ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 50 No. 1 Pages 141–170

The Neoliberal Production of Cultural Citizenship in Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

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Abstract: This essay draws together theories of neoliberalism and immigration to examine their shared interest in individual agency and the power of the nation-state. Though both theoretical perspectives tend to separate subject and object positions, this essay argues that Ruth L. Ozeki's novel *My Year of Meats* (1998) problematizes such a bifurcated understanding of subjectivity by narrating the complex political and economic positionality known as cultural citizenship—that is, a subject's self-determination within the state even as the state's normative structures influence the subject. Through Akiko Ueno, a Japanese housewife, Ozeki shows how an immigrant's subject and object positions cannot be separated from one another within the transnational framework of neoliberalism. The narrative foregrounds the simultaneity of these experiences to suggest that opportunities for freedom and agency are, paradoxically, both possible and impossible. This essay contends that *My Year of Meats* envisions forms of substantive individual and communal resistance to neoliberal values while also identifying how socially-produced cultural citizenship still places immigrants within the purview of the neoliberal nation-state.

Keywords: Ruth L. Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, neoliberalism, immigration

Ruth L. Ozeki's novel *My Year of Meats* (1998) ends in a confounding manner. Akiko Ueno, a Japanese housewife, seemingly achieves the "happy life" (214) she has always desired by immigrating to the United

States with help from Jane Takagi-Little, an Asian-American filmmaker. When Akiko learns that she is pregnant after her abusive husband John sexually assaults her, she flees to the US, settles peacefully, and starts what she believes is the ideal happy life. The novel has a happy ending in that Akiko asserts her own will to freedom, but it also falls in line with the tired trope of the immigrant story—a problematic narrative that supports the American myth of immigrant freedom. The novel's complex resolution owes to the way Akiko forms her expectations of the US from watching the television documentary *My American Wife!* that is filmed by Jane. Funded by BEEF-EX, a fictional national lobby for the US privatized meat industry, each episode showcases an idealized, normative US housewife—white, attractive, heterosexual—who makes a beef recipe for her family. Jane loathes the homogenous vision that is cast for the show by its corporate backers, so when her supervisor becomes sick and the directing duties fall to her, she decides to film episodes that construct a more diverse vision of American life. The families featured in these episodes grapple with different hardships and violent experiences. Jane's productions reveal that life in the US is not perfect, but this more nuanced image of the US is not what Akiko sees in her viewing of the show. Instead, in watching the documentary, Akiko assumes that the US is simply a place where happy lives are lived.

At first glance, *My Year of Meats* seems to be a story about transnational forms of disconnection between perception and reality, but there is an added dimension to that disconnect worth investigating.[1] Ozeki shows, primarily through Akiko's story, that the myriad subject and object positions involved in global interactions cannot be separated from one another. That is to say, moments of individual agency and instances of the individual being acted upon occur simultaneously, to the point that they are nearly impossible to distinguish. For Akiko, she elects to extricate herself from a harmful situation in Japan by migrating to the US, a decision that is shaped by an attachment to a mythical understanding of American freedom. In this way, *My Year of Meats* contributes to complicated positionalities within theories of neoliberalism and immigration, both of which seek to understand the interplay of subjecthood and objectification. Ozeki's complex narrative spotlights

different artistic, economic, and political conflicts (such as authenticity and constructedness, subjectivity and objectivity, and freedom and subsumption) that cannot be separated into simple binaries.[2] Instead, her novel foregrounds the simultaneity of these conflicts to suggest that opportunities for freedom and agency are, paradoxically, both possible and impossible. I argue that through the character of Akiko, *My Year of Meats* envisions forms of individual and communal resistance to neoliberal binaristic forms of thinking while also illustrating how socially produced cultural citizenship still places immigrants within the purview of the neoliberal nation-state.

Though written twenty years ago and set during the Gulf War, *My Year of Meats* remains a timely read in an era where neoliberal values, isolationist rhetoric, and anxiety over immigration form the basis of the American political landscape under the Trump administration. Ozeki's novel reminds us that the kind of immaterial, socio-cultural production associated with neoliberalism can often continue to flourish despite one's best efforts to resist or work against it. As I will argue, the episodes of *My American Wife!* that Jane directs are co-opted by an American narrative of exceptionalism, despite her careful attempts to complicate that national narrative. My understanding of US exceptionalism owes to the work of Ali Behdad and Donald E. Pease, where Behdad defines it as "the idea that the United States is . . . free of political oppression" for arriving immigrants (26). Pease notes that exceptionalist narratives of America claim that the US is not guilty of imperialist violence, even though "the state administered colonial institutions" from its founding (203). Exceptionalism has become a "political doctrine" and "regulatory ideal" precisely because it helps to globally transmit "the US national identity" (203). Thus, the US is exceptional because its acts of violence at home and abroad are excepted from the national myth of freedom.[3] Pease argues that sustaining this myth requires "far-reaching historical revisionisms" (206); and in *My Year of Meats*, Jane notes that one reason she "ended up in television" is because of her dedication to "practicing revisionist history" that challenges reductive American myths (148). Thus, Jane tries to use *My American Wife!* to showcase a more accurate picture of the US where violence is still a consistent part of the landscape. Even

so, Akiko watches the show and becomes convinced the US is the ideal place to live. The discrepancy between Jane's artistic production and Akiko's reception is important to consider, especially in light of different critics' suggestions that the most efficient means for protesting neoliberal capitalism are already housed within its very structures.[4] Indeed, this is what Jane does by trying to use a documentary supported by the private, corporatized US meat industry to critique that same industry and nation-state. She does everything she can to produce an honest narrative, yet it is structured in such a way that allows Akiko to idealize the US and what it means to live there. Jane, however, cannot share Akiko's belief that the US is where a happy life can be located because of her own experience of sexual assault that occurred there. Even so, Jane does not document gendered violence in *My American Wife!*, nor is it ever clear that she tells Akiko about her own assault. Thus, Akiko's view of the US does not take gendered violence into account, which enables her to read the US in more hopeful terms than Jane intends. Through this misrecognition, Ozeki suggests that any critique of the state can easily be turned toward the state's advantage—in the novel's case, an immigrant's eager acceptance of American exceptionalism.[5]

