
Out of Bounds: A Cartography of Transgression in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

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Abstract

In Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), the protagonist's fluid and multiple identity affiliations might seem to mark her as transgressive, but the novel shows how such deviance is actually normative, surprisingly common in twenty-first-century. The protagonist's hyphenated name, Jane Takagi-Little, immediately suggests a bifurcated racial identity while her androgynous appearance, surprising height, and adoption of men's Japanese language mark her as border crosser in other ways. Jane's description of herself as "polysexual, polyracial, perverse" further hints at the manner in which sexuality, race, and gender delineations are tested by those who inhabit interstitial spaces (9). As Jane travels across the U.S., filming commercials for BEEF-EX, an organization that exports meat to Asia, she defies the company's dictate to film "appetizing," white middle-class families calculated to bring the "heartland of America into the homes of Japan" (9). Rather than obeying corporate mandates, Jane redefines both what it means to be "American" and what it means to be a "family" by featuring diverse family portraits in her commercials. Trained as a documentarian, Jane selects interracial, nonwhite, lesbian, and working-class families for her commercials. In order to project a more interesting and realistic portrait of the United States, she also films families with adopted or disabled children. These BEEF-EX commercials are then introduced to curious Japanese housewives accustomed to a more homogenous society. Akiko, one such housewife, finds her life transformed by Jane's documentaries, and she liberates herself from an abusive marriage by embarking on a transpacific journey of her own. At once a travelogue, calendar, recipe book, indictment of the U.S. meat industry, and book of poetic reflections, *My Year of Meats*' playfully polyphonous and postmodern structure deconstructs clear genre delineations and, in doing so, presents the text itself as a literary space whose borders can be tested and remapped.

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