

“Halved as I am, I was born doubled”.
Inventively Messing up Hierarchies and Categorizations in
Ruth Ozeki’s *Halving the Bones*

Abstract: In this article, focusing on the analysis of Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury’s 1995 first-person documentary *Halving the Bones: Making a Family Album?*, I discuss the role of fiction and counter-memory in resisting the hegemonic practices that have marked Asian American history with distortions, omissions, and stereotypes. I show how Ozeki employs the fictional documentary medium to question hierarchies and categorizations and to reveal them as dispositifs of dominion especially concerning gender and race.

The autobiographical project traces one hundred years of the “half-Japanese, half-American” filmmaker Ruth’s maternal family history. Ozeki’s imaginative in(ter)ventions in the personal, cultural, and historical stories of her family end up creating a proliferation of voices and possibilities. I argue that the “mess” generated by introducing elements of doubt, multiplicity, recursiveness, and invention in the narration of the Japanese and Japanese American women’s lives is a productive, meaningful way to undermine the practices of categorization, racialization, and gendering these women have been subjected to throughout history. Through the sprouting “mess” in her documentary, Ozeki on the one hand connects the filmmaker’s present to the geopolitical, economic, and gender dynamics in the past lives of Japanese migrants. On the other hand, subverting the androcentric power of image-making, Ozeki provides women with the opportunity to address each other in an engaged and creative way. Reimagining and representing the shifting condition and identity of Japanese American women in the twentieth century, Ozeki’s subjective perspective carries a critical political dimension on screen and provides a present insight on the quest for home, belonging, identity, and cultural legacy.

Keywords: *Asian American family documentary, cultural identity, fictional documentary, mother-daughter, split subjectivity*

Unable to penetrate the wall of amnesia, I constructed images from the elements of my craft – actors, spaces, and light – and projected them onto a wall, *the* wall, to hint at what it obscured. And slowly the beam of light burned peepholes through that wall, revealing some of what lurked behind it, although I sometimes suspect that the secrets were merely the motivation, while the films, themselves, the real thing revealed.
(Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*)

Asian American film and video emerged in the early 1970s largely from the desire to reclaim the community’s history, and to provide counter-historical narrations in order to re-structure the long-time gaps in the cinematic representation of Asian Americans and fight the racist stereotypes in dominant media. The institutional racism and invisibility within Hollywood and other dominant media motivated the

necessity of Asian American filmmakers to create and tell different, more authentic, and more personal stories, precisely the stories of people of Asian heritage who have shared similar experiences of immigration, discrimination, and exclusion. Increasingly, Asian American filmmakers have engaged in subverting Hollywood's representation of Asians. They have contested commercial cinema's portrayal of Asia(ns) as an emblem of Western superiority according to racial, gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies, and have been engaged in a project of signifying their presence on cinematic conventions.

Since from its very first steps Asian American cinema has been concerned with recovering Asian American history and re-articulating Asian American experience, the earliest films have been interpreted and classified as oppositional to the mainstream cinematic discourse, whether they were engaged in documenting ignored, misrepresented topics or in demystifying the stereotypes that constitute the dominant representations. It is undeniable that Asian American filmmakers, as Kent Ono suggests, "use the camera differently from the way it was used originally to fix us in the camera's eye".¹ However, as Peter X. Feng argues in his collection of essays on Asian American film and video, *Screening Asian Americans*, reading Asian American film exclusively in an antagonistic way ultimately reproduces the same old Orientalist framework: this conception "implies that Asian American filmmakers take their cues from mainstream cinema".² Feng proposes an approach which tries to avoid a sharp polarization between marginal, activist filmmakers and a monolithic Hollywood:

This collection argues against conceiving of Asian American cinematic production as merely oppositional, while at the same time acknowledging that much Asian American cinema is dialectically engaged with the problematics of dominant cinematic representations.³

³ Ibid., 5.

Feng's methodological strategy also highlights that even though there is no such thing as an authentic, organic, and autonomous "Asian American cinema" as a category, Asian American filmmakers have often shared a common political and social agenda, responded to specific historical circumstances as well as to the political, ideological, and cultural power dispositifs that have materially and symbolically determined their individual and collective lives, and built a communal tradition of activism. In fact, although Asian American films and videos have always been eclectic and diverse, representing all formats and genres, some specific mediums, narrative devices and techniques, subjects, and ways to approach the subjects can be found across the board, even in the most independent Asian American films and videos of the 1990s and early 2000s.

In such contextual dynamics, it is hardly surprising that the documentary is, as Jun Xing states, "the earliest and most vibrant Asian American film genre".⁴ If at first the documentary was primarily chosen as a means to represent Asian

¹ Kent A. Ono, "Re/membering Spectators: Meditations on Japanese American Cinema", in Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, eds., *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 2000), 146.

