

# The Waste/d Spaces of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

Bella Adams

Liverpool John Moores University, U.K.

---

## Abstract

"How do you deal with a reality that is so overwhelming and so devastating with the tool of fiction?" asked Ruth Ozeki of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan's Pacific Northeast on and after March 11, 2011. *A Tale for the Time Being* offers a response to this question by dramatizing how the spatialized figure of the container that informs dominant views of the disaster, the human subject, and the literary object has been undermined. Paradoxically perhaps, Ozeki's tale deploys a container in the form of a plastic lunchbox to testify to the impossibility of containment. This particular piece of disaster debris has made its way across the ocean to the Pacific Northwest, to the obvious dismay of many of Ozeki's Canadian characters when it washes up on their local beach. On seeing the disaster debris from Japan for herself, not far from her Canadian island home, Ozeki says it represents "such a visual and material enactment—evidence that the planet is really small, and we are all radically interconnected" by human, plastic and nuclear waste that is a whole lot livelier than the containers for which it was intended. *A Tale for the Time Being* exposes this liveliness, or, in new materialist terms, "vital materiality" for the purposes of critique and care.

**Keywords:** waste, disaster, Fukushima, March 11, 2011, new materialism, ecofeminism.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i3.6886>

---

In Japan on March 11, 2011, a triple disaster killed 20,000, displaced 470,000 and affected 32 million people (Samet and Chanson 5, 17, 9). Following the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, the Japanese North American novelist, filmmaker and Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki asked: "How do you deal with a reality that is so overwhelming and so devastating with the tool of fiction?" (Siassina 2). Two years after this event, Ozeki published her third environmentally themed novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*. This novel focuses on a teenage diarist who disappears and possibly dies in the disaster, and the girl's reader, who is a Japanese North American writer. Although separated by the Pacific Ocean, these two characters are brought together when Ruth chances on what looks like some garbage on her local beach, but which turns out to be a plastic-wrapped, bright red Hello Kitty lunchbox containing among its contents Naoko Yasutani's diary.

By putting herself "on the line as the character [of Ruth] in the book," Ozeki negotiates the reality of the disaster in a way that is most relevant to her as a writer: she "break[s] the fictional container" and, more crucially, the fiction of containment (Siassina, "Ruth Ozeki" 2). This latter fiction found its most devastating expression in an event that laid to waste Japan's Pacific Northeast, and continues to do harm well beyond the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that was meant to contain it.<sup>1</sup> Ozeki's two interrelated breakages help to disrupt the dominant view of this particular

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Samet and Chanson's "Report."

place, if not space per se, as containable, specifically in this essay with respect to human, plastic and nuclear waste. All these waste materials resist their respective containments. They speak, leach, and leak. In new materialist Jane Bennett's terms, waste evidences "a *vital materiality*" that exceeds human control enough to bring about a new age for life itself, or the Anthropocene (vii; emphasis in original).

The world Ozeki describes is, in Bennett's words, "filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities," including "our trash [which] is generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak" (99, vii). Indeed, the "vital materiality" of waste helps Ozeki to illustrate an ecological worldview that is also "informed by basic Buddhist principles—of interdependence, impermanence, [and] interconnectedness" (Ty 161). As she explains in an interview with Eleanor Ty, "all the debris [from Japan] is starting to wash up on [Canada's] West Coast. It is such a visual and material enactment—evidence that the planet is really small, and we are all radically interconnected" (162).

This essay begins by considering the importance of the spatialized figure of the container to dominant discourses. It then examines how *A Tale for the Time Being* breaks the fictional container between writer-character-reader, before moving on to discuss how this breakage affects other relationships, most notably, them and us, subject and object, here and there. Waste flows with, through, and between these categories. It connects us all. For this reason, waste cannot simply be "othered" as dominant culture is wont to do with waste by dumping it in rural backwaters or into open seas, supposedly out of sight and out of mind. Following Ozeki, this essay attends to these waste/d spaces, as they expose the spectacular and slow violence of the Anthropocene (Nixon 2). These interrelated forms of violence mean that, as Ozeki explains, "we should all be worried about ... Fukushima," at least enough for us to stop thinking with containers, or to learn from human, plastic and nuclear waste that containment is a fiction that is bound to fail (Siassina, "Ruth Ozeki" 5). Her work helps to expose as fiction the ideologies and technologies of containment.

