attempt to make perfect sense through a coherent context is also reflected in the novel’s cover designs. In Japanese Canadian critic Roy Miki’s analysis of the cover of *Many-Mouthed Birds*, an anthology of Chinese Canadian writing, he calls attention to its commodified status, which is “one aspect of the public space within which texts by writers of colour are represented, received, codified, and racialized” (120). Despite the fact that the anthology aimed to intervene in mainstream assumption of minority writing, the cover, which features a feminized face shadowed by leaves, arguably signals a gendered and racial stereotype to attract more customers. The codified cover image becomes a “tell-tale sign of power relations, stereotypes, and expectations” (Miki 120) — a problem also at play in the cover of *A Tale for the Time Being*. The first example I wish to discuss in this respect appears on the UK edition of Ozeki’s novel published by Canongate. At first glance, the cover features the national flag of Japan with its distinctive red spot. Yet, this red spot turns out to be a sticker that can be peeled back to reveal an Asian girl’s — supposedly Nao’s — face (see Fig. 1). Like the trailer produced for the Viking edition, the cover of the Canongate edition of Ozeki’s novel highlights the foreign unknown, a “contextual hole” that invites the target customers to fill it. The national flag invokes Western readers’ potential expectations and possible imagination about Japan, inviting them to wonder what this Japanese novel is about. This blind spot of knowledge is resolved by the appearance of the Japanese girl’s face behind the flag. She



leads curious readers to the upcoming story, implying that it will be a story about her. Framed in this way, the girl becomes a Japanese other, and the novel is turned into a potential guide to othered Japanese culture. In other words, the girl is no longer a “contextual hole” because she is doubly framed by the flag that identifies her foreignness and by the book which promises the context readers need to render her knowable.



**Fig. 1.** Cover Design for *A Tale for the Time Being*, UK edition from: OZEKILAND, 16 May 2017, ruthozeki.com.

The cover of the Canongate edition thereby creates a self-confirming other rendered transparent and places the target readers as subjects positioned to formulate knowledge about this mysterious other. Like the trailer for the Viking edition, the cover of the Canongate edition renders the Western lens invisible. This implied transparency of knowledge is reinforced by the interactive cover created by Blippar technology.<sup>3</sup> By downloading an app, readers can scan the physical book cover on their smartphones and on the screen the red sticker will peel back showing the blinking Japanese girl with Ozeki’s voice narrating the opening lines of the novel. The link on the screen also connects readers to online discussion groups and an interview with Ozeki. This design provides potential and actual readers multiple points of access to decode the Japanese girl on the cover. These online sources suggest that even though the Japanese girl seems to be an unknown figure, there are various ways to render her knowable. According to Cate Cannon, the head of Canongate marketing, “this augmented reality tool encapsulated that feeling of stories within

<sup>3</sup> Blippar technology is a form of augmented reality advertising that enables consumers to link physical products to online audio and visual material through the Blippar app on smartphones and tablets. See Zoë Sadokiersk, “Interactive Book Covers” (2013).

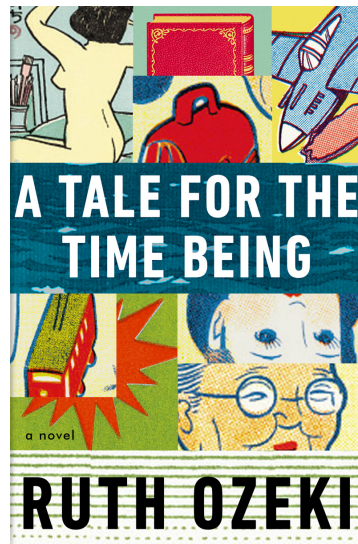
stories” (Cannon). Nevertheless, this design actually reduces the stories to one story: deciphering the Japanese girl layer by layer.

