

# P A M E L A C I S N E R O S

## OZEKI'S A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING: THE VALUE OF HERITAGE THROUGH PRIVATE WRITINGS

### Résumé

Cet article examine la représentation de *kikokushijo*, ou rapatriés japonais, dans *A Tale for the Time Being* de Ruth Ozeki à travers les yeux de son protagoniste, Nao Yasutani. Dans les mois précédant le tremblement de terre et le tsunami de Tōhoku en 2011, le roman examine les luttes de Nao pour appartenir à la société en tant que jeune femme qui retourne dans son pays natal comme ressortissante japonaise de l'étranger, ainsi que sa résistance à voir sa langue d'origine - le japonais - d'un œil favorable. Ces facteurs suscitent un intérêt pour la tenue d'un journal intime, qui devient le catalyseur permettant à Nao d'apprécier son individualité.

**Mots clés :** *kikokushijo*, Ruth Ozeki, famille, langue patrimoniale, discrimination, bouddhisme zen

### Abstract

This article considers the representation of *kikokushijo*, or Japanese returnees, in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* through the eyes of her protagonist, Nao Yasutani. In the months prior to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, the novel considers Nao's struggles to belong as a young woman who returns to her homeland as a Japanese national from abroad along with her resistance to view her heritage language – Japanese – in a favorable light. Her reflections lead to a personal exploration of Japan's reception of citizens from abroad and her own family history. These factors spark an interest in keeping a diary, one that becomes the catalyst for Nao to appreciate her individuality.

**Key words:** *kikokushijo*, Ruth Ozeki, family, heritage language, discrimination, Zen Buddhism

Ruth Ozeki's 2013 metafictional novel *A Tale for the Time Being* converges two distinct narratives beyond time and space. After the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, Ruth finds Naoko Yasutani's diary inside a lunchbox washed up on the shore as debris from the disaster.<sup>1</sup> Nao is a Japanese

American girl who returns to Japan with her family as a *kikokushijo* and records her life pre-3/11 in her journal.<sup>2</sup> Ozeki's work addresses the challenges that Nao faces during her time in Tokyo at home and school when she clashes with her family about their heritage culture and navigates the extremities

<sup>1</sup> On March 11, 2011, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake hit the eastern region of Tōhoku, notably Tokyo. An hour later, a tsunami struck the coast and shut down the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. As of December 2021, there are over “19,747 confirmed deaths ... [and] [more] than 2,500 people are still ... missing” (Oskin).

<sup>2</sup> *Kikokushijo* refers to “Japanese returnees, [or] students who return to Japan after a prolonged sojourn abroad. They are mostly children of Japanese businessmen and government personnel ... stationed abroad” (Kanno 362).

of *ijime* from her peers.<sup>3</sup> As she navigates these difficulties, Nao considers her diary a confidant to whom she reveals her family history, her suicidal thoughts and even a fascination with language itself. *A Tale for the Time Being* is considered a response to the 3/11 disaster, but Ozeki demonstrates how one's initial resistance towards a heritage language presents cultural differences and an identity crisis. This mindset is not permanent. Nao's social isolation motivates her to understand her family history through her private writing, enabling the Japanese language and culture to achieve personal value and positive recognition for her.<sup>4</sup>

Ozeki illustrates Japan's cultural context about *kikokushijo* through Nao's trajectory, and scholarship on the term's significance must be acknowledged, given its place in the narrative.<sup>5</sup> Before the 1970s, there was an unspoken emphasis on homogeneity and social harmony in Japan. This mentality emerged from Japan's isolation from the rest of the world, accompanied by a social "distinction between inside and outside (*uchi* and *soto*), which led to the exclusion of anything – such as *kikokushijo* – coming from outside unless it

could be properly incorporated" (Goodman 36-37). The 1970s observed a welcoming attitude towards repatriated Japanese, changing their impression of them from a "societal liability" now being "a valuable societal resource" because their lives overseas and foreign language proficiency made them highly employable (Kanno 363). The government became receptive towards them because their "enhanced horizons and strong personalities" were vital qualities for the Japanese workforce (Goodman 43). Their repatriated Japanese status did not risk their livelihoods in the country.

