“Storming” Contemporary Narratives: Positioning Tōhoku and Katrina within Anthropocenic Fiction

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Lynn and Evan, and to your unflagging belief in the power of literature, in the promise of a liberal arts education, and in my potential as an academic; to my thesis director, Jennifer Wicke, whose constant support and inspiring guidance has absolutely transformed the core structures of my thinking and writing; to the UVA English professors from whom I am so grateful to have learned, and whose encouragement has motivated my scholarship in countlessly wonderful ways; to my peers and friends at UVA, who kindly read multiple drafts and held innumerable conversations about my ideas, all of which were essential in shaping this thesis; and, finally, to George Rodrigue's Blue Dog, who first enchanted me during a childhood spent making music under that yellow gaze emanating from both the coffee table and the wall. You—the *loup-garou* keeping company with Louis Armstrong, Al Hirt, and Pete Fountain—remind me, to this day, of a chapter in my family history engendered by blues, jazz, and a city whose resilience, humor, and beauty traveled 1,224 miles to Philadelphia in the stories and music of my father.

“The quake shook and rolled our building in Shiodome Sumitomo Building.
We are stuck in our offices because elevators are stopped. We are watching the TV which is showing the tsunami rushing landward. The trains have been stopped. We can see Yurikamome Line and JR Yamanote Line stopped. We can also see fires. You can see the fires across the bay in the Odaiba area.
There is no panic but I am almost seasick from constant rolling of the building.”

- *Jeffrey Balanag, BBC “Japanese Earthquake: Eyewitness Accounts” (2011)*[i]

“Well, they heard that the storm was coming,
But it didn’t make much difference anyway,
And the help that they were promised
Was much too small and much too far away.”

- *Evan Walker, “Katrina” (2008)*[ii]

INTRODUCTION: Anthropocene, Now!

In Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted "Theses on the Philosophy of History," we are presented with an interpretation of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Eyes fixed upon a finite "single catastrophe" composed of infinite wreckage, the angel wishes to linger and "awaken the dead" but is instead carried away by the violent winds of a storm that "irresistibly propels him into the future" (257). Pulled away from a present reality in which only the angel, it seems, can make whole that which has been shattered, the angel reverently and fiercely watches as the "pile of debris before him grows skyward" (258).

This topos of the storm and its ruinous repercussions—wrought so elegantly by Benjamin—resonates across Ruth Ozeki's most recent novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010). Both texts address two recent storms—the Tōhoku tsunami (2011) and Hurricane Katrina (2006)—in pursuit of representing and reckoning with not only the storms themselves but the historical moment in which these storms occur: the Anthropocene. That is, Ozeki and Trethewey deploy their "storm-born" narratives to consider categorically urgent questions: what it means to experience, to narrate, and to memorialize the cosmic, metaphysical, and often unnarratable experience that is the Anthropocene.

Considerable work has been done by the academy, popular science, environmentalism, politics, and mainstream and alternative media on the Anthropocene, or the current geological epoch that has been so greatly marked by human interference as to be deserving of its own name. At first disguised by its seemingly straightforward definition, the Anthropocene not only exceeds today's politically-charged concept of

"climate-change" but often defies our understanding of it as an actualized experience—a "real time" situation—in which today's world is immersed. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes elegantly on the Anthropocene's incomprehensibility, stating that:

> "I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today" (199

The Anthropocene, then, might be described as a global kind of "world-historical phenomenon" in which humanity's debris is, as in Benjamin's thesis, being continuously piled higher and deeper at the feet of the contemporary world (Trexler, 4).

In what follows, I use Ruth Ozeki's novel and Natasha Trethewey's "memoir" to explore the debris left by Tōhoku and Katrina in service of gleaning possible methodologies for sifting through the wreckage of the Anthropocene itself.[1] In the first section, I examine how *A Tale for the Time Being* narrates the tsunami event, with particular interest in the relationship between the storm, temporality, and missing-ness. As the Anthropocene is a "living" history, it possesses a distinct time-scale: one in which we are, to borrow Benjamin's language, "irresistibly propelled into [both] the future" and the present. An examination of the novel's unusual temporal structure, therefore, may illuminate possible approaches to narrating not only catastrophic events such as a tsunami or earthquake, but the very "real-time" experience of the Anthropocene itself. By constantly shifting perspectives from pre-tsunami to post-tsunami, Ozeki destabilizes

[1] I hesitate to use the word memoir, as Trethewey incorporates not only photography but poems into her "meditation" on Katrina.

what it means to be "in the present" and, in turn, gestures toward a way to understand the Anthropocene as an ongoing process. Moreover, Ozeki's shifting temporality allows us to glance at missing entities, human and otherwise, who have been erased by the tsunami. In turn, I consider how the novel's internal questions about missing-ness may suggest that missing-ness is a state of being that mimics, in some form, the way of "being" in the Anthropocene.

I then turn to Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina* in pursuit of untangling an equally challenging narrative structure. Trethewey's memoir is, as its title indicates, "beyond" the event itself, in that she does not seek to construct a linear or factual narrative about Katrina; Ozeki's novel shares this trait, as it is disinterested in merely accounting for the loss of life and property as a means to memorialize the event. Instead, Trethewey uses poems, prose, and photographs in her attempts to narrate the events that represent the storm and its after-effects, with a particular emphasis on place. Chronicling a collection of stories culled from the Gulf Coast, Trethewey ultimately touches upon a deeply significant, and yet often overlooked, reality; Katrina did not just lay waste to New Orleans, Louisiana but to the entire Gulf Coast, regardless of whatever myth and popular memory might tell us about Katrina. This expansive understanding of Katrina's scope, achieved by an expansion of genre, presents yet another way of exploring what it means to narrate the cosmic anthropocenic moment.

