

“Things that Give an Unclean Feeling” (Shōnagon): Meat Consumption, Abject Bodies, and Toxic Flows in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*

Hannah Salih, *University of Amsterdam*

Under the fragmented conditions of modernity, the means of industrialized production are hidden and instead food is associated with a neatly separated domesticity. This paper considers how Ruth Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats* resists this exclusionary logic as part of the novel’s wider concern for disrupting normative binaries that separate self from other—woman from man, animal from human, inside from outside. While this concern operates on many levels in the novel, this paper focuses on how this notion of distinct categories and boundaries which uphold patriarchal, capitalist violence, coalesce at the level of the body, particularly women’s and animal’s bodies. The related, but divergent, processes of embodied abjection and toxic contamination, are two ways Ozeki conceptualizes how eating meat draws the body into a social and material entanglement with that previously occluded in a way that troubles our understanding of cleanly distinct categories. Instead, the abject and the toxic make clear the messy entanglements at the heart of modern meat.

In Ruth Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats* (1998), meat is so much more than what’s for dinner. The novel traces the story of Jane Takagi-Little, a Japanese-American filmmaker hired to make a documentary entitled “My American Wife!.” The documentary is sponsored by the United States’s Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, BEEF-EX, with the goal of drumming up beef sales in Japan by depicting various wives sharing family recipes based around beef. This mission is overseen by Joichi Ueno, the Japanese producer of the documentary, characterized as a vile misogynist and abuser of his wife Akiko, who suffers bulimia and as such is currently infertile. Sell the American dream, sell more meat in Asia, or so the logic goes. Yet, through the unfolding layers of the narrative, *My Year of Meats* shifts drastically from this tidy image of food as connected to culture and domesticity. By the novel’s close, Jane creates an exposé of the profit driven, exploitative and violent processes of meat production, exposing the violence of factory abattoirs and the use of dangerous hormones like DES in animal feed

for cost-cutting and profit-maximization.

The novel makes clear the modern dissonance between food production and consumption symptomatic of the fragmented conditions of a globalized, capitalistic world. This distinction is figured within a wider logic of a world predicated on a system of binaries, which inevitably lead to exclusion, such as inside-outside; private-public; self-other; safety-threat. In this paper, I examine how these concerns coalesce and flow through the body in the novel through the material and conceptual processes of abjection and toxicity. Thinking with abject bodies and toxic flows radically disrupts the material and conceptual borders of bodies and showcases how the novel makes us think critically about a world characterized by such simplistic binaries, including the way we think and consume food.

My Year of Meats critically exposes a world characterized by these boundaries that separate what is allowed in from what is not. For environmental philosopher Timothy Morton, this “inside-outside manifold is fundamental for thinking the environment as a metaphysical, closed system” (274). Morton’s view is echoed widely within the realm of the environmental humanities and stems from the European Enlightenment. It is highly relevant here because it demonstrates a wider system of thought, which privileges a way of being in the world that is contained and clean, and which sees the human in fundamentally the same way—autonomous and sovereign. In this system, the processes of mass meat production are cast to an outside, an elsewhere meant to stay hidden from the consumer and the public. It is also this very notion that leads to oppressive, hierarchical systems of society, excluding those deemed “other” racially, sexually, or on a more planetary scale of the environment. As we hurtle to the cliff edge of climate catastrophe, any discussion of cultural reimagining of these reified binaries is important as it allows us to think differently about how we might exist in and relate to the world.