There is much to learn from waste on a beach, starting with how human beings define themselves. Historically, their self-definition is associated with figures of containment, or, in Donna Haraway's words from *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics" (30). Anna Tsing and her co-editors clarify this understanding of individuals and their impact in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*:

The twentieth century was a powerful time for thinking through individuals. Individuals were the ideological unit of political "freedom." They also became the analytic motor of influential sciences, from economics to population biology... Individuals were just one kind of self-contained unit that could be summed up or divided up like building blocks, from genes to populations to species—and sometimes even to nations, religions, or civilizations. (71)

Here, “thinking through individuals” involves thinking with containers that operate on nearly all scales from, in Ozeki’s tale, human skin and nuclear containment pits to the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, it seems that all the scales are covered here, except the one that matters the most. In view of the earth’s anthropogenic degradation by plastic, nuclear and other chemical means, there is a dark irony involved in excluding this particular container (or, as close to a container as a planet can get) when unleashing human forces powerful enough to bring about human disempowerment and to endanger life on earth itself. For Haraway, Tsing and others writers associated with new materialism and ecofeminism in particular, “the autonomy of these [self-contained] units has come under question, and each question works to undermine the edifice built from the segregation of each from each,” most spectacularly in disasters like Fukushima 3/11 (Tsing et al. 71).

*A Tale for the Time Being* contributes to this undermining by posing questions that evoke the triple disaster, in particular, the giant waves, the breached seawalls, and, less visibly, the bodies buried under the rubble or washed out to sea along with the radiation: “What does separation look like? A wall? A wave? A body of water? A ripple of light or a shimmer of subatomic particles, parting?” (346). In each instance, separation, segregation, and self-containment fail, as they were always bound to do. The fictional space of Ozeki’s novel communicates this failure most directly in the form of the Buddhist concept of a time being. The novel also makes use of a number of narrative strategies that help to expose further the fiction of containment.

Adhering to the Buddhist concept of a “time being” (Ozeki 3) that is also an “*interbeing*,” Ozeki explains in an interview with David Palumbo-Liu that “what we experience as the self is more like a collection of fluid, interpenetrating, interdependencies that change and flow through time” (3). In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the Buddhist nun character, Jiko Yasutani, most embodies this concept of self. Over time, she tries to teach her great-granddaughter, Naoko, or Nao, for short, about this concept of a fluid and interconnected self. A time being might be anthropomorphized by the teenager, as “someone who lives in time, and that means you and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or will ever be,” but as her narrative progresses, a time being is increasingly de-anthropocentrized (Ozeki 3). In this respect, Nao’s (mis)interpretation of a time being introduces “an anthropomorphic element in perception,” arguably for the purposes of uncovering, in Bennett’s words, “a whole world of resonances and resemblances... We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of ‘talented’ and vibrant materialities” (99).

At first, Nao renders a time being in her own image, as “someone” rather than something, or “you,” “me” and “us” as opposed to “it”. A little later, she expands this view to include “all animals and other life-forms like amoebas and viruses and maybe even plants... as well as all the extinct species” (Ozeki 19). What appears to her next are the “vibrant materialities” of non-living forms. For Nao, “words and stories” are time beings, which come and go as they see fit—to Ruth’s obvious dismay (24). Ruth has writer’s block and has struggled for nearly a decade to write a memoir about caring for her mother. Words do not come easily for her, at least not as easy as they

seem to do for Nao, whose writing is described as “uninhibited,” “the writing itself never falter[ing]... straight through to the very last, tightly packed page” (37, 31). Later, however, Ruth discovers that Nao’s last “words are all gone... I mean they were there, but now they’re not. They’re missing” (343). Here, Ruth also experiences reader’s block.

Possibly, less surreally, Nao gains an appreciation for the time beings associated with everyday life from her great-grandmother and another nun:

The two of them had all these crazy routines they did for every different kind of thing you can imagine, like washing their hands or brushing their teeth, or spitting out toothpaste, or even going for a crap. ... They bowed and thanked the toilet and offered a prayer to save all beings. ... [O]ne day after I’d flushed, I turned to the toilet and said, “Thanks toilet”, and it felt pretty natural. (167)

Theirs is a world of time beings, or, in Bennett’s terms, “a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects” to which all three of them are grateful (vii). They might overestimate the toilet’s talent for waste elimination, or underestimate the anthropogenic harm of everyday chemicals in toothpaste and soap, but at least Nao and the nuns have some sense of a shared world of which we are all a part.

