

Hybrid Veggies & Mixed Kids: Ecocriticism and Race in Ruth Ozeki's Pastoral Heartlands

By Melissa Poulsen

In his ecocritical tome *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), literary critic Lawrence Buell suggests that to claim relevance in the twenty-first century, literary and environmental studies must recognize and engage with the interdependence of spaces traditionally opposed: the natural and the human built, the country and the city, exurbia and the urban. The environment, although often conflated with the “nature” of the first half of these pairings, includes all these interconnected spaces – and while its ideological division has been a means to work through the anxiety of late industrial capitalism, it is a more complex imagining of environment that now requires further critical inquiry. It is in the context of these arguments that this paper locates Ruth Ozeki's novels, *My Year of Meats* (1999) and *All Over Creation* (2003). Written with and against the pastoral tradition, Ozeki's novels merge country and city as they struggle with the bioethics of modified food – be it genetically modified potatoes or hormone-infused meats. Engaging in toxic discourse, a discourse which expresses anxieties around the environmental hazards and undetected infiltration posed by human-made products, *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* uses modified food to interrupt the possibility of a dichotomous country and city.¹ Yet Ozeki further complicates the interrelation of country and city as she launches a careful consideration of race and environmentalism through attention to the deep-seated connections between the language of race and the language of biology. Paralleling race and food specifically through mixed race and modified food, Ozeki calls attention to the consumption of toxic food within and across national borders while simultaneously questioning the uncritical consumption of the language of biology around the mixed race body. As her critique moves through the lens of the pastoral – or more precisely, through toxic discourse – Ozeki questions the silences in the pastoral imagery of ecocritical discourse, ultimately posing important questions about the construction of race in relation to place and activism.

The ecocritical thrust of Ozeki's novels, and its entanglement with racialization, first emerges in her 1999 novel *My Year of Meats*. Revolving around mixed race character Jane Takagi-Little, *My Year of Meats* traces Jane's development from a character striving to create community through race to a character creating community through ecocritical awareness. Jane works for the Japanese television show *My American Wife!*, which is sponsored by the American beef industry. A self-proclaimed “bridge” because of her mixed race identity, Jane believes she is well-suited to direct the show as it sells a racialized and gendered pastoral myth of the American heartland to Japanese

Melissa Eriko Poulsen is a Ph.D. student in the Literature Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is currently working on a dissertation exploring figurations of Asian American mixed race in literature from 1900-1960.
ISSN: 2154-2171

housewives in a campaign to increase beef sales in Japan. Ultimately, Jane interrupts this myth by exposing the racial, cultural, and sexual diversity of the American heartland *and* by uncovering the toxicity of a meat industry that gives DES to cows and growth hormones to chickens. By the end of the text, Jane's drive to create community via her mixed race identity is replaced by a community created around ecological consciousness.

Jane's shift from racial to planetary community, however, is troubled by Ozeki's exploration of race, food, and the language of biology through the biological concept of hybridity as it shifts from plants and animals to mixed race humans. Drawing on the 19th century racial science concepts of hybrid degeneracy and hybrid vigor – the first of which proposes the inferiority of mixing races or species and the second of which proposes their superiority – Ozeki entangles Jane's mixed race with the modified food imagery of the text, creating an uneasy connection that haunts the ecocritical thrust of the novel and Jane's imagined community. Jane plays on the mixed race term "mulatto," for example, to describe herself as a mule and explain her infertility. The slippage from mulatto to mule – an infertile animal often held up as an example of hybrid degeneracy – aligns Jane's racial identification with her infertility at the same time that it aligns Jane with hybrid animals and a language of biological science. Such slippage continues when Jane's coworker from Japan, "John" Ueno, suggests that she is a crossbred cow. Jane is a "good example of hybrid vigor...from crossbreeding" in contrast to the Japanese who Ueno characterizes as "old-fashioned cows" (44).² In fact Jane's mother was given DES – the hormone Jane discovers is being injected into beef cows – because she is a Japanese woman giving birth in a Midwestern hospital during a time when DES was thought to prevent pregnancy complications. Pointing out the racialized nature of the treatment, Jane suggests that the doctor was "used to treating large-bodied Swedes and sturdy Danes, with ample, childbearing hips" and assumed complications would be present in the birth of a mixed race child (156). Jane's infertility comes full circle as it is revealed that the DES given to her mother damaged Jane's uterus. Although her infertility is no longer a racial metaphor, Jane's infertility is nonetheless tied to her mixed race by DES – tying her also to the DES-injected cows she discovers during the filming of *My American Wife*. The uneasy blending of cow and mixed race imagery, however, is left unresolved, haunting the ecologically-focused community Jane forms by the end of the text.