Thus, the notion of "being in" the Anthropocene—and not simply preparing for it as an inevitable, and yet still distant, reality—unites these narratives, as each works in service of remembering the Anthropocene as an experience that continually "piles skyward" into the future. Yet, Trethewey's and Ozeki's radically different narrative

tactics also remind us that to speak of the living in the Anthropocene is to attend to a fundamentally unnarratable tale; there is no single, neat story for the anthropocenic reality. Accordingly, examining Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* alongside Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina* may help to answer questions about how we tell the story of the Anthropocene—how we might possibly attain a sense of this experience that defies explanation—not only for posterity's well-being but for our own.

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A cursory note on Tōhoku and Katrina, as each storm's devastating effects are intimately linked to, and undeniably results of, the Anthropocenic epoch; the Tōhoku earthquake, at a 9.0 magnitude, is the strongest earthquake ever recorded to hit Japan. Its consequential tsunami produced 133-foot high waves, moved the island of Honshu eight feet to the right, shifted the Earth itself on its axis, and generated sound waves later detected by low-flying satellites. This is to say nothing of the ensuing structural damages; level 7 meltdowns ensued at three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant. Overall, there were 15,894 deaths, 92.5% of which were drowning victims ("2011 Tōhoku").

Hurricane Katrina, which occurred six years earlier and approximately 6,688 miles away, was comparably devastating. The deadliest hurricane in the United States since 1928, Katrina outpaced her peers in terms of total property damage: 108 billion dollars of damage done by a Category 5 hurricane that lasted "only" eight days. Katrina's claim to fame, however, was her storm surge, which damaged fifty-three flood protection structures in and around New Orleans, Louisiana. Submerging 80% of the city underwater, the number of people who died when the levees broke varies widely

according to source. The best estimate, offered by the National Hurricane Center, is 1,836 fatalities overall. Moreover, Katrina not only drowned "The City That Care Forgot" but wreaked havoc along the Gulf Coast, downed power lines in Kentucky, and spawned tornadoes as far north as Virginia and Pennsylvania ("Hurricane Katrina").

Therefore, while writing about the Anthropocene often requires one to forgo narratives focused primarily (if not only) on tallying loss and accruing facts, I nevertheless present the data on Tōhoku and Katrina as context for this thesis. Summarizing these events, a paragraph each, is useful for framing my study but for demonstrating the failure of fact to capture both the depth of the storms themselves and the vibrant and violent epoch in which they engendered.

SECTION 1: Time

If you thumb past the paratextual material and front matter in *A Tale for the Time Being*, you will be greeted by the clear, enthusiastic voice of the novel's first protagonist; "Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is?" (3).[iii] The thoughtful, imaginative tone of Nao's question establishes the timbre of her entire narrative, a secret diary tucked between a repurposed hardcover of Marcel Proust's *A lá recherché du temps perdu*. A transplant from Sunnyvale, California to Tokyo, Japan, Nao has two purposes for writing in her makeshift diary: to recount the life of her great-grandmother and to chronicle her own, final days on Earth. With little fanfare, Nao establishes the crux of the novel by revealing that she is going to "drop out of time. Drop out. Time out. Exit [her] existence" after completing her great-grandmother's biography (7). By the novel's close, however, neither the authorial nor actual audience can confirm Nao's success in her so-called graduation from time. Perhaps the victim of suicide, perhaps the victim of the 2011 tsunami, or perhaps alive and well in Tokyo, it takes no great leap of imagination to accept that Nao is the novel's most obvious missing entity.

To best get at Nao's nuanced state of missing-ness, however, I suggest taking a more circuitous route through an investigation of the most important missing entity in the novel: the 2011 tsunami. Even without the direct narration of this catastrophic event, the novel is still deeply indebted to the tsunami experience, as the novel functions as an epistolary narrative that between Nao and the Japanese-Canadian writer, Ruth, who discovers Nao's journal on a remote, British-Canadian beach. Their respective narratives span two indeterminate time periods, before and after the tsunami, and Ruth often

discusses the devastation of the tsunami through language and imagery concerned with local, environmental after-effects.

And yet, the exact day of the tsunami—March 11th, 2011—never occurs in real-time during *A Tale for the Time Being*. The lack of direct narration captures, I argue, the problem of narrating the Anthropocene, as both the tsunami and the epoch during which it occurs are both beyond that which can be written out in a comprehensible way. Nevertheless, I argue that Ozeki uses the trope of the storm, its temporal ebbs and flows, and the topos of missing-ness to explore what it means to narrate the Anthropocenic moment. Ozeki begins her investigation by intertwining missing-ness and the experience of the storm during Ruth and her husband's initial conversation about the bag in which Nao's diary is contained:

> "Flotsam," Oliver said. He was examining the barnacles that had grown onto the surface of the outer plastic bag. "I can't believe it."
>
> Ruth glanced up from the page. "Of course it's flotsam," she said. "Or jetsam." The book felt warm in her hands, and she wanted to continue reading but heard herself asking, instead, "What's the difference, anyway?"
>
> "Flotsam is accidental, stuff found floating at sea. Jetsam's been jettisoned. It's a matter of intent. So you're right, maybe this is jetsam" (13).

Oliver's pairing of flotsam and jetsam, the accidental and the intentional, raises a question about why, exactly, the bag exists. On one hand, the bag highlights the urgency of Nao's narrative and it morphs into a sort of Chekhov's gun that must be opened, must be "plumbed" for information. And yet, the bag itself, which seems insignificant at first glance—even Ruth tells Oliver to "just leave it … it's garbage"—is not, in fact, narrative

flotsam or merely the container for Nao's diary. Instead, the bag also generates parts of an otherwise untold third narrative; the story of the 3/11 tsunami (9).