My Year of Meats, then, addresses two contradictory phenomena: first, the legitimacy and occasional success of attempts to resist neoliberal practices; and second, the imperviousness of neoliberal structures to such resistance. Specifically, Ozeki highlights the concurrent experience of subjecthood and objectification, what has been described as cultural citizenship, and examines it specifically within the context of immigration. Aihwa Ong et al. term "cultural citizenship" as a set of "cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory" (738). Being a cultural citizen means becoming enmeshed in "a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society," and the immigrant is uniquely affected by the state's normative standards that "define the different modalities of belonging" along racial and cultural lines (738). I argue that this simultaneity of "self-making"/"being-made" is precisely

Akiko's positionality in *My Year of Meats*.[6] Thus, the novel calls attention to certain limits of neoliberal thought. Within neoliberalism, individuals are defined chiefly by their economic potential, which appears to privilege freedom and agency but actually encourages greater biopolitical standardization and data accumulation for the sake of mapping and influencing human behavior.[7] As a result, one's potential to enter the market is more important than one's politics. As Mitchum Huehls argues, neoliberalism as an ideology situates the individual as both a subject and an object—an agent of freedom as well as a standardized unit—but it never represents the individual as fulfilling both roles at once (19). This desire for an either/or construction of the human is one of the chief contradictions within neoliberalism. *My Year of Meats* interrogates this contradiction through the characterization of Akiko and her experience as a new cultural citizen in the US.

I approach Ozeki's depiction of simultaneity in the novel as Henri Bergson outlines the concept in *Duration and Simultaneity*; that is, that the relativity of an event owes to competing interpretations—inner experience of the event versus outer observation of it (34). We often project our inner consciousness onto the world and believe as a result that there is "a time common to all things" (47). This is, of course, not entirely untrue, but common time does not negate variations of perception and experience across that simultaneity of time. Sharon Lynn Sieber argues that depictions of simultaneity in literature have been used to showcase "the falseness or inherent contradictory nature of language as a system of representation" (200). In other words, there is no unified sense of representational experience that literature or other artistic mediums can achieve, especially since time and space are relative. But, then again, interpretive meaning is also relative as its production fluctuates depending on who is doing the interpreting.[8] This is especially true in *My Year of Meats*, where Jane and Akiko view the content of *My American Wife!* in vastly different ways. My following arguments rely on the work of political theorists and neoliberal critics, from Bonnie Honig and Behdad to Huehls, as a way to further understand how *My Year of Meats* identifies and embodies forms of productive (albeit limited) resistance against neoliberal hegemony through cultural citizenship.

My Year of Meats follows how Akiko forms an idealized vision of the US from Jane's episodes of *My American Wife!*. As Jane becomes acquainted with the insidious practices of the US meat industry, she sabotages John's homogenous vision of the US by filming a more diverse set of Americans: Mexican immigrants, parents of a disabled daughter, and a biracial vegetarian lesbian couple. When completing a viewer survey of the show, Akiko gives Jane's diverse episodes higher marks for authenticity than John's normative presentations of American housewives. Akiko is also impressed by Jane's decision to create episodes with content that thwarts John's goal of "show[ing] perfect families" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 129), and he repeatedly complains to Akiko about Jane's subterfuge. Though Akiko consistently lives in fear of her husband, Jane's episodes embolden her to take action. Upon finding Jane's contact info among John's correspondence, Akiko contacts her with the hope that Jane can help her leave John, writing, "*Because of this program, I feel I can trust to you so that I can be so bold*" (Ozeki 214; emphasis in original). Jane eventually facilitates Akiko's escape to the US and her meeting of some of the families featured on *My American Wife!*. These journeys cement Akiko's feeling of belonging in America.[9]

What unsettles the ending of the novel is the disconnect between Akiko's and Jane's views of the US and how these perspectives remain unreconciled. What Jane understands—and what Akiko does not—is that the US is constantly (re)constructing its narrative and image for the world. Jane is the critical native citizen; Akiko is the starry-eyed newcomer. But while the episodes that Jane shoots without John's input are more realistic, the vision of the US is still a careful construction she has edited for affective impact—and it works. Jane's episodes are so moving that Akiko believes them to be depictions of real life. Akiko becomes convinced that America promises a happy life for anyone, just like it has for the people on *My American Wife!*; all she has to do is get to the US to experience the same happiness. Akiko's rosy abstraction of an idealized US life engulfs the narrative, and while the US does offer her an escape from John, she does not consider how life in the US could entail further hardships.

Ozeki has made vague comments on how to approach the happy, irresolute ending of *My Year of Meats*. She says that she gave the novel a happy ending because she believes it is important to imagine how to "change the future" for the better; however, Ozeki admits being "suspicious of the efficacy" of happy endings, even if she hopes they encourage readers to contemplate the political and economic issues long after they have put the book down ("Conversation" 13). It is tempting to read Ozeki's comments as sharing a conviction more recently expressed by Jessica Berman that fiction can encourage "ethical and imaginative freedom and, by virtue of its social situatedness, can also anticipate or rework relationships in the world" (22). These moments are a "redescription," where an alternative narrative of our environment potentially "resists or revises social reality" (25). But I am not convinced this is Ozeki's aim with her novel. Ozeki admits that she has Jane "discuss the shortcomings of happy endings" in the novel to nudge the reader toward "a more complex relationship with that ending" ("Conversation" 13), and we would be wise to follow this prescription. The possibility that Akiko has only happiness ahead of her in the US is especially hard to accept given the novel's setting during the Gulf War, a period of US history not exactly known for its openness and tolerance to immigrants.[10] Yet, on the surface, the novel seems to suggest that Akiko has arrived to a place where only a happy life awaits. This, then, is the productive work that Ozeki's novel does: it showcases how individuals can, on the one hand, resist cultural paradigms of oppression successfully through smaller-scale communal ties and, on the other hand, simultaneously fail to extricate themselves from the larger-scale influences of the state and its social forms of production.

