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THE BATTLE FOR BELIEVABILITY: SEXUAL TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, AND VICTIMHOOD IN ANNA BURNS' *MILKMAN* AND RUTH OZEKI'S *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

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THE BATTLE FOR BELIEVABILITY: SEXUAL TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, AND VICTIMHOOD IN ANNA BURNS' *MILKMAN* AND RUTH OZEKI'S *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

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Abstract

The widespread under-reporting of rape and sexual assault is largely attributed to the victim-blaming attitudes and routine disbelief of women in our culture. Believability–or what makes someone believable–lies at the center of this social dilemma, and raises critical questions surrounding the cultural reception of trauma narratives. This essay posits that exploring representations of sexual assault and survivor testimonies in literary fiction offers insight into the societal norms and power dynamics shaping perceptions of truth and credibility, particularly regarding gender and race. Through a comparative analysis informed by feminist theory and trauma studies, this essay examines how Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) employ imaginative storytelling to navigate trauma, resistance, and agency in the aftermath of sexual violence. Furthermore, it explores the reception of these narratives, both within and beyond their fictional storyworlds, highlighting the contrasting responses of disbelief and acceptance. Ultimately, this thesis argues that *Milkman* and *A Tale for the Time Being* work to expose and critique cultural perceptions of sexual violence and victimhood, and as a result, emerge as individual, innovative forms of advocacy.

Introduction

On January 18, 2015, an unconscious Chanel Miller was sexually assaulted by Stanford University student Brock Turner behind a dumpster outside of a fraternity house. Two Swedish graduate students happened upon the assault and detained Turner until law enforcement arrived at the scene. "[T]here's no way this is going to trial; there were witnesses, there was dirt in my body, he ran but was caught. He's going to settle, formally apologize, and we will both move on," thought Miller, who identified herself publicly in 2019 as the unnamed victim "Emily Doe." Instead, Turner hired a powerful defense attorney, expert witnesses, and private investigators, and Miller was ultimately forced to go to trial. Turner's team worked tirelessly to highlight inconsistencies in her story and details from her personal life to use against her, all with the intent of portraying the sexual assault as a mere "misunderstanding" (Miller). Miller recalls, "Worst of all, I was warned, because he knows you don't remember, he is going to get to write the script. He can say whatever he wants and no one can contest it. I had no power, I had no voice, I was defenseless…His attorney constantly reminded the jury, the only one we can believe is Brock."

In order to contend with the efforts to discredit her testimony, Miller was forced to recount her trauma repeatedly and in explicit detail. The opening line of her victim impact statement, which Miller read in its entirety to Turner in court in March 2016, explains: "You don't know me, but you've been inside me, and that's why we're here today." Three months after the hearing, the full statement was released publicly on *Buzzfeed News* and immediately went viral, igniting a widespread conversation about sexual assault, justice, and the treatment of survivors. In the statement, Miller addresses Turner directly: "You are guilty. Twelve jurors convicted you guilty of three felony counts beyond reasonable doubt, that's twelve votes per

count, thirty-six yeses confirming guilt, that's one hundred percent, unanimous guilt." In this sense, Miller's efforts to be believed proved successful; she *was* believed, at least by the twelve individuals who were tasked with deciding her case. It was up to Judge Persky, however, to "decide what that belief was worth" (Banet-Weiser and Higgins).

On June 2, 2016, Brock Turner was released from the Santa Clara County jail after only serving three months of his six month sentence (Grinberg and Shoichet). The brevity of Turner's sentencing sparked outrage across the nation and eventually led to the successful recall of Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge, Aaron Persky, in 2018. He was the first California judge to be recalled since 1932 (Gersen). The controversial campaign to remove Persky was led by Michele Dauber, a Stanford Law Professor, who wrote in an email to Jeannie Suk Gersen at *The New Yorker*: "The fact that Turner's victim was an Asian-American woman of color made refuting the Persky campaign's spreading of rape myths and falsehoods even more important, given that research indicates survivors of color may be less likely to be believed." In their book, *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt* (2023), authors Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins explore public perceptions of "believability" among sexual assault victims, as well as the ways in which gender and racial biases influence these perceptions, particularly in media culture. They explain, "Turner's conditions of believability were obvious; many were explicitly mentioned by Persky in his sentencing judgment. He was young, white, male. He came from a wealthy, supportive family. He was a talented athlete, a prominent and valued member of a prestigious college swim team, a student at an elite university that Persky had himself attended" (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 156). On the contrary, Miller, a Chinese American woman, was also young, although not as young as Turner, and had pursued her education at a different institution. Not only was she considered an unfamiliar presence

within the Stanford community, but she remained anonymous in news coverage, referred to only as “Emily Doe” or “unconscious intoxicated woman” (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 156). It was not until September 2019, less than a month before the launch of her memoir, *Know my Name*, that Miller revealed her name to the public. However, due to the widespread attention the case gained–and the widespread support of Miller–by September 2019, Turner was “competing for belief” with a seemingly different woman (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 157). As Banet-Weiser and Higgins put it, Miller was no longer “an anonymous, non-Stanford non-student who had been smeared by his lawyers as promiscuous, deceitful, and too drunk to know she did not want to be harmed,” but a woman who had both a face and a name, who was poised to speak her truth “in a newly thriving marketplace for stories just like hers” (157).

In what follows, I will argue that Anna Burns’ *Milkman* (2018) and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) occupy this “marketplace” alongside Miller’s story, serving as fictional representations of testimonies of sexual violence and women’s continuous fight against societal disbelief. Drawing upon insights from feminist legal scholars, recent trauma studies, and psychologist Bessell van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*, this essay will show how Burns and Ozeki’s protagonists, and the portrayal of their physical and psychological responses to trauma, mirror the experiences of real sexual violence survivors. Furthermore, it will examine how both authors employ imaginative storytelling to highlight the enduring impact of disbelief on victims’ ability to heal, reclaim agency, and navigate the aftermath of sexual trauma. Through comparative analysis, I aim to position *Milkman* and *A Tale for the Time Being* as individual, innovative forms of advocacy.