Whereas the design of the UK edition published by Canongate presents a seemingly coherent narrative from which the meaning of the cover easily arises, Jim Tierney, the cover designer of the US/Canada edition published by Viking, reveals that the meaning of the cover is not so clear-cut, but rather wrestled through a series of negotiations with the marketing team. Before his final design was accepted, Tierney proposed six different versions. One thing worth noticing is that Tierney thinks the “heart of the story revolves around Nao and her startlingly frank yet vulnerable thoughts on time, language, family, suicide, and culture” (Tierney). This is also the central theme of his designs. Apparently, from the very beginning of the designing process, Ruth’s narrative and the presence of Western readers were to be erased and Nao was the object to be understood. Tierney’s first attempt reproduced the modified Proust novel Nao uses as her diary (see Fig. 2). Tierney describes the illustration as Nao “floating spectrally above the rocky coast of British Columbia.” In Tierney’s account, the message of this design is “How did this book get here? Was it lost intentionally, or by accident? Is Nao alive or dead? Is she even real?” Similar to the previous examples I have discussed, Tierney’s design situates Nao as a “context hole” that invites readers to fill it with their reading. Although this design implies that the novel will provide the answer to this blind spot of knowledge, it does not highlight Nao’s exotic difference as the UK edition does.



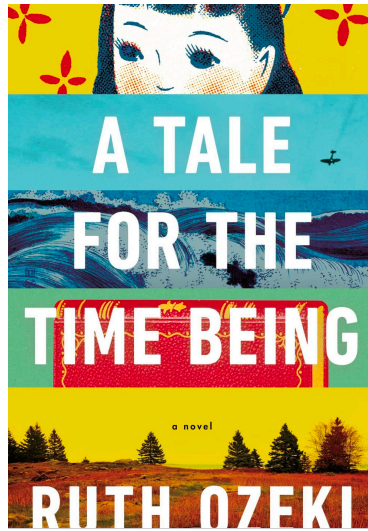
**Fig. 2.** First Cover Design for *A Tale for the Time Being* from: Tierney, Jim. “*A Tale for the Time Being: Cover Design Process.*” *J.T.*, 3 April 2013, [jimtierneyart.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-tale-for-time-being-cover-design.html](http://jimtierneyart.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-tale-for-time-being-cover-design.html).

However, the further the negotiations proceeded, the more conspicuous Tierney's designs reflected the marketing team's intervention. After three other designs were rejected, Tierney turned to Japanese pop culture. He recalls, "I think someone even went so far as to suggest that I put a 'Hello Kitty' on the cover." This intervention from the marketing team led to his fifth design, which looks like a Japanese comic book highlighting elements in Nao's narrative (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Fifth Cover Design for *A Tale for the Time Being* from: Tierney, Jim. "A Tale for the Time Being: Cover Design Process." J.T., 3 April 2013, jimtierneyart.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-tale-for-time-being-cover-design.html.

Compared with the first design, this version further highlights the foreign unknown by presenting elements in Nao's narrative in the style of Japanese comic books. This specific articulation of a "US nationalist recuperation" approach, in Wong's terms, erases the Western presence so as to form a coherent subject who is positioned to decipher the unknown other. This unknown other rendered transparent culminates in the final version of the Viking edition cover, which Tierney describes as "layered horizontal windows, each one interrupting and obscuring the next." Yet, Tierney adds, this obscurity is temporary because the further readers read into the book, "the more they [the layered horizontal windows] begin to fit together and make sense" (See Fig. 4). Tierney's comment on his design thereby suggests an attempt to align readers with Ruth's role in making sense of Nao's narrative.



**Fig. 4.** Final Cover Design of *A Tale for the Time Being*, US/Canada edition from: Tierney, Jim. "A Tale for the Time Being: Cover Design Process." *J.T.*, 3 April 2013, [jimtierneyart.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-tale-for-time-being-cover-design.html](http://jimtierneyart.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-tale-for-time-being-cover-design.html).