This new perception of *kikokushijo* overlooked social barriers that favour adherence to homogeneity over biculturalism. Kiyoko Sueda argues that although a native Japanese level offers *kikokushijo* a better opportunity to integrate, the country's "rhetoric of ... internationalization" cannot be ignored (53). Japan's internationalization often equates to "becoming westernized" given the English language's prestige in the workplace (53). There are high expectations for these individuals to maintain their heritage

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<sup>3</sup> *Ijime* is the Japanese concept of bullying within the country's school culture that is noted for its psychological emphasis yet also refers to a group who carries out this behavior (Yoneyama).

<sup>4</sup> *Kikokushijo* and *ijime* will remain italicized. Naoko will be referred to as Nao like in the novel.

<sup>5</sup> See #1 for the definition of *kikokushijo*.

language.<sup>6</sup> However, the ideal *kikokushijo* must be “fluent in the language of their previous host country and retain [a] ‘Japaneseness’ [mentality]”, that is, the perspective that the Japanese are “different from the rest of the world” (54). Yasuko Kanno’s study focuses on four interviewees and their experiences as *kikokushijo* as they negotiate their bicultural identities. She emphasizes that individuals who identify with this term in Japan “often behave in ways ... at odds with the norms of their home culture,” such as speaking up in class or being assertive (362). Kanno opted for the “narrative inquiry” approach to gather direct anecdotes from her interviewees over two years to understand their lives as *kikokushijo* (364-65). The adolescents reacted to their Japanese heritage with either gradual acceptance or complete rejection.<sup>7</sup> Her research attempts to personalize the *kikokushijo* experience for her contemporaries to stress that every individual realizes that a bicultural connection to Japan causes varying transformative results depending on their early attitude towards the Japanese language and culture, impacting heritage reception.

Ozeki undertakes a fictional autobiographical approach for Nao in *A Tale for the Time Being* and prioritizes her private contentions with her Japanese heritage, exemplifying how her parents and extended relatives contribute to her fate. Nao’s interactions with her family highlight Japanese cultural influence upon her self-identity. The Yasutani family immigrated to the U.S. when Nao was a baby for career opportunities, causing Nao to identify as an American and rely on the English language “like a fish out of water” (Ozeki 43). She is content living in an American “dreamland” until her father’s company goes bankrupt amid “the Dot-Com Bubble” (43) and interrupts her American pace of life. When her family relocates to Japan, Nao equates this event to misfortune. She feels disconnected from her parents because even though they lived in the U.S., “they identified as Japanese and still spoke the language fluently,” much to her resentment (43). On the other hand, Nao considers herself disadvantaged because her Japanese skills were rudimentary: “I identified as American, and even though we always spoke Japanese at home, my conversational skills were

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<sup>6</sup> A heritage language is a language other than English that is “an immigrant, indigenous or ancestral language that a speaker has a personal relevance and desire to (re)connect with” (Shin 204).

<sup>7</sup> See Kanno’s article for more an in-depth overview of her study’s results (367-273).

limited to ... where's my allowance, and pass the jam, and Oh please .... don't make me leave Sunnyvale" (43). Additionally, her father's unemployment meant that Nao had to attend "a public junior high school ... to repeat half of eighth grade" instead of "a private catch-up school" for *kikokushijo* children (43).<sup>8</sup> Her parents attempt to dissuade Nao's expectations until their marriage reveals disappointment.

Nao's American status makes her an outlier in Tokyo, but her father provides a sense of mutual understanding between them. Nao describes how she identified with her father's perception of her mother's "toxic vibe at that time in [their] lives" and likens their routine of walking through an "unreal" society in "terrible costumes" to being players "[within] a play that was guaranteed to tank, but [they] had to go out on stage anyways" (46-47). Despite their hesitance to participate in Tokyo life, Nao cultivates a love of Japanese temples and views them as "a core sample from another time" (46). Her father also reminds her of their visit before leaving Japan with her great-grandmother Jiko, a nun at a "temple on the mountainside," when she was a child (46-47). These peaceful