Navigating the "Economy of Believability:" Contemporary Fiction and Sexual Violence

The fear of being perceived as untruthful, blameable, and altogether *unbelievable* fuels the vast under-reporting of sexual violence. Rape is consistently the most under-reported crime, and 75.1% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police (Osborne). Unlike with other crimes, the testimonies of sexual assault victims are generally seen as "false until proven true;" survivors must prove they are "legitimate victims" and that their experience counts as "real rape" ("A Brief History"). In *Believability*, Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue that in our culture exists what they call an "economy of believability." "Like most economies," they explain, "an economy of believability involves representations, ideologies, labor, products, resources–and intersecting power hierarchies within all of these elements" (5). The question of who to believe and why in cases of sexual violence is influenced by this economy, where media, especially digital platforms, have become the primary battleground for determining the credibility of evidence and the presentation of individuals as believable subjects.

Furthermore, this "economy of believability" shapes how public bids for truth regarding sexual violence are not only "made, evaluated, and authorized" in contemporary culture, but also reveals a broader terrain of political struggle where one's ability to "speak truthfully" is subject to negotiation, influenced by both subjective factors such as identity (i.e., who one *is*) and performative actions (i.e., what one *does*) (Higgins and Benet-Weiser 3). *Believability* positions this economy as one in which white men have historically wielded disproportionate power, and as a result, as one that continues to be influenced by gender and race (5). "People from marginalized groups, such as women, queer people, and people of color of all genders," Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue, "have historically been routinely positioned as unbelievable, untrustworthy, doubtful subjects–as subjective subjects par excellence whose truths will always

remain not just unconfirmed, but unconfirmable" (7). According to a study conducted by the Center for Cross-Cultural Research at Western Washington University, victims of intentional interpersonal violence like sexual assault, as opposed to victims of natural violence or accidental violence, face greater stigma and are ultimately seen as "less legitimate, less credible, more blameworthy, and more personally flawed" (Delker et al.). One in four women will experience sexual assault in their lifetime, and although women cite numerous reasons for lack of reporting to the police including shame, concerns about repercussions, and the use of substances at the time of the assault, women consistently express a fear of disbelief from law enforcement (Oikonen et al.). This fear is not in vain; as many as one in five cases reported to the police are deemed "baseless" and are therefore considered "unfounded" (Oikonen et al.). This poses a critical question: *why* are the testimonies of sexual assault victims seemingly destined to be rejected, refuted, and altogether invalidated?

In her book *Tainted Witness*, Leigh Gilmore addresses the issue of sexual violence and the law, shedding light on the systemic bias that often positions women as less credible, and men as more credible. Gilmore explains that feminist legal scholars have long argued that the "truthfulness" of testimonies within a court of law is "indexed not to facts but to power" (15). This power dynamic seldom favors the victim. Even when the victim manages to regain a level of control, as exemplified by Chanel Miller's remarkable journey, one cannot overlook the sacrifices required of her, as well as the enduring trauma she will continue to face. In tandem with Gilmore's examination of disbelief within the legal system, Banet-Weiser and Higgins analyze the cultural ramifications of the #MeToo movement, as reflected in both television and journalistic media. They explain that a growing number of "in-depth investigations, podcasts, and documentary productions have similarly emphasized the routine disbelief of women and

others harmed by powerful men (both cultural and institutional) as a key issue for contemporary politics" (39). Furthermore, Banet-Weiser and Higgins examine these productions as more than "representations of unbelievability," but also as "sites for the explication of the kinds of labor involved in *becoming* believable" (39). By examining how authors depict the experiences of survivors, negotiate themes of trauma, agency, and justice, and navigate the reception of their narratives within fictional contexts, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural perception of sexual violence and victimhood.

When considering the fictional representation of the trauma of sexual assault, it is necessary to question the motivations behind its representation. In "Reading *Rape Stories*: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation," Wendy S. Hesford posits that the "critical challenge" as she sees it, "is to not reproduce the spectacle of violence or victimization and to not erase the materiality of violence and trauma by turning corporeal bodies into text" (193). She questions, in light of the potential for commodification and retraumatization, how critics and survivors (roles that are not mutually exclusive) are to move forward. Similarly, in "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale discuss the associated risk of sensationalizing survivor narratives and further exploiting victims of violence. This appropriation, Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale argue, can be subverted through several strategies such as: 1). Presenting survivors as subjects, 2). Dismantling the victim-expert split, 3). Abolishing the bifurcation between experience and analysis, and 4). Creating spaces for survivors to theorize their own experience and talk back (215).

Anna Burns' *Milkman* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* successfully demonstrate these strategies. By recording their respective protagonists' trauma stories through distinctive narration, Burns and Ozeki demand their audience recognize their respective

protagonists–middle sister and Nao–as survivors who not only have agency over their stories, but who are experts on their own experiences. Both middle sister and Nao are written in such a way that they are given space to engage in a dialogue with themselves; in recounting their trauma, they are able to both theorize and critically reflect on their experiences as a form of self-advocacy. While these narratives intersect conversations surrounding climate disaster and the Anthropocene, ancient Zen Buddhism, and national ethnic and sectarian divisions, they also center around young female protagonists and the gendered violence they face, both physical and psychological, and the consequences of such violence. Both novels examine the corporeal effects of gendered violence through complex narration, and even more specifically, through the language used to describe their bodily sensations (or lack thereof) when faced with traumatic sexual assault and harrassment. Rooted in the events of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Fukushima nuclear disaster following the Tōhoku earthquake of 2011, *Milkman* and *A Tale for the Time Being* challenge fiction and autobiography genre boundaries not only in their quality of historical research, but also in their authentic portrayal of psychological phenomena recorded in the physical body.