² Peter X. Feng, "Introduction", in Peter Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers U. P., 2002), 4.

⁴ Jun Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity* (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1998), 88.

American lives with authenticity from an inside point of view and to gain authority for the filmmaker, shortly thereafter it became the privileged medium to explore and express a number of more personal concerns, to tell family stories, and, through them, reflect on and give shape to individual identities. Again, it is not surprising that the majority of Asian American documentaries belong to the category of diary films or family histories (and to a smaller extent to the biographical histories and social issue films). But, Feng notes:

These films and videos do not attempt to plug gaps in memory and history by reconstructing what is missing, for such a strategy denies the historical process that produced those gaps: these films and videos create imagery that fills the gap while constantly speaking its own inadequate referentiality....

In the act of examining historical trauma, of theorizing why certain things are forgotten, these movies seek identity in the interplay between memory and history; in so doing, they further theorize the relation between family stories and the histories of ethnicity.⁵

⁵ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham and London: Duke U. P., 2002), 16-17.

Thus, Feng foregrounds some of the main features of Asian American documentaries that focus on the filmmaker's personal and family stories: the presence of a trauma that has to be screened in both senses of the term – *conceal from view* and *project into cinematic images* – the complex dynamics between remembering and forgetting that such trauma generates, a reflection about the role of an individual in history and of history in the individual identity, and the intersection of multiple discourses on the Asian American body, especially the Asian American woman's body. Elizabeth Weis calls the documentaries about families, in which the filmmaker's public and private dimension intersect, "family portraits", and states that "the urge behind these films comes from the filmmakers' desire to understand themselves through their origins-genetic and ethnic".⁶ Adopting a genealogical approach, the documentary becomes an exploration of identity within a discontinuous history that is deeply embedded in global politics and the racial configurations of the neocolonial U.S. context. To recount this biography, the documentary builds a dialogue between family memory and the archive, both official/historical and private, with their photographs, interviews, films, documents, and mementos, and shows the discrepancies between them. Through its disparate materials and textual elements – oral stories, interviews, newsreel, photographs, home videos, personal diaries, paintings, official documents, maps, recipes, snapshots, artifacts, letters – that combine into a narrative or a tale, independent video constitutes a field of cultural memory, one that intervenes into official history.

⁶ Elizabeth Weis, "Family Portraits", *American Film*, 1.2 (November 1975), 54.

This essay discusses *Halving the Bones*, the 70-minute biographical documentary written, produced, and directed by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury in 1995. Ozeki's documentary traces her mother's Japanese roots and constructs a portrait, partly factual and partly speculative, of her maternal grandparents. The filmmaker revisits

her grandparents' arrival to Hawaii, their lives there, the internment experience during World War II, and their return to Japan. I will show how Ozeki explores the Japanese American family documentary tradition in order to undermine the traditional documentary function as the realistic visual record of true events or stories, and its method of truth telling based on Western visual and cultural codes, which has marked Asian American history with distortions, omissions, mistranslations, and caricatures. The substantial number of documentaries on the removal and relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II makes this a genre almost unto itself. This practice of using documentary as a vehicle for reclaiming cultural heritage and personal identity is very common among Sansei (third generation) women filmmakers. Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering* (1988), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), Janice Tanaka's *Memory from the Department of Amnesia* (1990) and *Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* (1992) are always recalled and analyzed as belonging to the family portraits category because they attempt to understand the legacy of the internment experience through the effects of the internment on the filmmakers' families and, by synecdoche, on a whole generation of Japanese Americans. Focusing on the impact of the historical events on the individuals more than on the events themselves, the filmmaker explores how the historical process affects her personal life. Her own sense of incompleteness and the lack of memory in her family members are usually the spark that triggers a search that eventually enables the filmmaker to coexist with the ghosts from her past. The journey through the elusive memory is a different and sometimes very complex mediation between on one hand one's identity in the present, and on the other, the past signified through cryptic, amorphous, ever-changing images. The experimental style of these Japanese American documentaries in regards to the image production, along with a personal voice that manifests the presence of the filmmaker as the one who actually participates in the historical experience presented, subverts the seductive power of realism, the foundation of any traditional documentary. Rejecting the linear narrative and validating a traveling aesthetics based on memory, these documentaries turn to oral histories as sources of historical information: the stories told by interpreters of different moments of the filmmaker's family history, as scattered and contradictory as they often come out of the direct interviews, represent the most effective source for both private and public events. As a result, the film is presented as a multi-layered quest, one whose development is shown and whose evidence is interrogated in front of the viewer.