Various narrative strategies, for example, the mystery genre, scholarly footnotes, direct address, and shifting personal pronouns also help to convey this sense of a shared world, principally by involving Nao’s reader(s) in the tale. The question of Nao’s fate remains open to the last or ongoing since, as Ruth explains in the Epilogue: “not knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive” (Ozeki 402). For literary critic Guy Beauregard, “this difficult moment of *not knowing*” means that “Ruth’s reading of Nao’s diary emerges as part of an extended attempt to imagine the lives of countless others who may, or may not, have survived” (107). With respect to the long-term physical and psychological harm of Fukushima 3/11, for example, the increased risk of cancer among humans and nonhumans, such openness is important for those countless others who may or may not be surviving now.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the open question of Nao’s fate respects what Christophe Thouny identifies in another context as “the eventfulness of Fukushima, Japan” against the dominant “logic of containment” that seeks to reduce a planetary event to “a Japanese problem, a Tōhoku problem, a Fukushima problem,” and a “fleeting and insubstantial” one at that (2-4).

Ozeki’s shifting personal pronouns prove an especially effective strategy for breaking the logic or, more accurately, the fiction of containment between here and there, as well as between them and us. This strategy helps to ensure that Nao’s words make their way to Ruth and beyond. Ruth might think Nao is writing to her, but since she reads the diary aloud to her husband, Oliver, then he should “qualify as part of

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Samet and Chanson, “Report” 8-12.

you by now. And besides, ‘you’ can either be singular or plural” (Ozeki 344). Following Oliver’s argument, Ozeki’s readers should qualify, too, in what she has described in an interview as “an ethical matrix in which characters, writers, and readers are all enmeshed” (Palumbo-Liu 7).

On her first page, Nao involves us in this matrix when she says,

You wonder about me.  
I wonder about you.  
Who are you and what are you doing? (Ozeki 3)

These words are repeated in Ruth’s Epilogue in epistolary form, although her “you” is now Nao. The repetition reinforces the intimacy of the I/you relationship that Nao sought to establish from the beginning of her narrative:

*I will write down everything ... and when I’m done, I’ll just leave it somewhere and you will find it!*  
How cool is that? It feels like I’m reaching forward through time to touch you, and now you’ve found it, you’re reaching back to touch me! (26; emphasis in original)

The sense of touch, or the “*felt sense*” of Nao’s handwriting, which Ruth compares to skin (12; emphasis in original), along with the diary’s warmth, mustiness, acidity, and “something else that she realized must be Nao” (37-38), also undermine the presumed separation of writer-character-reader and, by extension, human from nonhuman.

Ozeki breaks the fictional container not only by putting herself on the line as Ruth but also by having this semi-fictional character “sense” Nao through the materiality of her handwritten diary. Put into print, as chapters in the novel, and by virtue of the plural “you,” Nao’s diary “touches” Ozeki’s readers too. When we open our copies of *A Tale for the Time Being*, we might also come to see how the atmosphere affects the pages. The air might be damp for us as well, making the pages smell a little musty or mouldy. In this respect, the pages recall “the fibrous memory that still lingers there, supple, vascular, and standing tall. The tree was past and the paper present, and yet paper still remembers holding itself upright and altogether. Like a dream, it remembers its sap” (346). Here, the sense that words and stories are time beings is reiterated by exposing how the material on which they appear and, for Ruth, disappear, has agency and memory.

With memory that still lingers in the vibrant materiality of the book, Ozeki offers a way for us to connect to Nao, even to care for her as Ruth and Oliver do, which is consistent with the Buddhist experience of the self as “a collection of fluid, interpenetrating, interdependencies that change and flow through time” (Palumbo-Liu 3). Writer-character-reader flow into and beyond one another, so much so that, as Ruth describes the experience, “your sense of being a solid, singular self would dissolve,” at least that is what she hopes for in order to free up the possibility of

understanding with “*all myriad things*. Mountains and rivers, grasses and trees, crows and cats and wolves and jellyfishes. That would be nice” (Ozeki, *Tale* 398-99; emphasis in original).