I first briefly trace how the novel formulates cleanliness as a trope that tries to maintain normative order and resist anything that troubles the narrative, the body, or the world. The prologue of *My Year of Meats* depicts Suzie Flowers, the first American wife and the supposed epitome of white, middle-class, heteronormative America sat in her immaculately clean home. Anything that troubles the neat definitions and the border of the home is framed as dangerous because it troubles the idea of uncontaminated, bounded categories, which are necessary for upholding systems of oppression. This is most clear when Jane recalls the true case of Yoshihiro Hattori, a sixteen-year-old shot by the butcher Rodney Peairs, who was then acquitted on the grounds of defending his home. Jane adds that “in America, we fancy ours a frontier culture, where our homes must be defended by deadly force from people who look different” (107). This is intimately bound with the novel’s view of “hearth and home” (12) and the domestic, which is framed as contained and closed. As the novel progresses, I argue that Ozeki strives to demonstrate that the reality is far messier and that such a closed system is a fallacy. The framing of cleanliness thus becomes the backdrop against which the messy, abject, toxic flows and connections are rendered both disruptive and demonstrative of wider systems of violence.

As laid out in two lists from Shōnagon—“Things That Give a Clean Feeling” (48) and the reverse “Things That Give an Unclean Feeling” (49)—cleansing is inextricably bound in abjection. If a home or a body is to be clean, something must be purged and forced outside. At the most explicit level, what is purged and abjected in the novel is women and animals and through that the discrepancy between the production and consumption of meat. Following the ideas of Carol J. Adams in her landmark book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), women’s studies scholar Laura Anh Williams conceptualizes this in her article “Gender, Race, and an Epistemology of the Abattoir in *My Year of Meats*.” Williams puts forward the notion of an epistemology of the abattoir, a structure of thinking food production that “occludes images of violence, of killing, or even of animals is the most direct product of an epistemology of the abattoir,” which, following Adams, keeps “our ‘meat’ separate from any idea that she or he was once an animal who was butchered [...] a subject” (Adams qtd. in Williams 253). This idea of separation is critical. In some sense, the equivalencies between female and animal bodies in the novel begins to trouble normative boundaries by framing the animals in a less hierarchical relation to the human, whereby both are caught in the systemic hierarchies of masculine-capitalist violence. The initial aim of “My American

Wife!" is "explicitly gastropornographic; the program's celebration of meat, 'climaxing' in its consumption, suggests both the gastronomic and sexualized consumption of the attractive wife. Woman is rendered as meat, and vice versa" (Williams 255). This ethical, political equivalency essentially connects eating meat with patriarchal virility and a heavily gendered mode of oppression. In many ways, *My Year of Meats* narrativizes Adams's argument. Jane describes a moment in a bar with the Japanese producer of the documentary, Joichi. In the bar, a group of "Texas beauties" "[straddle] his tenderloin and offer[s] up her round rump for inspection" (54). There is, however, something overly on-the-nose about this line. How easily this comparison can be made makes it tempting to uncritically accept this as Ozeki's main political message. Indeed, this comparison is crucial to much of the scholarship engaging with this novel, reading the narrative and thematic equivalencies Ozeki draws in portraying her message. Certainly, Jane's own uncovering of the "truth" of global meat production is largely based on revealing equivalences, on lifting the veil and exposing the structures beneath. What interests me, however, is not this operation of revelation but rather how the novel tackles this separation between meat consumption and production not just as an epistemological delineation but also as a material, ontological one. Food also functions within this visceral, embodied space in the novel, not just as a signifier for contemporary systems. Thinking in this way allows us to understand both the equivalencies and the messy in-betweens, the process of transgression that disrupts the notion of sovereign human/hegemonic subjects and not just the revelation of previously "occlude[d] images of violence" (Williams 253).

However, framing relationality as itself predicated on the very globalized systems that have led to the oppression of all those deemed "other," ensures that it is not effectively transgressive or radically troubling these binaries. This is, in my view, somewhat fundamental to both Adams and Williams's work. Even after Jane learns of the conditions of production, she still says she "craves the taste and texture of animal between my teeth" (246). The focus here on the visceral materiality of eating meat is just as critical to the novel's treatment of food. Through food, the systems of capital and violence are inevitably brought into the home and into the body. This demonstrates that such an easy mental occlusion is especially flawed in relation to meat consumption because we are so materially entangled in these networks through food.

