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*Halved as I am: Multiperspectivalism in Ruth L. Ozeki's My Year of Meats*

by Keiko Narisako

(Honors Seminar English 1130/Biology 1110)

The Assignment: Write a contextually researched paper – 10-15 page long - on an author whose work we read in class, so as to better understand the author's overall body of work and achievement within such frameworks as the author's biography, family, culture, and socio-politics, and history.

**A** Japanese American filmmaker and contemporary novelist, Ruth L. Ozeki is the only child of a Japanese mother, Masako Yokoyama and an American father, Floyd Glenn Lounsbury. In her autobiographical first novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), Ozeki sees herself through protagonist Jane, "Halved as I am, I was born doubled" (176). Ozeki uses her unique multi-cultural identity as her weapon and sees the world from a bicultural perspective. Her mission is clearly stated in the novel, as protagonist Jane says, "I became a documentarian partly in order to correct cultural misunderstandings" (78). Also, Ozeki, as a former documentarian, puts herself in another person's perspective to see things differently. In my paper, I will explore why Ozeki thinks this multiperspectivalism is important in her writing. Ozeki was born in the mid 1950's and grew up at the tail end of the baby boom generation in Connecticut. She did her graduate studies in classical Japanese literature and worked in Japan in the 1980's. Her ability to speak both English and Japanese, what she calls a "talent for speaking out of both sides of my mouth" (176), was regarded as a precious talent in Japan as the Japanese economy was growing and competing with other industrial nations. The social influence from the United States was tremendous. Ozeki had found her niche in the Japanese media industry: introducing authentic American culture to the Japanese public.

According to ecological economist Herman Daly, people of the world's diverse cultures are increasingly communicating with each other and joining in one another's diversity in a process called internationalization (Brennan, Withgot 634-635). However, this transition is not always smooth. Ozeki observes cultural collisions between Japan and America with irony and humor in a society where cultural understanding hasn't caught up with capitalist globalization.

Also, what makes Ozeki a unique writer is that she puts issues of food production at the heart of her novel. In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki takes on the beef industry and in her second novel titled *All Over Creation* (2003), she tackles genetically engineered potatoes. Her subject matter in both novels is controversial and political. The reason she chose fiction to express her interest in these topics is that she is more interested in complex human drama than being called an environmentalist writer. In both novels, there are many topics: race, cross-cultural understanding, feminism, global commerce, capitalism, media, food safety, and love. These topics are reflected by a diverse set of characters. Some critics say that Ozeki has cultivated her own unique form of American literature.

In *My Year of Meats*, Jane Takagi-Little is the daughter of a Japanese mother and an American father. She is a documentary filmmaker who is invited to coordinate a televised documentary series, "My American Wife!" promoting American beef to Japanese consumers by an American meat producer's lobbying organization, Beef-Ex. Jane and her Japanese crew hit the road in search for "perfect and authentic" American wives with good beef recipes. Jane ponders the idea of the authenticity of the American wife, and tries to introduce a diversity of people, such as an immigrant family from Mexico, a vegetarian lesbian couple, and a family of ten children adopted mostly from Asia. Her radical ideas angers Japanese producer, Joichi Ueno, but Jane's shows are well-received by the Japanese audience. On the other side of the glove, Ueno's wife, Akiko,

dutifully watches the show and prepares the American dishes to please her abusive husband. As Jane continues to hunt for authentic American wives with good beef recipes, she learns the dark secrets of beef production. In Japan, Akiko is inspired by independent American women, and she decides to leave her husband in search for a happy life.

In 1995, Ozeki made an autobiographic documentary film titled “Halving the Bones.” Michael Zryd points out that “it reverses *My Year of Meats*” trajectory of cultural education, sketching aspects of Japanese culture for her intended North American audience” (Zryd, 120). Ozeki focuses on three generations of Japanese women on her mother’s side in an effort to search for her roots and cultural identity: her grandmother, Matsue, her mother Masako and Ozeki herself. Their lives were affected by WWII, being caught between two nations. Zryd states,

What both novel and film share and mutually illuminate is the elaboration of a basically comic universe, dedicated to confronting realities of historical, gender, and generational conflict, but also dedicated to resolutions of cultural integration and understanding (Zryd, 120).