moments are short-lived when Nao's parents cannot hide the shortcomings of their marriage from their daughter. For instance, Nao's mother spends her days at the aquarium, "watching kurage through the glass" as a coping mechanism to alleviate her "stress levels" and to share said experience with other housewives (49). It is only when Nao's father starts working at a start-up that Nao comprehends the extent of her mother's stress. Career success gave the Yasutani family hope for better days ahead, especially Nao's mother who "stopped going to the aquarium and started fixing up [their] two-room apartment" while her father enjoyed his newfound wealth (49-50). Furthermore, Nao observes the family's first Christmas back in Japan as a physical manifestation of financial security considering their festive celebrations (50). They indulge in "Christmas presents, ... osechi, and ... [sitting] in front of the television" with their dinner as Nao's father recounts his start-up's potential for computers to understand humans (50). Despite their upbeat attitude, hope amounts to false pretensions. Nao's mother's wishes to manage the family's money while her father uses "[stacks] of ten-thousand-yen

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<sup>8</sup> In 1980s Japan, Kobayashi Tetsuya's study at the Educational Department of Kyoto University determined how to best help *kikokushijo* readapt into Japanese society upon their return (Goodman 38). A viable solution was to provide resources and funds to help *kikokushijo* attend select educational institutions that help with their resettlement (38). It was later found that these children excelled academically, entering "schools attached to the national universities" (39).

bills” to appease her (51). Eventually, Nao’s mother discovers gambling tickets in his clothes, and after a failed suicide attempt, Nao’s father confesses that his start-up was not an actual job (51-52). As a result, the Yasutani family fracture their dynamic and financial stability, driving Nao’s mother to commit suicide and her father to become a *hikikomori* (52).<sup>9</sup> Nao’s solitude increases despite her father’s presence.

Aside from her private concerns about her education prospects and the tensions of family dynamics, Nao also experiments with the presentation of a perfect self-image and life. She curates her life online to foster a semblance of her old life in the U.S. for her “best friend in Sunnyvale, Kayla” (79). In the early weeks of Nao’s return to Japan, she writes a blog entitled “*The Future Is Nao!*” to keep in touch with her American peers and to prime herself for a “future in Japan ... to be one big American-style adventure” (125). She creates “cheerful ... postings” for her blog but later realizes that her audience is minimal since “only twelve people ... visited [her blog] for about a minute each” (125). Her solitude continues to grow even with her only close friend. Although Nao obliges Kayla with answers

concerning Japanese “manga, ... j-pop ... anime [,] and fashion trends,” she recognizes the superficiality of their correspondence (79). Nao convinces herself that Kayla believed she “was ... a pathetic loser and it wasn’t cool to be [her] friend anymore” (125). However, Kayla disassociates herself from Nao and disregards her well-being. When Nao sends a picture of her Japanese school uniform, Kayla wants a uniform for Halloween instead, revealing her ignorance towards their friendship (126). Furthermore, Nao finds it difficult to connect with Kayla because they lacked common topics to discuss such as “fashion, or the kids at school, or what teachers [they] liked or hated” (126). She lacks a comfortable space to admit the truth behind her unhappiness and her isolating encounters with *ijime* students (126-27).<sup>10</sup> The fact that Kayla ignores her correspondence and admitted in an email “that she ... wasn’t interested in [Nao being] a whiner” signals their friendship’s demise. Nao’s intention to preserve her American friendship backfires because of her *kikokushijo* lifestyle. Consequently, Nao finds herself devoid of a stable family and same-age friends, but she diverts her attention elsewhere.

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<sup>9</sup> A *hikikomori* is the Japanese term for a “recluse” (Lee 33).

<sup>10</sup> See #2 for the definition of *ijime*.

Nao decides to change her initial resistance to Japanese culture and admit its personal value as a heritage language thanks to Jiko, her great-grandmother. Jiko is a Buddhist nun and writer who aims to “save all beings” with Buddhist prayers before reaching enlightenment after hearing stories about women’s hardships in Tokyo (Ozeki 17-19).<sup>11</sup> Ozeki draws on her experience as a Zen Buddhist priest to define Jiko’s character as her work [investigates] ... the Buddhist principles [of] ... interdependence, impermanence, [and] interconnectedness” (qtd. in Ty and Ozeki 161-62; Gullander-Drollet 301-02). Jiko’s wisdom inspires Nao to share her story with readers and delve into her Japanese heritage. Her great-grandmother’s response to her question, “How do you search for lost time ...?” metaphorically compares “the time being” to nature and the “sense of wonder” they instigate within the observer (Ozeki 23).