I intend to examine not only how Burns and Ozeki choose to narrate the sexual harassment, violence, and assault the characters middle sister and Nao experience, but also how the sharing of those experiences is received, both within the fictional worlds they create as well as outside of them. Central to this exploration is the concept of believability: how these authors navigate the complexities of depicting such trauma within the broader landscape of contemporary fiction and pop culture, resulting in narratives that are respectively met with disbelief and acceptance.

Originally coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo movement gained widespread recognition in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and assault to share their stories on social media. This call to action prompted millions of men and women to come forward. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022, five years after the eruption of the #MeToo hashtag, found that approximately half of Americans who are aware of the movement express support, while 21% express opposition (Brown). One of the key outcomes of the #MeToo movement has been the exposure of high-profile individuals accused of sexual misconduct, leading to resignations, firings, and legal repercussions for some perpetrators (Brown). Additionally, the movement has prompted organizations and institutions to reassess their policies and practices regarding sexual harassment and assault prevention, as well as their responses to complaints and allegations.

The impact of social movements such as #MeToo extends beyond real-life activism, influencing work of contemporary fiction and its treatment of sexual violence. Themes of sexual violence permeate contemporary fiction and its subgenres, exemplified in popular texts such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999), *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002), *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007), *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2015), among others. In her research on sexual assault and its impact on young adult literature, Amanda Charles explains that there is an "endless supply" of young adult novels that discuss themes of rape, molestation, sexual violence and abuse. Charles, having read *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson at just thirteen years old as a part of her English course curriculum, claims that as a result of the "dominance of sexual abuse in young adult literature," young readers often come into contact with explicit content with little to no effort at all. According to Charles, "when discussed correctly in a classroom or read appropriately outside of school," allowing young

adults to interact with these kinds of texts opens a space of empathy and healing, ultimately portraying the message, "You are not alone" (98). Stephen Chbosky, author of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, shares the same sentiment. The coming-of-age novel follows Charlie, a high school freshman, as he navigates life with severe social anxiety and depression. "[It's] a blueprint for survival," Chbosky emphasizes, "It's for people who have been through terrible things and need hope and support." At the end of the novel, we learn that Charlie was molested by his aunt as a child, which later proves to be the cause of his mental and emotional instability. In an interview on the widespread banning of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky states, "The classroom legitimizes these issues and by taking it out of the classroom we demote these things to 'dirty little secrets' and they're not dirty little secrets; these are things young people face every day." He says his goal in writing the book, ultimately, was to break the silence surrounding trauma and sexual violence (Vo).

Burns and Ozeki succeed not only in "breaking the silence" surrounding trauma and sexual violence, but also in challenging the traditional modes of narrating trauma stories. In "A 'Hair-Trigger Society' and the Woman Who Felt Something in Anna Burns's *Milkman*," Siân White explains that as a result of Burns' use of extended hindsight, middle sister's narration is "not merely homodiegetic (narrated by a character) but in fact autodiegetic: she tells her own story, for her own purpose, and in her own way" (113). Within this fictional autobiography, the protagonist's reflections and commentary are intricately woven into the narration of past events. Middle sister's digressive narration serves the dual purpose of conveying her "fear and bewilderment" in the past, while also drawing attention to the act of storytelling in the present (White 113). "The novel's implied narrative present," White argues, "coincides with unfolding

revelations about abuses of sexual power and sexual predation in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and beyond" (113).

A Tale for the Time Being, on the other hand, utilizes double-narration so that we may not only hear directly from Nao, but also hear from the character of Ruth, and witness the careful reception and treatment of Nao's story. *A Tale for the Time Being* is a work of autofiction, meaning the author and the protagonist share the same name and oftentimes, other identifiable qualities. The character "Ruth" shares numerous biographical similarities with the author Ruth Ozeki: they are both writers, both married to individuals named Oliver, and both reside on a small island near Vancouver. "Paradoxically," Marjorie Worthington writes in her essay, "'We'll Make Magic': Zen Writers and Autofictional Readers in *A Tale for the Time Being*," "the biographical connections between character and author spark a frisson of connection in the reader which lends an element of truth power to the novel, thus altering the way we read it" (91). She draws upon Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, claiming that "[A]lthough the narrative is a fiction, the name and biography of the author force the reader into constant engagement with the world outside the text, thus achieving 'a kind of reality-effect' or 'depthiness' (Worthington 91).

Milkman and *A Tale for the Time Being* also emphasize questions regarding the reception of survivor testimonies. In her chapter "Rape Consciousness: From Activism to Text" from her book *Writing the Survivor*, Robin E. Field addresses the evolution of rape fiction alongside rape consciousness in the late twentieth century. She notes a shift towards empathetic portrayals of survivors of sexual trauma and away from sensationalized depictions of violence. "The fundamental shift in the depiction of rape in American literature relies upon one key feature," Field explains, "The rape novel tells the story of the victim" (37). Readers encounter vivid

depictions of the physical and psychological trauma endured by the victimized woman, not about "the sadistic pleasures derived by the rapist in his forced sexual encounters" (Field 37). She argues that telling trauma stories is an essential rhetorical strategy to "promote understanding" and "create change," but even more essential is the "reparation of the breach between the individual and the community" (Field 44). "Recognition and restitution" are both necessary, according to Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, in order for a survivor of sexual violence to reclaim her agency (Field 45).

The exploration of sexual assault victim testimonies in contemporary fiction and popular culture underscores the importance of storytelling and the reception of survivor narratives in fostering understanding, empathy, and ultimately, societal change. Through these narratives, readers are invited to confront the realities of sexual violence, challenge traditional modes of storytelling, and participate in the process of recognizing and restoring agency to trauma survivors.

Milkman **and the "Stamp" of Societal Disbelief**

Anna Burns' *Milkman* follows the memory of 38-year-old unnamed "middle sister" and her recounting of the traumatic events that occurred when she was 18-years-old at the hands of a stalker, whom she refers to as "Milkman." Taking place in what the reader can infer is Belfast, Ireland, amidst The Troubles, Burns' fictional narrative is imbued with meticulous historical research, effectively enriching the ongoing dialogue surrounding the political and religious divisions in the country at the time. The narrator's voice seamlessly shifts between both her eighteen-year-old self and her thirty-eight-year-old self, and both selves often appear simultaneously in the text. As middle sister walks us through her memory of the traumatic events that occurred twenty years prior, the language she uses is especially notable, specifically when

describing the sensations that took place in her body when faced with Milkman's predatory advances.

