

Frances Tran
Professor Dawson
ENGL 86600
May 31, 2011

Toxic Risks

Contesting Neoliberalist Biopower in *My Year of Meats*

Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) re-presents the complex and deeply contested history of diethylstilbestrol (DES) and its toxic side effects from a literary vantage point. Narrated largely through the voice of Jane Takagi-Little, an aspiring documentarian, the text interweaves two narrative strands concerning the historical usage and abuse of DES. The first involves Jane's employment by the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate (BEEF-EX) to direct a new television series titled *My American Wife!*, aimed at increasing meat consumption in Japan. Producing this show gradually leads Jane to uncover a corporate scandal about the dangerous side effects of DES's use as a growth hormone for cattle. Ozeki complements this narrative with a second tale of self-discovery in which Jane recognizes herself as a "DES daughter" and, thus, taps into an even longer history of the chemical's mistreatment as a pregnancy drug for women. By bringing together these different yet interconnected histories, Ozeki's novel allows us to analyze how the forces of transnational capitalism intersect with historically racist, sexist and gendered political practices to place the body and racialized female bodies, in particular, at risk.

On account of recent reports about the dangers of nuclear radiation and other forms of toxic exposure, I contend that the prominence of discourses on toxicity today makes re-visiting the histories of DES and narratives such as Ozeki's essential for confronting the sense of helplessness, anxiety and fear that pervades our contemporary moment. Bodies are always insecure. But the feelings of vulnerability we experience in an age of neoliberal hegemony and

globalization have been exacerbated by a flood of information in techno-scientific research, exposing the body as a site of enormous risk, both to the familiar violence of natural disaster, poverty and war as well as to newly discovered forms of chemical and molecular vulnerabilities. The dangers attached to these proliferating tales of corporeal insecurity, however, not only stem from the health risks posed by toxic exposure. Instead, we must also interrogate the potentially “toxic” effects of their narrative framing, namely, the way these tales of risk are shaped and disseminated for public consumption.

This paper attempts to examine neoliberal narratives of toxic risk and, more importantly, demonstrates how aesthetic texts like *My Year of Meats* function as counter-narratives, creating alternative imaginaries that enable us to envision possibilities even in the most vulnerable circumstances. Therefore, instead of perceiving toxicity only in terms of its connections to death and disease, I claim that it also possesses a radically negative potentiality. Without forgetting the detrimental effects of toxins on individual bodies and the environment, we can view toxicity as a generative analytic, one that encourages us to consider different kinds of relationalities and political coalitions necessary for addressing inequities and achieving social transformation. Finally, I argue that analyzing toxicity through the framework of Ozeki’s novel allows us to challenge the often-marginalized role of aesthetics in politics and ultimately broaden avenues for political engagement in persisting issues of social and environmental injustice.

Neoliberal Politics, Narrating Toxic Risk

Neoliberal appeals for the privatization of formerly “public” resources, demanding self over governmental regulation, are familiar arguments in the context of discourses on globalization and endeavors to reduce restrictions to free market enterprise. As David Harvey succinctly states, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices

that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”¹ However, increasing threats of toxic exposure present a unique dilemma for neoliberal politics. The potential incursion of dangerous and at times deadly toxins on human bodies and the environment seems to imply a need to re-animate calls for governmental responsibility to ensure public welfare. Moreover, the fact that such toxins are produced as byproducts of global capitalism and transnational corporate ventures has fueled social and environmental justice critiques of unimpeded capitalist expansion. Rather than furthering “human well-being,” when viewed through an analytic of toxicity, the growth of “free markets” and “free trade” has generated tremendous costs to ourselves, our communities and the larger planetary space we all inhabit. I argue that it is precisely the ability of toxins to contest the discursive foundations of neoliberalism that engenders particular framings of narratives of toxic risk.