Ozeki’s Japanese grandmother, Matsue, was sent to Hawaii to marry a Japanese man in the early 1900s when she was a 16-year-old girl. Her family was related to a Shogun military leader, and they were high-class and privileged people at the time. Her marriage was arranged by her parents. They exchanged pictures and information, and future-husband and wife met for the first time at their wedding, which was a common practice. Matsue hated Hawaii, and she pretended to be sick in order to come back to Japan for medical treatment. Her sickness was actually pregnancy, and she bore her daughter, Masako, in 1924. In Hawaii, Matsue and her Japanese photographer and poet husband built a photo studio and made a living from his photographs. Then World War II came, and her husband was sent to the internment camps and kept there for four years. After he was released, they didn’t want to live in America any more and returned to Japan in 1960. Ozeki’s mother, Masako, later talks in “Halving the Bones,” that being born as a Japanese woman made a huge difference in her life (Halving, 1995). She and her family had endured many hardships in the “enemy” country.

Ruth Ozeki grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. There were no Japanese around her, except her mother. She had been aware of her “Japaneseness” since she was little. She had seen the WWII propaganda that constructed Japan as a malignancy as she was growing up. She found herself in an awkward position in America; however, she viewed the images differently from other people in Connecticut because of her mother. She says, “Her genes in my body had prevailed” (Halving, 1995).

Her American father was a worldwide known anthropologist and linguist. He was an expert on Native American Languages and Mayan writing as well. He taught at Yale until he retired in 1974 (Yale). He named Ozeki “Ruth” after a baseball player Babe Ruth, hoping she would grow up “all-American” (Halving, 1995). Ironically, her name Ruth means “not at home” in Japanese, and she felt absent in both places as she says, “Being racially half – neither her nor there” (9). She was regarded as Japanese in America, and American in Japan as she was growing up (Halving, 1995).

Despite the confusion and disappointment, she has learned to use her mixed cultural heritage to her advantage. She is grateful for her parents, who are both deceased, “for teaching her their two different ways of how it can be done” (Ozeki’s web log). An understanding of historical and cultural conflict is embedded in her and drives her to write as a person with cultural multi-viewpoints.

In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki gives us a glimpse of an authentic America where diverse cultures and racism co-exist. A WWII veteran is not happy to know that oriental-looking Jane is American. He asks her, “What are you?” (11).

At a black church in Mississippi, color is still a big issue. Jane asks the potential next

American wife, Miss Helen, if Jane's crew can shoot a scene in her church. Jane catches the uneasiness in Miss Helen's voice and tries to convince her by saying, "We are mostly yellow" (102). Thus, Jane separates herself and Miss Helen from white society, at the same time, hoping that she can establish a bond between "colored" people. Ozeki's careful cultural observation sets a framework as the story develops.

Cultural misunderstanding can be crucial. In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki introduces the shooting death of a Japanese high school exchange student, Yoshihiro Hattori. Hattori was shot as he was standing at the door of Rodney Dwayne Peairs, asking for directions. He was shot because Hattori looked "un-American" and scared Peairs. The whole Japanese nation tried to make sense out of this incident, and they learned a cultural lesson: violence is embedded so deeply in America that access to a gun is easy (88-89).

Cultural misunderstanding can be funny, too. As Ozeki says, "it always struck me that the funniest, most interesting, most tragic, and most culturally profound interactions always happened either behind the camera or when the camera was turned off" (Conversation, 6). The pompous and authoritative Japanese businessman, Ueno, realizes that he made a big mistake by trying to have an intimate relationship by force with Jane after their meeting over drinks. The next day, the power is reversed between Ueno and Jane. At the African-American Harmony church, a hung-over and despicable Ueno is surrounded passionately by African-American church goers, and he is emotionally "stripped so bare" that he sobs like a baby in his cult-like experience. He holds Jane's hand as if it were a natural thing to do. For Jane, it is a nauseating experience, but she needs these people's trust so much to make a good show that she can not shake off Ueno's hand (109-114).

