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# Living Ghosts:

## The Identities Women Cover/Uncover in *My Year of Meats*

*"In Japan, ghosts have no legs. Often they are wronged women who are not even dead yet, whose extremity of suffering forces the spirit from the body to torment their oppressors. Living ghosts. Neither here nor there*."

– Ruth Ozeki

A binary-driven consciousness is one that categorizes and organizes ideas, thoughts, and practices in terms of two: we have only two genders; we compare and contrast; we find opposites in pairs; we give directions in North or South and/or East or West; and we idealize duality in familial and/or romantic relationships. Binaries constrict us in the ways they force us to make choices between pairs. Yet, thinking and living in terms of twos thwarts our ability to be capacious in thought and practice, and undermines differences and identities that do not neatly divide into two. Because social practices thrive on a consciousness of binaries, visible markers of multifaceted difference and intersectional identities are forced to figure out how to fit into this binary structure. Chicana and Queer cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa claims that binary constrictions make us "see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block [it] with a counterstance" that creates subject-object dualities that give rise to dominance

and subordination (Anzaldúa 80). How do we deal with this oppressive system of binaries? Kenji Yoshino published work of nonfiction, that I argue, poses a reaction to this binary system. In this work, Yoshino examines the social practice of *covering* – a practice that he argues is a "hidden assault on our civil rights" because "[e]veryone covers" in order to "tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream" because "[i]n our increasingly diverse society, all of us are outside the mainstream in some way" (Yoshino ix-xi). Covering, then, is a way in which subordinate individuals are coerced to conform to a dominant culture. In this paper, I will explore how Ruth Ozeki's female characters in *My Year of Meats*—Jane Takagi-Little and Akiko Ueno— negotiate binary standards of gender and race through covering. I argue that Akiko Ueno is representative of a covered-self while Jane Takagi-Little is representative of an uncovered-self. They cover and uncover their multifaceted and fragmented identities as they situate themselves in a man's world—a world in which the globalization of a gendered American culture exacerbates a gendered Japanese culture. As covering is an act of conformity externally imposed yet internally experienced, the fact that the Asian/Asian-American women in Ozeki's novel must cover or uncover themselves reinforces the notion that binaries are limiting and further suffocates their individual, unique, and complex identities. When these women no longer cover, they are able to live outside the constrictions of binary conventions.

I will begin this discussion by first connecting binary standards of gender and race with Kenji Yoshino's theory of covering using Gloria Anzaldúa's analysis of social binary consciousness and how this forces Ozeki's characters to cover or uncover their social identities. I will then elaborate on gender and race performativity using Judith Butler's theory of gender identity and how Akiko's covered-self and Jane's uncovered-self *perform* gender and race in the novel. Next, I will delineate the specific ways in which their performances negotiate gender and

racial binary standards: covering because of patriarchal power, covering because of gendered public and private spheres, and uncovering race/ethnicity/nationality. I will conclude the discussion with a proposal of a new consciousness—a consciousness that mirrors Jane's uncovered-self throughout the novel: an analysis of Akiko's decision to leave her husband, and its implications of her eventual uncovering.

In order to investigate how Akiko Ueno and Jane Takagi-Little cover and uncover their multifaceted identities in *My Year of Meats,* it is crucial to understand a binary system as a structure of duality that locks ideas, thoughts, and practices into perpetual opposition. These kinds of oppositions create roles including, but not limited to: victors vs. losers; oppressors vs. oppressed; dominators vs. subordinates; majority vs. minority; objects vs. subjects; actor vs. reactor, etc. These roles emphasize counterstances. According to Gloria Anzaldúa,

> [a] counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and for this, it is proudly defiant (Anzaldúa 78-79).