In “Toxicity and the Consuming Subject” Nan Enstad demonstrates how such narratives of risk are constructed to produce certain forms of knowledge while obscuring others. News reports about the dangers of toxic exposure, she reveals, often generate a sense of paranoia and anxiety about the infiltration of toxins in daily life, whether through large-scale disasters or more insidiously in the form of our day-to-day encounters with foods and household products. Her discussion of a recent publication in *National Geographic* magazine, David Ewing Duncan’s “The Pollution Within,” provides an example of the neoliberal rhetoric of insecurity and risk Ozeki attempts to write against in *My Year of Meats*. Enstad argues that while the article succeeds in conveying a message about increasing corporeal vulnerability by citing abnormal

¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

levels of toxicity in Duncan's body, what remains overlooked are precisely those bodies most susceptible to toxic exposure because of the conditions in which they live and work. She asserts that many of the "others" figured in the piece are "nonwhite, all experience more disturbing exposures, and none receive nearly as much attention as Duncan who remains the main character."² While this unequal representation emerges as a function of the narrative style Duncan adopts in choosing to recount a "journey of chemical self-discovery," I contend that he also produces a contained narrative of insecurity that figures as a mechanism of neoliberalist biopower.³

Narratives like Duncan's "The Pollution Within" divert our attention from more serious accounts of toxic exposure, appearing to generate knowledge about toxicity while simultaneously managing and controlling the amount of vulnerability we experience as readers. Such tales communicate a general feeling of insecurity and anxiety by presenting toxic risk as an uncontrollable and inevitable component of everyday existence and thus, somehow beyond the scope of governmental control. Perpetuating these narratives ultimately allows neoliberal institutions of governance to disavow responsibility for attending to structural inequities and those bodies and groups most threatened by toxic exposure. Therefore, even though *National Geographic* and other news sources present themselves as progressive in their efforts to disseminate information about toxicity to the public, they nevertheless re-inscribe the worldview of their largely white, middle class readership and participate in the occlusion of bodies that have historically been portrayed as "toxic."

² Nan Enstad, "Toxicity and the Consuming Subject," *States of Emergency: The Objects of American Studies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 63.

³ David Ewing Duncan, "The Pollution Within," *National Geographic Magazine* (Oct. 2006), <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2006/10/toxic-people/duncan-text/1>.

Lisa Duggan argues in *The Twilight of Equality?* that “*The goal of raising corporate profits has never been pursued separately from the rearticulation of hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States and around the globe.*”⁴ These words underlie her broader argument about the insidious quality of neoliberalism, which while deeply embedded in cultural politics and historically discriminatory practices, nevertheless presents itself as primarily an “*economic policy*” based on “*neutral, technical expertise.*”⁵ Duggan claims that this division between culture and economics is neoliberalism’s “*most successful ruse*” and subsequently its greatest strength, obscuring through empirical research and generalized statistics the “*hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality*” inherent in neoliberal hegemony.⁶ Priscilla Wald’s *Contagious* reframes Duggan’s discussion of these structural inequities through an in depth analysis of the language, images and stories surrounding toxicity. She demonstrates in particular how contemporary neoliberal tales of toxic risk are informed by histories of exclusion and discrimination that have constructed certain bodies and groups as “*toxic.*” As a result, despite current promulgations about a “*post-race*” society in the U.S., Wald suggests that discourses about toxicity remain intimately connected to “*outbreak narratives.*”

These tales of outbreak, exclaiming against the dangers of contagions and viruses, often portray epidemics as emanating from particular geographies, “*timeless, brooding Africa or Asia, the birthplace of humanity, civilization, and deadly microbes.*”⁷ Wald asserts, “*Charting the one-way course of... accounts of emerging infections turns space into time, threatening to transform a contemporary ‘us’ into a primitive ‘them.’*” This rhetoric stigmatizes impoverished places as it

⁴ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 14-15, emphasis original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Priscilla Wald, “*Imagined Immunities: The Epidemiology of Belonging,*” *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 44.

obscures the source of poverty and of the ‘uneven development’ that characterizes globalization.”⁸ She therefore implies that a language of blame remains attached to racial groups and immigrants, posing them as foreign subjects in America that threaten a healthy national public. In this way Wald reveals how such discourses not only perpetuate false stereotypes, suggesting that racialized bodies are somehow “primitive” or “backwards,” but also prevent us from addressing actual sources of inequality, poverty and injustice. Consequently, while not always physically diseased or contagious, these bodies are nevertheless perceived as already “toxic” in a manner that permits political leaders as well as the general public to ignore the need for social and legal action.