In *My Year of Meats*, an American Jane is outgoing and never afraid of speaking her mind. She decides what she wants to do with her life. On the other hand, the Japanese wife Akiko is shy and obedient to her husband despite his physical abuse. She marries Ueno because of social pressure from being single at her marriageable age. She gives up her career as a writer to become a housewife and is ready to become a mother. These two women are connected through Jane's shows. The eclectic groups of people in Jane's shows give Akiko courage, and she learns to take control of her life. Akiko is greatly moved by how they overcome their hardships, their generosity beyond race, and their courage to live their lives whole against the social pressure in American culture.

Ozeki had worked in the media industries making documentaries about American life for Japanese television sponsored by industries (Conversation, 7). Ozeki speaks through Jane, "I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race, I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to educate" (27). Ozeki thinks her media experiences with a cross-cultural background are useful in terms of sending the right message in the tricky media world as globalization makes two countries closer. Ozeki says, "We live in a world where culture is commerce and where global miscommunication is mediated by commercial television (Conversation, 6). As a documentarian making T.V. programs for a Japanese audience, the issue of commercial sponsorship has always been a concern for her (Conversation, 7). In *My Year of Meats*, Ueno is steeped in conservative stereotypes of America, such as "attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality," "attractive, docile husband," "attractive, obedient children," "attractive, wholesome lifestyle," "attractive, clean house," while Jane introduces the rich diversity of America, such as an immigrant Mexican family, a large interracial family with ten adopted children, a vegetarian lesbian couple, to widen the audience's understanding of what it is to be America (11-12). A conflict arises when businessman Ueno tries to sell beef to Japanese audience by creating beautiful images related to America. Jane, on the other hand, as a documentarian, is on a mission to capture the truth.

Advertising has become a growing industry. Media critic Sut Jhally says in his film "Advertising and End of World" that the advertising industry is a "fantasy factory." He says that advertising industries spend increasing amounts of money to create the illusion that certain products

give consumers happiness (Advertising). Ozeki had once worked on this fantasy side in 1980's when she was making programs sponsored by industries. In the program she made for the multi-national corporation Philip Morris, she would walk around New York with her video crew, pockets stuffed with Marlboros and lighters, plying people on the street with cigarettes and begging them to smoke for them so that they could film their "smoking cut," which would eventually encourage people in Japan to consume more tobacco. Ozeki admits that she did not approve of the company at the time (Conversation, 7). Her experience of being caught between the sponsor's intentions and her own survival, like Jane and Ueno in the story, helped her to understand the economic power structure and drove her to write a story about the media industry.

Ozeki chooses beef as her topic in the story because it is a staple of the American diet, in another word, a national identify (Clyne, SATYA). In the story, as Jane and her crew continue to shoot families in rural places in all over the country, she learns horrible facts about beef production: the synthetic growth hormone D.E.S. bovine growth hormones, force-fed antibiotics, and the terrible conditions in slaughter houses. She focuses on D.E.S., or diethylstilbestrol, which has been widely used in livestock production even after it was banned in 1979. When being absorbed in human body directly or through cattle, it can accelerate human sexual maturation. It was also widely prescribed for pregnant women to prevent miscarriages and premature birth until various health risks were discovered, including cancer and infertility (124-126). In Texas, as the film crew shoots a ranch family, Jane actually sees not only how cattle but ranchers and their families' health are affected by chemicals. Finding out she is a D.E.S. daughter herself with deformed uterus, Jane is determined to capture the truth. Hidden behind a beautiful image, beef is the culprit.

Journalist Michael Pollan further reveals the threats imposed by the production and consumption of beef to our health and environment in his article "Power Steer," and concludes that nothing good is coming out of our diet of beef. He writes about the vicious cycle surrounding industrial beef production from his experience of owning a calf and following its life cycle, which starts with American agriculture. Farmers are encouraged to grow corn. Cheap surplus corn is fed to cows, but corn-fed cows are prone to become sick because their digestive system can not handle corn. Food poisoning by E. coli can develop easily among corn-fed cows. Also, cows are fed with rendered cow parts, which can cause mad-cow disease. To prevent corn-fed cows from getting sick, they are given various antibiotics and chemicals, which turn up in the meat we eat and in the environment. Corn and chemicals fatten cows faster, but studies show that corn-fed meat causes various health risks to humans. Growing corn as an industrial monoculture costs a lot. There are subsidies to agribusiness, the use of fossil fuel, chemical herbicides and fertilizers, plus the environmental costs, such as soil depletion, runoff synthetic growth hormones and nitrogen entering the waterway. Considering these costs, Pollan wonders if we still want to eat beef (Power Steer). In *My Year of Meats*, beef is metaphoric for America where large multi-national corporations take over politics and affluence plagues people. Beef is invading another small fish-eating country, Japan.