The marketing process of *A Tale for the Time Being* I have discussed reveals a mode of reading that situates the text as a story of an Asian other for actual or potential North American readers to comprehend. The highlighting of Japanese elements and downplaying of a Western gaze in the marketing strategy invites actual or potential North American readers to read Ozeki's novel as a text that offers a context to know the Asian subjects represented in the novel, thereby rendering North America and Asia into presumably disparate sites. In dividing Asian subjects represented in the novel and actual or potential North American readers into disparate groups, the marketing process of Ozeki's text recalls Brada-Williams's concerns about breaking apart the term *Asian American* in attempts to contextualize Asian American literary texts and Wong's observation about the internationalization of Asian American studies. An examination of the marketing strategy of Ozeki's novel thus pushes us to consider broader problems of contextualizing Asian American literary texts.

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Both the trailer for the Viking edition of Ozeki's novel and the covers of the novel I have discussed present in different ways narratives that arguably enable readers to render the unknown other transparent. However, Tierney's design process shows that behind this presumed perfect sense, there are constant negotiations, even power struggles, in the

production of meaning. These negotiations and struggles reveal that the sense-making process is not as effortless as it might appear at first glance.

Reader responses to, and reviews of, Ozeki's novel provide hints about such wrestling of meanings. While the responses and reviews are not critical works, examining the meanings the readers produce by responding to Ozeki's text helps to foreground the stakes involved in attempts to make sense of Asian American texts. Although the readers and reviews I will discuss attempt in distinct ways to create a coherent narrative of the novel, when read in conjunction with each other they reveal an incoherent process of making sense. For instance, Jovenus, a book blogger, posts that the novel has changed her previous distant feeling about Japanese novels because she feels "Japanese authors tend to be subtle and not mention the obvious in their novels." She thinks the change is because with "an American (Ozeki) writing about a Japanese character," her reading experience "feels different. It felt personal, transparent, explicit to the point of heartbreaking" (Jovenus). In this sense, it is the way that the foreign other is rendered "transparent" that produces Jovenus' positive feelings about the novel. She concludes, "If you don't like it, you would still come away learning more about the Japanese culture than the usual Japanese classics or literature would teach you (bar Yukio Mishima's novels)" (Jovenus). In this reading, Ozeki's novel is recontextualized as an index that enables readers to comprehend the Japanese other. Although Jovenus considers the novel as a means to understand the exotic other, her reading was not without difficulty. She complains that "The use of foreign words lends the book an air of exoticism but I think the novel contains too many footnotes than it is necessary [*sic*]" (Jovenus).<sup>4</sup> This difficulty of making sense contradicts her conclusion and instead points to the non-transparency of the novel, signaling that the other is not simply a comprehensible object and that Jovenus is not in any straightforward manner a subject making sense.

Lindsay Nelson, a blogger who has gained a PhD degree in Japanese literature and film, is aware of this invisible Western lens. In contrast to Jovenus, she expresses her discomfort with the transparent other. She says she enjoys Ozeki's novel but is "conflicted by these seemingly endless stories of Japanese suffering crafted for an English-speaking audience" (Nelson). She asks, "Why do these stories speak to us? Do they reinforce a narrative of the suffering, downtrodden Other that we'd do better to abandon?" (Nelson). These two bloggers' conflicting views on the novel help to disrupt the putatively unitary meanings of the cover designs of the UK and the US/Canada edition. On the one hand, the transparent other creates the pleasure of reading and a taste of an exotic culture. On the other, it invokes discomfort with victimizing the other. Each blogger makes sense

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<sup>4</sup> *A Tale for the Time Being* includes 165 footnotes.

of the novel in their respective posts. Yet, when juxtaposed, the meanings the bloggers produce by responding to Ozeki's novel become less transparent, thereby gesturing to, if only briefly, the stakes involved in attempting to make sense of the subjects represented in Ozeki's narratives.