When Akiko comes to the US, she enters as an immigrant whose arrival and belonging is viewed with ambivalence by established citizens. As numerous political theorists have observed, there is no historically consistent American stance toward immigrants. Behdad argues that, on the whole, the US has a "national consciousness" marked by "ambivalence" when it comes to immigration because there are "competing perceptions of national identity" (17). Will Kymlicka understands this ambivalence as stemming from American citizens' willingness to admit

that the US is "polyethnic" while also remaining hesitant to view the US as "multinational," since the latter might require granting certain rights to minority groups (22). Honig notes that this ambivalence stems from how the arrival of immigrants implies that the US has been "chosen" (46), which helps to confirm a sense of its universal allure and launches a national "reinvigoration" over being deemed "choiceworthy" by foreigners (45, 75). In this best-case scenario, an immigrant has the potential to become the "supercitizen immigrant" onto whom American-born citizens can "project [their] idealized selves" (78). However, at the same time, immigrants never cease to pose a threat to the US because of the "undecidability of foreignness"—that is, the difficulty in deciding whether foreigners are "good or bad for the nation" (97). While both sides of the American political aisle admire the supercitizen immigrant, ambivalence never fully goes away because the US can never truly know if it is only witnessing "immigrant practicality"—a newcomer doing and saying what s/he thinks is necessary to survive (53).[11]

Though the different positionalities of the individual immigrant are varied and numerous, the theorists discussed above make clear that the general public is often divided over how to view the immigrant. While the immigrant's industriousness benefits the US, s/he simultaneously poses a threat to natural-born citizens' ways of life. An immigrant either "has something to offer us" or "only wants to take things [i.e., jobs] from us" (Honig 80). This uncertainty over the immigrant is unsettling because it complicates the ability to preserve one-sided arguments about the benefits or detriments of a nation's immigration policies. At the core of the general public's and the state's concerns is the question of which side has the greatest impact—the immigrant on the nation or the nation on the immigrant. That is to say, does the immigrant retain subjecthood or become an object acted upon by the state? As Behdad argues, these two national responses to immigrants—admiration and unease—help to define the cultural identity of the nation (17). America's vacillating openness allows it to be either xenophilic or xenophobic depending on what the economic and social factors of the moment demand, which further allows the US to construct a belief that it can do no wrong when it comes to immigration. It is either a pillar of democracy for all or a

fortress under siege. This contradictory position is buoyed by a "historical amnesia" that represses responsibility for the racially violent history of US immigration while enabling the mythical view of the nation to continue unimpeded, where violence is the exception to the myth of freedom and not vice versa (Behdad 3).

The either/or dyad of American ambivalence toward immigrants is similar in structure to the ambivalence within neoliberalism over subjecthood and objectification, and *My Year of Meats* bridges these closely related political and economic uncertainties. Huehls convincingly argues that the movement back and forth between subjective and objective conceptualizations of the individual "defines neoliberal discourse" (9). While subjective and objective conceptualizations seem contradictory, both play into the value system of neoliberalism and support its laissez-faire stance. Neoliberalism "wins either way" since both images of the individual bolster the neoliberal economic agenda (10): s/he is either a free agent or contributes to a standardized data set. Huehls calls this the "neoliberal circle" and identifies it as a reason why it is so difficult to generate any substantial critique that "doesn't in some way reinforce neoliberalism" (11). He then considers what would happen if individuals embraced the ontological terms that neoliberalism seems hesitant to embrace—namely "the simultaneity (rather than the mutual exclusivity) of subject and object" (19). For Heuhls, this would mean inhabiting the "hybrid ontology that neoliberalism has produced for us" but refuses to represent concurrently (20). Akiko, in Ozeki's capable hands, represents that simultaneity in a novel that imagines the limits (and strengths) of American hegemony in a neoliberal, transnational age.

Ozeki is doing something quite compelling in that her novel carefully subverts our literary and political understanding of simultaneity. Benedict Anderson famously postulated that the form of the novel creates a nationally unifying sense of "meanwhile" as it encourages readers to imagine themselves connected to fellow citizens across time and space (24–25). While Anderson's concept of meanwhile is a unifying metric, one that grows national identities, Ozeki shows that literary simultaneity should be understood as a point of divergence, not convergence. The community of fellow citizens may continue to be imagined, but

what is imagined is not as unified as Anderson would lead us to believe. Instead, Akiko and Jane's different readings of *My American Wife!*, and by extension of the US, reveal that any imagined community is diverse and varied in its interpretive framework. Or, in Jenny Sampirisi's words, narrative exists "as a series of events that happen and fail to happen simultaneously within the uncertain structure of language" (71). The act of writing itself enters "an all-at-onceness" that we should not regard as a moment of either/or or both/and but as "n/either" (73). What Sampirisi describes here recalls Bergson's concept of duration—that the ceaseless flow of past into present as a way to mark the passage of time amounts to a fluidity of experience where the "present [is] ceaselessly reborn" (44). Bergson would likely disagree with Anderson, claiming that imagining a "link among all individual consciousnesses" is not a unifying moment but, rather, the instance when our consciousness should grasp "multiple events lying at different points in space" (45). That is to say, "simultaneity would be precisely the possibility of two or more events entering within a single, instantaneous perception" (45). The kind of nationalistically homogenizing and unifying imaginative moment within Anderson's understanding of meanwhile is, for Bergson, an opportunity to grasp the relativity of meaning within simultaneous events. Or, to return to Huehls, simultaneity is a space to productively explore the "hybrid ontology" of an individual's movement in today's age (20).

It is not coincidental that both discourses of immigration and neoliberalism circle around the simultaneity of individuals as subjects and objects. At stake in both discourses is the sovereignty of the state, and thereby the market, and that tension is visible in *My Year of Meats*. Indeed, *My American Wife!* is more than what it first appears to be—a dramatized infomercial for beef. Ozeki situates the events of the novel at the moment when Japan's economy was set to outpace the surplus value of the US in the 1980s and 90s. This historical moment carried not only a market concern but also implications for the continuance of America's hegemonic power, and *My American Wife!* gestures toward both of these factors. For example, each episode's family is quizzed at the end with a segment called "The Survey," and one of the questions is "Do you think Japan is an economic threat to America?" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 23).

Jane understands the show's broader, privatized goal as requiring her to "inveigle a nice woman with her civic duty to promote American meat abroad and thereby help rectify the trade imbalance with Japan" (35). Tongue-in-cheek though Jane's comment is, it reveals how each episode's subject family is positioned as a global ambassador for the US meat industry. The show's rhetorical situation stems from Europe's 1989 ban on imports of US meat, which led to the US government looking for new markets that were ultimately signed with Japan in 1990, "relaxing import quotas and increasing the American share of Japan's red-meat market" (127). Thus, the show's political imperative is to place both the interviewed US families and the Japanese viewers within the objectifying force of the market for the benefit of the US economy.

