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## REALITY BECKONS:

### Metamodernist depthiness beyond panfictionality

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## **REALITY BECKONS: Metamodernist depthiness beyond panfictionality**

It is often argued that postmodernism has been succeeded by a new dominant cultural logic. We conceive of this new logic as metamodernism. Whilst some twenty-first century texts still engage with and utilise postmodernist practices, they put these practices to new use. In this article, we investigate the metamodern usage of the typically postmodernist devices of metatextuality and ontological slippage in two genres: autofiction and true crime documentary. Specifically, we analyse Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* and the Netflix mini-series *The Keepers*, demonstrating that forms of fictionalisation, metafictionality, and ontological blurring between fiction and reality have been repurposed. We argue that, rather than expand the scope of fiction, overriding reality, the metamodernist repurposing of postmodernist textual strategies generates a kind of 'reality-effect'.

Keywords: *A Tale for the Time Being*; autofiction; depth; depthiness; metamodernism; ontology; panfictionality; parafiction; reality; Ruth Ozeki; *The Keepers*; true crime.

### **Introduction**

There is an increasing belief across the humanities – from literary criticism to film studies to art theory – that the phenomenon labelled postmodernism is now, as Linda Hutcheon claims, 'a thing of the past' (2002: 165). If, however, there is a shared sense that postmodernism is no longer with us, there is less agreement about what has replaced it. Amongst the suggestions are notions as diverse as: 'hypermodernism' (Lipovetsky, 2005), which stresses consumerism; 'digimodernism' (Kirby, 2009), which foregrounds digitisation; a 'post-postmodern' realist ethics (McLaughlin, 2004); 'cosmodernism' (Moraru, 2011) and 'planetariness' (Elias and Moraru, 2015; Moraru, 2015) which emphasise globalisation; and the 'Anthropocene' (Trexler, 2015) with its environmental concern.<sup>1</sup> Whilst these theories prioritise a component or sensibility of contemporary culture, other accounts focus on literary style and thematics. Walkowitz (2006), James (2012) and James and Seshigiri (2014), for instance, argue for the resurgence of modernist aesthetics in contemporary fiction. In contrast, Eshelman

(2008) and Bourriaud (2009; cf. Gibbons, 2012) suggest that contemporary texts adopt both modernist and postmodernist practices.

Our own designation for today's dominant cultural logic is 'metamodernism' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010; van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, 2017, forthcoming; van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017; Gibbons, 2015, 2019). We suggest this term to allude both to the surpassing of postmodern and pre-postmodern cultural logics and an indebtedness to them. In Greek, 'meta', after all, means 'after' but also 'with'. Whilst 'metamodernism' is not our coinage (cf. Dumitrescu, 2007; Furlani, 2007), our usage is novel. We conceptualise the emergence of metamodernism – transitioning from the historical period labelled postmodernism – as having taken shape in the 2000s, a period roughly lasting from 1999 to 2011 (for further elaboration on this historical transition, see: van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017). In line with commentators such as Kirby and Moraru, we, too, situate this transition in material developments – specifically the socio-cultural reconsiderations necessitated by the financial and ecological crises, the possibilities offered by web 2.0, and the demands and desires of generation Y. Moreover, like Eshelman and Bourriaud, we conceive of the cultural styles operating in this period as an assortment of postmodernist and modernist techniques, as well as pre-modernist modes, such as realism and romanticism (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). Importantly, however, metamodernism should not be understood as a wholesale return of nineteenth or early twentieth century realism or of the real; nor does it unequivocally reenergize modernist formal innovations nor desert postmodernist techniques. In this article, we show that postmodernist practices are not, as is sometimes suggested in accounts of post-postmodernism and twenty-first century culture, abandoned; but neither is their presence evidence that postmodernism is still alive and well. Rather, postmodernist devices are put to new use, reterritorialised.

Specifically, we investigate the function of the typically postmodernist strategies of metatextuality and ontological ambiguity in two distinctly metamodernist genres – autofiction and true crime documentaries. In both cases, such techniques imbue that which is fictional with depthiness (a kind of ‘reality-effect’), a concept we introduce below.

### **Postmodernist ‘Depthlessness’ vs. Metamodernist ‘Depthiness’**

Cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson defined postmodernism as a collective inability to experience, beyond a surface level, the totality of the objective (real, actually existing) conditions in which the subject lived its daily life. In parallel, the capacity of art, literature, and other forms of cultural narratives to speak to and depict these real and objective conditions was withdrawn; authentic depth of representation was replaced by free-floating signifiers on a surface level. For Baudrillard (1993 [1976]; 1983), postmodernism entailed the replacement of reality with ‘hyperreality’, where the image – or representation – no longer stood for a single referential real world but became instead a ‘simulacrum’, a simulation that no longer has any meaningful relation to that which could previously have been described as reality. Jameson (1991 [1984]) speaks instead of the loss of the real in postmodernist texts as ‘a new kind of flatness or *depthlessness*, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense’ (Jameson, 1991 [1984]: 9; our emphasis). This depthlessness emerged from the postmodern cultural condition in which the real objective circumstances of everyday life could no longer be perceived and cognitively mapped due to the overload of stimuli in, and of, a globalising consumerist and media culture.