Reviews of Ozeki's novel share a common focus on Nao's narrative despite their recognition of the novel's interlocking plots. For instance, Lesley Downer, a British journalist who writes about Asia, praises the novel by stating: "Many of the elements of Nao's story . . . are among a Western reader's most familiar images of Japan, but in Nao's telling, refracted through Ruth's musings, they become fresh and immediate, occasionally searingly painful." Wendy Smith notes: "As contemporary as a Japanese teenager's slang but as ageless as a Zen koan, Ruth Ozeki's new novel combines great storytelling with a probing investigation into the purpose of existence." Lisa Schwarzbaum in her review, entitled "Japanese Diary Washes Ashore, Its Mysteries a Gift," comments: "The most tangible character in *A Tale for the Time Being* is a 16-year-old Japanese girl named Nao who never makes an appearance in the flesh." Jaime Boler observes, "The character of Nao allows Ozeki to introduce Japanese manga and anime culture into her story, making it more lively and accurate." Identifying Nao's foreignness, the reviewers, despite their varying positions and assessments, reduce the interwoven plots of Ozeki's novel to a narrative that invites readers to understand an immediate and tangible Japanese other. Also, as Boler's review suggests, the novel becomes a supposedly transparent window to accurately understand Japanese pop culture. Echoing the trailer and the covers, the reviews dichotomize a knowable foreign other and Western readers who make sense. In the reviews, similar to what I have discussed about the marketing strategies, the desire to comprehend a Japanese other through reading Ozeki's novel is rendered implicit.

Despite their shared focus on Nao's narrative, the reviews unsurprisingly present conflicting interpretations. For instance, Ozeki's presumed identity varies with different reviews. Some, like the blogger Jovenus, see Ozeki as American. Other critics refer to Ozeki as a Japanese American writer. One of these critics is Liz Jensen, who opens her review with "If a Japanese-American writer who is also a Zen Buddhist priest wrote a post-Japanese tsunami novel, what themes might you imagine she would address?" Still others, like Susan Moon and Beth Jones, refer to her as "American Japanese." In terms of genre, although the reviewers regard *A Tale for the Time Being* as a novel, their interpretations disrupt this apparent consensus. Kris Kosaka traces the novel to Ozeki's multiple identities as both Japanese and American, as both a Canadian and US citizen. Drawing from these inferences, she describes the novel as "a hybrid" and "a metaphor for Ozeki herself" (Kosaka). In this sense, Kosaka suggests

that the novel could be read as Ozeki's autobiography, thereby adding a non-fictional aspect to its genre. Another critic, Beth Jones, says the novel is "a metafiction wrestling with grand themes." Yet, she later adds, "What binds [the novel] all together is the voice of Nao," who "provides us with a compelling coming-of-age story" (Jones). This reading suggests that the novel may be read as Nao's Bildungsroman. Jaime Boler states the novel is "wholly inventive from the first page to the last." In this view, the novel becomes purely fictional — in contrast to Kosaka's reading of the text as Ozeki's autobiography. Depicting the text as at times at least partly autobiographical and at other times as pure fiction, the reviews reveal a range of understandings that cannot be glimpsed in the trailer and book covers.

The knowledge produced around *A Tale for the Time Being* suggests certain difficulties involved in determining meanings for the text. Attending to the difficulties of making sense could be significant for readers of Ozeki's novel insofar as such difficulties reveal the limits of reading Asian American literary texts, including *A Tale for the Time Being*, simply as a form of ethnic literature that provides readers with full knowledge about histories of Asian migration or experiences of racialization. My subsequent analysis of Ozeki's text underlines how its narratives challenge readers to see the limits of positioning themselves as subjects who can make sense of the stories without difficulties. This challenge is important to the extent that it enables us to see how the textual complexities of Ozeki's novel help us to complicate readings of Asian American literary texts — a point I will discuss in the following section.