Through Ozeki's material, corporeal handling of meat is how we can trace our entanglements in a manner outside global flows of capital and which helps us think beyond identarian categories of male-female or animal-human, although as I shall show, this is not unproblematic in the novel. Given how concerned the novel is not just with meat production, but with its consumption too, I argue that thinking about bodies not just as signifiers of wider social systems but as bodies which bleed, vomit, digest, eat, have sex, morph and move is critical to this novel's desire to transgress normative boundaries and disrupt hegemony. Turning back to abjection here, but as an embodied process, is critical to how the novel conceptualizes this concern.

For Julia Kristeva, abjection is a process of becoming, which comes into being between the subject and object. The abject is of the subject, "I," yet because it is expelled from the self, it's never fully assimilated into the subject. It is also not fully other or object because it "does not cease challenging its master" (Kristeva 2). In this sense, abjection unsettles and transgresses the strict boundary of self and other. It is both horrifying through its association with the "annihilation" of the self and a "safeguard"

(Kristeva 2). Akiko, as Joichi's wife, is made to cook and eat every meaty meal on the documentary in an attempt to restore her fertility. Her visceral reaction to the American meat dishes she cooks evokes the abject: "She'd start to feel the meat. It began in her stomach, like an animal alive, and would climb its way back up her gullet, until it burst from the back of her throat. She could not contain it. She could not keep any life down inside her" (48). Akiko's body becomes the agent of containment in this section, but in her failure to be the perfect vessel for life, her need to vomit and reject the meat results in an image of overflow and ejection. By describing the meat as being alive, it essentially resurrects the animal and seemingly grants the food a sense of agency. In his phenomenological study of the anorexic subject, Fredrik Svenaeus identifies how anorexia is often experienced as an *uncanny* condition, as it is triggered by and manifests as "bodily alienation in which the body is perceived to be foreign" (81). The image of the animal climbing out of her body is a similarly alien experience, which dissociates her act of vomiting from the physicality of her body. It is only later in the novel when Akiko sees with absolute clarity the insemination of her egg, following her rape by her husband, that her sense of her embodiment returns. Akiko expresses this through the poetic form: "my pretty / gash. / Run, / river run" (206). The enjambment creates a transgressive and unstoppable flow of energy.

In comparison, while abject, the absolute rejection of the meat she eats seems almost clean. Akiko's body refuses to digest the meat and assimilate it into her body. On the one hand, this suggests a sense of resistance to the oppressive structures in which the meat is bound. On the other, it evokes other moments where abject bodily processes are figured within the language of cleanliness that leaves no traces. For example, Jane's mother states, "better you throw his baby away" (188), and Jane's doctor makes a flippant comment that her post-miscarriage womb is "spick-and-span" (351) with nothing left behind. This deviates from Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject. If the process is so clean, what boundaries are being troubled? I would suggest then that abject processes do not inherently present as dissolving the boundaries they move across. Instead, Ozeki uses the abject to highlight the power structures that benefit from there being a delineation between, for example, inside and outside. By frequently occluding the messiness of these material, embodied experiences, the abject is not consistently radically transgressive within the novel.

It's in the portrayal of Akiko's rape and the abattoir that the most grotesquely abject moments occur. As part of the exposé, Jane and her crew visit an abattoir where we witness the killing of a cow: "the cow was breathing hard, raspy breath [...] and from time to time she let out a strangled cry" (332). Further, "He bent down and looked straight into her bugging eye [...] he used the upward movement of his body to sink the knife deep into her throat [...] the blood gushes out in rhythmic spurts" (333). This is mirrored in the descriptions of the bodily harm inflicted on Akiko by Joichi after he discovers Akiko has been in touch with Jane, mentioning his abuse, that her periods have restarted, and her love for the lesbian couple Jane shows in one episode. In response, he viciously anally rapes Akiko: "he lifted her by the shoulders and pounded her against the floor, over and over" (282), causing her severe damage and the novel describes her bleeding, ruptured, and violated body in painful detail. Unlike the portrayal of Akiko's rejection of the meat, these moments seem like pure horror. In this moment, both the cow and Akiko are objects of consumption for men and their agencies are stripped in the most horrifying ways. Both Akiko and the cow are captured in the violent shift from being (semi) agential subjects to meat/food