Marie-Laure Ryan subsequently writes about the ontological legacy of postmodernism from a narratological perspective. In doing so, she speaks of the ‘doctrine of panfictionality’ – a ‘crisis’ in the dichotomy between fact and fiction that

ultimately leads to ‘the expansion of fiction at the expense of nonfiction’ (1997: 165). According to Ryan (1997: 168-173), postmodernist texts achieve this expansion through five central strategies: (1) self-referentiality, drawing attention to the text as a fictional artefact and thus preventing immersion in fictional worlds; (2) fictional imitation of nonfiction, which does not dupe readers but rather appears ‘as an ostentation fabrication’ (1997: 169); (3) fictionalising techniques, which reduce the credibility of non-fiction; (4) obvious intra-textual clashes between fictional and non-fictional ontologies; and (5) the inability to decipher the referential or fictional status of a narrative’s storyworlds. Aided by postmodernism’s dominant cultural belief in the loss of the real, these techniques function – in Ryan’s view – to override the real, in essence doing away with the category altogether. That is, rather than a distinction between fiction and non-fiction, postmodern logic only recognises fiction. It is for this reason that, for Ryan, postmodernist textuality ‘ventures into the realm of the textually possible but epistemologically scandalous’ (1997: 183).

We do not take issue with Ryan’s reading of postmodernism and panfictionality. We do, though, argue that just as postmodernism has been replaced by a new cultural logic, so too has panfictionality been superseded. Metamodernist texts instead produce a ‘reality effect’ – a performance of, or insistence on, reality – and ironically they create this effect by using many of the same postmodernist devices Ryan identifies as panfictionalising techniques. Indeed, Hutcheon observes that the postmodern moment may well be ‘over’ (2002: 165), but also cautions that ‘its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on’ (181). In this article, as a way of demonstrating the metamodern movement beyond what Jameson refers to as ‘depthlessness’ and Ryan as ‘panfictionality’, we explore how the typically postmodernist strategies of metatextuality and ontological collapse are recycled or upcycled, as it were, in order to

re-engage with the possibilities of representing reality in the twenty-first century.

Following Timotheus Vermeulen (2015, 2017), we refer to this re-engagement as a ‘new depthiness’. Vermeulen argues (2015; original emphasis):

If Jameson’s term ‘new depthlessness’ points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase ‘new depthiness’ indicates the *performative* reappraisal of these depths. [...] Depth, at least post-Jameson, will always be ‘depthing’ – a making, actual or virtual, of depth. In this sense, depthiness combines the epistemological reality of depthlessness with the performative possibility of depth.

Responding to Jameson’s notion of depthlessness and the comedian Stephen Colbert’s gimmick about ‘truthiness’ (2006; cf. Browse, 2017) – the truth felt in one’s gut as opposed to established through reason or empirical research – ‘depthiness’ designates a renewed need or wish to experience the world as possessing depth, *as real*, even amidst a lingering postmodernist scepticism of such an attempt. In this sense, whilst depthiness does not entirely rebuild the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction after postmodernism, it does create a ‘reality effect’ which renews the ontological category of the real.

Depthiness – in contrast to Jameson’s depth-model – is a post-simulacral strategy in the sense conceptualised by Carrie Lambert-Beatty in her discussion of the blending of ontologies in art installations (2009: 54-56):

Post-simulacral [...] strategies are oriented less towards the disappearance of the real than towards the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact. They achieve truth-status—for some of the people some of the time [...].

We agree with Lambert-Beatty here: the post-simulacral – or ‘depthy’ in our terms –



quality of contemporary aesthetics does not provide access to the real conditions of everyday life or to the depths of the human psyche, as some kind of realist or modernist work might have aspired to do. Additionally, contemporary aesthetics no longer allow viewers to dwell only on the hyper-stimulating surfaces that formed the postmodern interface between the object (or system world) and the subject. Rather, metamodernist texts – whether art, television show or film, or literature – use compositional strategies that were previously associated with postmodernism to point to a reality, even within the context of fictional worlds or pseudo-realities. Both depthiness and post-simulacral art are therefore concerned with the potential textual *effect* and receptive *experience* of reality. Accordingly, these texts require a reception of trust because they ‘create personal, alternative visions of depth, visions they invite us to share’ (Vermeulen, 2015). As visitors to an art installation, as viewers of a television show or film, and/or as readers of fiction, we subsequently read metamodernist texts *as though* they were real accounts even though they might be – evidently or not so evidently – fictional.