In the first few pages of the novel, middle sister briefly introduces us to Milkman before telling us of first brother-in-law, who would ask her inappropriate sexual questions when she was younger. She recounts a time from when she was twelve years old, "[H]e used words, words sexual, I did not understand. He knew I didn't understand them but that I knew enough to grasp that they were sexual. That was what gave him pleasure. He was thirty-five. Twelve and thirty-five" (Burns 1-2). As young as twelve years old, middle sister was able to sense the wrongness of her interactions with first brother-in-law. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed states, "Over time, with experience, you sense that something is wrong or you have a feeling of being wronged. You sense an injustice…Many of my early experiences of feeling wronged, as a girl, involved unwanted male attention" (22). By the time middle sister is eighteen years old, she is well versed with unwanted male attention. She recognizes it both cognitively and physiologically. She explains, "But by now, by age eighteen, 'smiling, friendly and obliging' always had me straight on the alert" (Burns 3). Here, "smiling, friendly and obliging" describes Milkman upon their first encounter, in which he approaches her in his van while she reads *Ivanhoe* on her routine outdoor walk. Almost immediately, rumors spark of middle sister's affair with Milkman, and middle sister remains at the center of those rumors throughout the novel. Accusations swirl among the community, and there is a collective agreement that the unnerving relationship between the two is the fault of middle sister herself.

Middle sister is not ignorant to these rumors and accusations, and even on the first page of the narrative, she states, "It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the Milkman" (Burns 1). Middle sister is aware, just as she has sensed since she was twelve years old in

conversation with first brother-in-law, that the blame she receives is part of the cards she has been dealt as a woman–a girl. Ahmed emphasizes:

> Being a girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body: you are being told; you will receive my advances; you are object; thing, nothing. To become girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behavior in accordance; to become girl as becoming wary of being in public space; becoming wary of being at all. Indeed, if you do not modify your behavior in accordance, if you are not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you…You can be made responsible whether or not you have modified your behavior in accordance, because gender fatalism has already explained the violence directed against you as forgivable and inevitable (Ahmed 26).

This gender fatalism is evident in Burns' Belfast. Middle sister is not immune, and as Milkman's advances transpire, she morphs into a body that comes to fear the touch of the world. Middle sister, in the midst of her victimization to Milkman's stalking, does not actively change her behavior. She is considered an outcast within her community. Her affinity for reading while walking turns into a hobby that is weaponized against her, as evidence of her oddness. Middle sister is a spectacle. Every time she denies her affair with Milkman, she is met with disdain and dismissal, even from her own mother. Eventually, Milkman seems to infiltrate every part of her, without ever laying so much as a finger on her physical body. In fact, because Milkman does *not* physically touch middle sister, her community is even more inclined to invalidate her claims. Middle sister's psychological distress is dismissed as an overreaction and exaggeration.

One of the strongest points of evidence of this infiltration occurs when Milkman is not even physically present. Middle sister is attending her evening adult French class, where they are

instructed to go outside and look at the sky. It is here that middle sister spots a white van that resembles that of Milkman's. Her recorded visceral response resembles van der Kolk's explanation of how the feeling of helplessness manifests in the affected body areas: "head, back and limbs for accident victims, vagina and rectum in victims of sexual abuse" (267):

> At the same time I dismissed a strange bodily sensation that had run the lower back half of my body, during which the base of my spine had seemed to move. It *had* moved. Not a normal moving as in forward bends, backward bends, sideways and twistings. This had been a movement unnatural, an omen of warning, originating in the coccyx, with its vibration then setting off ripples–ugly, rapid, threatening ripples–traveling into my buttocks, gathering speed into my hamstrings from where, inside a moment, they sped to the dark recesses behind my knees and disappeared. This took one second, just one second, and my first thought–unbidden, unchecked–was that this was the underside of an orgasm, how one might imagine some creepy, back-of-body, partially convulsive shadow of an orgasm–an *anti-orgasm"* (Burns 79).

Individuals affected by post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often have heightened physical awareness. This physical and psychological phenomenon can be understood as hypervigilance. To keep the body out of harm's way, a person becomes acutely aware of themselves and their surroundings (Lebow and Gepp). In 2015, researchers S.N. Avery, J.A. Clauss, and J.U. Blackford conducted a study of human response to threat based on proximal and temporal distance, and in their article "The Human BNST: Functional Role in Anxiety and Addiction," they explain that a sustained hypervigilant response is evoked by "potential and unpredictable threat" (127). They clarify, "[A]lthough short-term immediate ('fear') responses occur only in the immediate presence of a threat, sustained hypervigilant ('anxiety') responses occur both

when a threat is distant and in contexts associated with threat, even when a threat is not currently present" (Avery, Clauss, and Blackford 127). This authenticates Burns' *Milkman* in that middle sister's bodily responses are in line with recent research of real PTSD victims.

Van der Kolk explains that in neuroscience, there are two distinct forms of self-awareness, one that follows us throughout our entire lifetime, and the other that operates moment by moment:

> The first, our autobiographical self, creates connections among experiences and assembles them into a coherent story. This system is rooted in language. Our narratives change with the telling, as our perspective changes and as we incorporate new input. The other system, moment-to-moment self-awareness, is based primarily in physical sensations, but if we feel safe and are not rushed, we can find words to communicate that experience as well. These two ways of knowing are localized in different parts of the brain that are largely disconnected from each other. Only the system devoted to self-awareness, which is based in the medial prefrontal cortex, can change the emotional brain" (238).