through the application of violence. This is not food that nourishes, but “food” that is ravenously and pornographically consumed. Monica Chiu highlights this stating, “the novel advocates a growing awareness in the two female protagonists of the inextricability of men and meat and how this culturally sanctioned alliance often marginalizes women and the poor, instigating a feminist bent from the novel’s very masculine connotations of meat” (112). The explicitly, bodily descriptions in both these moments also pertains to the notion of the abject as their incredibly “unclean” nature makes it far more difficult to uphold the strict boundaries of the body. Jane, after being knocked out by a stunned cow in the abattoir, finds herself questioning on her way to the hospital whether she is covered in her blood or the blood of a cow. In that moment human and animal, typically distinct beings, are brought together in the shared violence inflicted upon them.

This is a dynamic that Laura Williams raises, but her argument lands more strongly on the ideological and structural similarities between women and meat. In this vein, Monica Chiu offers more of a critique of the novel as she identifies an essential circularity to the manner in which Jane’s documentarian practices trouble the normativity she supposedly resists. Chiu argues:

The text’s irony lies between rejecting Joichi’s ridiculous allusions to a so-called American dream and accepting Jane’s multicultural, nonhegemonic re-visions, invested with an American-style romance with difference, of which the nation’s primary acceptance has arisen through ethnic food. Such a flattening and homogenizing of difference veers little from Joichi’s approach. Thus, Jane can be accused, like Joichi, of cleansing her images. (120)

I agree with Chiu’s assertion here that at the level of the narrative, the novel is less transgressive than it appears. As I argued earlier in my reading of Akiko’s bulimia, the force with which that image of the meat clawing its way out is so charged with a socio-political symbolism that it negates the food from being just that—a material thing consumed through a body. Chiu highlights how the novel struggles to escape the frameworks it seeks to resist; however, I argue that focusing on the moments of embodied consumption of food, and not just on food as a cultural symbol, reveals a more fully actualized imagining of a messy, unclean entanglement, which forces us to think not just about connections to food through the circulatory objects of capital (meat, food, and, in the novel, women) but in physical, material connections, which challenges our understandings of closed binaries more radically. Thus, we begin to move towards the way Ozeki imagines human and non-human entanglements as ontological that is as a way of being both materially and existentially in the world.

However, in *My Year of Meats*, even in those most abject moments, there is still some sense that we could return to a clean state: Jane can wash off the blood and Akiko can re-envision the pregnancy that stems from her rape as being instead “conceived, in her mind” and “not necessarily through sexual relations with Joichi” (Chiu 118). To be sure, I’m not suggesting these are not necessary trauma responses, more that they are typical of a will in the novel, which Chiu also identifies, to tidy things up. In this sense, the abject moments of consumption reveal equivalencies between human and animal at the same time that they transgress bodily borders. However, there is still a sense of reversibility, which offers a way to separate into distinct categories once more by casting out the other. Turning instead to the novel’s

depiction of toxicity, we can see a more radical dissolution of reifying boundaries between normative binaries, disrupting the idea of the impermeable human further.

Within the new materialist school of thought, there is a group of work that deeply considers the bodily connections to the material world. For feminist scholar Stacy Alaimo, she distils this idea into the concept of trans-corporeality, which is predicated on the fact that as “flesh, substance, matter, we are permeable and, in fact, require the continual input of other forms of matter— air, water, food” (78). In Ozeki’s novel, this unfortunately extends to the consumption of toxic substances via food. The consumption of food becomes bound to not just harmful social structures but to a physical harm caused by hormones given to animals in the U.S. The Purcell family, one of Jane’s subjects, jokingly note that “‘some medicines they was usin’ in the chickens that got into the necks that we was eatin’.... An’ that medicine, well, if it didn’t start to make me sound just like a woman!’” (139). Ozeki shows how toxicity radically dissolves the boundaries of the body and draws people into an entanglement of matter. Mr. Purcell’s body has physically changed, who he becomes is now inseparably connected to what he consumes. Jane is similarly entangled with the toxic. Following the Purcell’s revelation, Jane shares with the reader reams of information about DES, a growth hormone used in American meat production and prescribed to pregnant women, once again drawing the two together under the industrial pharma-meat complex. Yet, unlike thinking the abject, or thinking about the epistemological and social connections, Jane confronts the fact that the toxic is inextricably part of her sense of self, of “me.” We can read this as embodying Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality as it places Jane in a web of “intra-active agencies” (127) that flow through and transgresses the body, ultimately “dissolving the outline of the subject” (112) in a far more complex way than abject flows.