While it would be “nice” to think with myriad things in their pristine form, of land, water, plants, and animals not marked by the violence of Fukushima 3/11 and the slow violence of plastic and nuclear waste, Ozeki's tale “stays with the trouble.” *A Tale for the Time Being* thus contributes to Tsing and her co-editors' “arts of living on a damaged planet,” its “ghost” of the Anthropocene arguably taking the form of Nao, and its “monster,” the possibly irradiated, bright red plastic lunchbox.

Even before Fukushima 3/11, the personal traumas Nao experiences, including parental neglect, classroom bullying, and sexual exploitation help to shape her concern that both she and her diary are waste:

What if you just think I'm a jerk and toss me into the garbage, like all those young girls ... who get killed by perverts and chopped up and thrown into dumpsters, just because they've made the mistake of dating the wrong guy?

Or, here's another scary thought, what if you're not reading this at all? What if you never found this book, because somebody chucked it in the trash or recycled it before it got to you? Then ... I'm just sitting here wasting time talking to the inside of a dumpster.

Hey, answer me! Am I stuck inside of a garbage can, or not?

Just kidding. Again 😊 (Ozeki, *Tale* 26-27)

Given the violent context, the playful tone and smiley face might seem out of place. Yet, Nao's direct and insistent address to a reader such as Ruth whose narrative is attuned to the materiality of waste in particular, does compel serious consideration of the life wasted not just in and after Fukushima 3/11, but before it as well. For these lives to be wasted in this way, they must have already been categorized as waste.

Ruth imagines the girl's death by water in terms of decomposition and redistribution, while Nao's own description aestheticizes these processes through images borrowed from *The Tempest*: “My beautiful white bones would fall to the bottom of the ocean, where anemones would grow upon them like flowers. Pearls would rest in my eye sockets” (193). The beauty of this scene gestures towards a romanticized ecological worldview, of humans returning to their “oceanic origins” (Alaimo 111). Importantly, however, the ecological romance is undercut by the fact that *A Tale for the Time Being* exposes how the ocean and other watery environments comprising the planet's hydrological cycle, or, for some, the Hypersea, are designated waste disposal sites (123). The pearls that are Nao's eyes are more akin to those of the Phoenician sailor in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* depicting polluted water that “sweats / Oil and Tar,” or “no water” at all (III. 266-67, V. 331).

From Shakespeare, to Eliot, to Ozeki, to us, waste flows so it will always end up in the sea, which, in turn, raises a question about another romanticization of oceanic waste, this time, in the language of flotsam and jetsam. Ruth's husband, Oliver,

explains the difference between these two forms of garbage: “Flotsam is accidental, stuff found floating at sea. Jetsam’s been jettisoned. It’s a matter of intent” (Ozeki, *Tale* 13). However, intent proves to be no easy matter when contemplating human, plastic, and nuclear waste.

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, traditional notions of agency and intentionality are expanded and undermined. Ruth’s agency is most obviously compromised because she takes direction, first, from an omniscient narrator, second, from Nao, and third, from nonhumans. In the beachcombing scene when Ruth chances on the bright red lunchbox, water, light, and trash combine to attract her attention. On its own maritime adventure “riding” the oceanic gyres and “escaping” the Great Garbage Patches, the plastic container catches Ruth’s eye, “a small glint of refracted sunlight angling out from beneath a massive tangle of drying bull kelp, which the sea had heaved up onto the sand at full tide” (14, 8). As other animals are prone to do, Ruth mistakes the shiny red plastic for “a dying jellyfish” on a “wounded” shoreline, further complicating the line separating human and nonhuman beyond the consideration of agency (8).

After misidentifying the package for a dying jellyfish, Ruth decides that it is garbage and intends to put it in the rubbish bin when she gets home, but its neat packaging inside several plastic bags suggests a level of care not usually afforded to waste. Ruth is unsure about how to categorize the found object: “‘Of course it’s flotsam,’ she said. ‘Or jetsam’” (12-13). Her confusion over two forms of waste that are differentiated in terms of intent raises a question about Nao’s disappearance and possible death, and, by extension, the reasons for it. Nao implies her diary is jetsam when she likens it to “a message in a bottle, cast out onto the ocean of time and space” (26). The message it communicates exceeds Nao’s personal experiences of trauma because the diary puts her in Japan’s Pacific Northeast every March. As Ruth observes, “she was there, she knew the wave was coming, she grabbed some... plastic bags and stuffed her most precious things inside” (374).

