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Transpacific Ecologies

Disappearance and Legacy

The idea of lost time, time beings, and temporality are the foundation for Ozeki's novel; however, the idea of disappearance, whether in a multitude of stories or in a magnificently powerful ecology, more specifically highlights how issues of scale and autonomy drive people forward. Ozeki tactfully combines the voices of teenage Nao, and adult Ruth, across time and space to emphasize these themes of impermanence, legacy, and storytelling. Although, while she demonstrates the powerfully beautiful, and often violent forces of nature to convey the small and fleeting lives of her characters, Ozeki's novel is far from hopeless. She brings these storylines together miraculously, and depicts disappearance with a humility and honor that is ultimately the legacy of her characters. Through Oliver's work as an environmental artist, Nao's devotion to grandma Jiko's legacy, and Ruth's astute frame narration, Ozeki utilizes scale and disappearance to illustrate the intersections of the human and natural worlds.

Throughout Ozeki's novel she utilizes the physical interplay between the human and natural world to grapple with ideas of impermanence and temporality. She describes the island on which Ruth, and her husband Oliver, live and explains that "when Ruth first saw these giant trees, she wept," Ruth said, "we're nothing, [...] we're barely here at all" (59). Ozeki paints the scene, "on all sides, massive douglas firs, red cedars, and bigleaf maples [...] dwarfing everything human" and contrasts Ruth's five feet five inches frame to the "towering," "ancient beings [...] two hundred feet overhead" (59). Ozeki uses this imagery of Ruth looking up at the gigantic trees to evoke the same awe from her readers that captures Ruth in this moment. Furthermore she establishes a sense of scale in the soaring forest. Later in the book, Ozeki describes the tsunami that crashed into Japan, and while the moment of catastrophe is not described itself in the novel, it is responsible for the core of the plot. According to Ruth, Nao's

journal was brought to her across the sea because of this natural disaster and as Ruth scours the internet for news she has to reckon with its tremendous power. “She watched whole towns get crushed and swept away in a matter of moments, and she was aware that while these moments were captured online, so many other moments simply vanished” (113). Here, Ozeki acknowledges both the strength of the wave and the abrupt rapidness of its destruction to instill alarm in her readers. Online, Ruth faces the disappearance of entire infrastructures as well as the disappearance of human stories; the tsunami is a violent representation of the delicacy of human life and legacy. Moreover, in another of Ruth’s chapters she details the force of a storm that hit her small island in Canada. She describes how “one minute the island was there, its presence marked by clusters of tiny glinting lights, and the next instant it was gone, plunged into the darkness of maelstrom and sea. At least that’s how it must have looked from above” (342). Ozeki’s careful diction such as “gone”, “plunged”, and “darkness” creates the same violent and enveloping nature that was present in the tsunami. She also shifts the readers to a bird’s eye view of “above” the storm to reassert a larger scale imagery. Ozeki combines the tsunami and storm to assert that no one is immune to the forces of the natural world. While certain scenes are beautiful and sublime, like Ruth gazing up at the seemingly boundless trees, other scenes are violent and terrifying, like the storm or tsunami. Throughout Ruth’s chapters, Ozeki emphasizes both sides of these larger than life forces to exacerbate her characters’ and readers’ feelings of impermanence and awe.

Ozeki demonstrates the power of nature in dissipating human structures; however, she goes further to question the active role of humans in this process. For example, as Ruth and Oliver plant bamboo and roses around their already “sprawling” property, “the house seemed in danger of disappearing, and by then, the meadow was beginning to shrink, too, as the forest encroached like a slow-moving coniferous wave, threatening to swallow them completely” (60). Here, Ozeki presents Ruth and Oliver as active participants in the landscape that ultimately envelopes their home. In this Edenic vision, the characters operate in tandem with their

environment to create a forest-bound fortress. Oliver exemplifies the idea of human agency in constantly adapting natural and human worlds as “he planted groves of ancient natives–metasequoia, giant sequoia, coast redwoods, Juglans, Ulmus, and ginkgo–species that have been indigenous to the area during the Eocene Thermal Maximum, some 55 million years ago” (60). Oliver’s intervention in the ecology around him extends past cohabitation. While his house fades into the environment that he, and Ruth, help to foster, he goes further to restore native species that disappeared from the island millions of years earlier. Furthermore, Oliver is keenly aware of legacy, both his own and the legacy of the physical space around him. He is an environmental artist and “his land art projects [...] he deem[s] successful only when he himself ha[s] disappeared from them” (297). He tells Ruth,

> “I want viewers to forget about me. [...] It’s not about any system of credit. It’s not about the art market. The work succeeds when all the cleverness and artifice have disappeared, after years of harvest and growth, when people begin to experience it as ambiance. Any residual aura of me as an artist or horticultural dramaturge will have faded. It will no longer matter. That’s when the work gets interesting [...] It becomes more than ‘art’. It becomes part of the optical subconscious. Change has occurred. It’s the new normal, just the way things are” (297-298).

Sacrificing his own fame, ego and success, Oliver not only accepts, but embraces his impermanence. As a brilliant example of the Buddhist teachings of Jiko, from Nao’s storyline, he finds peace in a selfless legacy, and does not try to usurp the natural world. Ultimately, through Ruth and Oliver’s characters, Ozeki asserts that disappearance, reappearance, and temporality are attributes of both worlds and humans and nature are constantly reinventing and dissolving one another.

While Ruth’s chapters focus on the role of nature in perpetuating and participating in cycles of impermanence, Nao struggles with the conflict between human disappearance and legacy. In Ruth’s world disappearance is framed within a larger understanding of scale and

temporality, but in Nao's world disappearance stems from a deafness and ignorance that she desperately hopes to avoid. As she sets out to remember and document the stories of her grandmother Jiko, Nao struggles to identify just who she is writing to. She says,

> "If I thought the world would want to know about old Jiko, I'd post her stories on a blog, but actually I stopped doing that a while ago. It made me sad when I caught myself pretending that everybody out there in cyberspace cared about what I thought, when nobody really gives a shit. And when I multiplied that sad feeling by all the millions of people in their lonely little rooms, furiously writing and posting to their lonely little pages that nobody has time to read because they're all so busy writing and posting, it kind of broke my heart" (25-26).

Similar to the passages from Ruth's chapters Ozeki makes use of scale to demonstrate the sense of smallness that envelopes both characters in their respective storylines. Here, the author utilizes the collective of "millions of people" in lonely rooms and with lonely pages to invoke the sense of brevity and insignificance that Nao faces throughout the book. In addition, Ozeki draws on the tension between Nao and Ruth's voices as she artfully intertwines their narratives and nests their thoughts inside one another. As Nao expresses her sadness, Ruth annotates the bottom of the page with another author's work: "Once the writer in every individual comes to life (and that time is not far off), we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding." –Milan Kundera, *Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 1980*" (26). Through the astute connections of a professional writer and the honest eyes of a teenage girl, Ozeki echoes themes of legacy across multiple voices. Here, the scale is human instead of environmental, but the anxieties of remembrance, temporality, and legacy are the same. Where Ruth and Oliver's lives get swallowed up by the scale of nature around them, Nao's storytelling gets drowned out by a multitude of voices.