To demonstrate the twenty-first century repurposing of postmodernist techniques to achieve metamodernist depthiness, we focus on two contemporary genres that blend fiction and non-fiction: literary autofiction and true crime television (cf. van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 2017). In accordance with our aforementioned periodization of metamodernism, both autofiction and true crime had strong cross-media emergences in the late twentieth century (Masschelein, 2007; Murley, 2008; Kjellman-Chapin, 2009) before booming in the twenty-first century. Contemporary autofictions make use of self-referentiality, ontological indecipherability, and intra-textual ontological clashes. Yet the metatextual strategies of autofiction (see Gibbons, 2017a, 2018) do not, in Ryan’s words, erect ‘a screen between the reader and the fictional world’, preventing the reader from ‘recentering into this world’ (1997: 169). Readers are, in fact,

encouraged to recenter – as an imaginative act of ‘projection’, ‘transportation’, or ‘immersion’ (cf. Duchan, Bruder, and Hewitt 1995; Gerrig 1993) – into the fictional world of a contemporary autofiction. The metatextual references in contemporary autofiction do, at times, draw attention to a work’s fictionality, but ontological indecipherability and intra-textual clashes prompt a re-interpretation of the text’s fictional or referential status. This subsequently leads the reader to reconceive of the fictional storyworlds as embedded within their own felt sense of reality. The way in which contemporary autofiction repurposes these three supposedly panfictional techniques is demonstrated in the next section of the article, which analyses Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). In comparison, true crime dramas – such as the Netflix mini-series *The Keepers* (2017) – exploit ontological indecipherability and use fictionalising strategies to solve actual crimes. Instead of reducing the credibility of non-fiction, the metamodernist repurposing of fictionalising strategies in true crime portends to present a (fictional) reality that is more valid than the actual reality at hand, and in doing so treats fiction – often unreflexively – as a more accurate method for representing reality.

In what she called a ‘plea’ against panfictionality, Ryan hoped to salvage the distinction between fiction and non-fiction as a means of ‘protection’ against the postmodern ‘replacement of reality’ (1997: 180). Contemporary autofictions and true crime television series – as metamodernist genres – respond, in part, to that plea. Although the epistemological boundary between fiction and non-fiction is not reinstated *per se*, the ontological collapse of fact and fiction is repurposed in order: firstly, to accentuate a reality that readers and viewers share with real flesh-and-blood authors or historical figures; secondly, to place the content of the fictional work in the context of that shared social reality; and finally, to evince a sense of responsibility in the reader to

the (fictional/fictionalised) reality (cf. Huber and Funk, 2017). Thus, when metamodernist texts deal with diverse yet contentious themes – such as crime, sexual abuse, depression, or climate change – readers or viewers are positioned to engage with these themes not as fictions but as real-world instantiations. Through this repurposing of postmodernist techniques, as we argue both throughout our analyses and in our conclusion, metamodernist works perform depthiness in order to reengage readers’ emotional and ethical relations with the real.

### **Autofiction: *A Tale for the Time Being***

There is, as Hywel Dix emphasises, ‘no single definition of autofiction’ (2018: 2), though it is generally conceived of as a loosely autobiographical genre in which a homodiegetic narrator represents the author of the work (cf. Gratton, 2001; Zipfel, 2005). Works of autofiction can be seen to exist on a referentiality-fictionality continuum, based on how explicitly the central protagonist can be identified with the real author of the work. At their most explicit, autofictions are characterised by the presence of a central protagonist whose name and identity match the author, such as Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series (2013 [2009] – 2018 [2011]) in which Knausgaard features as the narrating character. Along the continuum are works in which the protagonist takes a variation or abbreviation of the author’s name, such as the figure of ‘António Castro’ in Brian Castro’s (2003) *Shanghai Dancing*. In non-explicit cases, the protagonist remains nameless or has a different name to the author. Readers must infer an identification of protagonist with author in these texts, based on details in the text that suggest a biographical correspondence. This is true of the anonymous narrator in Teju Cole’s (2014 [2007]) *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

As this continuum suggests, the author can be implicitly or explicitly present in autofictions and presented as a first-person narrator or third-person character (see

Gibbons 2018 on pronouns in autofiction). Moreover, ‘some autofictions try to hide the fact that they are novels by assimilating autobiographical genres such as autobiography, confession, or memoir, while other autofictions are in fact more or less autobiographies, but use rhetoric related to and imported from fiction’ (Kjerkegaard, 2016: 121). The rhetorical strategies that characterise autofiction therefore centre on onomastic correspondence of the protagonist with the author and the associated fictionality or referentiality of the generic styles adopted, though in both cases to varying degrees. Contemporary autofictions utilise the crisis between fiction and non-fiction to produce depthiness, or, to respond directly to Ryan, ‘panreality’ – an expansion of the seemingly real. Indeed, a growing number of critical voices claim that autofictional strategies ‘jettison the logic of postmodernism in favor of a new position’ because they shift the debate from a fact/fiction dichotomy and towards a questioning of ‘how to live or how to create’ (Sturgeon, 2014).

Ruth Ozeki’s (2013) *A Tale for the Time Being* features the diary of a Japanese teenager called Nao who grew up in Sunnyvale, California, in the 1990s where her father worked as a ‘hotshot computer programmer’ (42) in Silicon Valley. Nao tells us that her father lost his job after the Dot.com collapse so the family moved back to Japan, where Nao is bullied and feels culturally excluded as a result of her Americanized identity and where her father Haruki’s depressive moods lead him to contemplate suicide. Whilst Nao and her family are patently fictional characters, many of the themes emerging from their stories – economic collapse, technological change, cultural alienation, and male suicide – are poignant issues that are relevant to readers’ sociocultural reality in the twenty-first century. As such, the fictional narrative encourages readers to participate in a deep engagement with these storyworlds, including emotionally with the characters’ situations.