Nao’s intention and consideration for her things make them jetsam, but there are other reasons for this categorization that have very little to do with care. Ozeki’s tale recounts an imperialist history in Japan’s Pacific Northeast, particularly in the Tōhoku region that was worst hit by the triple disaster:

This region was one of the last pieces of tribal land to be taken from the indigenous Emishi, descendents of the Jōmon people, who had lived there from prehistoric times until they were defeated by the Japanese Imperial Army in the eighth century. (141)

Presumably, the Emishi were wasting their land, which was apparently reason enough for its colonization then and, as the novel implies, now, too, since “Fukushima prefecture ... was also part of the ancestral lands of the Emishi. Now Fukushima is the prefectural home to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station” (141).

Commenting on this latest dispossession in terms of the asymmetrical relationship between city and country, activist-writer Sabu Kohso explains how “The countryside

[around Fukushima] has been made to service Tokyo... with its agricultural and marine products for food" ("Tokyo Apparatus, Version 1.0" 40). It also provides the city with its electricity, alongside "disposable labor power" for its construction and nuclear industries (40). Up until March 11, 2011, this service seemed to run smoothly, at least that was the claim on banners stretched across the region's main streets: "***Nuclear power is energy for a brighter future! / The correct understanding of nuclear power leads to a better life!***" (Ozeki 141; emphasis in original).

However, to whose future do these banners refer when the Tokyo Electric Power Company, or TEPCO, with government approval, manage "the rivers of highly radioactive water, which flowed directly into the sea" by releasing "11,500 tons of contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean" (Ozeki 197)? Ruth observes,

That much water is roughly equivalent to the contents of five Olympic swimming pools.

On April 5, the Update log noted the dumping had began. It lasted for five days. The radioactive levels of contaminated water were about a hundred times over the legal limits, but the Pacific Ocean is vast and wide, and Tepco didn't foresee a problem.

According to the Update Log, the company estimated that a member of the public eating seaweed and seafood harvested from nearby the nuclear plant every day for a year, would receive an additional annual dose of 0.6 millisieverts, well below the level that would be dangerous to human health. The company didn't estimate the consequences to the fish. (197)

TEPCO did not foresee a problem for the ocean and the life therein because the company assumed it had "an infinite capacity to absorb waste" (Hawkins 40). Writing from a different part of the Pacific Ocean, Gay Hawkins in *Culture and Waste* links this assumption with colonialism: "since colonization... the value of the ocean lay... in its potential as a site of elimination. Here was the ultimate natural resource for allowing waste to disappear, to be rendered invisible" (40). Yet, when a plastic lunchbox turns up on a Canadian beach, apparently all the way from Japan, this view of a self-contained and self-cleaning ocean is exposed as a fiction.

Imperialism, colonialism, racism, classism and speciesism intersect to devastate Fukushima and the surrounding region well before March 11, 2011. On these ideological intersections, a future for the area as jetsam was made increasingly likely, if not inevitable. This is not to say that Japan's pro-nuclear political and business elite, its "Nuclear Village" intended the Fukushima Daiichi plant to go into meltdown following the earthquake and tsunami, but only that there are a number of considerations relating to this event that complicate the matter of intent (Kohso, "Radiation and Revolution" 4).

Prime among these considerations is the fact that the smooth service, bright future, better life, and correct understanding of nuclear power were disrupted well before the

triple disaster. In *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, Richard J. Samuels notes, “By 2007, the utilities reported that there had been ninety-seven mishaps in nuclear power plants nationwide, including criticality accidents in 1978 and 1989 at TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi plant” (113). The lack of intention suggested by terms such as “mishap” and “accident” is reinforced further by Japan’s pro-nuclear elite in the disaster’s classification as a “black swan” (Samuels 125) event: “undirected,” “unpredicted” and “beyond the realm of regular expectations” and imagination (Bestor 767).

