**Sharing Worlds through Words:**

**Minor Cosmopolitics in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being***

The Japanese North-American author Ruth Ozeki (1956-- ) has been engaging with the real world in her novels. Her first two novels are clearly “issue driven”: *My Year of Meats* (1998) was triggered by the use of hormones in the US meats industry and *All over Creation* (2003) delved into the genetically modified technology in agriculture. Her third novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013; hereafter *Tale*), though being described by Ozeki as being “philosophical” and enacting “a performance of certain aspects of Zen philosophy” (Stanford Humanities Center; The Wheeler Centre), does not withdraw from the dialectics between the actual and the fictional.1 In addition to the autobiographical elements (i.e., Ozeki wrote herself and her experiences as a novelist into one main character Ruth), *Tale* encompasses a number of real-life events, among which the most obvious include the Japanese military aggressions during World War II, the global Internet bubble in the late 1990s, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, and the earthquake/tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. Indeed, the impact of the real world on Ozeki’s writing became indelible when Ozeki decided to give up the draft she had worked on since December 2006 to start all over again after the devastating earthquake/tsunami hit Japan on March 11, 2011 (henceforth referred to as “3/11”). Ozeki explained her decision in interviews: “There are certain catastrophes of such a magnitude. They draw lines in time”; also, the “post-tsunami” reality made the manuscript she wrote in the “pre-tsunami” time “no longer relevant” (Kenower).2 These statements compel one to read *Tale* as a post-3/11 text, more precisely as a text called upon to respond with a new set of sensibilities to the time ushered in by an event as catastrophic as the 3/11 earthquake/tsunami.

Two questions arise: how did the 3/11 earthquake/tsunami and its repercussions change our conception of the world? Also, how did *Tale* respond to this change? While a complete answer to the first question is beyond this article’s capacity, Ozeki’s arrangement for the novel to begin with a Hello Kitty lunchbox, which contains a diary written by the sixteen-year-old Nao in Japan, to be washed ashore on an island in Desolation Sound, British Columbia and picked up by Ruth the novelist, casts into relief the border-traversing impact of the earthquake/tsunami. Characters in the novel propose to explain the Hello Kitty lunchbox as part of the tsunami debris swept from Japan into the Pacific Ocean. Although this theory is not confirmed in the novel3, be it a reality or a metaphor the Hello Kitty lunchbox and what it causes to happen as the novel unfolds invoke a sense of increasing global interconnectedness in today’s world. Whether one likes it or not, as Ozeki observed in an extended interview by Eleanor Ty, “we are all radically interconnected” (162). And this radical sense of “global interconnectedness” escalates when one takes into account not only the transpacific trajectory of the tsunami debris but also the spread of the radioactive substance through the earth’s ecosystem in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear meltdown.4 While becoming “cosmopolitan” used to be a privilege of the elite few who could afford to live beyond local bonds and regional allegiances, the 3/11 catastrophe forcefully reminds one that in today’s world “cosmopolitan linkage” could no longer be as much the result of class privilege or a personal choice as a shared human destiny. In part due to this realization that no one, not even a novelist living on a “remote” island off the Canadian west coast (Ozeki, “Confessions” 34), could stand isolated from the world without being pulled into the drifts of radical interconnectedness, Ozeki decided to write herself as a character into *Tale*.5 “It’s an autobiographical story,” realized Ozeki as she launched into a rewriting of *Tale* in May 2011, “and so I just have to step forward and be in the book” (Ty 164).

Oxymoronic as it might sound to say that *Tale* is both “cosmopolitan” and “autobiographical,” from this seeming self-contradiction I would propose to read *Tale* as not simply about the world or a self but about the encounter of the world and the self. On the one hand, though being “autobiographical,” *Tale* is not confined to Ozeki’s solipsistic self-reflection. Ozeki herself has claimed that *Tale* is written in the form of an “I-novel,” a Japanese autobiographical genre which blends individual life experiences with fictional imagination and collective materiality (“Confessions” 39).6 In *Tale*, the character Ruth’s writing also evolves from a concentration on self (as one does in a memoir) to an exploration of self through others (as one does in an “I-novel”): ever since she stumbled into Nao’s diary, her life has branched to Nao’s stories and been subjected to transformation.7 The mutually constructing forces of a self and its others are rendered evident through the network of thoughts, emotions, and memories evolving from Nao’s and Ruth’s living contexts. On the other hand, being “cosmopolitan” does not mean that *Tale* embraces the world as a connected whole, nor does *Tale* stop at a passive recognition of global interconnectivity. *Tale* attained its present shape after the 3/11 catastrophe. One may thus claim, at least metaphorically, that the world delivered the story to Ozeki. Yet as important as the world realities that infiltrated Ozeki’s writing are the lines of coalitions and comparisons Ozeki has drawn, through her writing, for the world. This article will demonstrate, by directing attention from the world of global extensiveness to a world of literary virtualities and historical realignment that unfolds from Ruth’s reading of Nao’s diary, that *Tale* is not “cosmopolitan” in the conventional sense of taking a position of spatial transcendence over the world; the novel rather exercises what I propose as *minor cosmopolitics* as it inserts itself, via Ruth’s and Nao’s reader-writer relationship, into a creative world-sharing and world-making process.

In what follows, I will first trace the idea of “cosmopolitan” to make a distinction between “cosmopolitanism” and “cosmopolitics” by associating the latter with a world-making—or “worlding”—effort. Specifically, I coin the term *minor cosmopolitics* and explain its indebtedness to, as well as differentiation from, concepts such as “minority cosmopolitism” (in Susan Koshy) and “minor transnationalism” (in Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih), with a view to conceiving the world-making potentials of minoritized individuals imbricated by globality and their everyday concreteness. In the second part, to further deliberate on the minor cosmopolitics executed in *Tale,* I will attend to the interplay of words and world. Through a close analysis of the reading-writing relationship between Ruth and Nao, I will highlight the importance of the energy and matter of small scale, such as those embedded in the words of literary imagination, in an active engagement with a scale as large as the world. Significantly, Ozeki resorted to quantum mechanics to describe the reading-writing time-space and as such gave the cosmopolitics in *Tale* another *minor* dimension to test out the possibilities of conceptualizing the world in terms of the quantum rule of randomness and undecidability.