By tracing the but overarching tsunami narrative—while keeping an eye on what is told and the time in which it is told—I hope to demonstrate that it is a story that extends beyond a mere catalog of the bodies and voices erased by its very devastation. Instead, it is a "living" story in which the very real experience of the Anthropocene is vivified and explored. By "living," I mean that it is by way of Oliver's hermeneutics of suspicion that the otherwise absent tsunami story is narratively decoded but also, more importantly, vivified by the *body* of the bag. Oliver's dogged focus on the bag's materiality, while overshadowed somewhat by Ruth's interest in the diary, animates the environmental repercussions of the tsunami event and the "fleshy, damp immediacy of our own embodied existence as intimately imbricated" (Niemanis 559).[iv] Carefully unpacking the bag, Oliver performs a "forensic unpeeling" that joyously blends together the precise power of investigative protocol with the messy realities of a "natural" disaster (9). In doing so, Oliver unintentionally explores the question of how might we "read" missing bodies and narratives as records of the Anthropocenic epoch.

To answer, I will begin with the tsunami, which as I note above, is never narrated in the novel as a real-time event. In fact, it is not until the novel's "Part II" that the tsunami is portrayed as something other than jetsam or flotsam found washed ashore thousands of miles away from the original site of destruction. The novel's second section opens with a newscast, sans timestamp, of a tsunami victim who has lost his entire family, including a young daughter. The scene, a heartbreakingly familiar one to any reader (authorial or otherwise) who has done research on natural disaster events, is a

“vast field of tsunami debris” that he likens to a “‘dream'" (112). As the newscaster describes the wreckage strewn across the remnants of the town, he highlights one particular aspect of disaster for the benefit of his viewers: smell. The newscaster explains that “the scene is one of total devastation, but what the camera cannot pick up is the stench ... the smell, he explains, is unbearable, a choking odor of rotting fish and flesh, buried in the wreckage” (112). The emphasis on smells, which is echoed in Chris Rose’s collection of post-Katrina short stories, hearkens to the Kristevan abject, or “this defilement, this shit which [is] what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (*Powers,* 3).

Difficult to withstand, indeed, as the possibility of encountering a loved one's corpse, particularly that of a child, arguably forces a subject/object collapse within the observer, and yet, this collapse never occurs for the tsunami victim because he has not, and presumably never does, find the body of his child. As Jenny Edkins writes, there is a crucial difference between the missing and the dead; the dead have bodies and, as startling as those bodies may be to the living, they nevertheless generate a locus of mourning through encounter. This scene, though—perhaps better defined as a “vignette” as it stands anachronistically outside of both Ruth’s and Nao’s narratives—has no body to be mourned. This is not a particularly unusual scenario, as it is to be expected that after a disaster, such as a tsunami, the discovery and identifying of bodies is challenging. What is worth considering, however, is that the man does not state that he is looking for the actual body of his daughter, but that he is instead interested in finding the “backpack she was wearing on the morning of March 11 when the tsunami hit” (111).

We have, in this backpack, yet another object that stands in the place of the person and that acts as a proxy as Nao's diary does for her and as the barnacle-encrusted bag does for the tsunami. Accordingly, I want to suggest is that the surrogacy of the object for the subject is more than an aesthetic choice in Ozeki's project of writing disaster, but is instead a narrative device she deploys to tease out the inherently complex linguistic representations of missing-ness. This investigation of missing-ness, itself a complex experience to narrate, can be used as a lens to look at narrating the Anthropocene as well.

While I am wary of relying too heavily on Ozeki's explanation of the novel, she states in a recent interview that *A Tale for the Time Being* explores forgetfulness through "the metaphor of the gyres, the garbage patches, and the [other] things that get forgotten and lost" (Ty, 4). The "metaphor of the gyres" speaks directly to the problematics of the Anthropocene; to humanity's influence upon our current epoch because Ozeki, at least, can only speak in metaphor. She cannot narrate this experience through a language more direct than metaphor; accordingly, I want to contribute the metaphor of the container to this group, as vessels seem to function as an essential narrative byway to encountering the missing and, by extension, experiencing the Anthropocene.

Backpacks, bags, and, especially, *boxes*; near the novel's end, Ruth directs our attention to the history of the Schrödinger's cat thought experiment through a footnote, which in turn leads us to the novel's Appendix E. Seemingly tangential to the text, the cat-box experiment is actually the template for Nao's character, as Schrödinger's box is yet another vessel that signifies an otherwise missing body come into being. That is, Nao is Ruth's "Schrödinger's cat," as Ruth has evidence of Nao's existence vis-à-vis the

diary, but has not observed Nao as a living being. Therefore, Nao is both dead and alive throughout the entire novel, existing in what Oliver explains as a “smeared state of being”; I suggest that this liminal state of existence is remarkably similar to a state of missing-ness because Nao’s being, or not-being, is entirely dependent upon Ruth performing as an observer (397).

We must remember, though, that Ruth can only act as an observer for Nao by interacting with diary. It seems, therefore, that the litany of objects that I have commented upon not only exist as proxies for the missing bodies to which they belong, but also provide a narrative locus at which a person’s missing-ness can simultaneously exist and cease, just as Schrödinger’s box provides a space for the cat to be both alive and dead. The diary provides the contact zone for Ruth and Nao, allowing Ruth to observe Nao even in her missing-ness. The diary also functions as a space, however, from which Nao herself reaches out across both time and space to her addressee, “you.”

