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Disruption to Personal Identity in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

In *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, Iyko Day analyzes Asian North American literature and visual culture, under the Marx-inspired lens of romantic anti-capitalism. She argues that Asian representation in North America as alien, abstract labor, has formed the building blocks of settler colonial capitalism. She writes, “the principal violence of capitalism is in the very way it abstracts (or renders homogeneous as commensurable units of labor) highly differentiated gendered and racialized labor in order to create value.” This concept is borrowed from Marx, who wrote, “labour, too, possesses the same two-fold nature; for, so far as it finds expression in value, it does not possess the same characteristics that belong to it as a creator of use value” (30). This dual nature exists as concrete labor, which is defined by an intrinsic value (“use value”), and abstract labor, the quantitative, external utility of the labor (“exchange value”). Day emphasizes that the abstraction of Asians as simultaneously efficient and disposable has directly benefit the creation of “destructive capitalism.”

Day's analysis focuses on Asians through a retrospective lens, highlighting the detrimental impact of capitalism at an economic and societal level. Though she investigates historical causes and continuing manifestations throughout time of “the racialized abstractions that surround both high-tech, flexible Asian labor and working-class labor,” she does not examine how this has affected Asians on a personal, individualistic level. Not only that, but as

capitalistic values have had impact societies around the world—and notably in Japan—the damages from it are not only manifested in North America. Through examination of the characters in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, I wish to demonstrate that the consequences of the systemic dehumanization of Asians in North America and Japan are not only realized on a societal scale, but also in disruptions to personal identity. I argue that the capitalistic necessity of human labor—defined by Marx as having a dual nature of distinct intrinsic and external values—creates a personal dualism within the individual identity. This causes extreme conflict within the individual, and only by overcoming this dualism can individuals achieve internal satisfaction and re-humanization.

Individuals existing in a capitalistic society inevitably feel a conflict between their expected value to society and their inherent value. Specifically, their capitalism-borne characterization as a unit of abstract labor directly conflicts with personal interests they may harbor. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, we see this plainly in the characters of Haruki #1 and Haruki #2. It is most overt in the characterization of Haruki #1, who, while a student of “philosophy and French literature at Tokyo University” (Ozeki 179), is drafted into World War 2. Though he actively volunteers to be a kamikaze pilot, suicide bombers who were expected to crash their planes into American vessels, he writes in his diary, “I have always despised the capitalist greed and imperialist hubris that have motivated it [the war] ...I am determined to do my utmost to steer my plane away from my target and into the sea” (Ozeki 328). Haruki directly identifies capitalism as the reason for his internal conflict. Capitalism led to this war, in which he was needed for his “exchange value”—his external utility as a human who could pilot a war plane. However, his “use value”—his internal, personal characterization as an anti-war man of philosophy and conscience—is disregarded in favor of the abstraction into, as Iyko Day calls it,

“units of labor.” Here, quite literally, arises the “violence of labor abstraction” that Day refers to in her works.

Haruki #2, Naoko’s father, struggles with the external value ascribed to him as a high-tech worker, a computer scientist. An American “computer gaming company” recruits him, an extremely skillful software engineer, to design “first-person operator perspectives,” for video games (Ozeki 387). His external value, what the American company has recognized, is his unique proficiency for computer interface design. However, Haruki is a man of conscience; his intrinsic value lies in his strong morality. Once he realizes that his designs will be appropriated by the U.S. military for weapons operation, he persistently advocates to bring a sense of conscience to the design, to incorporate “some kind of reality check.” When he exhausts his abstract value, when he no longer represents “Japanese labor’s excessive efficiency” (Day) and makes known his humanity, he is fired. He is a perfect example of what Day terms “the racialized abstractions that surround both high-tech, flexible Asian labor,” who is completely “disposable.” When he no longer quietly aligns with the violent, capitalistic values that have brought him to America, he is promptly removed. The parallels in the stories of the two Harukis serve to strengthen the presence of this capitalism-borne internal/external conflict throughout time. Ozeki highlights the internal conflicts that arises from having expectations from society contradict directly with personal morality; I assert that these expectations arise from the dangerous capitalistic need for disposable labor. For both men, this leads to a complete destruction of their spirit.

In Haruki #1 and Haruki #2, we see an utterly defeating internal dualism, originating from their existence in a capitalistic society. Within several elements of the novel, Ozeki also presents an intentional blurring of identity that further torment her characters, emphasizing the

instability of dualisms. Ozeki has created clear duplications in the names of her characters, which highlights their struggle for understanding and achieving individuality. Nao's father, Haruki, shares the name of his deceased uncle. Though this nominal bond serves to strengthen the parallelism between their lives, in which they encounter friction between their inner morality and the expectations of their labor, it serves also to confuse their identities. After Haruki #2 attempts suicide for the second time, Nao writes him an angry note that says, "Your uncle Haruki #1 would not keep screwing up like this...If you're going to do something, please do it properly" (286). At this point, she is not aware of the admirable qualities the two Harukis share; their dedication to their moral principles. Not knowing this, she instead uses the connection between the two Harukis to shame her father. This parallelism can thus be a dangerous element; though favorable traits connect the Harukis, a modicum of individuality is taken from them. As the second Haruki, this loss of individual identity affects Nao's father more. Because his dedication to morality has caused him to inflict damage upon his and his family's livelihood, Haruki #2 suffers already from a sense of broken identity. This further confusion with his uncle, goaded by Nao, causes his depression to deepen as he experiences more obscuring of his identity.