1.

A concept dating back to the time of Greece, “cosmopolitan” derives from the Greek word “*kosmopolitēs*,” a composite of “*kosmos*” (world) and “*politēs*” (citizen), thus generally being interpreted as “citizen of the world.” Unconstrained by local bonds or regional allegiances, a “cosmopolitan” is conventionally known as committed to the interests of humanity as a whole and “cosmopolitanism” is upheld as an inclusive ethical appealing to a humanist cosmos of homogeneity and universality. Ironically, when trans-regional movements and cross-cultural contacts become increasingly an everyday reality, the human world is not becoming more unified. For one thing, the contemporary home-leaving and translocal encounters, instead of fulfilling the vision of a giant borderless *World* shared by human beings in general, brought face-to-face undissolvable differences and conflicts that disrupt globality into asymmetrical and discontinuous locales. For another, human beings are gradually subjected to global networks of political and financial interdependence; they are increasingly trapped in a shared destiny in face of global threats including climate change, environmental contamination, infectious diseases transmission and terrorist wars, among others. Human lives are becoming “cosmopolitan” in the sense that they are less confined by geographical barriers and long-distance communication has become a feature of the everyday, yet “cosmopolitanism” as a philosophical vision of human commonality and wellbeing passed on through Greek stoicism, Renaissance humanism, the eighteenth-century enlightenment philosophy and modern universalism has been challenged by these real border-crossing experiences of global connectedness.

Not surprisingly, studies on “cosmopolitanism” attempt to make distinctions between “cosmopolitanism” as a philosophical ideal and the “actually existing” cosmopolitan experiences. Bruce Robbins’s introduction to *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* is entitled “Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” and Ulrich Beck in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* also drew attention to “a new cosmopolitan realism” (14). Robbins pointed out that “cosmopolitanism” needs a new definition as its participants are no longer limited to those enjoying “a luxuriously free-floating view from above” but those caught in “transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and they are unprivileged—indeed, often coerced” (1). Robbins’s suggestion to conceive contemporary “cosmopolitanisms” as “plural and particular” experiences that are “socially and geographically situated” (2) is echoed by Beck in his insistence that cosmopolitanism “has ceased to be merely a controversial rational idea”: it “has left the realm of philosophical castles in the air and has entered reality” to become “the defining feature” of our era (2). Indeed, the increasing inseparability of an individual’s life and the world that characterizes the era of globalization—in Beck’s words the experience that “[m]y life, my body, my ‘individual existence’ become part of another world, of foreign cultures, religions, histories and global interdependencies, without my realizing or expressly wishing it”—would result in a “latent cosmopolitanism, *unconscious* cosmopolitanism, *passive* cosmopolitanism,” in effect a “cosmopolitanization” of the everyday (19; Beck’s emphasis). “Cosmopolitanism” no longer projects a solution to human conflicts and divisions; rather, real-life cosmopolitan experiences commit one to inexorable mixture, confrontations and negotiations with differences and distances.

Kwame Anthony Appiah succinctly summarized the contemporary reappraisals of “cosmopolitanism” by declaring that in our world “cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (xv). And in order to cope with this “challenge,” “cosmopolitics”—which designates conscious engagements with the uneven and changing force field of the world—has risen in importance in replacement of “cosmopolitanism” as a static concept of philosophical abstraction. Robbins asserted that “[t]he time for cosmopolitics is now” (10). He referred “cosmopolitics” to politics conceived and executed in a scale of spatial extension and transnational connection such as that embodied through transnational feminist, ecological, and human rights movements. Yet “cosmopolitics” could be understood not only in terms of spatial extension but also in light of temporal construction. Conceiving “the world” not simply as a spatial object but also as a temporal category, Pheng Cheah in *What Is a World?*: *On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* probed the temporal horizon in “cosmopolitics” by linking “cosmopolitics” to the Heideggerian idea of “worlding.” For Heidegger, “worlding” does not refer to a “cartographical process” that brings discrepant geographical parts on earth unto a map of totality, but rather refers to how the world is ceaselessly opened up and formulated through time (Cheah, *What Is a World?* 8). Unlike “cosmopolitanism,” “cosmopolitics” does not take “the world” for granted; it subjects the world to an interminable process of flexible spatial constitution and temporal reformulation.

Drawing on this idea of “cosmopolitics,” this article reads *Tale* not as projecting a cosmopolitan ideal of human commonality and commensurateness but as undertaking a cosmopolitics that ushers in selves in relation to others. Precisely, *Tale* undertakes a cosmopolitics that rides on the time of story-telling, reading and writing. As shall be seen, once the character Ruth starts to read Nao’s diary, *A Tale* plunges into a gyre of literary re-structuring of the world by drawing previous nonexistent alliances and comparisons between people, times, places, ideas and memories. At a personal level, Nao’s diary brings into Ruth’s world the life of Marcel Proust (as the diary is hid in a carved-out copy of Proust’s classic *In Search of Lost Time*), Old Jiko (Nao’s great-grandmother, an “anarchist feminist” and a woman pioneer of “I-novel” that has turned into a 104-year-old Buddhist nun), and Dōgen (whose teachings, passed on from Jiko, permeate Nao’s writings) as well as Nao’s own life stories. On a grander scale of world memories and worldly visions, Ruth’s reading and writing aligns the bullies Nao suffered in Japan as a “*kikokushijo*” (repatriate children) with the bullies Nao’s granduncle Haruki #1 was subjected to as a *kamikaze* pilot during the Second World War, which are further linked to the exploitations Nao’s father Haruki #2 experienced within the global capitalist system, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as the ethnic persecutions imposed on Muslim Americans in the wake of 9/11. These cases of human violence, furthermore, are investigated alongside Ruth’s meditations on the movement and mutation, power composition and existence struggles in the biosphere on the earth planet.8