Nao's first-person diary chapters are interspersed with third-person chapters, the focalising-character of which is 'Ruth'. Autofictional resonances are immediately apparent: the character Ruth shares her forename with author Ruth Ozeki and, readers are told, 'Ruth was a novelist' (Ozeki, 2013: 11). 'Ruth' is therefore used by Ozeki, in her own description in an interview, as 'a sort of avatar' within the novel (Sethi 2013). Beyond the correspondence in name and profession, there are additional biographical correlations: Ruth lives on Vancouver Island while Ozeki lives part of the year on Cortes Island, both in British Columbia; Ruth's fictional husband Oliver 'was an environmental artist, doing public installations (botanical interventions into urban landscapes he called them)' (56), whilst Ozeki is married to German-Canadian ecological artist Oliver Kellhammer, whose website describes his 'botanical interventions and public art projects'.<sup>2</sup> In another interview, Ozeki makes a more explicit personal connection between the narrative and her own life: 'I think of Ruth's story as a fictional memoir. The character of Ruth is semi-fictional (although if pressed, I would have to call myself semi-fictional too)' (Penguin Books 2013). Ozeki's parenthetical description of herself as 'semi-fictional too' seems suggestive of postmodernist derealisation or panfictionalisation of subjecthood since it implies the expansion of fiction into reality. Such a construal, however, relies solely on the ontological indecipherability of autofiction. In fact, rather than fictionalise the real Ruth Ozeki, the ontological blur of autofiction creates a reality-effect whereby readers imagine and experience the character of 'Ruth' as Ozeki.

In the first 'Ruth' chapter (which follows the first 'Nao' chapter), Ruth – whilst walking along her local beach on Vancouver Island – finds on the shore a washed-up plastic bag, inside of which is a *Hello Kitty* lunchbox containing 'a pudgy bound book with a faded red cover' (10). The book holds Nao's diary which has 'adolescent purple

handwriting sprawled across' each page (11). As Ruth begins reading Nao's diary, the opening lines of the diary – already familiar to readers from Nao's opening chapter (3) – are repeated: '*Hi!*, she read. *My name is Nao*' (12; original emphasis). This repetition is a typically postmodernist self-referential device, foregrounding the constructedness of the fiction *within* the fiction. For Ryan, it would prevent imaginative recentering into the fictional world and thus also the depth experience of that world for readers: 'how can the reader regard the fictional world as pseudo-reality if the message "watch me! watch what I can do" continually flashes on the page?' (Ryan, 1997: 169). It would be tempting to interpret the novel's alternation between 'Nao' and 'Ruth' chapters as a panfictionalising intra-textual ontological clash. However, readers encounter each of Nao's subsequent diary entries seemingly simultaneously to Ruth's own reading of them in the fiction. After the second 'Nao' chapter, for instance, the second 'Ruth' chapter begins with Ruth's reading of Nao's diary being interrupted (at the same point as Nao's chapter ends) by the appearance of her cat. As such, despite the distancing of third-person narration, readers are positioned temporally (in terms of their reading of the 'Nao' chapters) and subjectively (primarily through internal focalisation) with 'Ruth' as textual counterpart of real author Ruth Ozeki. Additionally, the novel's structure ontologically embeds the 'Nao' chapters within the 'Ruth' chapters; then, through autofictional correspondence, embeds the 'Ruth' chapters in – or perhaps superimposes them on – the real-world of Ruth Ozeki. Rather than alienate readers from the fictional world, the effect is make the fictional world *feel* more real. This feeling of referential proximity is indicative of metamodernist depthiness.

The 'Ruth' chapters also infiltrate the 'Nao' chapters, which are footnoted with Japanese-to-English translations, references to intertexts, and first-person comments which identify Ruth as the writer of these footnotes. Furthermore, in the 'Ruth'

chapters, Ruth is frequently depicted in the act of fact-checking: she ‘googled Nao Yatsutani’ (29), emailed ‘a professor of psychology at Stanford University, a Dr. Rongstad Leistiko’ (87) because of his connection to a suicidal Japanese man named “‘Harry”” who Ruth thinks could be Nao’s father (87-91), and reads numerous academic articles such as ‘Japanese Shishōsetsu and the Instability of the Female “I”’ (148, 172). Ruth’s search for a verifiable reality behind Nao’s diary is never rewarded, but there are always plausible reasons for this failure: Nao’s father ‘was able to develop a neat little spider that could crawl up search engine databases’ (382) and exchange ‘instances’ of people for ‘naughts’ (383) and because Nao ‘wrote the names in *romanji*’, Ruth knows ‘only the pronunciation’ (154). Davis argues that the ‘repeated shifting between the fictional world and the temptation of referentiality that Ruth (and the book’s readers) succumbs to broadens the novel’s metatextual character’ (2015, 95). That is, Ruth’s footnoted interventions and her commentary on Nao’s diary draw attention to the fictionality of the ‘Nao’ chapters. However, we argue that they also serve paradoxically to penetrate Nao’s fictional world with the pseudo-reality of the ‘Ruth’ chapters. This is even more true of Ruth’s googling which create depthiness by assuming, in the context of the novel, that evidence of Nao’s existence can be found. Furthermore, if readers also undertake internet searches about elements of the novel – as Davis implies above – this further enhances such depthiness since readers are treating the storyworlds of the novel *as if* they accurately represent the actual world.