Through van der Kolk's description of these two selves, we can understand thirty-eight-year-old middle sister as the "autobiographical self," who is able to configure her past experiences in order to tell her story with a sense of awareness that eighteen-year-old middle sister does not yet have. Eighteen-year-old middle sister experiences Milkman moment-by-moment, and even though she exemplifies hypervigilance when it comes to her bodily senses, she is "not safe," and thus, language often fails her. At eighteen, she is incapable of reckoning with her victimization. She attempts to articulate her experience alongside her lack of certainty, "Hard to define, this stalking, this predation, because it was piecemeal. A bit here, a bit there, maybe, maybe not,

perhaps, don't know. It was constant hints, symbolisms, representations, metaphors. He could have meant what I thought he'd meant, but equally, he might not have meant anything" (Burns 181). Eighteen-year-old middle sister relies on her body to do the talking for her, and as a result, her hypervigilance and hyper-awareness becomes the only way she can interact with the world around her. She emphasizes her own awareness of her hypervigilance:

> Thing was, my growing suspicions of almost everyone and everything was proof of how the milkman had got in. He'd infiltrated my psyche and now it was clear those first three meetings had never been the accidental encounters I'd tried to pretend to myself they had been. And now he was appearing, stopping me, standing in the way of me or falling into step beside me, all in the manner of some ordinary meeting up. This felt an injustice (Burns 166).

The narration here by Burns is particularly notable, especially the choice to use both "now" and "was" when describing the psychological effect of Milkman's actions. By narrating in the past continuous tense in "and now it was clear" and "And now he was appearing," Burns not only emphasizes the persistence of Milkman's intrusions into middle sister's life, but also demonstrates thirty-eight-year-old middle sister's reckoning with Milkman's intrusions in the present.

Ahmed explains in *Living a Feminist Life* that feminism allows you to revisit where you have been, and within that revisitation, you are able to become conscious of the injustices you were once taught to overlook (31). Older middle sister has lived twenty years since the events recorded in her narrative; she is even further acquainted with what it means to live out one's gendered fatalism: the girlification of her testimony. As the autobiographical self, older middle sister has access to language that her younger self could not locate in the moment-by-moment

experience. It is as if thirty-eight-year-old middle sister is using the recounting of these events to gift her younger self with insight she did not have before. Eighteen-year-old middle sister is limited to her physical body, but through *Milkman* the narrative, her older self meets her where she is, and provides her with language, awareness, and validity. Older middle sister becomes an advocate for her younger self, offering her the support that she lacked twenty years before.

Mid-way through the novel, longest friend from primary school reaches out to middle sister. Middle sister describes longest friend as someone she deeply trusts, "the one person I could speak with, the one person I could listen to, totalling in fact the last trusted-fewest person who wouldn't drain the life out of me that I had left in the world" (Burns 196). As they discuss middle sister's predicament, longest friend states: "Knowing you, you've probably not done anything, but according to rumour, seems you've done everything" (Burns 197). Middle sister takes this opportunity to confide in longest friend, telling her in detail about Milkman's advances, how he knows her routines as well as the routines of those around her. She tells longest friend of the "not touching" though "it seemed he was always touching," that she spends her time "waiting, anticipating, dreading" (Burns 198). She even discusses the overtly sexual behavior of first brother-in-law as well as her own mother's dismissal of her experiences. "I had said all," middle sister reflects, "I had told out to the right person. Definitely, longest friend had been the right person…So I was heard, and it felt good and respectful to be heard, to be got, not to be interrupted or cut off by opinionated, poorly attuned people" (Burns 199). This sense of relief, however, is incredibly short lived. Longest friend does not believe her. She not only informs middle sister that she is considered by the community as "beyond-the-pale," but accuses her of bringing her treatment upon herself. "The community," longest friend asserts, "has pronounced its diagnosis on you now" (Burns 199).

The "diagnosis" longest friend refers to is only reflective of middle sister's behavior, not Milkman's. Specifically, this diagnosis seems to hinge on middle sister's habit of reading while walking, revealed in their conversation:

> 'It's disturbing. It's deviant. It's optical illusional. Not public-spirited. Not self-preservation. Calls attention to itself and why–with enemies at the door, with the community under siege, with us all having to pull together–would anyone want to call attention to themselves here?' 'Hold on a minute,' I said. 'Are you saying it's okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read *Jane Eyre* in public?' 'I didn't say not in public. Just don't do it while you're walking about. They don't like it (Burns 200).

More specifically, longest friend criticizes middle sister's lack of awareness, and argues that because of this lack of awareness, in "terms of contextual environment," that "it is okay for [Milkman] and it's not okay for you" (Burns 201). The conversation with longest friend highlights the dynamics of believability within the novel. Despite being a trusted confidant initially, longest friend's response reflects the broader societal tendency to question and blame victims of sexual harassment. Longest friend's dismissal of middle sister's experiences and the community's pronouncement of her as "beyond-the-pale" underscore the challenges victims face in being believed and supported. Furthermore, the discrepancy in treatment between Milkman and middle sister, with Milkman's behavior being normalized while middle sister is criticized for seemingly innocuous actions like reading in public, further illustrates the gendered nature of disbelief and victim-blaming.

The most evident convergence of the separate middle sister selves occurs in the local chip shop. After news of middle sister's poisoning by tablets girl and tablets girl's subsequent murder

ripples throughout the community, she finds every single individual in the chip shop gawking at her, staring as if she was some sort of zoo animal. She states, "It had been Milkman. He had killed her. Ordinarily, not politically, he had killed her, and all because–so it seemed to this community–he hadn't liked that she'd attempted to kill me" (Burns 240). It is evident that the focus is on young middle sister's voice in this particular account, yet through her mastery over narration, Burns allows older middle sister to enter the conversation on the same page. We undoubtedly hear her voice, "That might have been true or might not have been true, but the chip shop thought it was true and, in that moment, surrounded by all these people with their minds made up, I thought it true as well" (Burns 240). Almost immediately after, we get another glimpse into Milkman's control over middle sister:

> [I]t had been my insides disoriented, pains in my stomach, quivers in my legs, my hand shaking as I put the key in the lock. Paranoia indoors too, it had been, in case he might be in my wardrobe when he wasn't, in case he might be in my cupboards when he wasn't, in case he might be under my bed. Each time he'd gotten close…closer…even closer, but I couldn't tell, not till now, if his stamp was still coming on me or if all the time already it had been on me" (Burns 241).