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Whereas the trailer and book covers of Ozeki's novel in their own ways present reading the novel as a transparent process of comprehending an Asian other, the reviews of *A Tale for the Time Being* render the text ambiguous again. Indeed, the transparency of making sense is constantly challenged in Ozeki's novel. The first example I wish to draw attention to is the juxtaposed depiction of Fukushima and Cortes Island. Preceding Ruth's reflection on Cortes Island is a passage about Fukushima: "The name Fukushima means 'Happy Island'" (Ozeki 141). This one simple sentence presents an absolute meaning, presenting Fukushima as a transparent signifier that corresponds directly to its signified: "Happy Island." This seemingly stable relation between signifier and signified is reinforced by the banners nearby the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station saying "Nuclear power is energy for a brighter future! The correct understanding of nuclear power leads to a better life!" (Ozeki 141). Underpinned by the apparently absolute meaning of Fukushima, the dominant interpretation of



the banners becomes: Fukushima is a “happy place” (Ozeki 141). However, the absolute referential power of the word *Fukushima* compromises its historical contexts. The first context is the colonial history of the Tōhoku region; the second is the later meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station in 2011. Put in the context of the Japanese Imperial Army’s colonization of the Indigenous Emishi, Fukushima’s transparent meaning— Happy Island—becomes contradictory. The colonial past historicizes the word Fukushima and reveals that happiness is by no means the word’s only meaning. Instead, the perfect sense of Fukushima is constructed by imperialism and power struggles between distinct cultures. Likewise, the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima exposes the contradictions of the banners rather than producing a single coherent meaning. Instead of “a brighter future” and “a better life,” the very subject of nuclear power that guarantees this optimism becomes the source of a contradictory if not utterly bleak reality (Ozeki 141). Both of these historical events provide contexts that expose the at-times invisible interventions of imperial power and the state that seek to erase the varied meanings threatening to undermine the perfect sense of *Fukushima*.

Likewise, as Guy Beauregard has observed, Cortes Island also has a shadowed colonial past. Unlike Fukushima, whose presumed happy name masks its colonial history, Cortes Island “was named for a famous Spanish conquistador, who overthrew the Aztec empire” (Ozeki 141). However, despite the bluntness of the name, its meaning is rendered less apparent and ahistorical by tourists who make Cortes Island “a gemlike paradise” (Ozeki 141). The island’s other name, “the Island of the Dead,” also arguably becomes less apparent because its reference ranges from “the bloody intertribal wars, or the smallpox epidemic of 1862,” a “tribal burial ground” to “a kind of gated community” (Ozeki 142). Whereas the absolute meaning of Fukushima is complicated by the exposure of power struggles, Cortes Island shows how the name becomes complex through historical amnesia even if the name has revealed its colonial past. Tellingly, such amnesia also occurs in reader responses and reviews in which the island is mostly referred to as a remote island in British Columbia.<sup>5</sup>

To be able to make sense suggests that one is recognized as a subject in language. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, this subject position is, however, constantly challenged. Ruth’s dreams helpfully illustrate the limits of making sense and her decentered subject position in language. In Ruth’s second dream about Jiko (Nao’s great-grandmother), meaning becomes slippery. In this dream, Ruth is not a bystander gazing at Jiko as she did in her first dream. Instead, Ruth’s visual power to make sense is undermined

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<sup>5</sup> For examples, see Jovenus; Nelson; and Smith. For a critical discussion of this topic, see Beauregard.



when she wears Jiko's glasses. Although the glasses are "similar to the ones Ruth wore," they do not help her see clearly (Ozeki 122). Rather, they are "too thick and strong, smearing and dismantling the whole world as she knew it" (Ozeki 122). In addition to her visual power, Ruth's linguistic power to make sense is challenged as well. She describes how she is thrown into "a place or condition that was unformed, that she couldn't find words for" (Ozeki 122). The binary oppositions between up and down disrupted by Jiko in the previous dream further disorientate Ruth's ability to make sense of space and time. She becomes faceless and deprived of a sense of direction. She tries to delineate the experience: "No up, no down. No past, no future. There was just this — this eternal sense of merging and dissolving into something unnameable that went on and on in all directions, forever" (Ozeki 122). Instead of a subject making sense of Jiko through language, Ruth loses her subject position and becomes a floating signifier: "Nothing but a vast and empty ruthlessness" (Ozeki 122).