A remarkable feat for a supposedly missing girl, Nao’s “making magic" with the "you" problematizes a more traditional conception of missing-ness because Nao creates a relationship with Ruth (and, as Rocío G. Davis would argue, the authorial reader for we are also “somehow interpellated by Nao’s interjections as well as the text produced by Ruth”) that contradicts what is means to be missing, invisible, erased (5, Davis 94). Admittedly a trite image, what I call Nao’s “message in a bottle” type narrative allows her to author a complex system of relations between missing and present persons because she understands humanity as a global collective of distinctly temporal “time beings.” A “time being,” Nao explains, “is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be” (3).

Misinterpreting the Zen Master Dōgen, Nao bends temporality to encompass the world and to create an "us" who fathom one another through the very temporality of existence; in this way, it is unsurprising that Nao's diary possesses the power to capture Ruth's interest in both a "writerly" and emotional way. And yet, Nao's ability to transcend her missing-ness only occurs through written narrative; in her everyday life, Nao "goes missing" in a variety of ways. Nao performs as what Edkins would call an ontologically-missing person because, as Nao reveals in her diary, she cannot navigate the gap produced by the forced "entry into the shared symbolic or linguistic world" of Japan ("Time" 131). A transfer student from California, Nao becomes a victim of extreme physical and cyber-bullying committed by her peers because she is, in her own words, that "poor loser foreign kid" (44). Moreover, Nao is "totally clueless about how you're supposed to act in a Japanese classroom" and is unable to participate in schoolyard politics (44).

Larger than her peers because of her American diet and too poor to buy her way into Tokyo teen culture, Nao is quickly deemed socially invisible by a form of physical torture, called "*ijime*" (44); her peers bruise and pinch her until she ends up covered in scars. Given that Nao's "Japanese sucked," Nao's inability to literally communicate with her peers may explain why she becomes erased from her social sphere and is, instead, bullied (44). The failure of language echoes beyond Nao's own inabilities to speak, however, as Nao explains that *ijime*, a term loosely translated into "bullying," "doesn't begin to describe what the kids used to do to me" (44). Neither the Japanese nor the English translation, provided retroactively as a footnote by Ruth, captures the horrors experienced by Nao; *ijime* is an especially arbitrary signifier for an arguably inexplicable

signified. Accordingly, I am going to bypass an examination of Nao's often obfuscated narrative of personal trauma and instead focus on the presence of Nao's *body* as an literal object that unsettles the conception of "missing-ness."

The physical scarring born out of *ijime* forces Nao's peers to acknowledge her body and her physical presence even as they negate her existence. That is not to say, of course, that the reality of her physical body is not enough stop her erasure, as her classmates eventually "kill" her by holding a funeral for her. Nao becomes, to borrow Edkins' term, "symbolically dead" after she receives an anonymous email with a subject line that says, "The Tragic and Untimely Death of Transfer Student Nao Yasutani." The funeral video, Nao says, "was getting hundreds and then thousands of hits, like it was going viral. Weird, but I was almost proud. It felt kind of good to be popular" (106). Nao's lengthier explanation of the video, heartbreaking in its earnest desire for approval, reveals two important facts about her funeral; the first being that she wasn't there. Nao, we learn later, is absent on the day of her funeral and only has access to it via the Internet. Thus, while I maintain that Nao's physical presence is not enough to engender her transition from missing to visible within her school culture, I suggest that her body seems to act as a weak barricade between her classmates and herself.

That is, her classmates cannot bury her on a day when she is present; she must not be there physically if she is to symbolically "die." Certainly, her physical presence would inconvenience the funeral procession, and it makes for a more startling plot point when we, like Nao, only realize she is "dead" after she has been ceremonially buried. However, using Edkins's essay as a guiding frame, I argue that Nao's transformation from ontologically missing into ontically missing is entirely dependent on the lack of her

actual body. Ekins writes that “the [ontically] missing are different from the dead” because they have no body (“Time” 129). In turn, Nao’s classmates’ removal of her body from the social framework allows her classmates an opportunity to make Nao ontically missing. What is peculiar is that, during the funeral, they treat her absent body with absolute respect; while Nao is not completely certain of their seriousness, she tells us that they place her portrait on the wall, and drape it with flowers and funeral ribbons (107).

Crying as they honor her portrait, Nao's classmates move her from an ontically-missing space—the “dead” girl without a corpse—into a space of visibility through the act of memorialization. During the "service," if you will, language fails yet again as Ugawa Sensei (Nao’s teacher) chants a Buddhist hymn; “of course I didn’t [understand the hymn] because these sutras are in an old-fashioned language that nobody understands anymore … but actually it doesn’t’ really matter because even if you can’t exactly understand the words, you know they are beautiful and profound” (107). What matters, it seems, is affect, for Ugawa Sensei offers Nao a flower and, only by making eye-contact with him, does she see his face “so twisted up and full of his own particular sorrow” (107). The question, of course, is if Ugawa Sensei looking at Nao or at her portrait; we might assume that he looks directly at Nao, in the "flesh," because she narrates this moment as though she is there in person. It is not until the following section that Nao chooses to reveal she has learned about her funeral at a later date. This slippage between selves lends this section tremendous value, particularly when we compare it to the moment I discuss earlier, the scene in which the tsunami victim searches for the backpack worn by his lost daughter.

Both the tsunami scene and Nao's burial scene vivify Joshua Pederson's augmented narrative moment in which "time may feel as if it's slowing down. Spaces may loom. The world may feel unreal, or the victim may slip outside his or her own body" (339). Ironically, the moments in and of themselves are remarkably lucid, the first presented as a television newscast and the second presented as an intimate encounter between Nao and her peers. And yet, when we look at each narrative as part of a larger story—Ruth's and Nao's, respectively—the distortions become clear as time, in some ways, stops during the tsunami narrative and as Nao slips between one Nao and another as she watches her funeral video.