The "now" uttered here is immediately understood by the reader as eighteen-year-old middle sister's "now." A few moments pass, and middle sister takes the chips and her money and exits the establishment. Yet, as the episode in the chip shop concludes, older middle sister's voice is once again brought into focus:

> Most damning therefore, my own behavior, this handling of the chip shop badly, no matter there'd been a compelling of me by everybody in it exactly to handle it badly. I knew now though, what they'd known for some time which was that no longer was I a

> teenager amidst a bunch of other teenagers, coming into and going out of and gallivanting about the area. Now I knew that that stamp–and not just by Milkman–had unreservedly, and against my will, been put on" (Burns 242).

Again, Burns' language in "Now I knew" indicates the insight younger middle sister provides to her older self as she records her memories. The moment in the chip shop marks the profound impact of societal disbelief on middle sister's sense of agency, as well as a notable shift in awareness. She is no longer a "carefree teenager," but rather, someone who has been "stamped" by societal judgements and expectations. Not only does Burns' narrative choice reveal the development of middle sister's character, but also demonstrates the ways in which her past continues to shape her present perspective.

Middle sister is not the only one who has been "stamped" by societal judgment. Ironically, the reception of *Milkman* itself reflects the reception of middle sister's testimony in Burns' storyworld. A.N. Devers covers the book's reception in her article in *The L.A. Times.* She notes that although the novel has been met with "careful appreciation," it has also been met with critical reviews, stating that is "eccentric," "odd," "difficult," and "complicated," as well as "impenetrable," "relentlessly internalized," and "baffling" (Devers). Devers combats this, asserting that *Milkman's* narration is not so much "eccentric" and "odd" as it is "unique" and "honest" and unlike anything else. "[Y]ou can't help but wonder if this is gendered criticism," writes Devers, "Would it receive this criticism of being too hard if it were written by a man?" Devers argues that *Milkman'*s critical reception bears resemblance to the subtle yet pervasive advice women often receive throughout their lives: to diminish themselves in order to be more "liked" by the masses. "Men and 'difficult' books by men," notes Devers, "don't receive this criticism."

Milkman concludes after Milkman's death. Middle sister and third brother-in-law are about to set out on a run like normal, like before:

> As we jumped the tiny hedge because we couldn't be bothered with the tiny gate to set off on our running, I inhaled the early evening light and realised this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks and reservoirs, I exhaled this light and for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed (Burns 348).

In this concluding passage, the narrative shifts to a moment of tranquility and renewal following Milkman's death. As middle sister and third brother-in-law prepare for their run, there is a sense of returning to normalcy, to the routines of their lives before the invasion of Milkman's presence. In this moment, there is a glimpse of hope and possibility, a reminder that even in the face of adversity, there can be moments of hope. However, the use of the phrase "almost nearly" in the passage adds a layer of complexity to middle sister's psychological and emotional state. It suggests a proximity to laughter or relief, yet stops short of fully embracing it. This hesitancy, ultimately, reflects the lingering impact of the trauma she has endured. Despite the momentary softening and the semblance of normalcy in the scene, middle sister's trauma continues to influence her emotions and reactions, both in the moment at eighteen and in reflection twenty years later. Despite her resilience and determination to move forward, she remains acutely aware of the skepticism and disbelief that have surrounded her testimony. Although Milkman is gone, middle sister is left with a new understanding of her friends and family and community, one that is shaped by personal experience, and one that is aware of the inescapable mistreatment of both women and survivors of sexual trauma.

Narrative Entanglements: Time, Trauma, and Empathy in *A Tale for the Time Being*

A Tale for the Time Being by Ruth Ozeki follows the story of the fictional character Ruth Ozeki, a novelist, who finds the diary of sixteen year old Naoku Yasutani (Nao) after it washes up in a HelloKitty lunch box along the shore of a remote Canadian island. Upon reading the diary, it is revealed that Nao has decided to write the story of her great-grandmother's life, Jiko, a Zen Buddhist nun, before ending her own. As Ruth reads the pages, it becomes evident that Nao, after moving back to Japan from California as a result of her father's unemployment, has faced severe physical and cyber-bullying at the hands of her schoolmates. Each chapter alternates between the voices of Ruth and Nao as Nao's story unfolds and as Ruth reacts to it in real time. The Tōhoku earthquake and Fukushima disaster hang as a backdrop to the novel, and through Ruth's conversations with Oliver, her science-minded husband, Ozeki addresses the historical and environmental implications surrounding the disaster. Furthermore, Nao's record of the traumatic events she experienced, as well as Ruth's reading of those events, reveal the inherent human struggle to articulate sexual trauma.

Ahmed states in *Living a Feminist Life*, "We encounter racism and sexism before we have the words that allow us to make sense of what we encounter. Words can then allow us to get closer to our experiences; words can allow us to comprehend what we experience after the event. We become retrospective witnesses of our becoming" (32). Through Ozeki's use of double narration in *Tale*, we witness this concept come to life. As Nao assigns words to the abuse she suffered on the pages of her diary, she gains an awareness that she did not possess at the time the abuse took place, an awareness her body was not capable of retaining. As Ruth receives those words, she takes on the role of Nao's protector and evolves alongside her.