Nao immediately remembers that the “time being” rhetoric belongs to a “Zen master named Dōgen Zenji [,] ... one of Jiko’s favorite authors” (24).<sup>12</sup> As Ozeki clarifies, Nao misinterprets the “time being”

“phrase ..., thinking that the time being [is] like a human being, ... a person or a thing, whereas ... Dōgen ... is ... more abstract” (qtd. in Ty and Ozeki 169). Hsiu-chuan Lee stipulates that the “time being emerges from “the Zen concept *uji* ... composed of two characters—*u-ji* (有-時) —which together mean both ‘time’ and ‘being time’ or ‘time being.’ The word thus makes ‘being’ inseparable from time; it is embedded in and manifested through time” (45-46). Dōgen equates the “time being” to “‘time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time”” (qtd. in Lee 46). Time itself is not physical but evolutionary “through time and time is illustrated by the existence of beings” (46). In other words, time constitutes the world itself repeatedly (Lee 46). Ozeki’s use of Dōgen also emphasizes hybridity given that she observes language’s purpose through a hybrid lens (qtd. in Hanrahan 274). Language embodies the hybrid because “we all have to communicate —the lines between truth and fiction are blurred, problematic, yet ... constructive, always creating something new” (274).

<sup>11</sup>One of Soto Zen Buddhism’s major components is *zazen* which is “sitting in meditation” over time to review the scriptures mindfully before reaching enlightenment (Earhart 109).

<sup>12</sup> Ozeki cites Dōgen’s “time being” phrase in the prelude to Part III of her novel: *To grasp this truly, every being that exists in the entire world is linked together as moments in time, and at the same time they exist as individual moments of time. Because all moments are the time being, they are your time being.*”

Nao's fascination with Jiko's life inspires her to delve into her familial roots, motivating her to learn about her uncle Haruki. In the narrative, Nao describes Jiko's admiration for anarchists such as Kanno Sugako and her son Haruki, a World War II kamikaze pilot (Ozeki 68-69). Jiko is the only person in the Yasutani family that Nao confides in because even "being in the same room with [her] ... can make [Nao] feel okay about [herself] and ... with everyone" (165). She also helps Nao practice zazen meditation to the point that she resolves "to enter time completely" and cultivate her "*SUPAPAWA!*" or a sense of personal security (181-83). Likewise, Jiko illustrates the past's relevance – its immortal aspect – through her discussions with Nao about her life, especially about the Yasutani's family history.

When she senses that Nao's anger originates from her return to Japan (169), Jiko takes the opportunity to introduce her son and foster Nao's curiosity for this relative. Claire Gullander-Drollet highlights Ozeki's illustration of how this global conflict "is memorialized along geographic, national, and linguistic lines" through its impact upon

Japan and the U.S. due to their respective roles as Axis and Allied powers (301). Nao explains that although the U.S. entered World War II after Pearl Harbour, Japan acted in response to the U.S.' "unreasonable sanctions ... and cutting off oil and food" given their status as an island nation-state (Ozeki 179). At nineteen, Haruki became a kamikaze pilot while he was a student majoring in "philosophy and French literature at Tokyo University" (179).<sup>13</sup> When Nao discovers this information, she forges an empathetic connection with Haruki, deciding that his experience of being a kamikaze pilot mirrors her worries about her family and life dissatisfaction (179-80). She first encounters his ghost at home, and the situation alarms her, yet his appearance as "a young version of [her] dad" makes Nao conclude that he is her uncle Haruki (213). Nao permits Haruki's presence in her life and forges an imaginary friendship with his apparition because he is a metaphysical connection to her family's past. Haruki's ghost is now a vital source to her understanding of her Japanese heritage, and Nao realizes that she wondered about his individuality, his "interests and his hobbies" but most importantly, his wartime experience and suicide (213-15). A subsequent one-sided

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13 A "kamikaze" is defined via a historic lens as "a participant in a suicide mission, esp. a suicide bomber" (*OED Online* def. 1b).

dialogue with his ghost manifests the novelty of the Yasutani family for Nao. During a visit with Jiko, Haruki's ghost reappears as Nao, signalling with his body language how the soldiers "[killed themselves with a pistol] rather than [be] ... taken prisoner by the Meriken" (240, original emphasis).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he directs Nao's attention to "a box wrapped in white cloth" located next to his alter but she does not focus on the object until after Jiko's funeral.