The intense inner conflict that Ozeki's characters experience cannot solely be attributed to the capitalistic societies within which they operate; it is important to acknowledge that immigration, too, has served a part in disrupting the identity of individuals. However, it is also true that immigration can be a function of capitalism, especially when it is driven by a demand for labor. Ozeki's inclusion of ghosts serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of reconciling one's cultural identity, as an immigrant. This is seen most plainly in Haruki #1's interactions with Nao, as a ghost. When Nao returns to Japan with her family, she is fairly ignorant of her family history. Though she is aware of general facts, she does not know any significant details about her

ancestors or even her family members. Interestingly, Ozeki makes the choice not to have Jiko tell Haruki #1's story, but to have Haruki appear as a ghost to tell his own story, and to direct Nao towards artifacts from his life (240). In Iyko Day's analysis of a film centering on the aftermath of the Japanese internment, she notes that "traumatic memories and feelings of loss are unconsciously passed from one generation to the next. Its haunting effects manifest in unrelieved sadness." This analysis fits well into Ozeki's story; we see a common theme of misery in each generation of the Yasutani family, most clearly in the parallel situations of Haruki #1 and Haruki #2. Not only do we see "haunting effects," but Haruki passes down his tragic story via his literal haunting. Immigrant stories are often borne from pain, sacrifice, and loss. However, the distinctions immigration creates within the generations of a family can create a detrimental gap in knowledge and understanding. It is knowing about Haruki #1's moral conflict and brave sacrifice that catalyzes Haruki #2's recovery. It is knowing about her father's moral conflict and brave sacrifice that catalyzes Nao's recovery. Ozeki shows us that these painful histories must be passed on to future generations, so that they can re-connect with their broken identities, and heal. Haruki's haunting allows Nao and her father to learn of their common sensibilities, and so take pride in their shared heritage.

The Zen Buddhist concept of non-dualism, referenced repeatedly throughout the novel, acts as an antidote to the curse of capitalism, which causes the arduous dualisms that the characters experience. As illustrated by the characters of *A Tale for the Time Being*, capitalism necessitates the abstract labor provided by interchangeable, easily disposable subjects, creating an inherent dualism within those subjects. Haruki #1 and Haruki #2 are the obvious victims of this; they are the sole males in their nuclear family and therefore expected to be the primary laborers for their families and thus for their employers. The duality that they must grapple with,

society having capitalized upon their external value, while simultaneously rejecting their internal value (morality), confuses their identity. Nao notes that Jiko often references the concept of non-dualism, “the not-two nature of existence” (194). Within the Zen Buddhist philosophy, the idea of non-dualism “also understands a specificity of thing-event to be a recapitulation of the whole; parts and the whole are to be lived in an inseparable relationship through an exercise of nondiscriminatory wisdom, without prioritizing the visible over the invisible, the explicit over the implicit, and vice versa” (Nagatomo). By creating a dualism between the internal and external value of humans, and exploiting (prioritizing) the external value as abstract labor, capitalistic societies obstruct the ability of people to exist peacefully in their humanity. Instead, it commoditizes them, at cost of their damaged sense of personhood.

Ozeki attempts to elucidate this concept of non-dualism using certain key examples, and by doing so, illustrates its importance in the reformation of broken identities. When watching a surfer fall repeatedly into the ocean, Nao says, “He’s just standing up...he’s up...he’s up...oh, he’s down” (194). Jiko responds by saying, “Up, down, same thing.” When Nao protests at this seemingly nonsensical idea, Jiko agrees with her, saying “You are right. Not same...Not different, either.” Here, Ozeki is able to capture the full essence of non-dualism with this simple exchange. Jiko does not literally mean that up and down are the same thing; her point is that they are not different. They are not two opposing acts, as dualism would suggest. She says, “[s]urfer, wave, same thing...A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean...A person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again...” (194). She acknowledges the fundamental similarities of the concepts, and does not focus upon any perceived oppositions. They aren’t different, but they aren’t the same either—they exist harmoniously, as both the same and different. Understanding

this is crucial to reforming personal identity; only when there does not exist opposition within the human can they survive. As capitalism ascribes a dualistic intrinsic value and external value, it cannot exist harmoniously with human personal identity. It damages personal identity. As Iyko Day said in her MELUS Conference 2017 keynote address, “for all people to live, capitalism must die.”