It is essential that we understand the extent of the connection between the characters of Nao and Ruth as we explore their shared narrative. In "Writing the Hyper Disaster: Embodied and Engendered Narrative after Nuclear Disaster," Emily Jones explains, "[Ruth and Nao] are entangled with one another in a quantum sense, that one cannot exist without the other" (108). This reflects the beginning of *Tale*, where Nao informs the reader of the diary (who is unknown to her), that she is reaching through time to touch them; Ruth recognizes the intimate nature of the diary before she even begins to read it, simply because the words are handwritten. She states, "Print is predictable and impersonal, conveying information in a mechanical transaction with the reader's eye. Handwriting, by contrast, resists the eye, reveals its meaning slowly, and is as intimate as skin" (Ozeki 12). There is an impermanence that accompanies the pages as a result of them being handwritten–they have been touched by the physical body belonging to the being who wrote them, and now they rest in the physical hands of Ruth, who reads them. In Appendix B of *Tale*, Ruth explains elements of quantum mechanics in her own words, "[E]ntanglement: by which two particles can coordinate their properties across space and time and behave like a single system (i.e., a Zen master and his disciple; a character and her narrator; old Jiko and Nao and Oliver and me?)" (Ozeki 409). Nao and Ruth exist within *Tale* as this "character and her narrator" who are entangled with one another across distance.

Although Nao and Ruth's bodies are connected on both the physical and metaphysical plane, in her diary, Nao recounts times throughout her life when she experienced a fracturing of the self. Nao is the victim of unthinkable sexual crime and assault, and after each attack on her body, she seems to become increasingly disconnected from it. After Nao moves back to Japan from the United States, she is labeled as an outcast and a foreigner by those at her junior high

school and becomes a target of abuse as a result. One day, her mother notices the marks and bruises that litter Nao's body:

> [S]he even found the bald patch at the back of my head where the boy who sat at the desk behind me had been pulling out my hairs, one by one. I tried to lie and say it was an allergy, and then I said it was hair loss from stress, and then I actually said it really was from gym class, and then I suggested it might be hemophilia or leukemia or Von Willebrand's disease, but Mom didn't buy any of it…I tried not to make a big deal about it, because I didn't want her going to the school and complaining and making a stink" (Ozeki 73).

The passage demonstrates the desperation Nao feels in lying to her mother, as well as the fear in anticipating her response. In "Who has to tell their trauma story and how hard will it be?" Delker et al. explain, "Even sexual assault survivors who have recovered from the life disruption of trauma may not feel comfortable sharing their history with others" (4). This reluctance not only has to do with the stigma attached to sexual assault, but also with the perception that their stories will be "emotionally difficult for others to hear, even for trained professionals such as therapists" (Delker et al. 4). However, Nao is not dependent on verbal testimony; instead, her body testifies for her. Emily Jones expounds on this event, "This chaotic attempt at explanation recalls Ruth's obsessive attempts to understand the effect of the earthquake and other traumas on Nao, but also demonstrates Nao's reluctance to put her actual trauma into language, instead relying on her body to convey the story" (Jones 109). Nao's mother, in the end, does not buy into Nao's attempt to explain away her physical appearance. "It's okay, Mom. Really. It's not personal. You know how kids are. I'm the transfer student. They do the same to everyone" (Ozeki 73). Nao's mother's response, "Maybe you're not trying hard enough to make new friends," is not only

dismissive, but insinuates that Nao is at fault for what has happened to her. Mirroring longest friend in Burns' *Milkman*, Nao's mother is more concerned with how Nao is being perceived by her community than she is with supporting and validating her trauma. According to research presented by EVAWI (End Violence Against Women International), receiving a negative reaction to a sexual assault disclosure can be more detrimental than receiving no reaction at all. The authors explain, "victims are better off telling no one at all about their sexual assault, than telling someone and receiving a negative reaction of doubt or blame" ("A Brief History"). Nao's mother's reaction reinforces the internalized guilt and shame Nao already feels, further distancing her from her own body.

One of the most evident scenes in *Tale* in which Nao experiences a separation from her body culminates in a brutal sexual assault in the school bathroom. After the assault, Nao's underwear is auctioned online alongside a video of the attack. Nao describes the scene:

> I just lay there, perfectly still. It was pointless to struggle or scream. There were too many of them, and no one would hear me or come to help, but really it didn't matter, because I was thinking about Number One, and he was giving me courage. They could break my body but they wouldn't break my spirit. They were only shadows, and as I listened to them arguing, I felt my face relax into a gentle smile, I summoned up my supapawa, and soon the shadows were just mosquitoes, buzzing in the distance and bothersome only if you let them be (Ozeki 277).

Here, Nao is experiencing a phenomenon called dissociation. She is totally and utterly removed from her body during the assault. Her mind occupies a completely different space. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk draws on French psychologist and psychotherapist Pierre Janet, who originally defined dissociation as "the splitting off and isolation of memory imprints" (182).

Van der Kolk expounds upon the psychological implications of dissociation, "Dissociation prevents the trauma from becoming integrated within the conglomerated, ever-shifting stores of autobiographical memory, in essence creating a dual memory system" (233). Nao's dissociation disallows the event to join the other memories her body holds; it does not allow her to assign language to the physical and violent acts being performed on her body. Just as she relied on her physical body to speak for her in front of her mother, Nao relies on her body to undergo the attack while absent of her conscious mind. It is not until after, in reflection, that she is able to feel what she has experienced, and even later that she is able to attach words to the event in her diary. In "Beyond Machine Dreams: Zen, Cyber-, and Transnational Feminisms in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," Marlo Starr states, "The violence enacted in the school bathroom does not belong to one moment in Nao's life but, once published to the Internet, this moment of sexual abuse is frozen in time—disseminated to a wider audience, with the potential to be looped, rewatched, and re-experienced over again (Starr 106). In accordance with traumatic experiences described in *The Body Keeps the Score*, the bathroom assault can be "looped, rewatched, and re-experienced over again" not only because it exists on the internet, but because of the way Nao has filed the event within her own mind. In a chapter on traumatic memory, van der Kolk states, "[T]he physical, embodied expression of trauma is a memory that is inscribed simultaneously in the mind, as interior images and words, and on the body" (186). He continues, recounting his work with patients who experienced severe trauma and their testimonies:

> All of our traumatized patients said that they had not been able to tell anybody precisely what had happened immediately following the event…Almost all had repeated flashbacks: They felt overwhelmed by images, sounds, sensations, and emotions. As time went on, even more sensory details and feelings were activated, but most participants also

> started to make some sense out of them. They began to "know" what had happened and to be able to tell the story to other people, a story that we call "the memory of the trauma" (van der Kolk 196).