The troping of mixed race, and the consciousness of race in ecological activism it underscores, is taken up in earnest in *All Over Creation*. Ozeki's focus on mixed race and food consumption, in fact, is more closely tied to an ecocritical project through a critique of the pastoral in *All Over Creation*. As such, Ozeki offers a clear critique of the silences of ecocritical discourse around race and mixed race. Set in the potato-farming town of Liberty Falls, Idaho, *All Over Creation* centers around the return of a prodigal daughter, Yumi "Yummy" Fuller, to her Alzheimer-ridden mother Momoko and her terminally-ill father, Lloyd. With the help of her three multiracial children Yumi nurses her parents while negotiating her return to the all-white community of her childhood. Meanwhile, a carload of hippie environmentalists calling themselves the "Seeds of Resistance" travel across country to meet with Yumi's father, whose polemic newsletters on seeds and genetic modification make him their prophet. The novel comes to a head as the Fuller's next-door neighbors decide to plant genetically modified potatoes to the horror of the Seeds of Resistance.

The small-town farming community of Liberty Falls, Idaho is initially constructed

through pastoral imagery. In the United States, sentimental or simple pastoral, as Leo Marx suggests, expresses a “simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence ‘closer to nature’...an undefiled, green republic, a quite land of...farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness” (6). Activating such nostalgic pastoral, Liberty Falls is portrayed as an idealized American heartland where “the country air smell[s] crisp and fresh” (179) and a tight-knit community tends to their potato farms. The Fuller Farm in particular becomes an Edenic space; Yumi remembers the farm as “living proof to us all that...man could work in harmony with nature to create a relationship of perfect symbiotic mutualism” (6). Working on the Fuller farm is close to godliness, an “ancient human impulse” to “emulate the divine author and tease forth a new crop of stories from the earth” (171). Less a process of labor and land manipulation, farming in Liberty Falls becomes an idyllic communion with Earth and with God.

Key to *All Over Creation*’s presentation of race within an ecocritical discourse is the interruption and countering of the pastoral construction of farming in Liberty Falls. As Lawrence Buell points out, the environment is both the “‘natural’ and ‘human-built’...what we loosely call ‘nature’ has often long since become ‘organic machine’” (3) as the “physical environment is being increasingly refashioned by capital, technology, and geopolitics” (5). Such blending of nature and technology is key to the counter-pastoral developed in *All Over Creation*. Lloyd’s “perfect symbiotic mutualism” is in fact bolstered by the “cooperation of God *and science*” (my emphasis, 6) – namely, technologies including high-tech farm equipment, GPS, pesticides, and genetically modified crops. The nostalgic image of the simple farming community is interrupted, for instance, by descriptions of irrigators: those “huge aluminum insects” whose “spitting hiss” of pesticides is “as incessant as a chorus of cicadas” (245). The supposed nature of the farm, complete with the summer sounds of *actual* cicadas, is exposed as a human and technologically modified nature. In addition, the simplicity of heartland farm life, so far from the noise and technology of the city, is revealed instead as a complicated capitalist engagement increasingly requiring knowledge of GPS and computers.

Such interruptions of farming’s symbiotic mutualism in fact lead to an exposure of the toxicity plaguing Liberty Falls. Following in the long tradition of toxic discourse in American literature, *All Over Creation* explores the narrative of what Buell describes as “betrayed Edens,” suffering “a rude awakening from simple to complex pastoral” as the toxic reality of their seeming pastoral spaces are revealed (37). Gradually emerging in descriptions of pesticide-spewing “aluminum insects,” toxic discourse develops more specifically in *All Over Creation* through the Quinn family, and revolves around their exposure to and use of chemicals and genetically modified potatoes. Cass and Will Quinn, lifelong friends and neighbors of the Fuller family, are plagued by a history of cancer and a battle with infertility. Cass has recovered from breast cancer, which took her mother’s life, but is incapable of carrying a baby to term. She attributes both of these health defects to the massive amount of pesticides to which she has been exposed her entire life, but which, as she explains to Yumi, the Quinn’s have no choice but to apply if they wish to be competitive farmers.