To describe the cosmopolitics enacted by *Tale* clearly, I introduce the concept of *minor cosmopolitics*. First, the word “minor” in *minor cosmopolitics* signals *Tale*’s deviation from the elitism frequently associated with cosmopolitanism. *Minor cosmopolitics* in this sense bears echoes to Susan Koshy’s conception of “minority cosmopolitanism,” according to which ethnic minorities conventionally categorized as subnational and marginal in global exchanges are recognized as exerting strong “scale-jumping” forces on the formation of worlds (Koshy 594). In *Tale*, the characters drawn into creative exchanges across temporal and geographical barriers are not strictly “ethnic minorities” as described in Koshy’s article, yet most of them could still be understood as “minors” in that they are bereft individuals in the global political and economic force field. Ruth, for example, is a novelist who has moved from New York City to Cortes Island off the coast of Vancouver in part because she and her husband Oliver “were broke and in need of affordable health insurance” (57).9 Nao is a bullied teenager caught between her childhood memory of “being a middle-class techno-yuppie’s kid in Sunnyvale, California,” and her maladjustment to the high school life in Tokyo as a “poor loser foreign kid” (70, 44). Nao’s father Haruki #2 “used to be in love with America” and was drawn by the Internet boom to the US as a computer programmer in the 1990s (42); but after the collapse of dot-com bubble, he lost his savings and visas, henceforth leaving Silicon Valley to become an unemployed and suicide-prone “*hikikomori*” (recluse) in Japan. To be added to this list of “minoritized” characters are also Nao’s great-grandmother Jiko, who is a feminist-writer-turned-a-104-year-old Buddhist nun inhabiting a small temple in a distant mountaintop of Sendai in Japan’s Tōhoku region (where the 3/11 earthquake/tsunami occurred), and Nao’s granduncle Haruki #1, a student of philosophy and French literature at Tokyo University forced into suicidal bombing missions during the Japan-US Pacific war. Struggling in scattered times and spaces of the world, all these characters are drawn, in one way or another, into global political, economic, cultural and environmental forces. They are constitutive of the minor “cosmopolitans today” as described by Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty: “the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging” (6).

Secondly, *minor cosmopolitics* alludes to “minor transnationalism,” a concept proposed by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. Initiated as a resistance to colonial ideology that constrains thoughts to struggles between the colonizers and the colonized and thus reduces most discussions about the “minor” to a confining dyad of minor/major or center/margin, “minor transnationalism” pushes forth to nonhierarchical networking possibilities between the marginalized and the underprivileged.As Lionnet and Shih explained, “[t]here is a clear lack of proliferation of relational discourses among different minority groups, a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that has historically pitted different ethnic groups against each other” (2). Colonial ideology intentionally plays up antagonisms between ethnic groups and plays down the possible alliances between them for fear that the minors might join force to tip the reigning superiority of the majors. In effect a continuous “minoritization” of the minors is possible only when each minor remains “mediated by the major in both its social and its psychic means of identification” (Lionnet and Shih 2). The horizontal force-joining of minors from scattered sites as suggested by “minor transnationalism” makes strategically possible the “scale-jumping” potential, as conceived by Koshy, for the minor to influence the major, or more generally for the small to have impact on the large. In *Tale*, deriving force first from the connection between Nao and Ruth as two marginalized figures and then unfolding into lines that conjoin other marginalized characters, *minor cosmopolitics* shares with “minor transnationalism” the agenda to “look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent” between different margins (Lionnet and Shih 1).

However, if “nation” and “nationalism” remain central to the conception of “minor transnationalism” (given the fact that the word *nation* is incorporated as one key parameter in the coinage of “minor transnationalism”), I conceive *minor cosmopolitics* as leaving out an explicit reference to “nation,” and is thus not as much bounded to a critique of nation or nationalism as “minor transnationalism.” I argue that *Tale* enacts a *minor cosmopolitics* more than a “minor transnationalism” insofar as the novel shows more concern about the various axes of connections across the world and the idea of being human individuals in relation of each other than about national divisions or national identities. Ruth, for example, is a Japanese North American who used to live in the US, spent years in Japan and now lives in Canada. Her marriage to Oliver, a man of German ancestry, is jokingly described as “an axial alliance”—“a small accidental consequence of a war fought before either of them was born” (32). Nao was born in Japan but stayed in Sunnyvale, California for about a decade before moving back to Japan. She continues considering herself an “American,” but this does not block her from having a close relationship with her great-grandmother Jiko or nourishing a strong interest in Jiko’s Buddhist learning. Haruki #2 sought career opportunities in the US; his plan fell through not because he was a Japanese but because of the collapse of dot-com boom as well as his insistence, as revealed through Ruth’s research, on building “a conscience into the interface design” of military/game software for compelling the users to react with human empathy at moments of urgency (307). Among the main characters in *Tale*, Haruki #1 is probably the only one whose fate is directly tied to the suppressing force of nationalism. He was assigned by the Japanese government to be a *kamikaze* suicidal pilot during the Second World War. Yet *Tale* arranges for Haruki #1 to choose ultimately not to die for Japan but for his conscience: after recognizing Americans as “*an enemy*” that he “*cannot hate*” (324; Ozeki’s emphasis), he plunged his plane not into an American battleship but to the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. In his letters to his mother Jiko, he stated that he would commit suicide, but as “a free man” rather than as an instrument of the Japanese imperialism (257).