I have discussed the cultural, political and historical dynamics that underpin discourses on toxicity at length to illustrate how rhetorical strategies and storytelling, more specifically, are embedded in neoliberal policies and practice. It is therefore through narrative, I contend, that we can realize Enstad’s appeal to re-conceptualize our understanding of toxicity and begin exploring ways of transforming instances of bodily vulnerability and insecurity into productive grounds for imagining new means of resistance. Even though “toxicity in our bodies” signifies for Enstad, a “sneaky triumph of capitalist logics at the most daily and personal level,” the volatile nature of toxins as unintended byproducts of globalization also figures as their peculiar power. Because these chemicals cannot be fully controlled by the corporations and institutions that produce them, toxicity has the potential to create ruptures in neoliberal hegemony that can push us towards reinvigorating a leftist politics. My paper thus begins from where Enstad’s theoretical project leaves off by exploring how the *aesthetic* allows us to engage in experimental re-imaginings of toxicity. In particular, I examine Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* as a novel that not only challenges

⁸ Ibid, 45.

neoliberal narratives of risk, but offers an alternative framing of toxicity that enables us to envision new relationalities and possibilities for political collaboration. It suggests that even amidst conditions of intense precariousness, there are other ways of confronting pervasive feelings of corporeal vulnerability and consequently, of re-shaping the grounds on which we articulate our demands for social and environmental justice.

Toxic Humor, De-naturalizing the Outbreak Narrative

Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* deals explicitly with the historical racial and gender inequalities that structure neoliberal discourses on toxicity by tapping into the "subversive possibilities" of what Cheryl Fish calls "[t]oxic humor."⁹ Fish claims that comedy "offers a counterpoint to the rhetoric of fear and catastrophe that dominates many environmentally themed works and points to the role of play and linguistic slippage" in creating an oppositional politics.¹⁰ I argue that Ozeki participates in such a project by presenting her novel as a parody of neoliberal practice. This becomes evident in the caricatures she offers of the meat industry, through the corporate entity BEEF-EX and *My American Wife!*, the televised documentary series it commissions Jane to produce, which unapologetically exports traditional "American" values embodied in white middle class women and their hearty beef recipes to Japan for consumption by Japanese housewives. Ozeki's reliance on "toxic humor" ultimately enables a critique of neoliberal hegemony without reinforcing or perpetuating the feelings of negativity and pessimism often associated with tales of toxic risk. More importantly, I contend that the comical tone and hyperbolic language she employs throughout the text suggests that her interest is not in

⁹ Cheryl Fish, "The Toxic Body Politic: Ethnicity, Gender, and Corrective Eco-Justice in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Judith Helfand and Daniel Gold's *Blue Vinyl*," *MELUS* 34, no. 2 (2009): 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

portraying “real,” lived experiences, but rather in challenging the discursive grounds of neoliberalism and its emplotment of various narratives of corporeal insecurity.

In this context, *My Year of Meats* can be read as a novel that disrupts and intervenes in the detection stories that emerge as offshoots of neoliberal tales of toxic risk and Wald’s “outbreak narrative” in particular. Wald describes how such tales of outbreak are necessarily accompanied by a familiar pattern of detective work. Using Wolfgang Petersen’s popular 1995 *Outbreak* film as a model, she demonstrates how these stories often open with a growing sense of paranoia about the possibility of widespread epidemic and end with the unveiling of some governmental or corporate scandal, thereby leading to an enlightened understanding of a specific contagion or disease and affirmations of individual autonomy and ethical behavior. The heroes of these tales, Wald reveals, are usually white, middle class males with a renegade or frontier cowboy attitude that allows them to bend the rules for the wellbeing of the public at large. *My Year of Meats* similarly reads as a detection narrative. It follows the story of a female protagonist whose job working for a transnational corporation leads her to uncover a deep conspiracy, in this case, regarding the use of DES to artificially enhance meat products despite the enormous health risks it entails. I assert, however, that Ozeki’s employment of “toxic humor” enables her to frame *My Year of Meats* as a detective story that disrupts and contests the very foundations of Wald’s “outbreak narrative.”