Genetically-modified potatoes, then, offer a happy solution to Cass’s problem but widen the scope of the toxic discourse, in fact becoming the central strain of toxicity in the text. Instead of a seemingly contained threat affecting only the Quinn family, genetically modified potatoes are a more invidious form of toxicity. These potatoes,

distributed by the aptly-named NuLife company, internalize the chemical spray to kill insects instantly without the mess of pesticides. Yet, as the Seeds of Resistance tirelessly campaign, the safety of these potatoes for human consumption is unverified; furthermore, products containing genetically modified fruits and vegetables do not require labels and easily infiltrate the food supply. If toxic discourse begins through the Quinn family as a misleadingly localized phenomenon, the genetically modified potatoes develop a toxic discourse that extends beyond its locality to have global implications.

Ozeki's text, however, goes beyond the tried and true tropes of the toxic counter-pastoral as it engages with issues of race and the environment. Toxic discourse may, as Buell argues, "refocus...and democratize...the pastoral ideal: a nurturing space of clean air, clean water, and pleasant uncluttered surroundings that ought to be one's by right," (38) but aside from such discussions of environmental racism and justice, the "experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in relation to America's environmental histories" (Hayashi 58), as Robert Hayashi points out, are largely ignored in environmental writing and ecocriticism. In *All Over Creation* Ozeki confronts these kinds of silences, using issues of race and racism in addition to toxic discourse and in parallel to the traditional use of class and labor, to counter the pastoral vision of Liberty Falls.

Following Hayashi's argument, *All Over Creation* highlights the presences of racial others and simultaneously exposes how they are written out of the pastoral. In an annual Thanksgiving play by the school children of Liberty Falls, Yumi is always cast as the Indian Princess. While other children play pilgrims or the food at the feast, Yumi spreads her arms to welcome the "noble pilgrims" to her "people's" land (7). A revisionist history that contains Yumi's otherness, writing the Asian out of the Midwest as she plays the part of the disappeared native, the Thanksgiving play points to the disappearance of racial others in the pastoral. The emptying out of the United States frontier of Native Americans through the myth of conviviality produced by Thanksgiving parallels the similarly masked history behind the potato farms and Liberty Falls. In fact, the text seems to suggest that acknowledging the presence of racial others interrupts the perceived innocence of the pastoral when Yumi is swept into an illicit relationship with her history teacher. Fascinated by Asian culture, which he "admires" (21) and considers "spiritual and deep" (20), Yumi's history teacher seduces her into a racially motivated affair that ends in an illegal abortion. With the innocence of pastoral romance contaminated by city-tropes of isolation, alienation, and abortion, both Yumi and her history teacher are (self) banished, Adam and Eve-like, to different cities. In the process, *All Over Creation* exposes the pastoral as an idyllic space only for those of a certain color.

Raymond Williams has suggested that "images of country and city have been a way of responding to social development" under capitalism (297); the ideological division of country and city, of vanishing rural past versus alienating, corrupting city, are a means through which complex structures of feeling are expressed. *All Over Creation*, in line with Hayashi's work, extends this assertion to include racialization as part of such social development under capitalism. Thus Yumi's figuration as exotic other forced into an illicit romance in Liberty Falls is a means through which to disrupt the dichotomous city/country tropes of simple pastoral specifically through the inscription of race. As evidenced in the alienation and exotification Yumi faces, Yumi does not find Liberty Falls a pastoral retreat; instead she finds the big city, Berkeley, California, a site of

community, of diversity, and of a "pan-Asian scene" (38). Such a sense of rootedness through pan-Asian community is created further and in contrast to pastoral tropes through her mobility, as she moves from Berkley to Texas to Hawaii. Yumi's return to Liberty Falls to aid her dying parents becomes, then, not a pastoral retreat or return but one marked by tension and unhappiness. By inscribing issues of race onto divisions of country and city, Ozeki subverts pastoral tropes to suggest the different possibilities and potentials of country and city because of one's racial location.

The counter-pastoral moves of *All Over Creation* are at once familiar and new, engaging in a long precedent of toxic discourse. Perhaps the most radical and largely unfamiliar move of the text is its unification of toxic discourse and racialization through the question of bioethics, and an entanglement of plant genetic modification and human multiracial identity. *All Over Creation* confronts the ambiguity of a language originating in biological science, co-opted by 19th century eugenic and racial sciences, and reactivated in current genetic biology. Through the conflation of plants and humans, activated particularly through the multiracial Fuller family, an uneasy homology develops as Ozeki continues her disruption of the pastoral heartland and further of even ecocriticism by exposing the presence and the tensions of these discourses' biological and cultural diversity.