*Tale* as such does not take nationalist ideology as its most fundamental target of criticism. It does not present cosmopolitan practices as antithetical to national belonging or conflate cosmopolitanism with transnationalism.10 While national categories remain present in *Tale*, by introducing characters that move, live and think beyond the confinement of national categories (as illustrated above), the novel from time to time compels readers to think on scales larger than nation. At other times, *Tale* sheds light on the geographical discrepancies, historical divergences and group divisions within one nation-state, thereby ushering in identificatory scales smaller than nation. Nao, for example, describes Tokyo as composed of places as varied as first, the “wild and weirdly awesome” Akihabara that is teeming with “stores and stalls spilling over with circuit boards and DVDs and transformers and gaming software and fetish props and manga models and inflatable sex dolls” (290); secondly, the “slick and modern” Shinjuku and Shibuya “with skyscrapers made of concrete and glass” (129); thirdly, the neighborhood her family inhabits that is “like a slum, old and crowded, with small, ugly apartment buildings made of water-stained cement all crammed together” on a “crooked street” (129); and lastly, the tiny temple on her way to school, which is located “right in the middle of Tokyo,” but feels like “a bubble in ice,” “a core sample from another time” (46).

And if Japan is presented not as an integrated nation-state, on Ruth’s side the names of several locales evoke community histories and memories that link these places to disparate lines of world history. The place nicknamed “Jap Ranch,” for example, used to be “one of the most beautiful places” on Cortes Island; it was an “old homestead” that “once belonged to a Japanese family, who were forced to sell when they were interned” during the Second World War (32). The place has since changed name and is now owned by elderly Germans. Yet Ruth insists on calling it “Jap Ranch,” for she does not want to let “New Age correctness erase the history of the island” (32). “Whaletown” is also a place name that heralds in “specter of the past” (59). Once a whaling station from which the place derived its name, all whales in this area were “slaughtered or had fled” between 1869 and 1870 in the trade of whale oil (58). As “whales were rarely seen in nearby waters anymore” (57), the name “Whaletown” functions as a historical vestige that summons lives beyond the human realm.11 “Cortes Island” is another place name on which Ruth dwells. Officially named after “a famous Spanish conquistador, who overthrew the Aztec empire” (141), Cortes Island has another nickname—“a shadow name that was rarely spoken: the Island of the Dead” (142). Sources of this nickname are divided among the locals, ranging from “the bloody intertribal wars,” “the smallpox epidemic of 1862,” the island’s origin as “a tribal burial ground,” to “the aging population of retired white people” (142). These divided interpretations of a place’s nickname illustrate the discrepant nature of the local lore. They also testify to the shifting ways of how a local community has been imbricated with the world. Guy Beauregard suggested that Ozeki represented in *Tale* spaces “marked by commercial and militarized violence and by the forced removal of Indigenous and other racialized subjects” so as to “prise apart depictions of Canada as a presumed place of refuge” (102, 107). In view of the global subtexts (the Japan-US Pacific war, the nineteenth-century global whaling trade, the European overseas exploration and colonization, the smallpox epidemic across the Americas, and so on) of these local memories and hidden histories, I would argue instead that *Tale* represents places such as “Jap Ranch,” “Whaletown” and “Cortes Island” not so much as parts of Canada but as parts of the world. The tentative suspension of the rubric of “nation-state” paves way for a literary restructuring of scattered locales in *Tale.*

2.

Thus far I have explained *minor cosmopolitics* by laying bare its connection to and difference from “minority cosmopolitanism” and “minor transnationalism.” My goal is to conceive the scale-traversing potential of the minors from discrepant geohistorical sites in world formation. In this section, I will turn to the instrumental function of *word*—a microscopic element with force—in Ozeki’s world-making project. *Tale* places at its center a character-writer or writer-reader relationship that delivers others’ worlds through words. This endows the term “minor” in *minor cosmopolitics* a third layer of meaning: besides referring to the minority status of the characters and the horizontal linkage between marginalized people and their histories, “minor” in *Tale* could also refer to the microscopic dynamics of words in literary reading and writing. Despite the fact that cosmopolitanism is commonsensically associated with large-scale thinking, *Tale*’s reference to quantum mechanics to illuminate the plasticity and multiplicity of space and time in literary imagination pinpoints the interlocking structure of the big and the small.

Briefly, *Tale*’s world-making project draws force largely from tilting the world from its habitual symbolic structures. Ozeki’s suspension of national categories in representing geohistorical memories as discussed in the previous section is one example. Through the relationship between Nao and Ruth, one could see even more clearly Ozeki’s attempt to release characters from conventional identity categories. From its beginning the relationship between Ruth and Nao is irreducible to that between nation-states. Nor could an even more simplistic framework of Asia vs. America or East vs. West account for their differences. The fact that both Nao and Ruth are “Japanese Americans” to an extent, yet out of different historical genealogy and hence developing very dissimilar boundary-traversing experiences and worldviews, renders problematic any simplistic attempt to differentiate them in terms of nation, culture, or geographical location. Instead of resorting to any convenient categorization, Ozeki cast Ruth and Nao’s relationship into that between two individuals, specifically between a character and an author, or a writer and a reader. Ozeki asserted that *Tale* is “very much about the process of fiction writing itself”; it dramatizes “what happens when an imaginary character reaches out” to an author (Ty 162). Ozeki elaborated this point further in an interview: it is like the characters are already “out there,” “floating around in the ether,” and “look through the clouds” in search of authors to carry out the potential of their stories (Kenower). Fiction-writing is accordingly initiated from a somewhat random encounter of a character and an author across time and space. It could be understood as a cosmopolitan encounter that, according to *Tale*, bears vivid similarity in both process and consequences to the chance encounter between two particles in the quantum universe.

For Ozeki, novel-writing must not be a solipsistic activity. It usually comes from others’ “voice” that conveys “a tone,” “an attitude,” and “a kind of sensibility” (Stanford Humanities Center). In *Tale*, it is Nao’s teenage voice that calls Ruth into the position of both a reader and an author. Nao’s diary opens by addressing a “you”: “Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I will tell you” (3). Significantly, Ruth is suffering from writer’s block when she encounters Nao’s diary. Unable to complete another novel, Ruth has spent years working on a memoir, with the “bristling tower of pages that represented the last ten years of her life sat squarely on the desk in front of her” (63). Though impressed by the sense of “certainty,” the “uninhibited flow” of Nao’s language (37), Ruth has serious doubt about allowing Nao’s diary to interrupt her memoir project. She asks: “What was she doing wasting precious hours on someone else’s story?” (31). On second thought, however, she admits to herself that only when she stops dwelling on herself and starts to pay attention to others’ stories could she become alive again as a novelist: “She was a novelist. She was interested in the lives of others. What had gotten into her, to think she could write a memoir?” (64).