Numerous intertextual references to real-world texts add to the reality-effects of *A Tale for the Time Being*: the ‘faded red cover’ that encased Nao’s diary is from Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*; Oliver quotes physicist Charles Bennett whilst reading *The New Yorker* and Ruth’s footnote provides a reference to a real *New Yorker* article by Rivka Galchen which features the same quotation (395);

another footnote embedded in a section of the (fictional) article ‘Japanese Shishōsetsu and the Instability of the Female “I”’ read by Ruth refers to the poem ‘Rambling Thoughts’ by real Japanese poet Yosano Akiko (150). Davis conceives of the *New Yorker* reference in particular as a metatextual gesture, highlighting ‘Ruth’s act of producing the text the reader holds, even as she is reading a received text’ (2015: 94). Such gestures highlight the act of production by the fictional Ruth but *as* avatar of real author Ruth Ozeki; they thus also present the real-world novel *A Tale for the Time Being* as Ruth’s edited version of Nao’s diary for the real reader.

In a short blog post called ‘Editorial Assistance’, Ozeki (2012) describes the process of editing the manuscript of *A Tale for the Time Being* assisted by her ‘bad cat, Weens’, shown in front of her computer in an accompanying photo. She continues (2012):

[Weens] is lying on top of my *Chicago Manual of Style*, and also on top of *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, written by Hiratsuka Raichō (1886-1971), founder of the Japanese feminist literary magazine, *Seitō* (Blue Stocking). In the *Chicago Manual of Style*, I was looking up the proper format for foreign language footnotes, appendices and bibliographies, of which there are many in this novel. In Raichō’s autobiography I was reading a poem, written by Yosano Akiko for the inaugural issue of *Seitō* entitled “Rambling Thoughts.”

Not only do all of the referenced works in Ozeki’s blog post really exist, but the described context maps onto fictive depictions of character Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*, reading at her desk or searching on her computer, accompanied by her cat ‘Pesto’. Furthermore, the blog’s photo of Ozeki’s real cat functions as ‘physical evidence’, as Linda Haverty Rugg argues of photographs in autobiographies, which ‘re-anchor the subject to the physical world, insist on the verifiable presence of an embodied and solid individual’ (1991: 2). Rather than expanding fiction into reality, this



inversely insists on the reality of the fiction.

An important reason for the depthiness of *A Tale for the Time Being* is the novel's thematic engagement with contemporary crises. As previously indicated, readers might empathise with the novel's characters relative to issues such as bullying, cultural alienation, depression, and suicide. The novel is also preoccupied with larger moments of crisis, such as the aforementioned economic collapse, the fallout from which results in Nao's father's unemployment and subsequent depression.

Environmental crisis is also a significant preoccupation of *A Tale for the Time Being*. Indeed, when Ruth first finds Nao's diary, she wonders 'How long had it been there in the ocean before washing up?' (10). At the close of the first 'Ruth' chapter, Oliver concludes, "'All that stuff from people's homes in Japan that the tsunami swept out to sea? They've been tracking it and predicting it will wash up on our coastline. I think it's just happened sooner than anyone expected.'" (14). Oliver refers to the Tōhoku Earthquake, which caused a tsunami devastating North-East Japan on 11 March 2011 and resulted in approximately 16,000 deaths. *A Tale for the Time Being* has consequently been read as 3/11 literature (Beauregard, 2015; Usui, 2015). Worrying about Nao in light of 3/11, Ruth feels an 'odd and lingering sense of urgency to... what? To help the girl? To save her?' (30). Marco Caracciolo (forthcoming 2019) even suggests that the novel's engagement with climate change and the anthropocene is reflected in its structure: oscillating between the chapters by Nao and Ruth on opposite sides of the Pacific ocean, the narrative form of *A Tale for the Time Being* embodies an environmental metaphor; that of ocean gyres or currents.

In an interview, Ozeki explains that her autofictional avatar allowed her 'to respond to events in both a serious and playful way' (Sethi, 2013). Ultimately, then, *A Tale for the Time Being* adopts both autofictional and metafictional strategies. Whilst

these are playful postmodernist devices, they are used to create reality-effects and in doing so draw readers' attention to deeply serious issues in reality, such as climate change and economic collapse amongst others. In their discussion of Ali Smith's (2014)

*How to Be Both* as metamodernist fiction, Huber and Funk argue (2017, 164):

*How to Be Both* emphatically exposes itself as a formal act-event, metareferentially celebrating its own fictionality and constructedness, precisely in order to appeal to the response-ability and responsibility of the reader, who is challenged to make sense of the complexities the novel offers.