Here, Anzaldúa asserts that the locked roles of individuals as either oppressor or oppressed are products of a culture of dominance and subordination stemming from a consciousness of binaries, or dualistic thinking, because "all reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against" (Anzaldúa 78). We see this culture manifested in gender and racial expectations and practices. Both of which, are social constructions that thrive on fashioning visible markers of normativity. If gender and race are social constructions, and if a binary system organizes these social constructions, then binary systems are socially situated, as well. Racial and gender binaries

force individuals to identify with visible social markers assigned to their respective race or gender. They must exhibit visible social markers that identify them as either man or woman; white or yellow. When individuals struggle to identify fully with these limiting options, they must *cover* certain visible identity markers in order to fit into a binary standard of society. I agree with Kenji Yoshino when he proclaims, "I doubt any of these people covered willingly. I suspect they were all bowing to an unjust reality that required them to tone down their stigmatized identities to get along in life (Yoshino x). In *My Year of Meats*, the binary consciousness is especially evident in Akiko's covered role as an abused housewife. She must cover aspects of her identity –independence, courage, wisdom, and competence (stereotypically masculine traits)—in order to obey her husband's idealized feminine gender norms. However, in contrast to Akiko's covered gendered self, Jane represents a new consciousness - an *un*covered racialized self. Jane is a biracial Asian-American who embraces the ambiguity of her physical appearance indicative of Anzaldúa's vision of a *mestiza* consciousness:

> The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts (Anzaldúa 80).

In embracing her mixed race—neither limited to just Japanese or just American racial norms—Jane exhibits what Akiko struggles to achieve: an unbounded and unrestricted identity, literally and figuratively. Akiko's covered-self psychologically binds her in an abusive relationship with a husband that physically and emotionally controls her. Covering subjects Akiko to her

husband's control over her identity, and consequentially, her body. Akiko's independence, courage, wisdom, and competence cannot be seen beneath her conventionally feminine behavior. Jane's Japanese-American identity cannot be perceived on the surface, either. Unlike Akiko, she does not tone down one fragment under the other—allowing her to be free of restriction and boundaries. Both Akiko and Jane's lived experiences in *My Year of Meats* confirm that *covering* is a visible medium that *covers* an invisible truth.

Akiko's covered-self *performs* gender while and Jane's uncovered-self *performs* race in the *M y Year of Meats*. Feminist scholar Judith Butler argues that "gender is not a noun," but rather, "proves to be performative" because gender is a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 33). Ruth Ozeki confirms this notion of gender being a performance in the following passage:

> Here is a list of IMPORTANT THINGS for *My American Wife!*
>
> DESIRABLE THINGS:
>
> 1. Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality
> 2. Delicious meat recipe (NOTE: Pork and other meats is second class meats, so please remember this easy motto: 'Pork is Possible, but Beef is Best!')
> 3. Attractive, docile husband
> 4. Attractive, obedient children
> 5. Attractive, wholesome lifestyle
> 6. Attractive, clean house

7. Attractive friends & neighbors
8. Exciting hobbies

UNDESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Physical imperfections
2. Obesity
3. Squalor
4. Second Class peoples

***MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN (Ozeki 12).

This list appears in the novel as a MEMO from the Tokyo office to the American Research Staff. From this list alone, we can see that the most pertinent qualities desired in the portrayal of an American wife rely heavily on performance and a "set of repeated acts"(Butler 33). Every single quality listed typifies stereotypically feminine behavior of a racialized and gendered being – the "All-American wife." But if gender is performative, then we must

> Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions and that this is a sedimentation over time that has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as a natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in binary relation to one another (Butler 140).

This behavior is not natural like sneezing and blinking. The behavior is, in fact, stylized and constructed. John Ueno assumes these same constructed "important things" are natural and

imposes them as realities of what his proper wife, Akiko, should behave and act like. Such stereotypical things not only include the feminine qualities listed above, but also other visible markers of femininity. We see here that

> 'John' believed that if she concentrated on positive thoughts of maternity, she would get pregnant, so he had forbidden her to write about anything else. His meat campaign to fatten her up and restore her periods was part of the same training. Positive Thinking leads to Positive Action which leads to Success (Ozeki 37).