Akiko's interaction with the show, however, yields an unintended consequence, for her subjective response to *My American Wife!* interprets the US as an ideal place to live. Her reading of the US in this way marks her growing cultural citizenship. The most compelling episode for Akiko features the biracial lesbian couple, Lara and Dyann. While watching the episode, she begins to cry "tears of admiration for the strong women" who found ways to have a family on their own terms (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 181). At this point in the novel, Akiko is not pregnant but wants to have a child someday; however, she abhors John and knows that she does not want to have a child with him. Lara and Dyann's story moves her to write a letter to Jane explaining how the episode has changed her life and motivated her to leave John. Akiko closes the letter by asking Jane where she can go to "live [a] happy life like" the one Lara and Dyann have (214). The connection Akiko makes between the US and a "happy life" is tenuous because, as Emily Cheng argues, it "posit[s] the United States as an unquestioned space of freedom" (203), which problematically allows Akiko to regard the US as a place where women can live liberated lives. But more than that, Akiko unwittingly compares herself and her unhappiness to a constructed narrative. What she perceives to be a better situation is actually a carefully edited composition, pieced together in a specific way to trigger the viewer's emotions. Jane specifically vocalizes this composition while filming Lara and Dyann; as she films, she sees the episode's affective potential unfolding into "an-

other heart-wrenching documentary moment" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 175). Later, while editing the footage, Jane reveals her personal stance on truth and abstraction. She initially believed in a "singular, empirical, absolute" truth, but as she worked more with "editing and camera angles and the effect that music can have on meaning," she came to realize how truth was measured in "ever-diminishing approximations" (176).

Jane's explanation of the truth as an ever-diminishing approximation is also an apt description of US exceptionalism. As previously noted, the historical amnesia of the US sanitizes the nation's problematic immigration history and constructs an approximate story of the nation and its values. It is a muted yet powerful form of forgetting that aids in building a national identity. Likewise, Jürgen Habermas mentions that this sort of "national consciousness" can lead to an "imaginary reality of the nation as an organic development" (116). Rather than believe the US has been carefully composed as an idea, citizens come to believe that the US has naturally developed into the nation it is today. Though Jane includes forms of cultural violence in other episodes of *My American Wife!*, the existence of gendered or sexual violence in the US is left unaddressed in Lara and Dyann's episode. This is not to say the episode is meaningless, but its meaning has been carefully manufactured, and the elisions are significant. While the film crew sets up the cameras to film Lara and Dyann, Jane notices how "the backs of [the couple's] hands brushed and their fingers entwined for a brief squeeze before releasing, quickly, well-trained in circumspection" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 173). This circumspection, though, never appears in the final cut of their episode, but it is a nuance that could begin to show that not everything about Lara and Dyann's life as a lesbian couple is liberated or happy in a heteronormative culture. With that omission, Akiko isn't given the opportunity to consider through the visual framing of the couple's relationship any of the societal hardships Lara and Dyann may have experienced, since the necessity for circumspection does not appear as part of their post-production story. All Akiko sees is a couple living a happy life.

This is not to discount the emotional power of Lara and Dyann's story in the episode. The unedited footage is moving for Jane, too. But as she edits, she realizes that she never actually told the couple, who are veg-

etarians, that *My American Wife!* is sponsored by BEEF-EX. This demonstrates that Jane's episodes, critical as they are of corporatized power in the US, are not outside the influence of neoliberal economics. Jane admits she has to "strive for the truth and believe in it wholeheartedly" while filming even as she knows she is manipulating it (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 176). The simultaneity of truth and construction in the final cut of the episode is captured by Jane's assessment of it. She describes it as "a good one, really solid, moving, the best I'd made," but she continues to fine-tune the footage to keep crafting "a seamless flow in a reality that was no longer [Lara and Dyann's] and not quite so real anymore" (179). In *My American Wife!*, that which is "really solid" and deeply "moving" isn't actually real at all. However, the constructed nature of film and television is not the problem here, since those are simply aspects of the medium. The complication comes when, after watching the episode, Akiko believes that the US is where her happy life can occur. Akiko accepts this ever-diminishing approximation of the US on her television as truth, which primes her for her move to America and transition into cultural citizenship.

Akiko's determination that the US is a space of freedom is solidified before she leaves Japan. When she returns home from the hospital after recovering from John's sexual assault, she thinks about the baby growing inside her and "didn't turn on the television, not even once" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 317). This is a significant moment since Akiko has sat dutifully in front of the television for most of the novel, rating the authenticity of the US and its citizens from what she sees on *My American Wife!*. Her decision to turn off the television is a declaration that she has seen enough and has decisively made up her mind about what the US offers. This is further evidenced by comments Akiko makes later to her friend Tomoko, where she still pursues the symbol of the US that others have presented to her. She tells Tomoko that she is convinced her baby is a girl and hopes she "can grow up to become an American Wife" (318), a strong woman like Lara or Dyann. Tomoko interjects, "She doesn't have to be a wife at all, you know," and Akiko responds, "I know. I'm just kidding. Sort of" (318). Akiko's continued attachment to the US as represented in *My American Wife!* is visible in her hopes that her

daughter will be just like the characters on Jane's documentary. Though Akiko reassures Tomoko that she is only kidding about her dreams for her daughter, her comment, "Sort of," makes that reassurance less than convincing.

Yet even for all the ways this conversation with Tomoko seems like a surrender of agency on Akiko's part, it is undeniable that Akiko does assert her agency in her decision to leave John and Japan. While it would be easy to view her decision as undercut by her pre-packaged, romanticized view of the US, Akiko still takes action with her life. While *My American Wife!* influences her decision, there is nothing about Lara and Dyann's episode that somehow announces it is imperative for her to move to the US and only the US. Akiko's actions fit Huehls' description of embracing the "doubled subject-object ontology" that neoliberalism refuses to represent (20); and when literature chooses to represent this dual position, it encourages alternative "forms of value production" (29). This is the compelling complication that *My Year of Meats* presents before Akiko leaves Japan: she is simultaneously an agent and acted upon. *My American Wife!*'s carefully calibrated affective properties clearly have an effect and touch her deeply. In that sense, Akiko functions in an objectified manner as a faceless consumer, a mere number within a larger mass of coveted viewer ratings. But what she does with that experience as a viewer is up to her; through her viewing of the show and her decision to leave Japan for the US, Akiko becomes an agent, determined to fashion for herself a life that is worth living.