This realization that a novelist’s responsibility is not to write about herself but to explore others’ lives turns Ruth’s writing from a self-trapped project that goes nowhere into an open-ended exchange, first with Nao, and then with the worlds unraveling through her connection with Nao. Although in the author-character model Ruth is the author, she is not given absolute authority over Nao. *Tale* introduces a writer-reader model alongside the character-author model to spell out the collaborative relationship between Nao and Ruth: Nao plays the active role as a diary writer who tries to write her reader into existence while Ruth the novelist is mostly the reader of Nao’s stories. While reading and exploring Nao’s stories, Ruth wonders from time to time about the issue of agency: “Was she [Ruth] the dream? Was Nao the one writing her into being? Agency is a tricky business” (392). Being aware that “Ruth” in Japanese could be pronounced as “*rusu*,” meaning “not at home” or “absent” (59), Ruth even imagines herself to be “as absent as her name indicated, a homeless and ghostly composite of words that the girl had assembled” (392).

Following Ruth’s line of thinking, if a novelist comes into existence only through her curiosity of and exposure to a character’s life and story across geographical and temporal barriers, literary writing would turn quintessentially a cosmopolitan practice. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah also addressed a similar kind of affinity between literary creation and cosmopolitanism by laying emphasis on writing, reading, and storytelling as important cosmopolitan practices. According to Appiah, people usually develop interest in and care for other groups after reading about these groups. Storytelling and story-sharing are fundamental to human community-building. Appiah contended:

We wouldn’t recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination…. [E]valuating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships. (29)

This statement throws light on the lines and ligaments that storytelling could conjure up among different human groups. But *Tale* does more than reiterate the important role narratives might play in weaving social fabric and enabling the coexistence of differences; it moves a step further to cast into vivid drama the boundary-crossing and viscera-affecting “magic” of words that not only brings one into better acquaintance with others’ worlds but ushers in a temporal/spatial becoming of the world.12 As shall be seen, Nao’s diary gradually comes into life when held in Ruth’s hands. “Running her fingertips across the soft cloth cover” of the diary, Ruth notices

the faint impression of the tarnished letters. They still retained the shape of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but they had evolved—no, that word implied a gradual unfolding, and this was sudden, a mutation or a rift, pages ripped from their cover by some Tokyo crafter who’d retooled Proust into something altogether new. (37)

Reading into the diary, Ruth further sees “[i]n her mind’s eye … the purple ink scripting sinuous lines into solid blocks of colored paragraphs” (37), as if Nao’s dairy were not a cold object already completed in the past but a narrative that is still living, still under formation at the moment of Ruth’s reading. More importantly, in the process of reading Ruth herself is drawn into the texture of the diary. Her mind and body are touched on and transformed by the life unfolding from the words in front of her. For example, dwelling on Nao’s line “*I’m reaching forward through time to touch you … you’re reaching back to touch me*” (37; Ozeki’s emphasis), Ruth once again feels the diary “warm in her hands,” and she knows that the warmth has “less to do with any spooky quality in the book and everything to do with the climate changes in her own body” (37).

Accessing another person’s stories results not simply in a shared world but also in the transformation of the reader and her cognition of the world. Nao urges Ruth to give up whatever assumptions and expectations while reading her story: “Assumptions and expectations will kill any relationship, so let’s you and me not go there, okay?” (6). Ruth also apprehends the power of fiction to tear down temporal lines and spatial barriers of existing realities. She puts it this way: “When she was writing a novel, living deep inside a fictional world, the days got jumbled together, and entire weeks or months or even years would yield to the ebb and flow of the dream.… Fiction had its own time and logic. That was its power” (313-314). To fulfill the potential in fiction to reconfigure the world with an alternative time and logic, Ruth attempts to read Nao’s diary at a speed that coincides with Nao’s speed of writing. As she says: “I was trying to pace myself. I felt I owed it to Nao. I wanted to read at the same rate she’d lived” (375). Instead of adapting Nao’s writing into her own speed of reading or trying to absorb Nao’s life into any conceptual abstraction, Ruth intends to leave the diary “real and totally personal” (38).13

*Tale* as such enacts an open-ended collaborative project between Ruth and Nao that is slowly unfurled in the present time of Ruth’s reading/writing. Given the fact that Nao plans to commit suicide upon completing her diary, Ruth’s slow-paced reading strategy also functions to generate more time to push off the closure of (Nao’s) life/story. To illustrate the importance of time in sustaining the openness of (Nao’s) life, in particular to explicate textuality’s world-making potential by pushing off narrative closure, *Tale* brings in quantum mechanics, which is first referred to in the conversations between Ruth and Oliver, and then explained more systematically in the novel’s appendices:

• superposition: by which a particle can be in two or more places or states at once (i.e., Zen Master Dōgen is both alive and dead?)

• entanglement: by which two particles can coordinate their properties across space and time and behave like a single system (i.e., a Zen master and his disciple; a character and her narrator; old Jiko and Nao and Oliver and me?)