Ruth's third dream further challenges the meaning-making power of language. At first, Ruth presses her fingers "against the rag surface of her dream," with her fingers "recogniz[ing] the tenacity of filaments and know[ing] that it is paper about to tear" (Ozeki 346). The paper surface of Ruth's dream symbolizes her penetration into the pages of Nao's diary and her attempt to make sense of it. However, she enters a world where words are "a pileup of sounds, like cars colliding on a highway, turning meaning into cacophony" (Ozeki 347). Although Ruth runs into words, she bumps into an opaque language that cannot provide the means to attain transparent meaning. Instead, it makes no sense and creates further confusion that prevents Ruth from understanding Nao even when she is in her diary. The pictorialized words appearing in Ozeki's text also show the limits of language's power to make sense. For instance, the word *crow* turns into a crow image on the page (Ozeki 349). This transformation of words into images opens up the meaning of the word to more varied interpretations, thereby arguably creating additional obstructions in the process of making sense. This difficulty to make sense culminates in a crucial scene where Ruth enters a mirrored room. She searches for Nao "in the mirror, a logical place, but sees only a reflection of herself that she does not recognize" (Ozeki 348). This scene is significant because it forcefully defies the direction of the novel's marketing strategies and certain reader responses and reviews, which in different ways see the novel as a transparent window to Japanese culture. Similar with certain readers and reviewers and the novel's marketing team, the figure of Ruth also expects Nao's diary to be a window to the girl's life. However, instead of a window, she encounters a mirror that reflects an unrecognizable self. Where she expects to find Nao's presence, she bumps into a self that has remained invisible throughout her reading. At this moment, Ruth, who has been in

some accounts invisible in her process of deciphering Nao's diary, discovers her own presence in intervening in Nao's narrative with her relentless pursuit of its meaning. Furthermore, the fact that Ruth's reflection is an unrecognizable self suggests that there is no self-affirming other. This ambivalent difference casts Ruth as an insider in relation to Nao's narrative but at the same time casts her outside of Nao's story. In other words, Ruth at this point in the text is not a subject making sense — and thereby stands in contrast with Nao as an object waiting to be deciphered. As Ruth's reflection yells, "*Don't be fooled!*" when she tries to see the girl in the mirror, the mirror scene also warns readers about their own invisible presence in the novel (Ozeki 349).

The dreams not only render Ruth's invisible role as a reader visible, but also decenter her from the position of a subject who makes sense of the figure of Nao. In fact, the subject positions of readers of the novel are shaken as well. Such subject positions are destabilized by the text's multilayered narrative frames and mixed genres. For example, the *you* in Nao's narrative is constantly shifted by Nao's different modes of address. At the beginning, the *you* is "only one special person" to whom Nao promises a "[t]otally "personal, and real" message (Ozeki 26). At one time the *you* even becomes "God" in whom Nao confides (Ozeki 136). The *you* is even thrown outside of the narrative when Nao declares, "But the fact is, you're a lie. You're just another stupid story I made up out of thin air because I was lonely and needed someone to spill my guts to" (Ozeki 340). The *you* can be both the characters in the novel who read Nao's diary and readers of the novel. If readers focus on Nao's narrative, they arguably become Nao's *you*. On the other hand, if they focus on Ruth's narrative, they become the characters reading Nao in the novel. Constantly shifted inside and outside of the narratives, readers of Ozeki's text experience Ruth's difficulty of reading as they read.

The *you* in Ozeki's text is further complicated by the inclusion of letters and a diary by a character referred to as Haruki #1, Nao's father's uncle, and Jiko's son. Because they are presented in a semi-fictional documentary style, these letters and diary cannot simply be read as a true record of a Japanese account of World War II. Neither can readers overlook the facts in Haruki #1's narrative such as references to the kamikaze soldiers. Much like Ruth's unrecognizable self in the mirror stops her from seeing Nao, readers cannot fully make sense of Haruki #1 through the semi-fictional documentary passages included in Ozeki's novel. Even though the diary and letters presumably provide readers private access to the figure of Haruki #1, careful readers of Ozeki's text cannot claim that they fully understand him through reading.