This is not to say that there is a transitional moment, where Akiko moves from being an object to an acting subject. She is both simultaneously as the affective propulsion of *My American Wife!* stays with her in the US. As an Asian immigrant, she occupies an unfixed position that can elicit ambivalence from established citizens. As noted earlier, whether or not an immigrant's arrival will benefit the US economically significantly affects the extent to which that immigrant is admired or reviled. Akiko's financial stability is hard to account for, since Ozeki keeps these details vague. On the one hand, she withdraws "two-thirds of the money [from] the joint account" she and John share before leaving Japan (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 319), but we are never told how

much money that actually is. On the other hand, Akiko is financially able to afford a last-minute flight from Japan to New York, and she stays with Lara and Dyann for seven months with the intention of nesting until she gives birth. Future plans for earning income in the US after her baby arrives are never mentioned. It seems that her wealth potentially opens doors of autonomy and freedom that otherwise might not be possible for a single immigrant woman.

Wealth is a key component of a scenario such as Akiko's due to its relevance within the model minority stereotype, an immigrant trope in the US that carries its own frictions between object and subject positions. Beginning in the 1960s, the continued view in the US of Asians as the model minority is problematic for its racialized stereotypes of Asians as family-oriented, hardworking, and financially successful, as well as how the narrative of Asians "making it" in America testifies to the ability of the US to take in outsiders and assimilate them into its socio-economic apparatuses (Lee 7).[12] This stereotyping, then, lauds the Asian immigrant's agency and initiative at the same time that it objectifies them as a boon to the economy of the state. Lisa Lowe argues that the latter overpowers the former to the point that the model minority trope is primarily an acculturating move. It robs subjects of their various classed, gendered, and cultural positionalities and then objectifies them into a homogenous, racialized construction (68).[13] For Lowe, it is a form of "discursive fixing" that seeks to "stabilize the identity of the immigrant" in a way that is advantageous to the state (19). But Ong has argued that recent waves of Asian immigrants to the US have complicated the acculturating power of the model minority trope. The influx of already-wealthy Asians does not fit into the typical from-the-ground-up immigrant narrative that the US prefers to tell. Instead, "affluent Asian immigrants plug directly into the upper reaches of American society and thus have an unsettling effect on middle-class whites" (Ong, *Flexible* 174), a description that may fit Akiko's situation. Similarly, Walter Benn Michaels argues that we have misunderstood the model minority trope entirely, proposing that it is not about the immigrant's "commitment to Americanization" but rather about "the successful importation of upper-middle-class status" ("Model" 1022). Within a neoliberal US perspec-

tive, Asian immigrants "succeed not because of their Asian values . . . and not because of their eagerness to assimilate and adopt American values . . . but because of their middle-class values" (1023). Thus, in the US, money matters over culture. But there is another problem here. This scholarly conversation and disagreement over what exactly the model minority stereotype offers Asian immigrants returns too easily to an either/or construction, where the model minority is either an autonomous subject position empowered by wealth or an objectification that limits the individual through racialized assumptions about behavior and work ethic. But Ozeki shows that both can happen at once.

Though a minority, Akiko fits the model type that the US political system prefers, where capital is a key factor contributing to an immigrant's successful American acculturation. Historically, friendlier immigration laws have been passed to increase US gains and stimulate the American economy.[14] The US has been open to capitalist-minded immigrants because their financial success can help to continue the national narrative of "upward mobility" (Honig 74). Here we have both micro- and macro-level forces operating. Akiko uses her access to an unspecified level of wealth to redirect the course of her life—leaving Japan, as I have already suggested, is a clear assertion of her agency. Yet at the same time, her move across the Pacific Ocean is facilitated by state structures that could potentially bestow on her the status of a preferable immigrant. The model minority, then, is not outside the paradigm Ong et al. outline of cultural citizenship; it is at once a form of "self-making and being-made" (738). Indeed, to a certain extent, Akiko will always be a foreigner no matter how much she assimilates. An Asian immigrant specifically remains what Lee calls a "perpetual foreigner," for no matter how many generations of Asians have been in the US, they are still viewed as outsiders whose "patriotism and loyalty" remain suspect (4). Akiko may fit the description of a model immigrant, but that is still an objectified space that her financial autonomy does not automatically preclude her from. But, as Lee notes, just as important as an immigrant's capitalist potential is her level of patriotism and loyalty. While individual agency and finance are key concerns of immigration, the ambivalence over subject and object positions stems from something more

affective in its constitution—namely, devotion. It is through the level of devotion to the immigrant's new country that the dyad within cultural citizenship of "self-making and being made" is further clarified (Ong et al. 738). Indeed, by the end of *My Year of Meats*, it is clear that Akiko's autonomous choices are still simultaneously driven by the national narrative of the US she gleaned from *My American Wife!*.

A key aspect of the neoliberal production of Akiko's cultural citizenship is her expression of patriotism. Once she arrives in the US, her aforementioned romantic view of the nation stays the same and quickly blossoms into full-fledged devotion, though it is briefly challenged by a train ride in the Deep South. While travelling on the train, Akiko sees people living in poverty along the tracks, and the sight hits her "with a shock" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 336). In her mind, Americans are not poor: "Maybe in the past" they were, "or in the movies, but not now. Not these days. Not in real life" (336). Akiko's thoughts amount to cognitive dissonance, for poverty is either a historical moment or a cinematic one. Her belief that poverty is a thing of the past means her image of the US is unrealistically optimistic in an economic sense, so much so that she does not know how to place the poverty displayed before her eyes. In order to reconcile this discontinuity, Akiko treats American poverty as a trope of American movies, which allows her to claim that it no longer exists. In other words, movies are not real or, rather, they show things that are not real anymore. This is an important admission in Akiko's inner dialogue given how devoted she has been to accepting *My American Wife!* as reality. Part of this acceptance stems from the genre of Jane's storytelling. That Jane's work is done as a documentary—and not, say, a sitcom—demands a certain amount of faith from viewers. On the train, Akiko easily dismisses movies as fiction, but she has more trouble doing so with *My American Wife!* since the documentary form ostensibly presents that which is real, authentic, or unscripted. But Jane's documentary is, of course, no less a construction than any other narrativized medium. Though she portrays real families, Jane acknowledges her post-production efforts to force or maximize a certain emotional appeal. This rhetorical and narrative decision on Jane's part places elements of fiction into her work that still announce themselves as nonfiction.