• the measurement problem: by which the act of measuring or observation alters what is being observed (i.e., the collapse of a wave function; the telling of a dream?) (409)

An irony might be detected at first sight of *Tale*’s inclusion of quantum theory, as the development of quantum physics has been historically linked to the invention of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. Widely known as it is that Albert Einstein’s letter (drafted by quantum physicists [Leó Szilárd](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le%C3%B3_Szil%C3%A1rd) in consultation with [Eugene Wigner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_Wigner) and Edward Teller) to US President Franklin Roosevelt in 1939 led to “the Manhattan Project” that was responsible for the production of the first atomic bombs, *Tale’s* concern with the US-Japanese war, 3/11, and the Fukushima nuclear crisis seems to be in contradiction to its citation of quantum mechanics as one possible theoretical base for *minor cosmopolitics*. A closer investigation into the history of twentieth-century physics, however, would reveal that the relationship between quantum theory and the development of nuclear forces was more accidental than intentional. The revolution made by the discovery of quantum at the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of quantum theory in popularity in the 1920s among physicists was primarily theoretical and philosophical. It challenged the classical mechanical world picture by asking questions such as “Do physical properties come into existence only as a result of measurements? If so, is the observed world real and objective? Can the object and subject be distinguished or do they form an indissoluble whole? Can the lessons of quantum mechanics be extrapolated to society and culture?” (Kragh 171-172). But for the rise of Nazism that sent a large number of Jewish quantum physicists and their affiliates not only into international exile but also into a fear that Nazi Germany would be the first to construct atomic bombs if the US did not take immediate action, neither Szilárd nor Einstein would have suggested the militarization of physics. In fact, after the “quantum fugitives” (Fraser’s term for the quantum scientists exiled from Europe due to the Nazi violence) discovered that the Nazis had not tried to build bombs, Szilárd “organized another missive” to advise Roosevelt “to stop the [nuclear] effort before it was too late,” but this time the letter was left unread, and when the atomic explosions became a reality in 1945, “the initial jubilation of the Los Alamos scientists sublimated into guilt” (Fraser 188, 192).14

While Ozeki did not explain why she brought quantum theory into *Tale*, resonances could be detected between the stories of “quantum fugitives” and the stories of Haruki #1 and Haruki #2, not simply in the sense that “quantum fugitives,” Haruki #1 and Haruki #2 were all “minor cosmopolitans” in face of large suppressing forces from race, nation, or capitalism but also in the way that they all struggled between the military/capitalist exploitations of their knowledge/ability and their desperate attempts to adhere to human conscience. But *Tale* draws on quantum mechanics not simply for generating literary allusions to the stories of “quantum fugitives.” More significantly than that, by citing quantum mechanics and focusing on its revolutionary worldview, *Tale* contributes by restoring to quantum theory its philosophical dimension. Invented with strong theoretical and philosophical concerns, quantum theory was militarized and industrialized largely due to World War II. Helge Kragh, for example, mourned for the lost dialogue between physics and philosophy after the War:

One result of the postwar generational shift and the general turn toward instrumentalist and pragmatic modes of thought wasthat philosophy lost its place in physics. Many members of the earlier generation of physicists had a deep interest in philosophical questions and were sometimes inspired by philosophers in their innovative work, or they discussed competently the philosophical implications of the new physics. (441)

*Tale* attends to the philosophical implications of quantum theory and in return, quantum theory enriches *Tale* with insights about world formation at the atomic and subatomic level. Indeed, the appropriateness of referring to physics in a literary text concerned with world-making was laid bare by Dennis Bohnenkamp in his study of the influence of post-Einsteinian physics on literature: “theories of physicists and literary fictions have much in common. Both posit hypothetical worlds” (20).

Quantum mechanics introduces new modes to posit the world. Ozeki pointed out in *Tale*’s appendices that while classical physics is constrained by phenomenal reality and its causal laws, quantum mechanics directs attention to the movement of “atomic and subatomic particles,” among which are discovered a set of new rules for the universe (409). The sheer change of scale from what scientists can see with their naked eyes in classical physics to “the smallest scales and atomic increments” in quantum physics is enough to compel one to imagine the constitution of the world in a radically new way (409). The rule of superposition, for example, sheds light on the possible coexistence of many worlds before the intrusion of an observation. The principle of entanglement accounts for our imagination of the world as a huge quantum network of connection and interaction across time and space. “The measurement problem” then challenges the existence of an objective reality. Since it is a measuring act, such as an observation, that would collapse the multiplying possibilities of a quantum universe into a fixed and single state, the acts of reading and interpretation are given primary importance in determining the “reality” in the macroscopic world.

To elaborate, whereas classical physics attends to the properties and movements of objects and systems available to objective measurement and representation, quantum theory casts into relief an all-inclusive time-space of calculation and indeterminacy. The former offers ontological and realist description of the world, yet the latter heralds in microscopic worlds with irreducible differences, chances and connections. Temporally, the former is concerned about a commonsensical causal relationship between the past, the present, and the future as spatialized compartments, whereas the latter is pointing toward past and future imperfects—the continuing, the repetitive, and the not-yet-complete that constitute an unbounded scope of virtualities.15 *Tale* cites the thought experiment of Schrödinger’s cat to explain quantum mechanics’ nature as “a calculus,” “a machine for predicting experimental results” (415): before the box containing the cat is open for observation, there exists equal probability for the cat to die or live. The wave function in quantum field allows each particle (such as the cat in Schrödinger’s experiment) to occupy in our conception diffuse and changeable positions (like a wave). In this way quantum physics propels one to comprehend the world not as a formed totality but as “worlds” still being made.

*Tale* finds correspondence between this quantum field of multiplying potentialities and an all-inclusive Zen moment. Ozeki wrote in the novel’s appendices: “If Zen Master Dōgen had been a physicist, I think he might have liked quantum mechanics. He would have naturally grasped the all-inclusive nature of superposition and intuited the interconnectedness of entanglement” (409). In particular, Ozeki stressed the reality-altering potential of the human mind that is implied by both quantum physics and Zen Buddhism. She recognized Dōgen not only as “a contemplative [person]” but also as “a man of action,” who “would have been intrigued by the notion that attention might have the power to alter reality” in quantum mechanics (409). Significantly, *Tale* casts the process of Ruth’s reading and writing into a site of both Zen and quantum wave production, a site in which webs of words proliferate to generate “entanglements” that are capable of flexing time and space into linguistic and epistemic plasticity. Essential to Ruth’s reading and writing is thus an attempt to restore the world’s wave probabilities by salvaging the possible becoming in the past as well as in the present.