Ozeki also takes a look at a large corporate culture in America and sees how it is interpreted in both countries. In the story, a 16-year-old girl Christina Bukowsky is hit by a delivery truck in the Wal-Mart parking lot. The corporate retail giant, Wal-Mart, does nothing to help the family until the media catches the story, and they finally pay a large settlement (132-135). The Japanese cameraman, Suzuki, admires Wal-Mart. Jane observes, "To a Japanese person, Wal-Mart is awesome, the capitalist equivalent of the wide-open spaces and endless horizons of the American geographical frontier" (35). However, it is a known fact in America that Wal-Mart destroys local business and encourages cheap foreign labor. Furthermore, the economist Daly argues that the growing power of multinational corporation contributes not only to environmental degradation because of its high-consumption life-style, but also to the homogenization of the world cultures, where many cultures are displaced by many other (Brenna, Withgott 635-636). The story ends as Jane's documentary of beef production comes to light. Jane's mission to "educate" is successfully accomplished, and Beef-Ex

cancels the programs. People find the truth in Jane's fight against the large beef industry.

Ozeki says, "I don't think I could have written a novel had I not been a filmmaker first" (Conversation, 12). In her 1995 documentary film, "Halving the Bones," in which Ozeki goes to Japan to attend her grandmother's funeral for her estranged mother, Masako, and brings her grandmother's bones, she uses multi narrative voices. The story is told by a narrator, Masako and Ozeki herself. What is interesting about the use of multi-narrative voices is that the story changes according to who tells the story. Masako says that the reason she couldn't attend her mother's funeral was her arthritic knees, but Ozeki is suspicious of her reason. Ozeki says the real reason was that Masako was so Americanized and she was afraid of not knowing how to behave at a Japanese funeral where people expect the daughter to conduct the ceremony and the whole ritual processes take a couple of days (Halving, 1995). "As a former documentary filmmaker, this question of voice and point of view is interesting on several levels," she says (Conversation, 9).

In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki continues to use narrative multi-perspective. She uses the Juxtaposition of first-person and third-person narrative voices, but also adds other texts, such as correspondence conducted through faxes, detailed shooting proposals for each show as well as excerpts from the Japanese Eight Century court diaries, Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. Ozeki uses two different narratives voices for her two female protagonists to emphasize their distinct characteristics. Ozeki uses two different narratives voices for her two female protagonists to emphasize their distinct characteristics. For protagonist Jane, Ozeki uses a first-person narrator because Ozeki needs to make a strong character speaking for her to address issues that threaten to overpower us (Conversation, 8). An American, Jane is independent, liberal, and a fighter as well. By using a first-person narrative, her strong traits are magnified, and her story comes directly to us. On the other hand, a Japanese Akiko is shy, dependent and withdrawn. A third-person narrative for Akiko is used to draw her withdrawal from the society.

By mixing up the two types of narrative, the antagonistic character Ueno's conflicts and his evil temperament are also drawn through his interactions with both protagonists. Using their correspondence through faxes reveals the drama directly, as faxes are supposed to do. Jane's shooting plans are cinematic and almost visual to give us an idea what a documentary making is like. The excerpts from *The Pillow Book* show Sei Shonagon's careful observation survived beyond a long period of time. It seems Ozeki throws everything she knows in one pot, but it turns out to be an interesting work of literature.

Ozeki hints at her optimism in Kudzu. Kudzu is a weed in America (75-76), but it is a treasured food in Japan. It makes the most elegant sweets and good medicines as well. The Japanese cameraman, Suzuki, teaches a family in South how to make starch out of its tubers. The husband, Vern, is very excited to create his original recipe with kudzu for the state fair (83). With proper understanding, even a weed can be turned into treasure, and people from different cultures can come to understand each other. Ruth L. Ozeki is a unique contemporary writer who watches the world carefully from her multiperspective. Ozeki's novel, *My Year of Meats*, finds us at the right time in a world of rapid globalization.

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