To put it another way, as the tragic scope of the tsunami victim's search looms toward dreamlike proportions, Nao's memory contradicts in its seeming clarity, and it is only in each scene's revisioning that the relationship between observation and missing-ness, for both the tsunami and Nao, comes forth in its clearest fashion. After the victim's vignette in "Part II," Ruth narrates (we must assume retrospectively) her personal response to the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Unable to turn away from the countless hours of amateur video footage, Ruth transforms into Benjamin's angel of history:

> Every few hours, another horrifying piece of footage would break, and she would play it over and over, studying the wave as it surged over the tops of the seawalls … always, from the vantage point of the camera, you could see how fast the wave was traveling and how immense it was. Those tiny people didn't stand a chance, and the people standing off-screen knew it. *Hurry! Hurry!* their disembodied voices cried, from behind the camera. *Don't stop! Run! Oh, no! Where's Grandma? Oh, no! Look! There!* (112-113).

While not directly related to the scene of the man and his daughter, this scene contributes to the novel's effort at a cohesive tsunami narrative because it is the only representation of the actual wave in the novel.[v]

For Ruth, the mediated, retrospective approach to the tsunami, complimentary to both Benjamin's and Ozeki's projects, lets her approach the "unbearable and irreconcilable tensions between [the] magnificence and [the] disaster" of the 2011 tsunami (Ozeki 70).[vi] Moreover, it allows her to "see" the otherwise missing body of the tsunami but without fear of encountering it in a real way. Protected by an impassable distance (both physical and temporal) between the British-Canadian Island on which she lives and the Japanese coast upon which the tsunami lands, Ruth embodies a peculiar kind of contemporary crisis: what it means to observe disaster from a distance "too far" and in a time "too late," if you will, to fully comprehend a catastrophe.

One way Ruth struggles toward comprehension of the tsunami and those who have been made missing by it is through the power of replay; Ruth's obsession with the amateur footage allows her, unlike Benjamin's angel, to not only watch as the "pile of debris before him grows skyward" but to also rewind it, to reexperience the act of witnessing ("Theses" 258). This curious kind of witnessing—fueled by the Internet's infinite power—forces her to recognize over and again the "small people" whose fate, unknown to them but understood by her, is swift erasure from their metaphorical and literal environments.

There is an unbridgeable gulf between Ruth and these anonymous people, however, because she cannot identify their faces nor place their "disembodied voices" within anything more than this single moment of time that she replays; in short, she can

recognize them as people but not identify them as individual "time-beings" belonging to Nao's global collective. Accordingly, Ruth cannot fathom them from the wave because she knows "that while these moments were captured online, so many other moments simply vanished" (113). The Internet further catalyzes the event's missing-ness and "the keyword cloud shifted from *revolution* and *drought* and *unstable air masses*," accelerating the forgetting of the Japanese tsunami through SEO tactics and the hyperactivity of a global conscious inundated with online media, a forgetting to which even Ruth admits she becomes a part of (113).[vii]

Nao, too, is forgotten. After her burial, she transforms into a "living ghost, and this realization filled [her] with an awesome sense of power" (132). Ignored by her classmates, Nao's school life becomes quiet, if not pleasant, and it appears that the faux funeral protects Nao from further abuse; she converts into one of those "small people" who her classmate's once recognized as human but do not relate with as, to borrow Nao's language, a "time being." At the same time, Nao's narrative slippage between herself and another Nao—one who imaginatively experiences the funeral in real-time as opposed to the one who realistically observes it via email—indicates more than a trauma narrative, but as a temporality in which the missing can encounter herself.

Nao's experience of time is messianic, in an Agambenic way, because it "is the time that we ourselves are" and it allows her to reimagine her funeral in way that honors her, in a manner that centralizes recognition, participation, and connection (*The Time That Remains* 69). Nao lives in a "now" that keeps the missing on the peripheral, waiting to not only be seen but, quite simply, "be." Moreover, Nao works against the topos of missing-ness that Ruth encounters in the videos and which the bag or the box produce;

imagine, for a moment, if Schrödinger's cat could speak. Nao is the "speaking cat" and, while that does not guarantee her existence, it forces us to do what Edkins' urgently qualifies as the way to see the missing; we must look in the realm of the everyday, at a school girl's diary, to recognize the "lives of the oppressed, the missing, the formerly disappeared, [and] the survivors of betrayals" (138).

Nao's ghostliness and her pleasure at living as a messianic "time being" does not, however, last. Her body is dredged up once again through an act of abhorrent sexual violence that is, like her funeral, filmed and placed on the Internet. There is no slippage of selves at this moment; Nao simply recounts the conversation her peers have as they ambush, undress, and film an attempted rape and then ends the segment without further discussion. Tragic in its degree of personal violation, this scene also contradicts the argument that I begin in the previous paragraphs; Nao does not succeed, it seems, at being missing, but is simply shifted from one kind of missing-ness to another at the whims and desires of her bullies.[viii]

A strangely pessimistic turn for a novel that negotiates the depths of contemporary crises through the vulnerable and buoyant voice of the ever-captivating Nao, I argue that this scene reminds us that missing-ness is not as simple as being "vanished" or being "visible." Missing-ness, as a state of being, ebbs and flows with the cultural currents that produce it; it is, to borrow Oliver's language about flotsam and jetsam, a "matter of intent" (13). The narratives of missing-ness change as well, for they are sometimes, as Natasha Trethewey says, the "preferred narrative … [the one] of the common bond between people in a time of crisis" (*Beyond Katrina* 20). They are also, however, the narratives that Nao's diary and the bag produce; narratives that are "full of

omissions, partial remembering, and purposeful forgetting" (Trethewey, *Beyond* 20). *A Tale for the Time Being* combats this amnesia by remembering that "words are like a finger. A finger can point to the moon's location, but it is not the moon. To see the moon, you must look past the finger" (416). It seems we must look therefore, both the authorial and actual audiences, past the finger, the bag, and the box to find the narratives that are otherwise "dropped out" of time.