Despite seeing tangible poverty, Akiko redirects her focus to the passengers who board the train, imagining how they must be "taking the train to find their happy life" like she is (336), which preserves her ideal conceptualization of what constitutes "real life" in the US. In other words, Akiko comes close here to identifying how her notion of the real is also a construction; however, by ignoring the poverty she has witnessed and instead choosing to imagine her fellow passengers' similar pursuit of happiness, Akiko expresses her own historical amnesia. She has a vague understanding of American history, since she concedes that there was a time—"maybe in the past" (336)—when Americans were poor. But even when she sees poverty from the train, she chooses to disavow the possibility that people could still be poor "these days." Even on the train, Akiko holds to her understanding of the US that she gleaned from *My American Wife!*, disavowing anything that does not confirm the idealized vision she brings with her from Japan. Just as she misreads Jane's vision of the US in *My American Wife!*, Akiko now misreads the reality of poverty in the US. This scene on the train holds a potential breakthrough moment for Akiko, one in which she might realize that she has been pursuing an idealized construction of the US and not the actual thing itself.[15] The opportunity passes, however, when Akiko decides to reflect on her experiences in the US that have already confirmed her romanticized hopes. This includes her recent Thanksgiving holiday with the Beaudroux family, who were featured on an episode of *My American Wife!*. From Louisiana, Grace and Vern Beaudroux have twelve children, two of their own and ten adopted from East Asian countries. Sitting on the train and thinking of her time with them, Akiko recalls, "[t]hey were authentic, exactly what [I] had seen on TV" (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 336). Here she equates edited constructions with authenticity or, more precisely, labels the vision of the US she acquires from *My American Wife!* as accurate and trustworthy.

That Akiko actively constructs and preserves her own romanticized vision of the US is further demonstrated as her train ride continues. The majority of her fellow passengers are African American, and the elderly train attendant Maurice has a friendly conversation with Akiko, informing her that she is riding the "Chicken Bone Special" (Ozeki, *My*

Year of Meats 338). Maurice explains that this name comes from the train's passengers who are often too poor to buy the lounge car's meals, so "these poor colored folk, they gotta make do with lugging along some home-cooked fried chicken instead" (338). The passengers around Akiko share their fried chicken and potato salad with her while Maurice starts clapping and leading the passengers in a chant of "chicken bone" over and over (339). Akiko "shiver[s] with excitement" over the communal camaraderie (339). As a result, she feels "as if somehow she'd been absorbed into a massive body that had taken over the functions of her own, and now it was infusing her small heart with the superabundance of its feeling, teaching her taut belly to swell, stretching her rib cage, and pumping spurts of happy life into her fetus. *This is America!* she thought. She clapped her hands then hugged herself with delight" (339; emphasis in original). Thus far, Ozeki situates Akiko as the agent in her search for the true America through her flight from Japan and determination to travel parts of the US to meet people featured on *My American Wife!*. And although her pronouncement of "*This is America!*" acts as a confirmation of her successful search, Akiko is also being acted upon in this moment. Ozeki's use of the passive voice—"somehow she'd been absorbed"—makes it clear that something other than Akiko's own willed optimism infuses her with patriotic euphoria. Ozeki emphasizes how Akiko's romanticized view of the US, where economic inequality becomes an exception to disregard, swallows her. By being "absorbed into a massive body," Akiko is claimed by the US and her autonomy is challenged, since the excitement "take[s] over the functions of her own" body. After this physiological commandeering, an affective invasion follows, "infusing her small heart with the superabundance of its feeling" that also spreads to her unborn child. Both mother and child have been filled with a patriotic happiness and awe.

The joy and happiness Akiko experiences on the train overshadows the harsher realities of poverty, and she believes that what she is witnessing on the train constitutes American reality and that it is something to be giddy over. Rather than consider why her fellow passengers are unable to afford food on the train, which might reveal some negative socio-economic and racial truth about the US, Akiko sees the

situation around her as a joyous moment. Monica Chiu notes that Akiko's reaction here "soften[s] America's harsher realities" through a "normalizing of difference" (109). Michaels argues that effacement of difference via normalization is precisely the work of neoliberalism; by over-privileging issues of race and identity, the celebration of cultural difference overshadows the urgency of "minimizing economic difference" ("Model" 1023–24). Akiko commits this same socio-economic oversight when first boarding the train. She notices that most of the people on the train are black and assumes they are also "taking the train to find their happy life" like she is (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 336).[16] Akiko does not consider that there could be social or economic reasons for taking a train instead of a car or a plane, assuming instead that everyone in America is destined for a happy life. The joyous sing-along moment on the Chicken Bone Special does nothing to counter her assumptions.

It is also important to contextualize that these scenes take place on a train, for the train as literary setting carries historical significance as a place where claims to citizenship and belonging have been challenged or negated. Daylanne K. English notes how train car vignettes are familiar stock scenes throughout African American literature, where the law would seek to "reinforce the noncitizenship status of African Americans" by moving black passengers to the back of the train to make room for white travelers (53). Thus, the train car is a space where the juridical and cultural objectification of people has overruled their individual agency and autonomy as subjects. Lest the reader begin to accept Akiko's agency and autonomy too quickly in this scene, the symbolism of her geographical movement further suggests that she may not be as free (or have as happy an ending) as she thinks since she is on a train in the Deep South traveling north to New York, mimicking a journey purportedly to freedom.

Though these train scenes could appear to problematically metonymize the Deep South with fried-chicken-loving African Americans, the stereotypically racist constructions serve a purpose here. Akiko is surrounded by a bunch of happy-go-lucky African Americans, alluding to the long history of docile Uncle Tom stock characters that have populated

American fiction and placed a shroud over black outrage at centuries of oppression. Akiko's fellow passengers, then, reveal the dynamics of American exceptionalism that otherwise elide the reality of racial inequality and, therefore, support the myth of American freedom. Akiko does not grasp this, viewing their poverty instead as an aberration within an otherwise consistent national narrative of freedom and opportunity. It is no wonder that the black passengers' cheer, congeniality, and chanting (resembling a religious service) all help to reinforce Akiko's patriotic fervor and cultural citizenship. Oblivious to the racialized history of the poverty she views from the train, she is able to maintain her idyllic view of the US, supported as it is by this stereotypical block of fellow passengers.