For instance, Ozeki replaces the heteronormative white male subject of such tales with the distinctive voice of Jane Takagi-Little, a woman of Japanese and Caucasian descent. Instead of the typical white renegade cowboy with an incorruptible sense of morality, I contend that Jane’s racially hybrid body reflects her vexed positionality in the United States. On the one hand, she unabashedly admits her complicity in a hegemonic capitalist culture, acknowledging that it

was a selfish need for economic and fiscal security that caused her to take the job directing *My American Wife!* for BEEF-EX. However, as Jane travels across the fifty states interviewing “American” housewives who embody the “heartly sense... of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America,” Jane begins to feel her own exclusion from the largely white middle class group of females being featured on the show.¹¹ As a result, she becomes increasingly daring in her choice of bodies to represent on TV, moving from a family of Mexican immigrants and their “Texas-style Beefy Burritos” to Lara and Dyann, a lesbian couple that is in fact vegetarian. For Jane, *My American Wife!* thus gradually shifts from its original purpose of marketing meat in Japan to a broader struggle for representation and visibility for racialized minority groups. The comic nature of this television show ultimately allows us, in an absurd and exaggerated way, to recognize the racist, sexist and gendered politics that underlie neoliberal globalization and engage, as Jane does, with our own participation in this system. Ozeki therefore suggests that acknowledging our complicity in the very institutions of governance we critique is a significant initial step in creating a viable oppositional leftist politics.

Ozeki also contests the conventional unilateral perspective of Wald's "outbreak narrative" and other neoliberal tales of toxic risk by interrupting Jane's story with that of Akiko Ueno, a Japanese housewife who "consumes" both the meat recipes advertised on *My American Wife!* and the larger message about American diversity Jane attempts to relate. Although often criticized as a stereotypical portrait of the demure Asian female, Akiko nevertheless de-centers our gaze from a focus on the United States and pushes us to consider the transnational ramifications of BEEF-EX's corporate venture in Japan. In fact, we learn that it is the sudden premature suspension of Akiko's menstrual cycle that causes her husband Ichiro Ueno to pitch

¹¹ Ruth L. Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 8. All subsequent quotes from this text will be cited parenthetically.

the idea for *My American Wife!* to BEEF-EX, believing that consuming more red meat like hearty "American" women may solve the problem of Akiko's frail body. The dark comedy that underlies the couple's relationship and the way it fuels BEEF-EX's politico-economic agenda in Japan illustrates how structural, racial and gender inequalities manifest across national borders. Rather than limiting our critique to the social and institutional systems within the US, Ozeki consequently asks us to consider through Akiko's character and story the way neoliberalism also shapes hegemonic policies and practices globally.

The most significant intervention *My Year of Meats* makes, however, is not through Ozeki's employment of "toxic humor," but in her depiction and treatment of DES's multiple histories. I argue that her focus on toxicity *queers* our understanding of space and time in a globalized world and thus provides an oppositional language to the "outbreak narrative" and prevailing neoliberal discourses of corporeal vulnerability. In other words, Ozeki's novel compels us to re-map the spatiotemporalities of globalization to account for the bodies, histories and structural inequities that are often subsumed under paranoid reports about increasing threats of toxic exposure.

Toxic Consumption, Queering Space and Time

While David Harvey's conceptual framework of "time-space compression" is often used to describe how technologies impact our experience of time and space in an age of globalization, shrinking distances and accelerating time, it also informs the temporal and spatial dynamics of the "outbreak narrative" and other neoliberal tales of risks.¹² Such narratives approach the crises around toxicity from the limited time frame of the present, conveying an urgency and sense of paranoia and fear that is fixated with the "here and now." In addition, these tales portray the

¹² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 1990), 283.

dangers of toxic exposure as threats particular to national spaces despite the global consequences inherent in the issue of toxicity. It is precisely the feeling that distances between nations are shrinking that intensifies anxieties about the potential infiltration of contagions, disease, and toxins into the “sacred” space of the nation. In *My Year of Meats* I contend that Ozeki’s representation of the various histories of abuse connected to DES challenges attachments to presentist notions of time and the space of the nation-state.