The same is true of *A Tale for the Time Being*. The dual ontological grounding of contemporary autofiction encourages readers to engage emotionally and empathetically with characters, on the one hand, and to reflect seriously on the crises that those characters experience and are subjected to – crises which resonate with, and are inescapable in, readers' sociocultural reality. By collapsing the dichotomy between, and embracing the blur of, fiction and non-fiction, *A Tale for the Time Being* – as an exemplar of metamodernist autofiction – performs metamodernist depthiness by embedding the fictional narrative in the real-world and, relatedly, presenting the storyworld *as* real. Thus, contemporary autofictions provide authors and readers alike with a liminal space, a depth pseudo-reality, in which to affectively respond to real-world issues.

### **True Crime – *The Keepers***

In the past decade, there has been a sudden and surprising upsurge in true crime documentaries, 'crime fact that looks like crime fiction' (Seltzer, 2007): that is, crime reporting that follows the rules (and ethics) not of journalism but, rather, of drama. The upsurge covers multiple media: literature, cinema, television, weblogs and podcasts.

Amongst the most popular current examples are the television series *Making a*

*Murderer* (2016), the webdiary *True Crime Diary* (2006-2014), and the podcast *Serial* (2014). These contemporary examples of the genre have been described in terms of ‘reinventions’ of the true crime genre (see Franks, 2016; McCracken, 2017). Amanda Keeler even identifies true crime as a subgenre, what she calls the ‘reinvestigation program’ (2016). This is because true crime documentaries radically redevelop conventional true-crime genre criteria, exchanging closed cases for open ended stories and tropes of recollection for strategies of critical interrogation and speculation.

This section of the article analyses the Netflix hit show *The Keepers* (White, 2017) as a metamodernist text. As with other recent true crime drama, it features five particular assumptions and corresponding strategies. These are: that a crime has been committed but not solved, either because no one has been found guilty or the wrong person has been imprisoned (Bruzzi, 2016); that the legal system as a whole is unable and/or unwilling to bring justice – though individual police officers or lawyers may well be enlisted to help (Boorsma, 2017); that, implicitly, people working in the entertainment industry, often without legal training or experience, are qualified to take on the roles involved, including those of detective, prosecution, and/or legal scholar deciding on the constitutional parameters of justice (Engley, 2017); that the fictional techniques used in that industry are legitimate means to communicate and/or execute these roles (Kumamoto Stanley, 2017; Letzler, 2017); and, finally, as we hope to demonstrate here, that fiction can make valid empirical claims about the ‘reality’ of the true crimes explored.

*The Keepers* purports<sup>3</sup> to document a group of brave elderly women trying to solve the murder of one of their beloved teachers, Sister Cathy, in their Catholic high school five decades ago. As the account progresses, more salient details come into view and are the central focus either momentarily or protractedly. One such terrible, tragic

detail that is increasingly foregrounded is that many of the women were abused as minors at school. This aspect becomes important because the murdered teacher was informed of the abuse and, in some accounts, confronted the perpetrator – another teacher – who was a priest. Other details that take on significance are: this priest’s alleged friendship with and participation in the abuse of other teachers and priests, police officers and other people in power, including politicians; the apparent cover-up by the local church councils and arch diocese; the seeming intentional negligence on behalf of the prosecution; and competing and inconsistent accounts by some of the key witnesses. The lack of conclusion in *The Keepers* – its refusal to definitively indict an individual – is a departure from true crime’s past, as a genre, in which ‘the killers were always caught and punished’ (Murley 2008; cf. Bruzzi, 2016; McCracken, 2017). Erica Haugtvedt (2017) has demonstrated that the recent appreciation of speculation does not resemble twentieth century true crime fiction but does have multiple precedents in nineteenth century true crime fiction. As such, the ambiguity of *The Keepers* is in keeping with our view of metamodernism in its adoption of both postmodernist ontological slippage as well as pre-modernist speculation.

The model for documentary storytelling adopted by *The Keepers* is more like detective fiction than investigative journalism, more like the oeuvre of Agatha Christie than Truman Capote, more like the work of Scandinavian noir writer Søren Sveistrup than crime documentarian Jean-Xavier De Lestrada. *The Keepers* does not, for instance, predominantly browse through archives for clues in order to actually solve a mystery, neither does it function as a reconstructive account of detective work using microscopic or telescopic camera lenses to expose a previously unnoticed detail on a photograph. Instead, in terms of textual strategies, the genre favours techniques associated with fiction and fictionalisation. These fictionalising techniques are overt and, in this sense,

highlight the constructedness of the investigative narratives in the show. However, even though the show may therefore, at times, appear ostentatiously fictionalised, the underlying reality is never discredited. Instead, these techniques appear to reveal truths about the crime as a consequence of fiction.

