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Clara Younge
Macalester College, cyounge@macalester.edu

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My Year OF Meats

By: Clara Younge

Book Review

Meat is the message of the new Japanese television program, *My American Wife*, and Jane Takagi-Little is the messenger. *My American Wife* is called by its producers a “documentary” – a cross between the Travel Channel and Rachel Ray. Each week a half-hour-long episode focuses on a new American Wife with a new meat recipe, and the goal is to impart to Japanese housewives “the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.”

Jane takes the position as the show’s coordinator and part of the production team simply because she needs a job. Upon first introduction, her greatest aspiration is to get a chance to direct some and advance her career as a documentarian. However, as the show goes on and Jane makes an effort to diversify the selection of wives, she learns more and more about the meat (and the message) she is helping to export to Japan.

In an epic journey up, down and around the American Midwest, Jane is promoted to director, then almost fired multiple times for showing “unwholesome” or “unattractive” wives and meat. Instead of the network-suggested “middle-to-upper-middle-class white American woman,” Jane seeks a more heterogeneous image of America. She looks to document an America that is more authentic, more true, more dynamic and complex. In her travels, she finds a New Orleans family with ten transnationally adopted children and a striking sense of generosity. She directs an episode about an Indiana couple and their daughter’s miracle recovery from a paralyzing accident – but the network disapproves because the recipe is for lamb instead of beef. Finally, when Jane chooses to put a vegetarian, interracial lesbian couple on the show, the network threatens to fire her and decides that she must run all ideas by them for approval. But

Toxic meats. DES. Hormones. Antibiotics. Premature the larche. The book quickly turns to something of an exposé on the beef industry, as Jane does more and more research on the little leads she gets from the families she interviews for the show. She learns from Lara and Dyann, the vegetarian lesbians, that because of hormones in processed beef, fertility rates are half what they were fifty years ago. The narrative voice occasionally turns to documentary interludes to explain the history behind the meat. DES is a manufactured estrogen originally used to fatten up chicken and cattle for slaughter, but simultaneously prescribed to pregnant women across the country to prevent miscarriages. Jane pieces together that the DES that her mother was prescribed during pregnancy has rendered her incapable of having her own children. Ultimately, Jane decides to use the show to expose the beef industry for what it really is – “unhealthy, corrupt, inhumane, and out of control,” as Dyann puts it.

In *My Year of Meats*, Ruth Ozeki weaves together a multiplicity of narrative styles, subjects and themes ranging from media to marriage to masculinity to, of course, meat. She includes a mix of faxes, memos, reports, articles, poems, and lists to move the story along, and begins each chapter with an excerpt from *The Pillow Book* by Heian court lady Sei Shōnagon. The narration switches from Jane’s first person point of view to a third person attached to some of the wives and mainly to Akiko, the wife of Jane’s boss “John” Ueno. This fluidity in the narrative voice allows a view into the lives of both Jane, living in America and producing the show, and Akiko, living in Japan and watching the show weekly. The two women serve as mirrors for each other’s characters, and the reader is able to learn more about both of them than we would knowing each by herself.

Through Jane’s thoughts and interactions with her Japanese boss, Ueno, his wife Akiko, the cameramen Suzuki and Oh, her lover Sloan, and all the American Wives she meets, readers are brought to think about some of the beliefs and values that we take so for granted. What is “authenticity”? Can it co-exist with “wholesomeness”? What responsibilities do the producers of the show have, both to their audiences – nameless, faceless Japanese housewives – and to

thier subjects – all the American Wives on the show, and all those they claim to represent? Can you really, as Jane says, “use wives to sell meat in the service of a greater Truth”? Ozeki also deals with issues of race, gender, nation, class, and sexuality, in Jane’s experiences as a “polysexual, polyracial” Japanese American as well as the brief narrative views we get of the lives of each of the American Wives.

In some ways *My Year of Meats* is a distinctly Asian American novel. First and foremost, it is written by an Asian American author, about an Asian American main character. The story is largely about Jane “straddling” the divide – “selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of pacific islands.” Jane’s experiences with being treated as a “perpetual foreigner” by Americans and a “crude, uncivilized foreigner” by Japanese are typical to Asian American stories. Much of the narrative challenges American notions of Asian/Americans. Orientalism is the idea that all of Asia is stuck in the past, still celebrating traditional, primitive (backwards) cultures, and that any Asian that does not conform to this is not “authentically” Asian.