Ozeki presents an interesting idea of non-dualism regarding life and death, which speaks to the nature of existence within art. She writes about Schrödinger’s cat, a “quantum thought experiment” (62) in which the cat, the subject of the experiment, exists in a state of being simultaneously alive and dead. In a similar vein, Zen Master Dogen was documented as giving a famous lecture in the year 1255. The catch was, “[h]e had died in 1253, two years and many moments earlier” (62). Perhaps, “on that day in the summer...Zen Master Dogen wasn’t entirely dead. Of course, he wouldn’t have been entirely alive, either.” The point is, he could have been both or neither, but either way, he lives on through that piece of work, the famous lecture, as well as other works. Being overtly concerned with life and death as opposing concepts obstructs the value of the art; what does it matter if something is alive or dead? Existence can live on in a variety of ways, including within books, memoirs, diaries, documented lectures. Capitalism values commodity, and that which produces commodity. Art finds a way to exist outside of that value-scheme. In art, things can be not-two, non-dualistic, free. In a sense, non-dualism allows for true identity, unencumbered by limitations of thought or boundaries of society. It is a necessary escape, and accepting this non-dualism can be an escape.

The characters of *A Tale for the Time Being* only reclaim their identity when their personal interests finally align with their career interests, when they no longer are dualistic individuals. Haruki #1 has no means of recovery, but Haruki #2 and Nao are able to benefit from

their shared history with him and avoid the same fate. Haruki #2 is able to align his intrinsic attachment to morality by inventing quantum computer programs that can “sanitize” (382) a person’s presence on the Internet. By having his external value be derived from his intrinsic value—his strict morality—he is able to break out of his depression and derive worth from his work. This seems to be what is necessary to achieve personal fulfillment within a capitalistic society. It is a hack; Haruki and Nao now operate partly outside of the confines of society due to this quantum technology. They do seem to achieve peace and non-dualism, but it is only by fantastically removing parts of themselves from society. This points to the difficulty of extricating oneself from the confines of a dualistic, capitalist society—it takes science fiction.

Perhaps the most intriguingly dualistic element of *A Tale for the Time Being* is not in its characters, phrases used, or stories told, but in the narrative structure. Ozeki intentionally blurs the lines between the roles of the reader and the writer, using this to highlight the inextricability of reader and writer. Presumably, given their parallel qualities, the character Ruth represents the author, Ruth Ozeki. Within the book, she frames herself as the finder and reader of the secret diary authored by Nao. In doing so, she is simultaneously the author of the book (*A Tale for the Time Being*), but also a reader of the book (Nao’s diary portions). This identity is further complicated by Ruth’s dream that she “put Haruki Number One’s secret French diary into his box of remains on the alter” (394), thereby altering Nao’s life path by handing her this information. By actively interfering with the characters of the book is is reading (Nao, in Nao’s diary), Ruth’s role as reader is twisted; how can a reader also influence the events of the novel? Oliver, Ruth’s husband, provides a quote from Charles Bennett as an explanation of this seeming contradiction: “Quantum information is like the information of a dream... We can’t show it to others, and when we try to describe it we change the memory of it” (395). The very nature of

observation is that it alters the subject of observation. Though this is factually true for quantum mechanics, Ozeki seems to be implying that the same applies to literature as well. Novels themselves do not exist in a vacuum; whatever is read exists as whatever the reader interprets it as, thereby affecting the work itself. Ozeki illustrates the non-dualism of the nature of a book by emphasizing the existence of the reader and the writer as not two opposing parts, but as one symbiotic system. A book, like so many other elements of life, does not exist as a duality. Recognizing that non-dualism is essential to the full and satisfactory understanding of the thing, just as with personal identity.

Though actively intertwined with that of reader, the role of author itself seems to be an important means to retain a true identity. In writing about herself as a character, she is able to reclaim her own identity, paint herself as she wishes to be seen. Nao does the same, as a writer of her own book, the diary. For Haruki #1, authorship has a similar but more crucial role. He writes, “[d]uplicity is a hardship I am unwilling to suffer, so I have decided I will keep two records: one for who, and this hidden one for truth, for you [Jiko]” (317). Amongst a hostile situation, Haruki uses authorship in attempt to maintain his true identity, his true self. Having control over the narrative seems to be an important element to feeling whole, a way of taking back agency. A common thread through *Alien Capital* is the ability for Asian Americans to reclaim their stolen narrative, their stolen lives via representation in art. For these characters, and for Ruth herself, this seems to be the case as well. Authorship itself can act as an antidote to an exploited identity, wherein labor is put in towards exhibiting the intrinsic value a person may possess, as opposed to their abstracted external value, imposed upon them by society.

By viewing *A Tale for the Time Being* through the lens that Iyko Day has used in her novel, *Alien Capital*, to view other works, we are able to see the human aspect of capitalistic

exploitation. In the simplest of terms, dual expectations create inner conflict in individuals, leading to a fractured sense of identity. The ability to restore this sense of identity lies in the concept of non-dualism, recognizing that things are not differentiated by their distinct sides, but that those sides instead come together to form a whole. The beauty of *A Tale for the Time Being* lies in its versatility. Not only can we analyze the characters and the language used for the damage caused by capitalism, but in the structure itself, we see a means of reparation. Ozeki actively confuses the reader with vagueness of outcome and complexity of plot, but the purpose is not confusion. The book seems to be a meditation on personal identity and the way we, as readers and writers, can work together towards understanding it for ourselves.

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