The narrative is set up as a televisual whodunit, starting from the discovery of the dead body, introducing the amateur ex-detectives and their personal troubles, considering the powerful players attempting to manipulate and/or obstruct the investigation, and inspecting the various suspects – all of whom are shown to be untrustworthy. The narrative arc of the series is designed to generate suspense and revelation and this is mirrored in the cinematography. There are, for instance, almost no static shots in the entire series. Even shots of landscapes, crime scenes, photographs and books move, alternately zooming in search of hidden details or zooming out to look for missing context. One of the most obvious narrative devices is the use of handheld cameras, which replicate the feeling of sneaking up on individuals. In one particular shot during an interview with a former priest who, it is suggested in the narrative, may know more than he lets on, the camera jerks left and right in order to find the right frame for its subject – or indeed, suspect. Problematically, even though the subject is aware of the documentary maker's presence and is standing still, the camera nevertheless racks focus – that is, readjusts the lens. It does so unevenly in an apparent attempt to capture his facial features. Racking focus on the face of this suspect does not reveal hidden depths in his features or expressions. Rather, such shots suggest the continual possibility of exposition. In this sense, the ontological indecipherability of true crime documentaries is reminiscent of a remark by Jean-Marie Schaeffer with respect to someone caught in a lie: 'The hardest challenge is not to make-believe the reality of fictional entities but to reduce to fictional status entities that have been

introduced as real' (2010 [1999]: 113). Continual movement in *The Keepers*, in plot as well as cinematically, is a means of studying a reality it intimates but never really explicates or exposes. In other words, it creates a reality-effect.

Throughout *The Keepers*, strategies conventionally associated with fiction are used not just to communicate narrative events; the rhythm of editing is adjusted to signal tension or contemplation. As such, images of Sister Cathy smiling are dramatically juxtaposed with shots of her grave to register shock. Similarly, real archival footage is mixed with (unexplained) fictional film – shots, for instance, of adults and children walking school corridors. These intra-textual ontological clashes encourages a consideration of the archival footage in relation to the fictional film, and vice versa. The archive is imbued with the narrative force of the fiction whilst the fictional is instilled with the weight of the real. Moreover, images are composed in obvious intertextual reference – to *Angels and Demons*, *House of Cards*, *The Good Wife* and *All the President's Men* – foregrounding fictional conspiracy theories involving the church, the legal system, and politics. For instance, the opening credits itself features monochromatic, pixelated zoom shots of statues of saints and angels, some of which are angels of justice, covered in flies. Viewers subsequently form judgments based on their emotive reactions to such fictionalised images. This allows viewers to become more immersed in the storyworld of *The Keepers*, in the same way that Ryan suggests occurs with fictionalising strategies as employed in the non-fiction genre of New Journalism (1997: 170-171). Yet, instead of reducing the true crime to a fictional construct, viewers' emotional engagements heighten their interest in the supposed reality of the case, however inaccessible it might actually be.

What increasingly becomes obvious as *The Keepers* progresses, and what legal scholar Megan Boorsma (2017) has observed in *Making a Murderer* and *Serial*, is that –

in lieu of legally admissible evidence as to the murder of Sister Cathy or the alleged cover-ups and negligence – these fictional devices perform the role of the prosecution, with doubts and suspicions granted the same status as facts. Concerns are voiced but not necessarily revisited; allegations are made – by interviewees, whom viewers are asked (through repeated narrative and/or visual personalisation and victimisation) to sympathise with – but not resolved. As the camera zooms out or pans down, there is always the sense that there is more to be revealed, that there are truths still to be discovered. What these fictional devices demonstrate, in other words, is not who killed Sister Cathy, but that no one (least of all the institutions in which we have over the course of the twentieth century put our faith) should be trusted. *The Keepers* therefore seeks to reconnect viewers with the possibilities of reality but by suggesting that it works according to the obsessive, overdeterministic rules of a particular fictional genre – true crime – where everything might be true because nothing is certain.

Fictional worlds necessarily contain, in Ruth Ronen words, ‘spots of indeterminacy’ (1994): there are things that are, inevitably, unknowable. Gregorie Currie (1990), for instance, writes that we cannot know how many hairs Sherlock Holmes has. Most spots of indeterminacy are incidental. To paraphrase the film scholar V. F. Perkins (2005), no story would ever get going if it had to itemize all of its world’s details – that people breathe, they can bleed, there are plants, there is gravity, and so on. There are spots of indeterminacy, though, that are deliberate: these spots add drama or ambiguity, and these gaps matter precisely because they are purposeful gaps. Recent studies of transmedia storytelling suggest that texts expressly create gaps so that fans can fill them, for instance in fan fiction and/or blogs (Jenkins, 2006, 2007; Gibbons, 2017b). Thus, significant gaps of indeterminacy stimulate greater engagement with the storyworld from readers and/or viewers. *The Keepers*, though, treats the actual world