In fact, toxicity effectively queers our understanding of space and time because it is an analytic that engages in what Sara Ahmed terms a “politics of disorientation.”¹³ Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology* that our daily interactions with others and even our private thoughts are not arbitrary, but shaped by already established lines of behavior and thinking. For her, examining “orientations” consequently becomes a way “to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others,” and *disorientation*, a means of disrupting the normative patterns and sequences we follow.¹⁴ While acknowledging that disorientation is not an inherently revolutionary or celebratory concept because the affects it produces can be extremely unsettling, Ahmed nevertheless asserts that the “point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.”¹⁵ I argue that Ozeki takes up Ahmed’s challenge to perceive hope in disorientation by figuring toxicity in her novel as a means of disorienting or “queering” our perspective of neoliberal globalization. Rather than focusing on the conventional objects of consumption, she demonstrates how tracing flows of toxins as byproducts of global capitalism forces us to consider alternative temporalities and sites.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 158.

An analysis of toxicity necessitates a radical shift in our conceptions of spatiality. The novel arguably begins from a national space, encapsulated in the *My American Wife!* TV series, which requires Jane to travel across the fifty states interviewing American housewives. However, Ozeki reveals in the course of her text, that toxicity forces us to examine other spaces and, more specifically, the intimate space of the human body, as opposed to the normativizing figurative body of the nation. Perhaps one of the most unsettling representations of bodies in the novel is that of Bunny Dunn's daughter, Rose. While interviewing Bunny as a potential candidate for the show's segment in Colorado, Jane discovers that Rose's young body bears the mark of DES's harmful effects, presenting us with a disturbing image of a prepubescent girl with the fully developed figure of a woman:

Rose's skin was still a baby's, milky white and downy... Then Bunny pulled the T-shirt up further. Naked, Rose was not plump at all. The plumpness was an illusion created by two shockingly full and beautiful breasts, each tipped with a perfect pink nipple. The girl was five years old... Her mouth opened and closed like a little fish's... then her mouth found her thumb and closed around it, and she started sucking. (275)

The vivid imagery Ozeki employs in this passage, contrasting Rose's enlarged breasts with her baby skin, presents a disconcerting juxtaposition between woman and child. Even more troubling is how these two extremes transform the innocent infantile act of Rose sucking on her thumb into a strange, uncanny sexual gesture. This portrait is intended to disorient readers, confronting us with the horrific reality that this early development, which the text defines as "premature thelarche," is only one of the possible effects of DES (273). More importantly, however, I argue

that Ozeki's intensely visual and graphic depiction of Rose's body suggests that the body figures as a necessary site for examining the consequences of "toxic consumption."

Rather than framing threats of toxic exposure in terms of national security, through a hegemonic narrative about the vulnerability of the nation-state's metaphorical "body," Ozeki compels us to trace links between vulnerable bodies that traverse constructed national borders. This becomes especially evident when Jane realizes the far-reaching implications of *My American Wife!* after she is contacted by Akiko who, while watching the show from Japan, wonders if her husband's impotence may be connected to DES. Jane admits: "Maybe it was because my shows were broadcast in Japan, on the other side of the globe, but until now I'd never really imagined my audience before... While I'd been worried about the well-being of the American women I filmed as subjects, suddenly here was the audience, embodied in Akiko, with a name and a vulnerable identity" (231). Through Jane's recognition of an audience in Japan and the larger collective of vulnerable bodies this audience signifies, Ozeki illustrates the need to explore, not only how toxins infiltrate the intimacy of individual bodies, but also how they circulate within the global economy. Because toxins are not limited to boundaries between nations and populations, and yet, manifest in particular bodies, she shows how toxicity enables us to employ a more versatile conception of space. As a framework, toxicity consequently allows us to re-negotiate and even bridge local and global paradigms, shifting between the localized spaces of human bodies and broader flows of consumption that transport toxins globally.