Nao's personal interest cumulates in the material with Haruki's letters. The repository offers a glimpse into Haruki's inner thoughts, written to fulfill specific purposes. Ozeki emphasizes that the value of multilingual writing reflects authorial intent, "frequently [enabling] authors to elude the ... government" as seen in Haruki #1's attempts to tell his story sans political interference in Japanese and French (Gullander-Drollet 303). His writings convey different intentions as well. The Japanese letters are "censored for fear of governmental interception [and] use almost comically euphemistic language to describe the horrific environment at the army base" (303). On the other hand, French reflects Haruki's true thoughts that describe "the violence we might expect from [military

figureheads]" and how his superiors used violence to desensitize their soldiers from their own "acts of violence" against innocent Chinese civilians (303-04). Nao finds Haruki's last letter prompts the most personal reflection of Japan's wartime strategies: "Tomorrow I will tie a cloth around my forehead, branded with the Rising Sun, and take to the sky. Tomorrow I will die for my country" (Ozeki 217). Haruki humanizes the kamikaze pilot. Ozeki's narrative manages to "rescue [these pilots through Haruki] from oblivion and [provides] ... instances in which the complexity of his motivations attains a significance simultaneously true unto itself and healing to the pained circumstances of the protagonist" (McKay 8).

These experiences convince Nao to admit to Jiko that she witnessed Haruki's ghost tell her about his initiation into the military and suicide methods (Ozeki 241-43). Her confession and genuine curiosity enable her great-grandmother to reveal that contrary to the correlation of war participation with anti-American hatred, Haruki did not harbour murderous intentions: "He never hated Americans. He hated fascism" (244). Her admission that her son "was not the warrior type" because these young men believed

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<sup>14</sup> Ozeki translates "*Meriken*" as follows "134. Meriken (メリケン)–Americans" (240).

prime minister Tojo Hideki's rhetoric that their sacrifice was heroic (245), reflecting "the trauma of the war years" (McKay 16). Words carry intergenerational power. Haruki's literary endeavour successfully "transcends the boundaries of space, time, and death, ... [touches] down in the present era and [enacts] a transformative effect on his great-niece" (qtd. in Hanrahan 280). Nao finds her life purpose thanks to her family.

Nao's familial past constitutes a part of her Japanese identity regardless of her previous animosity. Instead, she continues to move forward and reduce her animosity towards her heritage at Jiko's funeral, primarily through language. For instance, she expresses her love towards her great-grandmother with her favorite food, "[slipping] some Melty Kisses into her hand" (Ozeki 364) and breaking the usual protocol for "Zen masters [to not] usually take chocolate with them to the Pure Land" (364). Ozeki preserves language in the narrative here through Nao's recovery of a box next to Haruki's altar that contains his French diary (366-67). This diary is a vehicle that conveys Nao's enthusiasm to understand her family history and even her father participates in this "project" (368) with his daughter. In addition, Haruki's diary reignites Nao's interest in the French language, specifically, a love for

Proust's compendium (390). She was initially under the impression that using Proust as her main subject for her diary was meaningless because, given her suicidal intentions, Nao "[wanted] to leave something worthwhile behind" (22). Nao then retracts her perspective. She now considers reading Proust's work in its original form a worthwhile investment of her time considering her realization that "[he] actually wrote seven [volumes]" of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (390). Furthermore, H.M Hanrahan considers a significant connection between Proust and Nao: "[Her diary is] a 'hacked' ... version of ... *In Search of Lost Time*, an old edition with the original pages removed and new, blank pages sown in. Thus readers encounter Ruth's version of Nao's story of her own life and ... her family ... in ... one of the classics of Western literature" (275). Accordingly, Ozeki redefines the power of language beyond her work's narrative form to highlight the diary's overarching importance.