according to the same criteria as the fictional world: through continual interplay between set-ups that are not resolved and cinematographic devices of suspense (and, indeed, through the use of fictional methods that are not even appropriate for answering the questions of reality), it opens up spots of indeterminacy within viewers' models of measuring both the real and the fictional world (e.g. scientific models to measure natural phenomena; the law to measure guilt). This does not though, reduce everything to fiction: By dramatising the indeterminacy, fiction becomes a valid means by which filmmakers – as amateur investigators – offer an assessment of reality: they ask viewers to believe in their storylines conceiving of these fictional possibilities as reality effects. In doing so, the fiction is a depth means of unearthing the unknown inconclusive reality of the actual crime case. *The Keepers* therefore suggests that producers, writers, and filmmakers consciously fictionalise in search of, or to corroborate, truths they feel to be true (possibly for valid reasons) and, in doing so, asks viewers to also believe in those fictional truths.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have analysed two contemporary case studies, one in literary autofiction and another in true crime. Our analyses demonstrate the existence of a metamodernist repurposing of the postmodernist collapse between fiction and reality in order to produce, what we have described as, depthiness by means of reality effects. Jameson saw depthlessness as 'the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms' (1991 [1984]: 9); thus the shift that we have drawn out in this article – from depthlessness to depthiness – is significant evidence of the shift from postmodernist to metamodernist aesthetics in the twenty-first century. If autofiction rekindles a relationship with a reality by asking readers to immerse in storyworlds and their quasi-reality, true crime documentary has a related but differing emotional impulse: through



fictionalisation, it simultaneously generates trust and suspicion in viewers for whom all allegations become possible truths and, thus, possible realities. Autofiction phenomenologically makes readers *empathise with* a reality, true crime makes viewers *suspect* that there is another more plausible reality – a reality exposed by the fiction rather than the reality of actual historical events. In both cases, postmodernist textual or filmic techniques do not panfictionalise but instead create reality-effects by asking readers and/or viewers to trust in their intimations of depth and embed their fictional storyworlds in a felt sense of reality.

In their discussion of Karl Ove Knausgaard's autofictional writing, Arnaud Schmitt and Stefan Kjerkegaard claim that 'panfictionalism has a limited theoretical range' (2016: 568). There has been a transition from predominantly postmodernist forms of cultural production (for which panfictionalism's theoretical range is more than sufficient) to predominantly metamodernist forms of cultural production (for which its theoretical range is, indeed, too limited). We further contend, therefore, that – in metamodern times – panfictionality has reached its limit. Our studies of *A Tale for the Time Being* and *The Keepers* show that metamodernist texts play with the very same postmodernist strategies that Marie-Laure Ryan argued produced panfictionality. However, metamodernist texts use them instead precisely as a means of creating depthiness by way of what could be called, following a gag from comedian Stephen Colbert, 'truthiness' (Browse, 2017, Vermeulen, 2015, 2017), that is: truth not as verifiable epistemic reality but as part of a personally felt, experiential possible reality.

Contemporary autofictions – such as Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* – conflate fiction with autobiography and historical reality not at the expense of non-fiction, the repudiation of truth, or the loss of depth; instead, they ask readers - as in Kjerkegaard's interpretation of Philip Roth's autofictional works – 'to make sense of

the truth *of* the fiction rather than the truth *in* the fiction’ (Kjerkegaard 2016: 127; original emphasis). This critical account of autofiction as a literary genre that seeks to get at truth and at reality is gaining traction. Alison Gibbons, for instance, advocates the ‘honest value’ (2018b: 95) of contemporary autofiction as a means of social, relational storytelling in the real-world whilst Pieter Vermeulen argues that metafictional and autofictional elements ‘emphatically do *not* serve to expose fiction as pure artifice or expose reality as an imaginative construct; instead, and in marked contrast to more familiar postmodern deployments of metafiction they serve to assert the irreducible *actuality* of the reality that the novel describes’ (2017: 667). Meanwhile, True Crime documentaries – such as *The Keepers* – use the techniques of fictionalisation and storytelling to create, or perhaps even re-create, a version of reality that purportedly is truer, more realistic, than the evidence-based epistemic reality that has been traditionally defined by experts (in law, science, journalism, etc.). True Crime therefore creates storyworlds that recombine well-established facts with alternative fictional possibilities but in so doing, the genre uses (and abuses) spots of indeterminacy and ontological indecipherability in order to suggest an alternative depth reality. In other words, *The Keepers* generates depth in contexts where such depth – or truth – could not be excavated previously.

Metamodern genres such as contemporary autofiction in literature and true crime in television evince a reconfigured relation between the real and the fictional – or, rather, a world with an epistemological reality and a universe with a fictional ontology – in today’s culture. There is no wholesale return to depth-models, but there are panrealistic intimations of depth – performances of depthiness – dressed up as truth-claims that are, by necessity, fictional or fictionalised. In this way, fiction beckons for reality.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that although we characterize these approaches herein as distinct, there are varying degrees of overlap between them.
2. Biographical information about Ruth Ozeki found in the ‘long bio’ on her website (<http://www.ruthozeki.com/about/long-bio/>) and about Oliver Kellhammer’s on his website (<http://www.oliverk.org>). See also: Davis (2015: 93).
3. In our description of the series, we use the words ‘purport’, ‘alleged’, ‘apparent’, and ‘seeming’ deliberately because, as many of the reviews note (mostly approvingly), the series does not conclude by definitively indicting one person as the perpetrator. Such ambiguity is not, in our view, necessarily a cause for celebration since – as a consequence of the allegations raised throughout *The Keepers* – no one person is ultimately accused; thus instead, everyone is (seemingly and potentially) guilty.

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