However, can this really be the case given that, as Theodore C. Bestor observes, disasters and catastrophes “are known events” that are “familiar both in forethought and hindsight?” (768). For instance, it is known that “nuclear power is always already based upon catastrophe (inherent in the process of nuclear fission... and radiation)” (Kohso, “Radiation,” 4). Further evidence for this fact is provided by Japan’s history, most obviously, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the *Lucky Dragon* incident in 1954. Less than ten years after the Americans bombed these two Japanese cities in the Second World War, their nuclear test in the Bikini Atoll “went disastrously wrong and contaminated a Japanese fishing vessel... with a thick coating of black fallout” that poisoned the crew on the *Lucky Dragon* and its catch (Brown 39). More recently, from the late 1970s onwards, there have been nearly one hundred documented nuclear accidents at Japanese power plants.

In terms of “natural” disasters, Japan’s infrastructure and advance warning system also suggest that earthquakes and tsunamis are known events, as does Fukushima’s proximity to seismic activity. Riccardo Tossani explains this geographical fact, the short distances involved possibly indicating that Fukushima 3/11 was not beyond expectation or imagination, after all:

Thirty two kilometres below the surface of the Pacific Ocean, just 70 km east of the Fukushima shore, a section of the Eurasian Plate ... had for the last 200 years been snagged on the Pacific Plate below, pressing against it and building up energy suddenly released in a seismic event. (257).

Seismic events and marine transgressions are known in the Pacific Northeast, with Tossani providing a list of well-documented tsunamis from 869, 1611, 1896, and 1933 to support this knowledge (257, 259).

Furthermore, these disasters are remembered on tsunami warning stones and in folklore. As Ruth learns:

In towns up and down the coast of Japan, stone markers were found on the hillsides, engraved with ancient warnings:

Do not build your homes below this point!

Some of the warning stones were more than six centuries old. (Ozeki 114).

Accompanying the ancient stones are ancient folktales of a giant catfish so upset by “human trespass against his watery realm” that he responds by causing “the earth to shake and tremble by his furious thrashing” (Ozeki 198). This response is not unlike that of Godzilla in times that are more recent. Only a few months after the *Lucky Dragon* incident in 1954, Japanese cinemagoers witnessed, “a deep-sea prehistoric monster awakened by oceanic nuclear tests. The confused and angry beast pulverized Japanese cities with his radioactive breath in ways that looked very much like the atomic-flattened Hiroshima” (Brown 40). The long-running *Godzilla* franchise has helped to ensure that “radiation and nuclear annihilation have suffused Japan’s subculture since... 1954. The two themes crop up repeatedly in manga and anime cartoons” (“Godzilla’s Grandchildren; Art after Fukushima”).

The triple disaster thus looks less like a black swan event, but one that occurs frequently enough to be scientifically, geographically, historically, and culturally well documented, which in turn complicates the matter of intent. The fact that nuclear power is catastrophic by design and unequal to the techno-scientific processes meant to control and contain it suggests that a disaster like Fukushima 3/11 can only ever produce the sort of waste that is jetsam. Yes, Nao intentionally cast her things into the ocean, safely contained in a plastic-wrapped Hello Kitty lunchbox, and yes, TEPCO intentionally released thousands of tons of radioactive water into the sea, but there is also a level of intentionality beyond these individual acts, which emerges from nonhuman forces so powerful that they endanger life itself. The exclusion of nonhuman agency and intentionality consistent with a logic of containment, here, most obviously by the pro-nuclear political and business elite in Japan (North America and other nuclear states) contributes further to their responsibility for reducing the Fukushima Daiichi plant and its surroundings—the Tōhoku region and the Pacific Ocean, if not the entire earth—to jetsam.

Paradoxically perhaps, Ozeki deploys jetsam in the seemingly innocuous form of the plastic lunchbox to demonstrate the impossibility of jettisoning jetsam. Despite its cutesy Hello Kitty design, this uncontainable container is the monster of the Anthropocene, which travels the Pacific Ocean leaking, leaching, and conglomerating with it as it goes, and with us since we are all waste disposal sites. In *Culture and Waste*, Hawkins states the matter plainly: “our ultimate destiny [is] as objects of disposal... In death the spirit may be honoured, but the body is now fully waste, after a lifetime of producing its own waste,” which, as it turns out, never really went “away” (39). In Bennett’s words, “our trash is not ‘away’... but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak” (vii).