This diary reflects the power of writing through the text's physical form, how linguistic terminology appears in the diary, and Nao's manifestation of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's third space which will be the paper's second major focus. Gullander-Drolet argues that Ozeki's novel

exercises this “framing of the translational *through* the practice of interlingual translation—... the novel’s translational form” (294, original emphasis). *A Tale of the Time Being* incorporates footnotes to reflect upon its “experimental approach” and invite the reader to study Nao’s story indirectly, “consulting the elaborate footnotes and appendices in the book, which provide crucial historical and cultural context for the narrative” (296). The footnotes “provide definitions of Japanese terms, ... [how] ... kanji does (or does not) translate into English. ... [The] text interpellates its reader into the position of a translator, requiring them to be attentive to the gaps and absences that underpin translations of history” (296-97). Yunte Huang identifies the translational use of footnotes as “counterpoetics” in which actively change “historical master narratives” through “imagination as a means to alter memory and invoke minority survival in the deadly space between competing national, imperial interests and between authoritative regimes of epistemology serving those interests” (qtd. in Gullandar Drollet 297). Counterpoetics is at the forefront of Ozeki’s text through “book fragments and journal articles to text messages, blog posts, and email correspondences” but the diary is significant because Ozeki accentuates “the

subversive potential that these personal and subjective forms of writing carry ... [with two] diaries ... —one ... from the 1940s, one written in the more recent past— and both work [together] to show the ... ways in which [World War II] ... shaped the experiences of subjects geographically and temporally removed from the historical ‘sites’ of this atrocity” (297).

Another feature to consider is how Ozeki connects language directly to Nao’s narrative through a specific part of Nao’s prose, referencing Japanese religion and even the metaphysical. As Nao reflects on her life in Sunnyvale, she reflects on the role of the Japanese language at home. For instance, she develops an obsession “with the word *now*,” arguing that the adverb parallels her linguistic disconnection from her parents (Ozeki 98, original emphasis). While her parents “spoke Japanese at home, ... everyone else spoke English, ... [leaving her] caught in between the two languages” and as a result, Nao found herself in a “strange and unreal” world because this adverb indicates a different meaning in Japanese via code-switching (98). In particular, Nao explains that Japanese words emphasize “kotodama, which are spirits that live inside a world and give it a special power” (98). Concerning “now,” Nao conjures the spirit imagery of a larger fish,

“NOW” that threatens “the little fish *Naoko*” from understanding the meaning of “now” or living in the present. Lee suggests a linguistic connection to quantum mechanics theory, postulating that the word choice “represents a moment of wave function in which many superposed worlds are possible” (45). Additionally, its similar pronunciation illustrates the diary’s purpose “to save both ‘Nao’ and ‘now’. ‘Now’ embodies ... the quantum/Zen moment of overflowing potentialities [and] also the time needed for the survival of a self. To lose ‘now’ is to lose one’s self—to give up one’s agency to ... representation” (Lee 45). In other words, Nao desires to ‘drop out of time,’ — ... ‘to commit suicide’ (45). However, when the diary reaches Ruth, although Nao’s physical self is ‘now’ gone, she [narrates] once again into the temporal productivity of ‘now’” (46).

Furthermore, Tokyo acts as the setting for Nao’s immersion into a cross-cultural life, one that allows her to experience the third space. Homi K. Bhabha’s third space addresses “the problematic claims to cultural purity and homogeneity, and embrace the hybridized nature of cultures” (Cuddon and Habib 723). When the third space is well-received, the acceptance “of culture’s *hybridity*” occurs as a result (723). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues

that only certain individuals embody Fanon’s moving metaphor, embracing “revolutionary cultural change [and] are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity” (Bhabha 55). However, when these people attempt to instill change, they are relegated to “translation and negotiation” (55). Nao’s decision to write a diary enacts Bhabha’s third space for her, in which these two primary spaces embody her pensive reflections as she alternates her focus between her family at home and *ijime* at school. The division of these spaces occurs when she reverses her opposition towards her Japanese heritage. She engages with cultural hybridity to establish a clear Japanese American self-identity regardless of her actual location.