Given the importance of time in the unraveling of quantum probabilities, Ruth meditates on the possibility for writing to carry on “the texture of time passing” while reading Nao’s diary (64). She longs for a piece of writing that “could re-enact in words the flow of a life lived” (64). In a similar vein, Nao is driven by a desire to capture in writing each performing moment of “now.” She claims: “the problem of trying to write about the past really starts in the present: No matter how fast you write, you’re always stuck in the *then* and you can never catch up to what’s happening *now*” (97-98; Ozeki’s emphasis). The “*kotodama*” (word-spirit 言靈) of “now,” Nao adds, “felt like a slippery fish, a slick fat tuna” (98). In light of quantum theory, “now” is valuable for it represents a moment of wave function, in which the superposed many worlds are possible. “Then,” on the contrary, marks the already solidified symbolic reality, a static moment of signifying fixity after the collapse of the quantum wave function. The fact that “Nao” is pronounced like “now” renders clear that embedded in Nao’s diary writing is an effort to save both “Nao” and “now.” “Now” embodies not only the quantum/Zen moment of overflowing potentialities but also the time needed for the survival of a self. To lose “now” is to lose one’s self, a giving up of one’s agency to the world of representation. In Nao’s own words, it is like to “drop out of time,” to “[e]xit my existence”—or, put it more bluntly, to commit suicide (7).

No other concept better captures this correlation between the existence of time and the existence of life than the Zen concept “*uji*.” Meaning both “time” and “being time” or “time­ being,” the concept “*uji*” is composed of two characters “*u*-*ji*” (有-時), thus linking “being” and “time,” making manifest “being” as inseparable from time, or “being” as embedded in and manifested through time. Dōgen declared: “[t]he ‘time being’ means time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time” (48). It is a mistake to objectify time, rendering it a space-like container in which “being” exists. Rather, “being” evolves through time and time is illustrated by the existence of “beings.” Dōgen asserted: one “must see all the various things of the whole world as so many times” (49). Plural in nature, “time” is no longer just “something that goes past” (Dōgen 51). One is encouraged to generate as “many times” as a way to save “beings.”

Taking “*uji*” as its title, *Tale* is concerned about the preservation of time and time-beings. Nao’s planned suicide upon the completion of her diary could be interpreted both literally and symbolically. It could refer as much to the destruction of Nao’s physical body as to Nao’s surrendering herself to an inevitable disappearance of “now” when she ceases writing. This suicidal closure of one’s self and time, however, is lifted open when Ruth picks up Nao’s diary on the other side of the Pacific and starts a prolonged reading process, in which Nao’s self and narratives are brought once again into the temporal productivity of “now.” Read in this light, Ruth’s reading/writing is from its beginning a rescue mission.16 What appears as Ozeki’s surreal plot arrangement for Ruth’s life to branch into Nao’s and ultimately save Nao and her father from their suicidal attempts could be understood as Ozeki’s way to test out, through her fiction writing, the time-giving and life-saving power of Ruth’s reading and writing. Moving beyond the realist world measurable by classical physics, Ozeki enacted via her fictional writing a ghostly quantum time-space of superposition and entanglements. When Ruth continues reading Nao’s diary, trying to “pace” herself and “read at the same rate” Nao lives, the end of the diary keeps “changing”—more precisely, “receding” (375). “Every time I open the diary,” Ruth says, “there are more pages” (376). For one moment Ruth even confronts a blank page, as if Nao’s fate remains undecided, awaiting Ruth’s intervention as a reader/writer. Ruth’s friend Muriel, a retired anthropologist, offers a theory that compares Ruth’s role as a reader to that of an observer in quantum mechanics, a role equipped with the ability to alter Nao’s life reality: “Her story was about to end one way, and you intervened, which set up the conditions for a different outcome. A new ‘now,’ as it were, which Nao hasn’t quite caught up with” (376). Or, to borrow language from Zen Buddhism, Ozeki contended (in appendices) that Ruth’s reading introduces into Nao’s diary a “Zen moment when possibilities arise—a schism occurs, worlds branch, and multiplicity ensues” (415). Indeed, Ruth herself appreciates the effect of “not-knowing” the exact outcome of the story. In her letter to Nao at the end of *Tale*, she claims that “not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive” (402).

3.

The accidental encounter of two individuals’ minds in *Tale* has extended into a grand fiction that gives the world a literary structure. In effect, more time allows in more worlding opportunities. In keeping “all the worlds alive,” Ruth not only encompasses happenings and memories on her side of the world into her writing, but also makes use of the prolonged time of reading/writing to launch into the Internet gyre of information for a research that ends up, as shown in the first section of this article, salvaging world histories embedded in Nao and her family members’ life stories. Compared to an ocean gyre, the Internet in *Tale* is conceived as a gyre memory. Ruth asks: “Is the Internet a kind of temporal gyre, sucking up stories, like geodrift, into its orbit?” (114). Like a garbage patch that slowly breaks down into “razor-sharp fragments and brightly colored shards,” the Internet gyre memory contains “an undifferentiated mat of becalmed and fractured pixels” (114, 115)—“all the stuff that we’ve forgotten” (114), unless someone like Ruth gets into the gyre to salvage bits and pieces that would otherwise drop out of human history.