There is no “away” for waste to go, no waste spaces, as such, which means that the kind of “colonial rubbishing” experienced in the Tōhoku region for centuries, of the ancient Emishi, and after them, the local workers for Japan’s nuclear industry, happens well beyond the spaces traditionally treated as waste disposal sites (Ghassan Hage qtd. in Beauregard 104). Despite its appeal to localism and pastoralism, Japan’s “Nuclear Village” is global, quite literally, after March 11, 2011, and contributes to “a new age for life itself” or the Anthropocene (Kohso, “Radiation” 5).

In regards to nuclear radiation's impact, Kohso describes "a new spatiality and temporality: the spatiality of radioactivity that is forming a constantly changing and expanding complexity of mosaic patterns; and the temporality of the half-lives of radioactive substances, which ... last a much longer time than any of us can deal with" ("Radiation" 5). For him, "Fukushima 3/11 announces the end of this world, articulated by capitalism/nation/state" (15). Rob Nixon envisages this end in slightly different terms when he explains that nuclear weaponry, nuclear energy, and nuclear waste, the latter exported to far-off war zones as the West's "depleted-uranium arsenal" represent a force that converts "the earth into a biological weapon that threatens biology itself. We're all downwinders now, some sooner than others" (212, 232). Sharing a similar view, Thouny says, "There is no them, only an us" because "radiation respects no boundaries" (Thouny 5, 7). For this reason, Ozeki insists, "we should all be worried about... Fukushima" (Siassina, "Ruth Ozeki" 5).

So, rather than thinking with containers, perhaps our tale for the time being is to start learning to think with waste instead. Such learning involves a shift in our dominant understanding of space, a deterritorialization of sorts, from the spatial image of a container to reticular images, or networks, "matrixes" and "meshes" of "fluid, interpenetrating, interdependencies" (Palumbo-Liu 7, 3). This shift cannot stop earthquake-induced continental and planetary movements, and it cannot stop tsunami waves. Ozeki's novel gestures towards the sheer power of these deterritorializing forces when Ruth's husband Oliver says,

The earthquake ... moved the coast of Japan closer to us. ... It also caused the planet's mass to shift closer to the core, which made the earth spin faster. The increase in the speed and rotation shortened the length of the day. (202).

Seismic activity on this scale is a deterritorializing force that operates to "disturb" and "dislocate national, spatial, and temporal boundaries "by restoring," in Paul Giles' words, "a matrix of historical and geographical materialism" (48, 57).

Nao, too, is forced to reckon with a deterritorializing force when her great-grandmother tells her to "bully a wave":

"Go to the water and wait for the biggest wave and give it a punch. Give it a good kick. Hit it with a stick." ...

Over and over, I ran at the sea, beating it until I was so tired I could barely stand. And the next time, I fell down...

"I lost. The ocean won." (Ozeki 193)

In this scene, Nao learns "the uselessness of fighting a wave" to which she is radically interconnected, consistent with what her great-grandmother calls "the not-two nature of existence" (269). In Jiku's words: "A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave ...

same thing.” Nao disagrees with her great-grandmother and points out that a person is a person and a wave is a wave: “ ‘Yes’, she [Jiku] said ‘you’re right. Not same... Not different either’ ” (194). In Fukushima 3/11, the ocean presumably wins again, and Nao’s vulnerability to such a powerful deterritorializing nonhuman agent, a power intensified by nuclear radiation, exposes why we should be imagining waste/d space differently, and, hopefully, not so disastrously.

*A Tale for the Time Being* invites us to imagine what separation looks like. “A wall? A wave? A body of water? A ripple of light or a shimmer of subatomic particles, parting,” and, I would add, a plastic container (Ozeki 346). In each instance, containment fails and is exposed as a fiction, with devastating consequences when it involves a nuclear containment pit. No container can keep nuclear waste in, or, for that matter, water out. As Tossani observes of the so-called tsunami-proof seawalls currently being built along Japan’s northeast coastline, including those at Fukushima, “engineered structures, even those so extensive in scale ... are nevertheless fallible. Height, while an important safety factor may realistically not be enough to guarantee effectiveness for major events” (259). The seawalls seem more effective ideologically, although, again, there are no guarantees. As Thouny points out, “the Japanese land and sea wall ha[s] a deceptive ideological function, to figure a desire for a national state of sovereignty [and] ... a national sovereign subject, protected ... against inhuman threats” (2). Whether material or ideological, these walls invariably fail because they are built with the view that, as Thouny suggests, what is beyond humans lacks intentionality and agency, and so is utterly different from us, our waste especially.