This idea is engaged in Ueno’s statement that “Joichi is not a modern name,” and that he should be called “John.” Likewise, it is disproven in the display of Japanese modernism – the article stating that Japanese women would rather buy their meat from vending machines and Jane’s memo stating that Japanese housewives are “more accustomed to these amenities [referring to household-use technologies] even than her American counterpart.” On the other hand, discourse of the “Model Minority” appears in many Asian-American texts supporting the idea that Asian Americans can look beyond their disenfranchisement and racial discrimination and achieve the American Dream. Ozeki does not seem to engage this dialogue at all, refusing to either accept or reject it. Her story is more about Jane’s relationships with her Japanese boss, the American Wives, and her lover Sloan. Jane does not have any great dilemma about her identity as a Japanese American hybrid body, and takes it as a blessing, calling herself a “cultural pimp,” marketing All-America to the population of Japan.

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Regardless of engagement with such themes or an Asian American literary tradition, we can easily say that this is an Asian American text, because it was written by an Asian American author and about an Asian American character. However, to label this book as solely an Asian American text reduces its significance in the larger scheme of things. *My Year of Meats*, with its blending of genres and literary styles, is both more specific and more broad than that. The novel engages so many diverse themes that there is no one label that can accurately describe it.

One seemingly minor but overwhelmingly present theme in Ozeki’s work is that of names. Within the first few pages of the first chapter, we are introduced to Jane’s mother and her superstition about Jane’s name: “How can you say ‘justa name’? Name is very first thing. Name is face to all the world.” Jane’s last name is the hyphenated Takagi-Little because of her mother’s superstitious hope that her ancestors’ Takagi (meaning “tall tree”) would make up for the insignificance of her father’s Little. It is no coincidence that everyone she speaks to calls her primarily “Takagi.”

Throughout the book, Ozeki plays with the names of her characters. Joichi Ueno – pronounced like “Wayno” – is Takagi’s Japanese boss. She nicknames him “John,” after the

American movie star John Wayne, because of his obsession with the American myth of rugged masculinity. When he tells his wife, “Joichi is not a modern name. From now on, call me ‘John.’” she continues to call him “John” with quotation marks for three months. By the end of the book, Akiko thinks it strange to hear his mother say his real name, “Joichi.” Akiko’s name itself is taken from the woman who was empress at the time that Sei Shōnagon wrote her *Pillow Book*. And John’s Japanese name, Joichi, contains all the same letters, in a different arrangement, as Emperor Ichijo, who was married to Akiko.

The crew for *My American Wife* consists of Suzuki and Oh. The cameraman is Suzuki –coincidentally the name of a Japanese motor vehicle corporation. Suzuki, too, is comparable to a Heian courtier, with his long hair, tight ponytail and narrow Heian eyes. He also has “a passion for Jack Daniel’s, Wal-Mart, and American hard-core pornography.” Oh, on the other hand, is quiet, monosyllabic, and shy, just like his name.

The importance of names is explicitly mentioned again when, shooting footage in a graveyard sometime after she has become pregnant, Jane catches herself reading the names on the tombstones and realizes she is thinking about her baby. “Testing them for sound, invoking their identities.” She imagines her mother’s voice, “Name is very first thing. Name is face to all the world. But you shopping for one in graveyard?”

For the children of the Beaudroux family, their names have a history. In the Family History Corner, each adopted child shows their description from the Christian adoption magazine where Grace and Vern found them. We see that the children’s names: Joy, Newton, Cici, Elvis, Page, Jake, Emily May, Duncan, Joey and Chelsea, are the results of a family vote, replacing names like Dong Chul, Ha Young, Young Bum, Nam Hee, Mee Ree, Ho Young, and Min Jung. Some of the children didn’t have names before they were adopted. And if “name is face to all the world,” then these children had no face.

Even the name of a street takes on meaning, as, towards the end of the book, Jane walks through New Orleans to find Sloan. “Beale Street,” she says, “is full of blues and magic.” But the name has become a fake, and it is only a tourist attraction “gritty with lost authenticity;” a mere “self-referential shadow of [its] former, bad-ass self.” To what extent can a name really authentically represent what it belongs to?

“Name is very first thing. Name is face to all the world.” And like Jane Takagi-Little, this book cannot have just one name. For to say that it is an Asian American novel would not be incorrect (nor would it be “little”) but it would ignore all the other pieces of *My Year of Meats*. Perhaps, like Ueno, it ought to have a name that changes with context, with who is referring to it, and with how “modern” it is feeling on a particular day. But most likely, *My Year of Meats* should have, like Jane, a hyphenated name. To be, not an Asian American novel, but a Meat-Media-Motherhood-Marriage-Romance-Race-Gender-Hybrid-Sexuality-Truth Telling-Asian American-Authentic Novel.