Ozeki illustrates all of Akiko's episodes in the third person point of view to further emphasize Akiko's objectivity in an environment where she has no autonomy – an environment where she is seemingly mindless and numb. In this passage, Ozeki reveals John's offense at Akiko's loss of menstruation in third-person limited point of view. He assumes that menstruation as being the end-all-be-all definition of a woman. Yet, menstruation is natural to sex, not gender. To delineate between sex and gender, we can think of the former as a coatrack.[1] The coatrack is an essential body—an individual's sex. Items that you put on the coatrack are the body's gender. They are material adornments that render gender as visible, not intrinsic. John treats Akiko like a coatrack – like an object. He handles this offense by objectifying his wife: this is attempt at fixing Akiko –as if she is a broken object needing repair. This objectification emphasizes the subject-object binary that forces Akiko to cover other aspects of her personality in order to conform to John's feminine gender standards. John perceives Akiko's entire personality and identity as a failure –

[1] Amber Knight illustrated this 'coatrack' gender metaphor on March 23, 2011 during her POLI 265: Feminist Political Theory lecture.

reducing her entire human identity to fragmented expectations of her gender. Like the coatrack, Butler elaborates this performativity in the following passage:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence of identity they otherwise purport to express *fabrication* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means…Words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core (Butler 136).

The same "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed are performative" in race, also. Recall the list in the Ozeki passage. Notice the asterisks calling attention to the capitalized statement, "MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN." The Tokyo office reduces abstract "values" to material "things" and reifies these "things" as "attractive husband…children…friends" that are typically "all-American." These things or types of behavior are visible markers of an "all-American" race, according to the Tokyo office. Unlike Akiko, Jane does not cover when performing race. She admits, "I have an honest, earnest face. It's the Asian-American Woman thing – we're reliable, loyal, smart but nonthreatening" (Ozeki 157). Ozeki presents Jane in the first person point of view rendering Jane as the subject (instead of object) of her autonomy. Jane is entirely aware of performing her mixed race—embracing it, rather than covering it.

Akiko Ueno, on the other hand, must cover her multifaceted identity because of societal constrictions regarding her place in the binary distinction of the public sphere vs. the private sphere. Feminist political philosopher Susan Okin defines the public and private sphere as

> "the distinction between state and society (as in public and private ownership), and to the distinction between non-domestic and domestic life. In both dichotomies, the state is (paradigmatically) public, and the family, domestic, and the intimate life are (again paradigmatically) private (Okin 117).

The binary opposition of the public and private spheres reveals fragments of Akiko's covered identity. In her marriage, we see only the gendered identity that she must obey/conform to. Yet, seeing her place in the marriage in the binary organization of public vs. private spheres reveals the parts of her identity that have been toned down and completely masked. This is evident because once "the multiple interconnections between women's domestic roles and their inequality and segregation in the workplace, and between their socialization in gendered families and the psychological aspects of their subordination" (Okin 123). Akiko wasn't always a covered self. Here we see that

> [i]t hadn't always been like this. She and "John" had been married for three years. Before that, Akiko had a job at a *manga* publishing house, writing copy for comic books. She had studied the classics in college, but there wasn't much of a market for that these days. Not that she ever really thought she'd have a career or even continue her education (Ozeki 37).

Akiko used to have job. She used to study classics. She used to want a career and continue her education. Because public and privates spheres are so gendered, Akiko must choose between one or the other since the binary system does not allow for her to experience both. In this choice, supported by her unhealthy patriarchal marriage, Akiko must not only conform to feminine

gender expectations, but must cover important facets of her scholastic, hard-working, professional, and autonomous identity –facets that are not traditionally 'feminine.' When she got married, Akiko even "gave up the job in order to learn to cook and otherwise prepare for motherhood" (Ozeki 37). Feminist journalist, E.J. Graff argues that although women "choose" to stay home, "they didn't choose the restrictions and constrictions that made their work lives impossible" (Graff 6). The binary public vs. private spheres is the reason "women are told to downplay their child-care responsibilities in the workplace is because of patriarchy" (Yoshino xi).