The novel's internal questions surrounding the conditions of missing-ness translate quite nicely into larger conversations about anthropocenic fiction, particularly the problematics of readership and materiality. In considering Anthropocenic fiction at-large, Kate Marshall suggests that what is "[seen in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*] as an 'inhuman scroll' … is a radically ambivalent encoding of the Anthropocene as a temporal and medial horizon of contemporary US fiction" (537). Perhaps seemingly comparable to Nao's diary, we know that the scroll, like Nao's diary, is actually anything but inhuman; the diary is, in many ways, the essence of human-ness, providing Ruth (and the actual audience) a portal into the engaging world of Nao Yasutani.

So too is the bag in which Nao's diary arrives. It is not "inhuman," even though it bears the narrative of the 2011 tsunami, a non-human character. Instead, it is remarkable proof of a lived reality in which there is a categorically urgent need to remember the missing. Distorting the boundaries between the missing and the visible by "muddying the waters" of identifiable characters and the blurring the boundaries of time, Ozeki's novel ultimately invites us to participate in melding of temporalities and characters. This invitation allows us to defy time, to seem to forget certain things—such as the actual tsunami—in service of *remembering* not only the sensationalized, publicized

"participants" in disaster, but the thousands of missing who remain missing long-after the flood waters of factual information, media-attention, and fascination with eye-witness accounts recede. Thus, I want to conclude by suggesting that *A Tale for the Time Being* deploys the topos of the missing and temporality in order to not only untangle the knotted threads of a single disaster composing one part in the tapestry of the Anthropocene.

SECTION 2: Place

If you, conversely, glance at the cover of *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast,* your eye will likely be immediately drawn to its cover — the image is of the front of a decrepit, storm-damaged house. Titled "The Last Look," the original photograph (from *H.C. Porter's Backyards and Beyond: Mississippians and Their Stories*) captures a disquieting picture in black and white: the back of a man standing before, and presumably looking at, a house wrecked by Hurricane Katrina. For Trethewey's "memoir," however, only the house is featured on the cover. A ruin and memorial simultaneously, this flood-wrecked home is arguably one of the most recognizable motifs of the post-Katrina landscape. Accordingly, I begin my investigation of Trethewey's post-hurricane meditation as an Anthropocenic narrative by examining the significance of the flooded house.

Trethewey commences *Beyond Katrina* by considering how the landscape of memory, which overlays the landscape of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, is often linked to the physical home. She writes in particular about her grandmother who, "emboldened by the 'false alarm' [before Katrina] and by the fact that her home had withstood [Hurricane] Camille thirty-six years before … was one of the people who wanted to 'ride out the storm' from home" (9). While her grandmother was eventually evacuated during Hurricane Katrina, she nevertheless "conflates the two storms" in memory and steadfastly maintains that she was at home during Katrina (9).

This remarkably intimate story captures the unnarratability of the Anthropocenic moment, as Trethewey subtly and elegantly reveals that, in telling a story about both Camille and Katrina, there "is the suggestion of both a narrative and a metanarrative" that

relies upon "how intricately intertwined memory and forgetting always are" (11). A part of this "metanarrative," and a part of this forgetting, is the narrative that Trethewey directly links to the physical home. That is, the story of Katrina and the story of the house both contribute to what Trethewey calls "competing narratives" about the political and cultural influences that are intimately related to the Anthropocene (11). These competing cultural and political narratives are best captured when Trethewey writes:

> Watching the news, my grandmother turns to me when she sees Senator Trent Lott on the screen. 'I made draperies for his house,' she says, aware, I think, that theirs is a story intertwined by history: his house gone along with the work of her hands (11).

Senator Lott, a Republican representing the state of Mississippi, was the owner of what former President George W. Bush called, as Richard Parry cites, "'a fantastic house overlooking the bay. I know because I sat in it with him and his wife. And now it's completely obliterated. There's nothing'" (Parry). Pairing Parry's critique of Bush's inability to recognize the "magnitude of the horror" (and the arguably insensitive tone of Bush's comment regarding Lott's flooded mansion) with the concerns Trethewey raises in *Beyond Katrina* illuminates the "dominant narratives" that arose after Katrina, narratives that are deeply embedded in the Anthropocene (11).

Trethewey's memory of this conversation, in which Lott's wealth is juxtaposed alongside Trethewey's grandmother's physical labor, is a subtle and yet powerful reminder of the racial and social inequality that has plagued, and continues to plague, the Mississippi Gulf Coast. These longstanding inequalities are, unsurprisingly, intimately tied to the conditions of the Anthropocene and to the environmental effects of political

and cultural discrimination. Many conceptions of the Anthropocene are rooted in the consumption of fossil fuels and the use of these materials is very much tied to political, national, and cultural agendas. Thus, while a full exploration of the relationship between fossil fuels, politics, and the Anthropocene is beyond the scope of this thesis, the significance of political and cultural forces is nevertheless a key component of the Anthropocenic experience that Trethewey's meditation explores.