Ironically, Akiko's thought of "*This is America!*" can be read as her first moment of true clarity about the US in the novel (Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* 339; emphasis in original).[17] In line with the aforementioned theories of immigration, this is America, the nation that takes immigrants and attempts to acculturate them to its larger narrative by convincing them to believe that social and cultural violence or inequality are merely exceptions to the norm. Michaels reminds us that neoliberal values encourage this type of cultural narrative that glosses over economic inequalities to the benefit of the multicultural project ("Neoliberal" 74). Behdad makes a similar argument that American multiculturalism takes a "new cultural politics of difference" and uses it to display "its power of absorption" (12). In the end, it is "a linear narrative that begins with difference but ends in sameness" (13), the sameness being that everyone—citizens and immigrants—agrees to America's myth of exceptionalism. Akiko may have enacted her own agency by deciding to leave Japan and move to the US, but that does not make her immune to the state's effect on her.[18] While Akiko's absorption into the US—her objectification, the "being made" aspect of cultural citizenship—does not negate her autonomous efforts of "self-making," (Ong et al. 738), it does suggest that attempts to extricate oneself from oppressive environments can never be fully realized. The friction of subjecthood and objectification seem destined to continue in their simultaneity, regardless of one's efforts to land fully on the side of freedom.

Though Akiko never strays from the path of patriotic cultural citizenship, she does not fully yield her autonomy either. Akiko asserts her agency by making a decision to change the trajectory of her life. It is important to note that this choice does not fall into the realm of what Jane Elliott terms "suffering agency" (84), a key feature of recent neoliberal novels where characters have the freedom to choose but only between deplorable options. Instead, Ozeki uses the characterization of Akiko to show something more complex than just a buffet of bad alternatives. The life Akiko embraces by moving to the US is certainly an improvement on her situation in Japan. Her decision to leave is an assertion of her self-worth and a resolution to survive, both for herself and her unborn child. The problematics of American exceptionalism aside, Akiko's options are better in the US than in Japan, and it is easy to forget that there is not always something implicitly hegemonic in the possibility that one place could offer greater safety and security over another. After all, Ozeki is writing about one individual; Akiko is not a stand-in for Japan any more than Jane is for the US.

How much an individual's choices are self-determined and to what extent they are driven by larger-scale social and cultural conflicts is difficult to map, which is why *My Year of Meats* is challenging reading. As mentioned earlier, Ozeki places Akiko's East-to-West movement and the production of *My American Wife!* within the context of Japan's economic growth in the 1980s and 90s that threatened the global financial power of the US. As Giovanni Arrighi has carefully shown, capital typically has moved from declining centers to rising centers, where the latter expands capitalist power to a greater extent than its hegemonic predecessor could (15). But this did not happen between Japan and the US. Japan found it difficult to redistribute assets from the US to its own economy because "the world's richest and most developed continental power proved to be not as devoid of control over foreign business," as Japan soon found out (Arrighi 18). Additionally, at this same point in American history, the US was asserting its imperial/military strength in Kuwait and against Russia. I mention these events to note that the novel's trajectory is inseparable from the tangles of neoliberal economics and imperialism that join Japan to the US and the US to much of the world, and Ozeki clari-

fies how these larger political and economic concerns affect people's subjective decisions. They give cause for the creation of *My American Wife!* and are objectifying forces, but they also have the potential to create space for subjective, agential responses such as Jane's subversive episodes and Akiko's decision to leave John. Though Jane's and Akiko's actions do not challenge the macro-level conflicts that Arrighi describes, Ozeki envisions how their accomplishments are not inconsequential, either. By the end of the novel, John is abandoned and his show cancelled after Jane sends damning, previously unaired footage of *My American Wife!* to major news outlets. In it, she captures the use of banned drugs on a cattle feedlot, revelations that will not please Japanese investors. Jane also stays in contact with Lara and Dyann and coordinates Akiko's ability to stay with them until she has her baby, thus helping Akiko replace the isolation she endured in Japan with a community of supportive women. But lest the reader take these events to mean that the political and economic landscape has significantly changed, Ozeki makes sure to leave Akiko's subsumption into patriotic fervor on the train as one of the novel's final images. It is another instance in which her novel makes it impossible to separate the subject and object positions the characters occupy.

Critics are often quick to dismiss *My Year of Meats* as didactic. Perhaps this is not surprising given that the novel preaches to readers how they should feel and think about the US meat industry. By including fabricated news articles and faxes in the novel, Ozeki quickly disseminates factual information about questionable practices within food and drug corporations, which can come across as gimmicky efforts to break from the rigors of narrative. But this didacticism is a surface ploy that actually functions as an expertly crafted framing device. Consider that Ozeki positions a heavily didactic text (*My American Wife!*) that the characters interact with within a larger, seemingly didactic frame (*My Year of Meats*) for her readers to encounter. Read alongside Akiko's story, *My American Wife!* falls short of its intended political effect, since Akiko does not grasp the nuanced vision of the US that Jane hopes to give the show's viewers. I argue that readers should view this as a self-referential exchange where Ozeki also queries the effect of *My Year of Meats* in the neoliberal moment. In other words, does this novel do anything? Should

readers expect that art and entertainment do something? Ozeki's answer, via the character of Akiko, seems to be yes to both questions, albeit not without the qualification that artistically-generated social change may only happen in small ways. For example, *My American Wife!*, for all its problems, constructed presentations of reality, and connections to neoliberal corporate America, is transformative for Akiko in positive ways. The documentary does nothing to holistically change more macro-level political concerns, but it is a vehicle through which Akiko's life is changed for the better. *My Year of Meats* seems to suggest that that's probably enough.

By the novel's conclusion, nothing has successfully challenged for Akiko her romanticized view of the US. It is telling that she is subsumed by the nation on her train ride as she delightedly accepts an idealized conceptualization of the US. As she sits on the train, moving from the Deep South to the North in a reiteration of a historical and mythic journey out of bondage to freedom, she enters a scripted future. In other words, it seems that Akiko's story has been absorbed into the American myth of immigrant freedom. Certainly, stories can be co-opted and probably always will be to some extent.[19] But what Ozeki presents in *My Year of Meats* is a smaller vision of possible hope within larger political concerns: two women pushing against a violently masculine, imperialist, and neoliberal world by taking the reins of representation and, in the end, using art to forge a small community of femininity that tries to protect and provide for future generations. Ozeki's novel, then, suggests something rather hopeful, if also cynically realistic, about the hard but worthwhile nature of liberating work within and outside the arts. All things are not rectified by the end of *My Year of Meats*, but small, restorative victories can still be had.

Notes

1 Other scholars have written about the novel from a more transnational approach. See Johansen's "The Political Allure of the Local" and Palumbo-Liu's *The Deliverance of Others* (Chapter Four).