In this sense, we can understand *Tale* not only as Nao's story, but as "the memory of the trauma." This adds to the complexity of Nao's character, who is young and charming and girlish, yet who has also experienced inarticulable pain and suffering within her years. She walks the line between narrative memory and traumatic memory, and Ruth is left to sort out the pieces.

Jiko, Nao's 104-year-old great-grandmother, also inhabits a body that speaks for her. At one point in the narrative, Nao stays at Old Jiko's bathhouse, and studies the old woman's naked body, noting that she seems to inhabit multiple bodies at once: "[W]atching her pale, crooked body rise from the steam in the dark wooden tub, I thought she looked ghostly—part ghost, part child, part young girl, part sexy woman, and part yamamba, [mountain witch, mountain hag], all at once. All the ages and stages, combined into a single time being" (Ozeki 166). This is a moment of recognition for Nao: that bodies, women bodies, are able to occupy multiple personas at once (Starr 102). Nao's body is no different; it exists as the girl in America, the girl who has been battered by the hands of school bullies, and the girl who eventually stands on her desk at school and reclaims her power. Her body also houses the girl who dedicates her final days to preserving her own life in writing, creating a tangible memory of her physical body.

"Writing experiments from around the world," van der Kolk details, "consistently show that writing about upsetting events improves physical and mental health" (243). He explains, "You can connect those self-observing and narrative parts of your brain without worrying about the reception you'll get" (van der Kolk 240). Nao's diary, however, does not act merely as a space for Nao to record stories, memories, and events from her and her family's life; through her

entries, Nao engages in a continuous dialogue with a reader she imagines for herself. This reader listens to her and champions her and is invested in her words. Furthermore, by employing elements of magic realism, the reader–Ruth–eventually takes part in writing Nao's fate. When Ruth nears the end of the diary, she realizes that the final pages that had once been filled, are blank. Nao's words have disappeared, and Oliver, Ruth's husband, suggests that Ruth ought to "go find them" (Ozeki 345). As the pages continue to magically "recede" and reappear, Ruth imagines that Nao has been given a new identity and lives with her father in Montreal, Canada. She imagines that Nao is doing well, that she no longer struggles with suicidal ideation, and that she still plans to write the story of Jiko's life. In Nao's final entry, she tells her reader, "You may only be make-believe, but you are my true friend and you've helped me. I really mean that" (Ozeki 385). She explains that writing to her reader has become her new found "superpower." (Ozeki 389). In the novel's epilogue, we are left with a final letter from Ruth addressed to Nao. "You wonder about me. I wonder about you," she writes, echoing Nao's first entry (Ozeki 402). "[I]f you ever change your mind," Ruth says, "I'll be waiting. Because I really would like to meet you sometime. You're my kind of time being, too" (Ozeki 403). Here, in the closing lines of the novel, we are left knowing that Nao has agency over her own life and actions, and through Ruth's engagement with Nao's story, readers witness the transformative power of storytelling in the face of trauma. Ruth's acceptance serves as a lens through which readers can empathize with Nao's experiences and find hope in her resilience. According to Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale's four strategies to validate victims of sexual violence, Nao's mother fails. Ruth, on the other hand, succeeds. Not only does Ruth position Nao as the subject and the expert over her own story, but the changing final pages of the diary create a space for Nao to "theorize [her] own experience

and talk back" (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 215). Ruth and Nao, together, become Nao's biggest advocate.

Conclusion

"Despite the liberal rhetoric that often claims we are 'post-' racism and 'post-' sexism," Banet Weiser and Higgins explain, "the social construction of race and gender have deeply sedimented histories that share logics across centuries" (185). They conclude that believability is not "static," but occupies contrasting conditional spaces, and often "morphs into a mechanism that secures power rather than reveals a 'truth'" (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 185). Both *Milkman* and *A Tale for the Time Being* address the complexities of power structures, gender dynamics, and the ways in which women's testimonies of sexual violence are received and perceived within their respective narratives. In *Milkman*, middle sister grapples with the culture of victim-blaming and disbelief as she navigates the aftermath of Milkman's stalking. Despite her attempts to assert her truth and resist Milkman's unwanted advances, middle sister is ostracized from her community. Her experiences highlight the challenges that survivors of sexual violence often encounter when seeking validation and support, as well as the ways societal norms and gender expectations shape perceptions of innocence and disproportionately favor men. Furthermore, the parallels drawn between middle sister's experiences and the novel's reception underscore the nature of gendered criticism and the pressures placed on women to conform to certain standards and modify their behavior.

Similarly, *A Tale for the Time Being* sheds light on the vulnerability of young women and the lasting impact of societal indifference and complicity. As Ruth delves into Nao's story, she confronts her own biases and preconceptions, struggling with the weight of witnessing another's pain and the ethical responsibility of validating Nao's testimony. The novel's exploration of

dissociation and the "fragmented self" underscores the profound impact of trauma on the psyche, as Nao struggles to reconcile her physical and emotional experiences. Through magical realism and intertextuality, Ozeki blurs the boundaries between past and present, self and other, inviting readers to reconsider their own perceptions of reality and narrative "truth." As Ruth and Nao's narratives converge, we are reminded of story's ability to foster connection across time and space.

Both novels explore the complexities of bearing witness to women's experiences of sexual violence and the ways in which societal norms influence perceptions of truth and credibility. Through their respective narratives, Burns and Ozeki challenge readers to confront the discomforting realities of gendered violence and the urgent need for empathy and understanding, even in the face of disbelief. By centering the experiences of their female protagonists and challenging the structures that perpetuate disbelief, *Milkman* and *A Tale for the Time Being* serve as compelling reminders of the strength and resiliency of trauma survivors, exemplifying the profound influence and potential of literary fiction.

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