Furthermore, while discourses on toxicity often emphasize the urgency of the "here and now," proclaiming against the ever-increasing risks of toxic exposure in the present, Ozeki's portrayal of the interconnected histories surrounding the mistreatment of DES disrupts these narrow perceptions of time. Ingesting harmful toxins, as the text shows, causes damage to the

body, but indicators of their negative effects on an individual's physical health may take years to develop. Jane's discovery of the connection between DES's abuse in the meat industry and its misuse as a pregnancy drug enables her to engage in a form of self-recognition, understanding her own body and its infertility as a product of DES and herself as a DES daughter: "Suddenly it seems perfectly clear... The bludgeoning my uterus received occurred when I was still only a little shrimp, floating in the warm embryonic fluid of Ma" (156). Jane's words reveal how DES's effects possess an intergenerational dimension, manifesting in her own body because of her mother's earlier ingestion of the chemical to prevent miscarriage. This discovery calls attention to the multiple nuanced and extended temporalities we need to consider when examining what Rob Nixon terms the "slow violence" of toxicity.¹⁶ But perhaps what Ozeki does most forcefully is to take Jane's revelation even further, depicting how she goes on to imagine a fictional interaction between her mother and the doctor that led him to prescribe her DES:

I can imagine the whole thing. Ma, frightened, pregnant, not speaking a word of English, sitting in the doctor's office... Of course old Doc Ingvortsen, the family doctor in Quam... was used to treating large-bodied Swedes and sturdy Danes, with ample, childbearing hips... But Ma was Japanese. My birth certificate signed by this doctor, lists her race as "yellow." And she was narrow... So he gave her a prescription, probably about 125 milligrams of diethylstilbestrol, otherwise known as DES, to take once a day during the first trimester of me. To keep me in place, floating between her delicate hips. (156)

Although Jane imagines this exchange between Ma and Doc Ingvortsen, it conveys the intricate histories of racism embedded in the prescription of DES, which presents racialized females as

¹⁶ Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 3 (2009): 445.

especially vulnerable to this practice. The "toxic" orientalist stereotypes connected to Asian women as possessing "delicate" and "narrow" bodies, Jane reveals, is intimately intertwined with the toxins that have infiltrated her own uterus. Therefore, despite the privilege critics often attach to Jane's racial hybridity, as a woman of Caucasian and Japanese descent, her body still bears the marks of this historically racist and gendered prescription of DES.

Ultimately, this analysis of how toxicity compels a re-mapping of the spatiotemporalities of globalization enables us to ask new questions about how the time and space of toxic consumption alters the way we approach issues of social justice. Ozeki suggests that our demands to rectify structural inequities must be shaped by a deep awareness of the multiple historical trajectories that influence the transmission and consumption of toxins, both on the broader scale of transnational economies and within the localized spaces of communities and the intimacy of human bodies. This understanding of the various spatial and temporal dimensions that toxicity animates allows us to begin imagining different forms of connection and avenues for political collaboration.

Affective Politics, Re-Imagining Relationality

Therefore, while *My Year of Meats* reads like a detective story, in contrast to the detection work that often accompanies neoliberal tales of toxic risk and Wald's "outbreak narrative," it does not offer an ending couched in terms of enlightened rationality. Ozeki instead emphasizes how Jane's exposure of the corporate scandal surrounding BEEF-EX's illegal use of DES results neither in scientific triumph, through a cure that rectifies past injuries and prevents the proliferation of toxins, nor in a greater awareness of the chemical's dangers. Jane herself admits, "Of course I knew about toxicity in meat, the unwholesomeness of large-scale factory farming, the deforestation of the rain forests to make grazing land for hamburgers" (334).