Trethewey captures the influence of these forces once again when she transitions from writing about her grandmother to discussing the historical context in which the Mississippi Gulf Coast is steeped. She writes at length about the gambling industry on the Gulf Coast, reminding us that "this is not the first time that economic decisions have instigated the overlaying of a new narrative on the Gulf Coast" (12). Weaving together narrative, economics, and culture, Trethewey works to reveal how the gambling industry — itself tied to the Gulf in the literal way of "dockside gambling" — forces the citizens of the Gulf Coast to put their economic pursuits and wellbeing directly in the path of potential danger. By this, I mean that Trethewey opens her meditation by confessing that she, "like many people from the Mississippi Gulf Coast, are haunted — even at the edges of consciousness — by the possibility of natural disaster" (1).

The failure of the economy and political forces to protect those in the Gulf Coast, and especially those in New Orleans, from natural disaster is well-known and well-memorialized; therefore, before moving forward in Trethewey's meditation, I want to juxtapose her writing alongside the writing produced by authors who directly associate their post-Katrina narratives with the city of New Orleans. Chris Rose's *1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina* is a heart wrenching collection of short stories written post-Katrina that,

like Trethewey's meditation, narrates the experience of the storm in an immensely personal way. Most significant to my study is Rose's epigraph; he dedicates the collection to "Thomas Coleman, a retired longshoreman, who died in his attic at 2214 St. Roch Avenue in New Orleans' 8th Ward on or about August 29, 2005. He had a can of juice and a bedspread at his side when the waters rose."

It is as difficult to linger upon this epigraph as is it to conceptualize the reality that the epigraph attempts to convey. Moreover, Rose's acknowledgement that "there were more than a thousand like him" furthers the struggle to imagine a very physical, post-Katrina reality. Consequently, I cite the epigraph because it focuses, as does Trethewey, on the indescribable experience of the storm upon the home; the epigraph uses the motif of the flooded house, and the increasingly suffocating attic in particular, to memorialize the otherwise unnarratable experience of Katrina that resonates across individual experiences of the hurricane.

The image of the home appears also in the plays of the New Orleans-based author, John Biguenet; Biguenet has written several plays about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, all of which deploy the home as the primary space in which the horrors of the hurricane are both played out and worked through. Like Trethewey and Rose, Biguenet uses the home because it is an incredibly useful metaphor when discussing the otherwise incomprehensible context of Katrina; for example, he writes, in a 2006 memorial newspaper column, "so I imagine that's how they died, many of the drowned, trapped in a dark house or in a pitch black attic, if they made it that far, as water rushed in from failed levees our government could not find the funds to strengthen" (503).

We can only imagine, it seems, the reality of those who suffered during the post-Katrina flooding, and I would like to suggest that these kind of imaginative techniques apply quite well onto the experience of the Anthropocene itself. While placing the Anthropocene in the future, a problem for a sci-fi text to tackle, the Anthropocene is here now, wreaking havoc on the home that we call Earth. Accordingly, using the image of the Katrina flooded-home helps with determining how and, perhaps, when the Anthropocene arrived. We might, as John Biguenet argues, suggest New Orleans as one of the first places at which the storm of the Anthropocene made landfall:

> Because in the end, what happened in New Orleans is not about New Orleans … what happened August 2005 is not about the place where it happened. It's about the people who let it happen. And because no one was held accountable, it will happen again. New Orleans is simply where the future arrived first (508).

Biguenet's disinterest in place, and his emphasis on people, suggests a reading of "where the future arrived first" that pairs nicely with Trethewey's revealing of the "man-made destruction of natural wetlands that heightened [Katrina's] impact" upon the southern United States (Fulton 728). And yet, while it may be tempting to fully accept New Orleans as the "first" place at which the future, and by extension the Anthropocene, arrived, Trethewey also reminds us that "almost all" of those who she asks about Katrina speak about New Orleans and "almost never does anyone answer 'the Mississippi Gulf Coast'" (2).

The forgetting of the Mississippi Gulf Coast as a site of trauma and a place forever changed by Hurricane Katrina presents us, consequently, with the crux of Trethewey's meditation: how do we address a place that was not only erased by

Hurricane Katrina, but by the following cultural and national narratives that attempted to memorialize the hurricane? How, if at all possible, might we rebuild the Gulf Coast? The motif of the home, while useful as a memorial, does not function as a space in which rebuilding can be performed; the house can only stand as a testament to the power of Katrina and the failures of U.S. culture and politics.

Trethewey presents a possible answer by juxtaposing her prose with poetry; by infusing her family narrative with poetry, Trethewey combats the inevitable effects of the hurricane and forgetful, dominant narratives and attempts to reinscribe the Gulf Coast through poetic language. While all of Trethewey's poetry works toward this end, her poem, "Liturgy," is most successful in its representation of place, as Trethewey concludes by stating that "I am the Gulf Coast" (66). By positioning herself as the Coast, Trethewey affirms the Coast as a space that, while physically devastated, is nevertheless contained within the memories and identities of its inhabitants.

Moreover, Trethewey dedicates each opening of the first six stanzas to a person or persons: "to the security guard"; "to Billy Scarpetta"; "to the woman"; "to Miss Mary"; "to the displaced"; and "to those who died." Some nameless, some identified, all of these individuals are joined together by "looking at the Coast." A seemingly simple refrain, Trethewey's insistence on the Coast as something to still be looked at challenges the assumption that the Coast is beyond recovery. That is not to say, of course, that one can simply write the Coast into existence; Trethewey acknowledges that "this [liturgy] cannot rebuild the Coast" but instead functions as "an indictment, a complaint" about the post-Katrina reality (66).