Akiko Ueno's covered gender identity, unlike Jane Takagi-Little's uncovered racial identity, is a product of the binary consciousness of patriarchy. Feminist scholar Sandra Bartky asserts that "[i]n modern industrial societies, women are kept in line by fear of retaliatory male violence" and that a "false consciousness engendered in women by patriarchal ideology is at the basis of female subordination (Bartky 76). John's abusive language and controlling behavior reinforces a binary-driven patriarchy. Akiko fears the blows of her abusive husband. This is indicative of her subordination to his domination. Her fear of this male violence keeps her covered. If she does not conform or obey his standards of femininity, she suffers the consequences. We see this, particularly, in the forced ritual John imposes on Akiko's daily habits in efforts to repair her broken femininity:

> He swelled with pride—and that's when her meat duties started. Every Saturday morning, she would be required to watch My American Wife! And then fill out a questionnaire he had designed, rating the program from one to ten in categories such as General Interest, Educational Value, Authenticity, Wholesomeness, Availability of Ingredients, and Deliciousness of Meat. To

> complete these last two, she would have to go out and shop for the ingredients and then prepare the recipe introduced on that morning's show. On Saturday evening, when 'John' came home from work, they would eat the meat, and he would critique it and then discuss her answers to the questionnaire.
>
> 'Kill two birds with one stone,' 'John' said jovially. They were sitting at the low kotatsu table after dinner. 'John' was drinking a Rémy Martin, and Akiko was having a cup of tea.
>
> 'You will help me with the campaign,' he continued, 'and learn to cook meat too. Fatten you up a little.' (Ozeki 21).

In this episode, John makes no equal exchange of conversation between him and his wife. This reinforces the dominant-subordinant binary of patriarchy. Every idea is a command—taking away Akiko's autonomy. It is as if John exhibits the right to control her behavior and lifestyle on the simple rationale that he is husband and she is wife. She is left opinion-less and silent in this context of patriarchal domination. Bartky elaborates that

> The woman who monitors everything she eats…a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that *she* is under surveillance in ways that *he* is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite (Bartky 80).

This is especially evident in Akiko's reactionary behavior to John's dinner demands. His desires for her to "learn to cook" and "fatten [you] up a little" were not working.

> Akiko had a hard time with positive thoughts. After dinner, when the washing up was done, she would go to the bathroom, stand in front of the mirror, and stare at her reflection. Then, after only a moment, she'd start to feel the meat (Ozeki 38).

Akiko's "relentless self-surveillance" does not stop at her post-dinner purging John attacks her sexuality when he exclaims, "Forget it…[Y]ou don't care. You don't care about sex. You are a cold, dead fish" (Ozeki 195). Akiko cries out "'No I'm not! […] Look at me! I'm not like that anymore" (Ozeki 195). Because she continuously fails to live up to John's gender standards, she turns to pornography as a model of ideal femininity in attempts to reinvigorate desire and passion in their intimacy. "She stood up so he could see her skirt and blouse. John watched her, his face expressionless. As an afterthought, she spread her fingers in front of her so he could see her manicured nails. Then he grinned" (Ozeki 195). Later on, John hits her when she executes erotic nibbling into a painful bite. Notice that Akiko spreads her manicured nails as an "afterthought" because the movements are unnatural to her. She acquired this learned feminine behavior from the pornographic magazines she studied. This speaks volumes of the gender binary of patriarchy. As Barky reiterates, "[t]o overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed (Bartky 65). John grins at Akiko's quasi-pornographic gestures because it reinforces his patriarchal power: he is subject and she is object. From these passages, John emotionally and physically abuses Akiko when she fails to live up to his ideal feminine standards. Akiko covers other parts of her identity in order to exhibit the feminine part fully for her husband's pleasure,

and by extension, ensures her physical safety from his violent blows. In this regard, Akiko succeeds in her negotiation of gender binaries. She completely bows to "an unjust reality that require[s] [her] to tone down [her] stigmatized identities to get along in life" (Yoshino x). Akiko covers extensively to the point that we only see her covered self – the feminine self that John forces her to portray and convey.