Consequently, what becomes evident in the novel's conclusion is a collective realization of something we have always known, a challenge to our own willful ignorance towards persisting problems of racial and gender inequality and growing threats of environmental apocalypse. Jane asserts:

I would like to think of my 'ignorance' less as a personal failing and more of a massive cultural trend, an example of doubling, of psychic numbing... We are paralyzed by bad knowledge, from which the only escape is playing dumb. Ignorance becomes empowering because it enables people to live. Stupidity becomes proactive, a political statement. (334)

By demonstrating how ignorance and stupidity can be considered a kind of politics today, Jane forces us to confront ourselves and the state of our contemporary political sphere. Rather than allowing "bad knowledge" to paralyze us, she suggests that we must learn again how to *feel* in order to overcome the "psychic numbing" that afflicts and impedes us from demanding action against those injustice we *know* exist. As a result, what Ozeki's novel detects in its conclusion is not a corporate scandal, but possibilities for reinvigorating a leftist politics capable of addressing social and environmental injustice. For her, the *aesthetic* is essential for creating this sense of potentiality. In the text Jane explicitly employs the aesthetic form of the documentary to challenge BEEF-EX's endeavor to increase meat consumption in Japan. By pouring her life savings into making this documentary Jane creates a media sensation that compels audiences both within the US and worldwide to recognize the health risks posed by DES.

More broadly, I argue that *My Year of Meats* figures as a text that demonstrates how aesthetics open up opportunities for analyzing the material implications of neoliberalism's narratives of risk and, thus, for developing practical strategies to respond to specific

permutations of corporeal violence. As Julie Sze notes in “Boundaries and Border Wars,” Ozeki’s representation of the various histories of DES allows the novel to play an important role in environmental justice activism. Sze states, “At the core of the term *environmental justice* is a redefinition of the ‘environment’ to mean not only ‘wild’ places, but the environment of human bodies, especially in racialized communities, in cities, and through labor.”¹⁷ This expanding definition of the environment and environmentalism becomes especially clear in Ozeki’s treatment of toxicity, demonstrating how toxic consumption enables us to engage in environmental justice projects through the localized spaces of “human bodies” as well as the global flows of transnational capitalism in a larger planetary space. While Sze goes on to draw specific links between Ozeki’s discussion of DES and the organizing efforts of Native women in the Arctic, struggling to fight against “exposure to environmental pollutants from persistent organic pollutants (POPs),” I contend that the novel also has more immediate implications for political collaboration building.¹⁸

My Year of Meats pushes us towards recognizing shared vulnerabilities that transcend categories of difference, towards the realization of an “affective politics.” Ozeki conveys this potential for alternative, affective forms of relationality through her portrayal of Akiko, whose voice and presence in the text disrupts the unilateral perspective of Jane’s narrative. I contend that Ozeki significantly decides to allow Akiko’s “toxic” migrant body, which also bears the marks of her husband’s violent abuse, to represent the possibilities for the kinds of connections and unities that can arise from an intimate awareness of toxicity. Figuring as the marginalized “other,” Akiko nevertheless manages to quite literally create a transnational, transracial network

¹⁷ Julie Sze, “Boundaries and Border Wars: DES, Technology, and Environmental Justice,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 792.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 806.

of women when she decides to leave Japan and travel to the US, visiting each of the women Jane features on *My American Wife!*. By forming relationships with these women, many of whom are themselves touched by “toxic” vulnerabilities, both physical and metaphorical, Akiko engenders an affective community that provides hope for creating unity out of vulnerability and insecurity.

Finally, while Jane’s assertion at the end of the novel, “I don’t think I can change the future simply by writing a happy ending,” echoes Lauren Berlant’s claim that “shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world,” I follow Ozeki in suggesting that altering affective moods is a vital initial step for enacting social transformation (160).¹⁹ Because neoliberal politics thrive on generating feelings of risk and insecurity to manage bodies, our work must begin by mobilizing feelings of hope to create the conditions of possibility for achieving social and environmental justice. Jane’s decision to try her best to imagine a “happy ending” therefore illustrates how the aesthetic emerges as a means of accessing the kinds of transformative visions that appear absent in our contemporary political sphere. Consequently, what makes *My Year of Meats* such an important text to consider for re-framing our understanding of toxicity is not any empirical knowledge it provides about DES, but rather the affects it stimulates, allowing for the recognition and imagination of solidarity in vulnerability, reminding us how the body and even insecure bodies continue to be sites of enormous, untapped potentiality.

¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 35.