Moreover, the intended reader of Haruki #1's diary and letters is arguably as unstable as Nao's *you*. Unlike Nao's unspecified and shifting

you, Haruki #1's you addresses a specific reader. In terms of the letters, he addresses them not only to Jiko, but also to the imperial government of Japan. With censorship in mind, he presents the bullying he experienced as "special exercises" and as "a favor, they say, turning us into military men" (Ozeki 253). Here, language is not a transparent window to meaning but rather a means to conceal meaning. In this view, Haruki #1's words are evidently not reliable. However, in the last letter included in Ozeki's text, Haruki #1 writes, "But no matter what nonsense I write in [the next 'official' letter], please know that those are not my last words" (Ozeki 258). This sentence suggests Haruki #1 is telling the truth in this letter and presumably makes his words reliable. This reliability seems to allow readers to understand and to enter Haruki #1's narrative frame. However, the format of the letters alerts readers that they can never fully enter the narrative frame because they are not Haruki #1's intended reader, Jiko.

Haruki #1's diary also swings readers inside and outside of its narrative. Like the letters, the diary casts readers as outsiders from the beginning by addressing the *you* in French as "ma chère Maman" (Ozeki 317). Yet, as Haruki #1 later writes in an English translation produced by a character named Benoit, "Duplicity is a hardship I am unwilling to suffer, so I have decided I will keep two records: one for show, and this hidden one for truth, for you, even though I hardly expect you will ever read this" (Ozeki 317). The *you* here seems to refer not exclusively to Jiko, but anyone who finds the diary and is able to read French. In this sense, the diary seems to promise truth for anyone able to read it. This promise of truth implies transparency and invites readers to enter the narrative frame. However, in the middle of the diary, Haruki #1, convinced that nobody will read his words, writes, "I write them for my own benefit, to conjure you in my mind. They are meant only for me" (Ozeki 323). Here, readers are ostensibly banished again, and even arguably rendered non-existent. Readers are simply Haruki #1's configuration. It is he that writes them into existence. Instead of reading Haruki #1, readers of Ozeki's text thereby encounter their selves rendered unrecognizable by Haruki #1's unstable you. Constantly shifted inside and outside of Haruki #1's narrative, readers cannot easily make sense of him. Instead, their subject positions are repeatedly challenged by the limits of their powers to make sense. This difficulty of reading, like the mirror Ruth faces, blurs the line between a subject who makes sense and an other who exists to be deciphered.

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In this essay, I have traced the knowledge produced around Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* through a discussion of how its marketing process and its initial reception present readings that are predicated on a

presumed division between North America and Asia thereby framing the text as a means to learn about the other. In contrast to such readings, I have investigated how the textual complexities represented in Ozeki's novel create space for us to consider the limits and risks of attempting to comprehend Asian North American literary texts through dichotomized concepts of a reader who makes sense and an other who is to be made known. Although the book trailer and the various cover designs I have discussed seek to attract North American readers by presenting a presumably transparent other, the design process and certain reader responses and reviews show that any final coherent meaning is constructed by multiple negotiations and interventions — interventions that enact what Wong has helpfully termed "recontextualization." The novel itself presents the extraordinary difficulty of making sense rather than simply providing a window to Japanese culture. This inability to *make sense* has the potential to intervene in straightforward, positivist readings of the Asian other. Through representing the complexities and risks involved in attempting to make sense of stories of the other, Ozeki's novel offers a counterpoint to some of the troubling framings seen in the marketing and initial reception of the novel.

Following Brada-Williams's observations about the potential of and risks involved in contextualizing works of Asian American literature — a point I have discussed in the beginning of this essay — teaching and learning about the textual complexities of *A Tale for the Time Being* may further challenge us to examine some of the presumptions informing our attempts to better understand Asian North American literary texts. In this view, the significance of Ozeki's novel extends to the broader analytic frameworks we bring to bear while teaching and learning about Asian North American literary texts. If Asian American studies or Asian Canadian studies seeks to develop inter-referential frameworks extending beyond national frames without presuming to be an arbiter providing accurate ways to make sense of literary texts, *A Tale for the Time Being* and the meanings produced around it can help extend this dialogue.

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