The parallel between biodiversity and cultural diversity emerges in arguments laid out through the Fuller's seed company. Beginning as Momoko's side-project, "Fuller's Seeds" plants and raises a variety of highly endangered vegetables and flowers, sending carefully farmed seeds across the country via catalog mail order. Momoko receives her seeds from far and wide, as people send her heirloom crops they no longer have the capacity to keep viable. As Yumi describes, these seeds were once "tucked into an immigrant's hatband or sewn into the hem of a young wife's dress...smuggle[d] from the old country or...clinging to the belly wool of a yak...travel[ing] across the steppes of Mongolia" (171). Momoko's seeds specifically, but all seeds generally, embody the migrations and drifts of people in the United States; her "heroic efforts to preserve the rich diversity" (113) of plants is paralleled to the preservation of the cultural diversity brought through migration.

Such dedication to diversity stands in contrast to the farmer of the pastoral heartland, the "large-scale potato farmer, a monoculturalist" made "nervous [by] all that diversity" (111). The ambiguity created here around the term "diversity" as it slips between biodiversity and cultural diversity is cemented in the Fuller's company newsletter, where Lloyd suggests that "anti-exoticism" – disliking non-native *plants* – is "explicitly *racist*;" one should not "promote Third Reich eugenics in [the] family garden" (my emphasis, 67). Lloyd conflates the fear of non-native plants with the deep-seated xenophobia of the United States. He goes on to point out that "our plants are as immigrant as we are" since "not a single one of the food crops that make the U.S. an agricultural power today is native to North America" (67). A former monoculturalist himself, Lloyd attempts to interrupt the imagined pastoral heartland through a questioning of the plant and racial nativism it projects.

The positioning of Momoko, the only Japanese immigrant in Liberty Falls, and Lloyd as the only couple nurturing diversity in potato monoculture continues the ambiguous representation of "diversity." The homology between bio- and cultural diversity is further expressed as the boundaries between plants and humans are blurred.

One instance centers around the naming of Momoko and Yumi Fuller. Yumi is known as "Yummy" in Liberty Falls because the townspeople supposedly cannot pronounce her name; in fact, as indicated by her teenage theme song, "yummy, yummy, yummy, I got love in my tummy," Yumi's nickname indicates her commoditization stemming from her status as the racial other in the community. Momoko Fuller's name plays similarly off connections to food; her name, which might be interpreted as "Peach Girl," echoes the Japanese folktale "Momotaro" about a boy born from a peach. This connection is expanded as the planet is described as "a split peach, whose pit forms the core, whose flesh its mantle, and whose fuzzy skin its crust" (3). Thus while Yumi's nickname implies a parallel between human and plant commodification, Momoko's name goes further to suggest a kind of human-plant-planet interaction, a sexualized, fertility-focused plant and human imagery that borders on a kind of crossbreeding imagery.

The images and concepts of crossbred plants and humans continue to develop as Yumi becomes associated with plants. Activating heartland idioms, Yumi is "the apple of Lloyd's eye" (5) and together they are "two peas in a pod" (19). Yumi imagines that her father, like the potatoes he nurtures, might be "capable of creating endless offspring out of chunks of its living flesh, and [she] fe[els]...like she was a little chunk of his" (112). Other children are similarly described as plants. Yumi's children are her three "little seedlings" while Seeds of Resistance's Charmey imagines the baby inside her as a "little lima bean" (172, 120). Such sexualized, fertility-focused imagery continues as a NuLife ad constructs potatoes as "little diapered spud[s]" and claims to handle potatoes "like babies" (99); a magazine article on potatoes looks like "a Playboy centerfold" with a "long, plump, beautifully reticulated potato" (84). At the extreme, Seeds of Resistance earns funds from web-pornography that involves copulation with fruits and vegetables.

Through the sexualized, fertile imagery of crossbred human-plants *All Over Creation* tracks the lives of multiracial characters and interracial relationships while developing a bioethical argument against genetically modified organisms. As the storylines develop, the issue of human hybridity becomes increasingly conflated with that of plant hybridity. Yumi, for instance, describes that as a child she always felt like "a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes" (4). Similarly, Momoko compares Yumi's children to cross-fertilized, hybrid squashes that accidentally grow in Momoko's garden. Momoko identifies the "large mutant squashes" as "a little bit Suke, and little bit Delicata, and little bit...watchamacallit...like [Yumi's children]. All mixed up" (118). An uncomfortable moral ambiguity begins to emerge as the imagery of plants and humans, and furthermore cultural and bio-diversity, merge.