Nao’s subjection to *ijime* causes her to experience a public identity crisis because of volatile social discrimination. However, she decides to reframe this aggression to feel secure within her mental space on her own terms. Otsuka intended to illustrate *ijime* as a problematic social issue via fiction (qtd. in Ty 164). In Japan, *ijime*’s equivalent is bullying and constitutes “violent physical assault[s],” money extortion, sexual harassment, and intentional ignorance even by an entire class of students (Yoneyama 160-61). The commonality between *ijime* conduct is that it is “*always* collective bullying” against one

individual (164-65, original emphasis). Its purpose is to “[stamp] out individuality,” ensure adherence to school rules, oust the victim as “egotistical,” or ensure students have dominant “classroom power” over their peers with aggressive behavior (169-72). The reasons that Nao is an *ijime* target connect to her life overseas. She is not from a well-established family, her appearance is “big” for Japanese standards, and, above all, she is a *kikokushijo* (Ozeki 44). Her beginner-level Japanese skills help her avoid being linguistically isolated, but her social status impedes her from settling into Japan well (Gullandar-Drollet 298). Likewise, a hyena metaphorically represents the peers who victimize her despite her father’s beliefs that she was “popular and everyone [made] an effort to be nice to [her]” (Ozeki 48). Instead, they always seek an opportunity to assault her verbally and physically, resulting in Nao’s collection of “scars and pinch-shaped bruises on [her] arms and legs” that she hides from her mother (70). These classmates target her, calling “her a gaijin (foreigner) [,] ... a bimbo (poor person) [,] and hurl insults at her using idiomatic English ... from rap videos” (Gullander-Drollet 298).

The *ijime* group at her school continues to harass her, and even her homeroom teacher participates in Nao’s ostracization when he pretends “to mark [her] absent” in class when she is there (Ozeki 77). However, Nao rationalizes that he acts this way because he is a “loser” in the eyes of the “popular students,” thereby conforming to an unspoken class hierarchy (77-78).<sup>15</sup>

Death becomes a prominent feature within Nao’s *ijime* experience, given her wish to end her life (22) as her peers challenge her resistance to Japanese social expectations. They treat her as though she is an “American disease” which eventually leads to “the idea for the funeral” (100). Everyone turns their back on Nao, acting “quiet and looking very sad” and even “passing [a] folded paper” (101). Nao becomes aware of their planned event after attacking Daisuke but decides to ignore their scheme (104). Consequently, she views her pretend funeral as a “beautiful and ... real” occasion where everyone left flowers at her desk and expressed their condolence to her portrait, complete with “black and white

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<sup>15</sup> Yoneyama states that in Japan, teachers feel unable to subvert the established presence of *ijime* at school because their punishment equates to scapegoating but “could also reflect [a genuine] unwillingness to do anything about *ijime*, outright negligence or even false denial” (176-77).

funeral ribbons” (107).<sup>16</sup> The event is a catalyst for Nao to be “rendered ghostly ... because there is a gap—a kind of asymptotic (mis)alignment—between these imperatives for belonging and her ...American [value] system” (Gullander-Drollet 299). In a reversal of events, the next semester gives Nao a different school experience. Her peers ignore her, but she adopts a new strategy (Ozeki 265). She chooses to process this abnormal behavior using her great-grandmother’s Buddhist meditative “superpower” (181-83) and Uncle Haruki’s courage. These familial resources help Nao feel emotionally invincible even when her classmates implicate her in a sexual assault incident (276-77). This incident makes Nao consider herself incapable of escaping her peers even in death, so she decides to die. However, her original goal to use her “remaining time on earth ... to write old Jiko’s life” becomes intertwined with her Japanese heritage (332-33). She takes the initiative to understand her family, and a love for the French language discovered through Haruki saves her from giving up her future (22). In the end, Nao’s family is instrumental to her self-identity, and she learns to

appreciate her Japanese heritage given its role as a support system for her narrative.

Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* presents Nao as a young woman who rejects her Japanese heritage in light of her *kikokushijo* status and social prejudice. However, she finds solace in her diary. This notebook becomes the mechanism that helps her find her voice and comprehend her family history. She ultimately abandons her resistance to her self-identity to regard her Japanese culture as the answer to self-fulfillment.

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<sup>16</sup> Ozeki’s depiction of a false funeral can be found in real life. In 1986, Shikagawa Hirofumi committed suicide after experiencing *ijime* in his classroom following a notable incident in which “most of [his] class,” including “four teachers” held a mock funeral a few months prior to his passing (Yoneyama 157).

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