The dissolving nature of toxicity also shapes the narrative. Jane spends much of the novel trying to piece together the chronology of her exposure to DES. Toxicity also dissolves temporal boundaries in the novel as past events only materialize at a later date. After Jane loses her baby, she says it was “maybe not one thing, but a combination” (347). Try as she might, she cannot pinpoint the single cause or exact moment of loss, so we can see how the toxic is always deferred. Thinking about food, this again becomes a matter of consumption because it is distinctly and specifically an embodied entanglement, but it also shows how this concern fundamentally presses upon the novel’s narrative form as well as its thematic concerns. Gender scholar Mel Chen’s reading of toxicity neatly summarizes how the toxic queers (hetero)normative bounds and animates non-human and human agents through the “[collapse of] object distinctions between animate and inanimate” (209). This is evidently the case in *My Year of Meats*, as meat in all its toxic contamination becomes intimately entangled with the novel’s own form, animating and shaping it. This disrupts those binaries even further than Williams first articulates. Jane ultimately realizes she is unable to unravel herself from the toxic and so is unable to unravel herself fully from the processes of industrialized meat production. As such, through meat consumption within the home, Ozeki’s novel constructs the notion that food consumption inevitably brings the fragmented processes of modern, globalized, industrial capitalism and exploitation to bear on our embodied experiences.

In one moment of the novel, Jane reads from Fry’s geography book, pondering the book’s intention “to present the *earth as the home of man*” (185) in an essential man versus nature type battle. It’s

clear that this viewpoint delineates and abjects nature from man. It is this system of thought which allows for the awful treatment of both women and cows in the novel. Abjection and toxicity are related but divergent embodied experiences in the novel that reveal how American food production and consumption contaminates across the scales of the environment, the transnational and the body, disrupting our understanding of closed-systems and a distinction between woman and nature on the way. Moments of bodily abjection do offer a transgression of these idealized notions of a bounded body. However, their repeated association with cleanliness shows its limitations. Toxins in the body are dangerous and Ozeki works to expose this. Yet, by showing how Jane's material body is so deeply enmeshed with the toxic, it doesn't just transgress but radically dissolves the distinction between her and her environment. Perhaps we might then see toxicity as a mode of thinking within the novel, which allows Ozeki to more effectively confront this problem of man versus nature. As the meat is consumed, it brings us into contact with categories, ideas and, materials, which have been cast out. The damage caused by meat production is typically occluded, but by tracing the processes of abjection and toxicity in the novel, I hope to have shown how thinking about the embodied consumption of meat as realized in the novel makes visible the multifarious connections that mean meat is, under the conditions of globalized modernity, never simply what's for dinner.

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Chen, Mel. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Chiu, Monica. "Postnational globalization and (en) gendered meat production in Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2001, pp. 99-128.

Kristeva, Julia and Leon Samuel Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.

Morton, Timothy. "Guest Column: Queer Ecology." *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 2, 2010, pp. 273-282.

Svenaesus, Fredrik. "Anorexia Nervosa and the Body Uncanny: A Phenomenological Approach." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, vol. 20 no. 1, 2013, pp. 81-91.

Ozeki, Ruth. *My Year of Meats*. Canongate, 2013.

Williams, Laura Anh. "Gender, Race, and an Epistemology of the Abattoir in *My Year of Meats*." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2014, pp. 244-272.