Yet, there is no escape for us from waste: first, because waste is too vital, vibrant and lively to be managed by the science and engineering of containers; and second, because waste already flows in, through, between, and with us. In this sense, waste *is* us, which should make us care about it a little more. The character of Nao demonstrates both points: she might be dead, but she remains lively. Although Ruth’s question about Nao’s fate remains unanswered, arguably as a way of keeping the ongoing disaster of Fukushima 3/11 lively and alive, Nao’s words still manage to make their way to Ruth and to us, beyond all containers—the diary, the lunchbox, Tōhoku, Japan, the Pacific Ocean, and *A Tale for the Time Being*. By breaking containers, including those between fictional and real spaces, as well as those between here and there, us, them and it, Ozeki’s tale breaks the fiction of containment. In the final instance, this fiction found its devastating expression in a disaster that claimed 20, 000 human lives, and that continues to do anthropogenic harm because we, in our efforts to bully the ocean by using it as a natural waste storage site, are losing, if we have not already lost.

### Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasure in Posthuman Times*. U of Minnesota P, 2016.

- Beauregard, Guy. "On Not Knowing: *A Tale for the Time Being* and the Politics of Imagining Lives After March 11." *Canadian Literature*, 127, winter 2015, pp. 96-112.
- Bestor, Theodore C. "Disasters, Natural and Unnatural: Reflections on March 11, 2011, and its Aftermath." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72.4, 2013, pp. 763-782.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Brown, Kate. "Marie Curie's Fingerprint: Nuclear Spelunking in the Chernobyl Zone." *Arts of Living on a Damage Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, edited by Anna Tsing et al., U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 33-50.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Poems*. Faber and Faber, 1954.
- Giles, Paul. "The Deterritorialization of American Literature." *Shades of the Planet: American Literature and World Literature*, edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, Princeton UP, 2007, pp. 39-61.
- "Godzilla's Grandchildren; Art after Fukushima." *The Economist*. March 10, 2012, [www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2012/03/10/godzillas-grnadchildren](http://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2012/03/10/godzillas-grnadchildren). Accessed 21 Aug. 2018.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Hawkins, Gay. "Down the Drain: Shit and the Politics of Disturbance." *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003, pp 39-52.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
- Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being*. Canongate Books Ltd., 2013.
- Kohso, Sabu. "Radiation and Revolution." *Borderlands*, 11.2, 2012, pp. 1-17.
- . "Tokyo Apparatus (Version 1.0)." *Mechademia*, 10, 2015, pp. 36-53.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. "Where We Are for the Time Being with Ruth Ozeki." *Los Angeles Book Review* September 6, 2014, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/time-ruth-ozeki/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/time-ruth-ozeki/). Accessed 13 July 2017.
- Samet, Jonathan M., and Dayana Chanson. "Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant Disaster: How Many People were Affected?" March 9, 2015, [www.greencross.ch/wp-content/uploads/uploads/media/2015\\_fukushima\\_report.pdf](http://www.greencross.ch/wp-content/uploads/uploads/media/2015_fukushima_report.pdf). Accessed 1 March 2019.
- Samuels, Richard J. *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*. Yale UP, 2013.
- Siassina, Maria. "Ruth Ozeki: The Ocean Between Us." *National Post* October 15, 2013, [nationalpost.com/afterword/ruth-ozeki-the-ocean-between-us](http://nationalpost.com/afterword/ruth-ozeki-the-ocean-between-us). Accessed 13 July 2017.
- Thouny, Christophe. "Planetary Atmospheres of Fukushima: Introduction." *Planetary Atmospheres and Urban Society after Fukushima*, edited by Christophe Thouny and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 1-18.
- Tossani, Riccardo. "Thousand-year Event: Towards Reconstructing Communities." *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan: Response and Recovery after Japan's 3/11*, edited by Jeff Kingston, Routledge, 2012, pp. 255-276.

Tsing, Anna, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.

Ty, Eleanor, “ ‘A Universe of Many Words’: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki.” *MELUS*, 38.3, fall 2013, pp. 160-171.