On the other hand, we see Jane's uncovered and unrestricted racial identity. Jane so embraces all the aspects of her mixed-race identity: the obstacles, the stigma, and the ambiguity. In this passage, we see Jane's implementation of ambiguity as she owns her multifaceted identities unrestricted of binaries:

> In spite of the Little, my dad was a tall man, and I am just under six feet myself. In Japan this makes me a freak. After living there for a while, I simply gave up trying to fit in: I cut my hair short, dyed chunks of it green, and spoke in men's Japanese. It suited me. Polysexual, polyracial, perverse, I towered over the sleek, uniform heads of commuters on the Tokyo subway (Ozeki 9).

Jane reacted to the system of binaries by choosing to live outside of it. Unlike Akiko, Jane actively leads a lifestyle in which she does not allow binaries to dictate choices, expressions, or ideas. This is especially evident when she admits,

> I've always blamed my tendency to vacillate on my mixed ethnicity. Halved, I am neither here nor there, and my understanding of the relativity inherent in the world is built into my genes. Nothing is absolute, and certainly not desire. But knowing this was not enough anymore. It was to suspend knowing and

> decide, What do I want? What do I want, absolutely, with my whole heart? (Ozeki 314).

Because Jane regards herself as "neither here nor there," she does not define her identity in terms of twos. She does not choose between the spaces of "here" or "there." She even poses abstract questions as an appetite to learn more about various parts of herself – various parts of her identity. In doing so, Jane has no need to cover. She is free, autonomous, and independent. Binaries do not coerce her to tone down or favor any significant part of her identity, racially or otherwise.

Perhaps Jane's uncovered mixed-race identity is exemplary of a new consciousness – one that eradicates binaries and the subject-object implications indebted to them. Gloria Anzaldúa describes such a consciousness as "*La Mestiza consciousness*." She proposes that

> The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that orginates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, or war (Anzaldúa 80).

This new consciousness eliminates binaries, and consequentially eliminates the need for individuals to cover. In Akiko's case, the elimination of covering also ends rape and violence in

her marriage. Throughout this essay, I have discussed extensively the psychologically suffocating effects of covering as Akiko struggles to exist in a constricting context of gender binaries. Anzalduúa reiterates this struggle:

> In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. (Anzaldúa 79).

Rigidity, for Akiko, means her death in her marriage. Akiko's borders and walls are the binaries that force her to cover – a covering that places her in submission to John's abusive behavior. Towards the end of the novel, Akiko makes the conscious decision to no longer be subjected to "a swamping of psychological borders." Akiko literally chooses to live a life outside of her world of binaries, and adapts the new consciousness. She manifests these psychological borders into actual geographical borders – moving from Japan to America, "Akiko smiled. Finally she had done something—something worthy of the women in Bobby Joe's songs" (Ozeki 321). In this bold action, we witness Akiko uncovering aspects of her once covered identity: independence, autonomy, empowerment, and courage. Inspired by Jane's uncovered self, Akiko uncovers herself.

Perhaps this elimination of a binary consciousness and the adaptation of a mestiza consciousness is a step in "analyzing civil rights in terms of universal liberty rather than in terms

of group-based equality" because "it avoids making assumptions about group cultures" (Yoshino 189). The new consciousness welcomes uncovered selves in that it embraces the crux of intersectionality—we are never just one or two things – but a composite of all things that form our multifaceted identities. Toning down a fragment, any fragment, of one's identity kills that fragment of one's self. If ghosts are spirits of a tortured soul, then killing a tormented and neglected fragment of our identity—a part of who we are—makes that fragment a ghost. Covering is how we continue to live when we've created a ghost of a fragment of our entire identity. Like Jane lives and Akiko learns, uncovering covered selves is lifting the veil and setting free the living ghosts of the soul.

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