And yet, Trethewey's eye is still turned towards something both lost and found. For example, she writes in the poem about "my mother's grave — underwater" and then illuminates, a few pages later, about the grave in her prose (65). Trethewey, upon her return nine months after Katrina, cannot find her mother's grave. Searching in vain, she stands in cemetery "foolishly, a woman who'd never erected a monument on her mother's grave" (67). Functioning in similar manner to the storm-ravaged house, the "near-vanished" gravestone forces the realization that "monuments and memory" are not weighed equally in situations like a post-Katrina experience (67).

Thus, Trethewey's meditation seems to reveal that we cannot mark the devastation of the storm with homes or graves, as these "man-made monuments … are never neutral" (55). They are political, as are the narratives told about events like Katrina and, as such, cannot be relied upon to fully commemorate disaster and loss. It is only in narrative — in both poetry and prose — that we subsequently can combat the amnesia of disaster, whether it be natural event or "man-made" narrative that, in its effort to memorialize, erases certain groups and voices from the story. It through revising the story alongside the place, as Trethewey's meditation does, that gives the "people [who] carry with them the blueprints of memory for a place" a way to speak about disasters and experiences, such as Katrina (60).

The meditation's internal questions, and its concerns about how to write a place after a disaster, translates well onto the questions of the Anthropocene and anthropocenic literature. Narrative provides one way to commemorate disaster and is particularly significant for Anthropocenic texts like Trethewey's meditation because, as I state above, the Anthropocene is now. The future has "landed," and whether or not it did first in New

Orleans is of less significance than the recognition that Katrina (as well as the 2011 Japanese tsunami) is not so much a harbinger of future doom but the first "wave," if you will, of a Anthropocenic present. Faced now with the overarching questions of place and geography which shape the meditation — how we find the "here" from where we used to be — it seems that Trethewey might suggest that we must turn to literature in an effort to parse a cosmic history that touches the lives of individuals while also reaching beyond the dominant narrative of Katrina.

CODA

"You wonder about me. I wonder about you." (402). So begins Ruth's final section in *A Tale for the Time Being* and it is with this wonderment in mind that I conclude this thesis. Exploring the Anthropocene is a necessarily challenging task as it is a largely indescribable concept and the many texts that perform as Anthropocenic literature are sometimes so different as to be more puzzling than revealing. Nevertheless, both Ozeki and Trethewey touch on the "pulse" of the Anthropocenic moment by illuminating a present way of writing that accepts, as best it can, the uncertainty which accompanies the Anthropocene. By this, I mean that Ruth writes, at the very end of her letter to Nao, that "I don't really like uncertainty. I'd much rather *know*, but then again, not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps the worlds alive." (402).

Keeping all the worlds alive, but especially the one in which this thesis' actual audience exists, is of utmost importance to our contemporary moment. Ozeki works towards keeping this world alive by playing with temporality and by looking for those who are disappeared in an effort to not only find the victims of a particular tragedy but to subtly point toward a future in which we all, "we" being human," may eventually go missing. Trethewey's discussions of place and memory ultimately gesture toward a similar warning as, for her, there is "a destination, some place not far up the road" at which she metaphorically points within *Beyond Katrina* (123).

It seems, therefore, that it is important for both authors to approach the cosmic quality of the Anthropocene through their expansive considerations of time, place, and narrative but also through the distinctly individual experience. Thus, I want to conclude by briefly considering the significance of the individual and of individual relationships to

understanding the Anthropocene as a global reality. I cite Ruth's question within the context of Ozeki's novel, but it could also very well be a question posed by Trethewey to the many individuals who she addresses in "Liturgy" or, conversely, to the family members whose lives create a framework for her text. By extension, the question could be also posed by me; as the daughter of a musician who spent his formative years in the city of New Orleans, the metaphorical "watermark" that Hurricane Katrina left in my nuclear family's home was not high. And yet, as distanced as I am from Katrina in terms of both space and time, the hurricane certainly touched upon my family narrative. Accordingly, I wonder if we might use the possibilities inherent in narratives that focus on relationships to illuminate the otherwise obfuscated temporality, geography, and "knowability" of the Anthropocene.

Notes

[i] "Japanese Earthquake: Eyewitness Accounts." *BBC News*. BBC, 11 Mar. 2011. Web. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12711152>.

[ii] Evan Walker, "Katrina," *Feelin' Better Already*. Evan Walker, 2008. CD.

[iii] For sake of ease, I cite quotations from the novel as just the page number. Citations bearing Ozeki's name are from her personal essay, "The Art of Losing."

[iv] While Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker are concerned with climate change at-large and conceptions of "transcorporal weathering" as a result of climate-change, I find their work particularly applicable to Ozeki's novel because the problem of environmental disaster (global and local) is intimately tied to various kinds of record keeping through bodies, human and otherwise.

[v] This segment on Ruth's experience with the tsunami and the mediation of the disaster through television is labeled "2" in the "Ruth" section and directly follows the "1" section, in which the Japanese father searches for his daughter's backpack.

[vi] While Ozeki does not discuss the 2011 tsunami in this essay, Ozeki's interest in disaster-born loss applies itself well to an examination of the tsunami as a world-event that is both magnificent and disastrous.

[vii] SEO, or "search engine optimization," is a tactic used to affect the visibility of websites in a search engine's unpaid results. These unpaid results are often referred to as "natural" or "organic" results. Accordingly, I want to point directly here at the role of SEO tactics in discussions about "natural" disasters; while beyond the scope of this study, the concept of the "natural" search as one that "sifts" through what is more popular seems intimately tied to questions about visibility and invisibility as malleable aspects directly linked to cultural and neo-capitalist systems.

[viii] I should note that the video is ultimately removed by Nao's father, who creates a program that erases all trace of it from the Internet. That being said, I read the moment as a failure of Nao's missing-induced agency because (1) she is victimized and abused in a retrospective way, and (2) she does not perform the erasure of the video herself.

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