The boundaries between cultural and bio-diversity become increasingly blurred through the use of metaphor. The ethical trajectory of the text, propelled by Seeds of Resistance and Lloyd Fuller, suggests that genetically modified potatoes and the monoculture of farming are negative, while the preservation of biodiversity via the Fuller's garden is a positive and important task. The parallel multiculturalist equation, however, projects human and cultural diversity as positive. Yet genetically-modified potatoes might be read as a form of hybridity and thus diversity, while biodiversity might be read as a nativist or xenophobic action. The squash incident, discussed briefly above, expresses this tension most clearly. Momoko's garden requires careful fertilization that avoids cross-fertilization in order to preserve the integrity of the various endangered plants. In other words, to preserve the diversity, Momoko has to avoid further diversity.

The “mutant squashes” thus become undesirable, making their comparison to Yumi’s multiracial children problematic.

In yet another example, genetic modification, a kind of hybridization, is symbolized in-text as the merging of bacterium and potato, of flounder and tomato, and marked as negative by *Seeds of Resistance*. Yet this kind of crossbred imagery is not far from the plant-human confluences of the text discussed above that are in part propagated by the *Seeds of Resistance*. Furthermore, the botany work of Luther Burbank, which is similar to Momoko’s careful fertilizing, takes on a negative edge, as his Russet potato in conjunction with capitalism creates the monoculture of farming and is eventually used as the base for genetically-modified potatoes. Thus even as the *Seeds of Resistance* configure a new relationship with nature, they are still strangely haunted by what is occluded – the hybridization or diversity not embraced. The slippage produced as bio- and cultural diversity are conflated through the language of monoculture and hybridity might signify the ultimate autonomy of such conceptions. At the same time, the uneasy ambiguity Ozeki produces through the simple but insistent equation of mixed race and hybrid plants serves as a reminder of the potential of such slippages, and thus the aporia confronted by ecocritical discourses.

Such slippage between bio- and cultural diversity is another means through which Ozeki interrupts the *Seeds of Resistance*’s new pastoral. Their new pastoral is accompanied by a vision of Arcadia in which “the whole planet [is] a garden, teeming with millions upon millions of flowers and trees and fruits and vegetables and insects and birds and animals and weevils and us” (409). Against this image is another kind of future, one of “genetically mutated, impoverished, barren, patented forms of corporately controlled germplasm” (409). The hopeful solution to *All Over Creation* lies in the use of the internet to catalogue and preserve Momoko’s garden, a parallel yet subverted version of the farming pastoral’s symbiotic mutualism of farming and technology. The aporia of Ozeki’s metaphors, however, work in these proposed solutions to expose the ideological work and ambiguity behind even this Arcadia. Rather than fall into didacticism concerning either imagined future, Ozeki interrogates the potentials and the constraints inherent in their imagining.

Ozeki’s complex exploration of the ideological baggage of the pastoral and the ecocritical in both her novels highlights important questions about bioethics as we seek ecologically sound paths in a world of interconnected environments. At the same time, Ozeki sheds light on further areas of consideration including issues of race and emplacement, and the related issues of race and mixed race in ecocriticism. As explored in this paper, Ozeki’s texts suggest ways to think through the influences of constructions of race on pastoral imagery and ecocritical activism. At the same time, Ozeki engages a parallel inquiry for further research; in an act as deceptively simple as setting her interracial families in the United States’ Midwest, she pushes readers towards new ways of conceptualizing the crucial but often disconnected meanings of emplacement in both ethnic and environmental studies.

Notes

¹ Toxic discourse, often understood as a counterpastoral narrative, has a long literary genealogy. Previous literary examples of toxic discourse include Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad;" further examples can be found in Leo Marx's discussion of betrayed Edens in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) (Buell 37).

² The contradiction created by these two comparisons – Jane as the hybrid degenerate mule vs. Jane as a crossbred cow with hybrid vigor – offers an important example of the way *My Year of Meats* works on one level to deconstruct existing stereotypes about mixed race people via contradictory imagery. For the purposes of this paper, however, the salient point is the way these animal comparisons then develop ambiguity in the text's final environmental community.

Works Cited

Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.

Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Ozeki, Ruth. *All Over Creation*. New York: Viking, 2003. Print.

---. *My Year of Meats*. New York: Viking, 1998. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973. Print.