Ozeki claimed in a conversation with David Palumbo-Liu that her three novels are all about “agnotology“: the study of culturally induced ignorance, and the question “what drops out of history” is central to her fictional creation (Stanford Humanities Center). Her experience of taking care of her Alzheimer’s-afflicted mother between 1998 and 2004 propelled her further into meditations over the connection between time, existence and amnesia. Considering people like her mother as a being “literally dropping out of time” while losing memories of the world (Stanford Humanities Center), in *Tale* Ozeki drew into close affinity the efforts to generate time, save lives and restore memories. Essential in the *minor cosmopolitic*s staged in *Tale* is therefore not any individual’s ascendancy to a well-ordered cosmos of transcendence, but how fiction reading/writing could restore lives and memories while also positively communicating the openness of the world. Words as quantum particles operating on small scales play essential roles to enact imaginary uncertainties, bring in forgotten lives and histories, and prolong every “now” to forestall epistemic closure. They carry out a world-making project of huge magnitude not only by reconstituting lines between lives and memories but also by unfolding the temporal dimensions of “not-yet-known” or “not-yet-decided.”17 Although *Tale* as a novel has to conclude at some point no matter what, just as the collapse of wave function “*must* happen because the reality of the macroscopic world demands it” (*Tale* 415; Ozeki’s emphasis), Ozeki’s vision as a writer is captured in *Tale* by the words of Nao’s granduncle, Haruki #1, before his suicide mission. A *kamikaze* pilot, Haruki #1 wrote in his letter to his mother: “no matter what nonsense I write in it [the official letter], please know that those are not my last words. There are other words and other worlds” (258). Aiming at neither homogeneity nor totality, *Tale* puts forth a cosmopolitics that points to other worlds through other words.

**Notes**

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1. The influence of Zen Buddhism on *Tale* is evident*.* The title of the novel is indebted to Dōgen’s fascicle on time, “For the Time Being” (“*Uji*”), and Ozeki was ordained a Zen Buddhist priest in 2010.
2. Ozeki discussed the influence of the 3/11 earthquake/tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster on her writing in several interviews. See also Ty 164; The Wheeler Centre; and Stanford Humanities Center.
3. Ozeki might have intentionally left this theory unconfirmed for disrupting a cause-effect linearity that is commonly appealed to in a realist comprehension of reality. The world in *Tale*, as will be demonstrated in this article, is instead marked by (the quantum rule of) accidents, coincidences and uncertainties.
4. For a detailed analysis of the interconnection of issues such as the ecological and psychological impact of the tsunami debris, the radioactive contamination, and the ways through which information is conveyed in a digital age in *Tale*, please consult Matsunaga.
5. The word “remote” is reiterated in *Tale*, such as in the description of Cortes Island as “a remote island in the middle of Desolation Sound” (11), or when Ruth says that she was carried by Oliver’s mind “currents” onto “the remote shores of [Oliver’s] evergreen island” (57). Guy Beauregard observed that the trope “remote” also frequently appears in reviews of *Tale*, hence raising the question: “remote in relation to where?” (98). Read under the rubric of cosmopolitics, the novel’s intention to play on the concept of “remoteness” in a world of “global radical interconnectivity” becomes significant.
6. “I-novel,” or “*shi-shōsetsu*” emerged in the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods, in which the author usually reveals his/her mind and life under the guise of fiction. Influenced by the western autobiography, “I-novel” nevertheless develops its own unique assumptions about self and life: first, though being fictional, “I-novel” derives materials from its author’s “lived experiences”; secondly, instead of presenting self as an autonomous entity, “I-novel” presents the self as embedded in the collective and as such the writing about the self is always pointing toward connections to others. For details about “I-novel,” see Fowler; and Suzuki.
7. Though not mentioning “I-novel,” Rocío G. Davis also noted that “[w]riting the lives of others becomes a key operation for the characters” in *Tale*: Nao and Ruth “struggle to write the stories of others, perhaps as a strategy for understanding themselves” (96-97).
8. Besides her concerns about the tsunami debris and radioactive pollution, Ruth also dwells on the power relationships between human beings and the forest, and between introduced species and local flora and fauna on Cortes Island, not to mention that Ruth’s husband Oliver is “an environmental artist” who “translated the vast, wild, Pacific Rim ecosystem into poetry and pixels” (56).
9. One might note, though, that Ruth does not necessarily consider New York City a metropolitan center; she jokes that she does not lose anything as she just traded “one island” (the island of Manhattan) “for another” (Cortes Island) (57).
10. In this point *Tale* resonates with Pheng Cheah in suggesting a complicated dialectics between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Probing into the historical genealogy of both cosmopolitanism and nationalism, Cheah argued that it is anachronistic to think of cosmopolitanism as fundamentally a resistance to nationalism since the development of the former predated the birth of the latter. In fact, before developing into absolutist states with ideological and territorial rigidity, nations as imagined communities were cosmopolitan by nature. See Cheah, “Introduction Part II” 22-30.
11. These “no-longer-representative” place names are described by Michelle N. Huang as “name-as-remainder” that marks the erasure of local human and animal (100-101).
12. The word “magic” occurs more than once in Nao’s diary. Toward the end of the first section in her first diary entry, she addresses her “imaginary” reader: “if you do decide to read on, then guess what? You’re my kind of time being and together we’ll make magic!” (4); and again at the end of the second section, she reiterates: “like I told you, together we’re making magic, at least for the time being” (5).
13. The encounter and exchanges between Ruth and Nao as two subjects irreducible to each other bear strong resonance to Luce Irigaray’s treatise on the irreducible duality of human world. As Irigaray seeks in “the irreducible difference of the other” an essential dimension of human freedom, Ruth “shares worlds” with Nao to pave ways for the unfolding of the infinite becoming of the world. For Irigaray’s ideas, see *Sharing the World*.
14. Please see Fraser for a detailed historical narrative on the “quantum exiles.”
15. This brief comparison of classical and quantum physics is indebted to Bohnenkamp; Krips; Plotnitsky; and Miller.
16. Ruth’s “rescue mission” must not be comprehended within the imperialist framework of “a Canadian rescues a Japanese” or “a Westerner rescues an Easterner.” What is “recued”in *Tale*, via a prolongation of Nao’s life through Ruth’s reading and writing, is the time required for a continuous world-making project. Ruth herself is aware of the time-generating and life-giving force of writing. She claims in one passage: “I’ve always thought of writing as the opposite of suicide…. That writing was about immortality. Defeating death, or at least forestalling it” (314).
17. Dōgen in “*Uji*” uses the word “*mitō*” (未到) the “not yet arrived,” “not yet understood,” or “failure to understand” to describe this dimension. He states: “You reckon time only as something that does nothing but pass by. You do not understand it as something not yet arrived” (53).

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