2 In other words, *My Year of Meats* moves beyond reductive understandings of postcolonial and neoliberal experience, where descriptions of political envi-

ronments are too easily understood along either/or binary splits. Within postcolonialism, that could be binaries of West/East, center/periphery, colonizer/colonized, or European/Other. Various critics have noted that engagement with subaltern communities is one way to work against these paradigms, though there is also the risk of reinscribing the Other in Us-versus-Them binaries by speaking for the subaltern with one's academic research (see Coronil, "Listening to the Subaltern"; hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance"; and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"). Within neoliberalism, reductive binary splits could be freedom/socialism, private/public, subjecthood/objectification (for a classic representative example of these reductive theoretical models in practice, see Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*).

Similarly, I am aware of the potential irony within the methodological approach I take to Ozeki's novel—critiquing US exceptionalism via a literary text that is mostly taken up with US concerns, a sort of recentering of American ethnocentrism in the very act of criticizing it. This same slippery slope has previously been identified within postcolonial theory—that it only recenters the West as it critiques it. This, however, is precisely one of the main problems Ozeki spotlights with her novel: how even the best intentions to protest or resist dominant power structures may only end up strengthening them. Jane's documentary is a case in point, since it critiques American exceptionalism only to eventually impress another immigrant with the social construction that is American freedom.

3 To combine some of these terms, Ong also points out how neoliberalism often functions in an exceptional manner. Though we tend to think of the political notion of exception from Schmitt as "mark[ing] out excludable subjects who are denied protections," Ong notes that "the exception can also be a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets . . . associated with neoliberal reform" (*Neoliberalism* 5).

4 See Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, Feher's "Self-Appreciation," and Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish*. Theorists also extensively debate whether neoliberalism is a global ideology or a nationally rooted form of capitalism, with many arguing that neoliberalism disavows the state system by replacing it with the market. However, Slobodian most recently claims in *Globalists* that a long historical view of neoliberalism shows how it requires both global entities and regulatory state structures to succeed on an international scale.

5 As different theorists have noted, this co-optation is one of the hallmarks of neoliberal ideology—its adept knack for producing and preserving a rhetoric of common sense that makes it seemingly impervious to transformative criticism. See Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, Levinson's *Market and Thought*, and Robbins' *Perpetual War*.

6 Rosaldo has been credited with coining the term "cultural citizenship," defining it as the minority's "right to be different and to belong in a participatory demo-

cratic sense" (402). His theorization, though, does not sufficiently account for the overwhelming influence of the nation-state on a foreigner or immigrant like Ong's does. More recently, in "Globalization, National Cultures and Cultural Citizenship," Stevenson has further problematized the idea that "cultural citizenship" is as closely tied to the nation-state as Ong argues. He conceptualizes a more cosmopolitan understanding of the outsider's level of agency as he or she works to connect the "self and society" (43).

7 These aspects of neoliberalism are discussed at length by both Foucault and Brown.

8 Ogden explains how this kind of understanding of simultaneity might benefit literary criticism. He calls for a "Quantum Criticism" inspired by the way quantum mechanics "creates conceptual paradoxes" by representing "all the available knowledge about the potentialities of a system in the quantum realm" (80, 83). Literary criticism in this vein would seek to understand how the truth or "state of things" is "multiple and simultaneous" (85). It is an examination of how meanings "interfere" and "overlap" with each other (86).

9 Some scholars have suggested that Jane and Akiko, as a sort of feminist pairing, are successful in liberating themselves from patriarchal paradigms. See Ladino's *Reclaiming Nostalgia* (Chapter Six) and Black's "Fertile Cosmofeminism." For scholars who disagree with such a reading, see Palumbo-Liu's "Rational and Irrational Choices" and Chiu's "Postnational Globalization."

10 In 1986, just a few years prior to the events of the novel, the Reagan administration approved the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which responded to public calls for greater control of the Mexican border. This act made it illegal to hire undocumented workers for the first time; however, the law also provided loopholes "that made it possible for growers to employ temporary Mexican workers" without the threat of prosecution (Behdad 21).

11 Honig's arguments certainly call to mind early theorizations of mimicry as a form of political resistance in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.

12 The myth and stereotype of the model minority is predicated, among other qualifiers, on the financial success of Asians, and the Census Bureau reports that as of 2017 the median household income for Asian Americans was $81,331 compared to $68,145 for white Americans (Semega et al.). One way to understand this aspect of stereotyping is through Honig's arguments, mentioned earlier, that economically savvy immigrants are viewed as less of a threat in the US. Though the model minority trope contains racialized assumptions, it is a form of stereotyping that regards the Asian immigrant as a safe newcomer.

13 See also Wu's *The Color of Success*.

14 This has been true at times of the American stance toward Asian immigrants. See Hsu's *The Good Immigrants*.

15 The suggestion that a nation is an actual thing itself can be problematic, given Anderson's theorization of the nation as an "imagined community" (6). To say that the US can be an actual thing for Akiko to encounter simply means that there is a type of experiential knowledge one gains only by living in an actual physical place (for example, the knowledge that poverty does, in fact, still exist in the US). Akiko has only recently moved to the US, so she can continue to dismiss poverty as something not real, rather than accept that it might be part of some people's national experience. While on the train, her televisual understanding of the US still holds court.

16 Akiko's projection of happiness onto her fellow passengers calls to mind Bergson's argument about how the sense of our own inner duration can lead us to misinterpret the world around us:

> To each moment of our inner life there thus corresponds a moment of our body and of all environing matter that is "simultaneous" with it; this matter then seems to participate in our conscious duration. Gradually, we extend this duration to the whole physical world, because we see no reason to limit it to the immediate vicinity of our body. The universe seems to us to form a single whole; and, if the part that is around us endures in our manner, the same must hold, we think, for that part by which it, in turn, is surrounded, and so on indefinitely. (45)

17 It is also worth noting how similar Akiko's exclamation here is to the main refrain "Ain't that America!" in the song "Pink Houses" by John Mellencamp, which both sides of the US political establishment have used at campaign rallies. Similar to Akiko's dismissal of the poverty around her, the first verse of "Pink Houses" describes a vision of American black poverty, only to move on to the chorus and exclaim that America is "something to see" and the "home of the free."

18 As noted earlier, arguments like Ladino's and Black's seem to suggest that Akiko's move to the US is a wholly successful and liberatory venture and not one fraught with problems.

19 See Brouillette's *Literature and the Creative Economy*, where she examines the extent to which marginal and minority writers in the UK address their fraught complicity in their art being co-opted into bolstering neoliberal economies.

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