The search attempts to recover people's dispersed biographies into history, but, as Marita Sturken notes, "this memory is not about retrieval as much as it is about retelling and reconstruction. It is about acknowledging the impossibility of knowing what really happened, and a search for a means of telling".⁷ By reconstructing personal memory in a creative way, Japanese American filmmakers, such as Yasui, Tajiri, and Tanaka, hint that memory can be made up, fictionalized,

⁷ Marita Sturken, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions", in Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 184.

since it is drawn from all the stories and images collected and recollected. This strategy generates a disrupted, fabricated counter-memory that shares boundaries with invention, fiction, and dreams, and creates an autonomous cultural space outside hegemonic narratives. I argue that Ozeki brings the fictional elements in her autobiographical documentary one step forward: playing with the instability of the relationship between fact and fiction, she uses the fictional documentary medium to generate a new multi-layered context of signification. All categories and distinctions – fiction and history, memory and desire, sounds and images, mother and daughter – end up being productively messed up. The sprouting “mess” in Ozeki’s documentary is a constructive, meaningful way to undermine the political control that hierarchies and categorizations impose. With and within her documentary, Ozeki resists the racialized history and questions its authority, so that history is no longer a puzzle to be recomposed, but an assemblage of relative truths that speak for the filmmaker’s present. Simultaneously, subverting the androcentric power of image-making, Ozeki provides women with the opportunity to address each other in a dialogical, engaged, and creative way.

Halving the Bones shares most of the constitutive elements of the Japanese American family documentary. A Sansei herself, Ozeki films an autobiographical documentary in which the filmmaker, in a first-person voice-over, tells the stories of her mother and grandmother in an effort to find meanings that could stand for her split self: half Japanese, half American. Like the most famous Japanese American documentaries, *Halving the Bones* focuses on the interplay between history and memory, truth and accumulated, contradictory memories and images. In dealing with the lost, destroyed, left-behind fragments from her family’s past, whose absence can be marked only by the remaining or re-invented pieces, Ozeki adopts very different strategies in regard to subject positions and textual development: she relies on both conventional and unconventional sources – memoir, photographs, amateur video footage, pictures, calligraphy, traditional Japanese paintings, passports, artifacts, music. All these distinctive narrative features fill the documentary not only with Asian images, but with the visual texture of Japanese American culture. Here oral histories, through both direct interviews and reported talks, assemble the stories again in a subjective mode. Ozeki’s first-person singular voice speaks with emotion and feeling, slow and soft. It is a voice that does not so much explain the images, as create ambiguity, interrupting the harmonic synthesis between images and sounds, and opening up narrative possibilities. In the most classic ethnic tradition, *Halving the Bones* remains an exploration of identity, of what it means to be “half” and to never fully belong anywhere, but Ozeki’s difficult journey is an act simultaneously of discovery and invention.

A strikingly original feature of *Halving the Bones* is that though the documentary explicitly references all the narrative strategies and themes of the Japanese American family video, and though it stakes out a position for itself within that

tradition, it nonetheless remains somewhat aloof from that cinema. I believe that the reason why *Halving the Bones* is never mentioned in academic discussions about the biographical cinema dealing with the Japanese American family resides in the dialectic between tradition and invention played out within Ozeki's documentary. *Halving the Bones*, in fact, shares the same channel of distribution with Tajiri's *History and Memory*: the non-profit feminist media arts organization based in New York City, *Women Make Movies*. Also, it has been screened in the same film festivals, such as the Sundance Film Festival and the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival. However, at a first glance, Ozeki's documentary appears more traditional: it recounts the simple story of her family narrated by the filmmaker without recurring to the clashing of strong images, collages, pastiche or other postmodern techniques that abound in the more frequently discussed documentaries. Ozeki actually plays with the previous tradition of both classic documentary and Japanese American independent video, jumping in and out of each in a playful, fictional, subtler but no less political way. It is no coincidence that the only academic mention of Ozeki's documentary I could find is in a book called *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*. One of the editors, Alexandra Juhasz, defines the fictional documentary as follows:

A fake documentary engages disingenuousness, humor, and other formal devices to create critical or comic distance between itself and documentary's sobriety, truth, and rationality....

Fake documentaries do and undo the documentary form, the film's subject (theme, topic, storyline, characters), and the moral and social orders. They are formally rich as well as uniquely situated to reveal the certainties, as well as the lies, about history, identity, and truth that have sustained both documentary and the world it records.⁸

⁸ Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1-2.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

Fictional films that we receive as documentary, that is, fake documentaries speak about the links between and among objectivity, knowledge, and power (usually the hidden trinominal of classic documentaries), thus challenging the status of visual evidence within the hi/story they document. At the same time, though, "the mere act of documenting something endows a presence, authority, and permanence that transforms the lie into something awfully close to truth".⁹ In one of the essays collected in the volume, Eve Oishi describes how in *Halving the Bones* Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury adopts as true the racist stereotypes in the Western portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans, and shows how those stereotypes have determined her private memories and influenced her sense of her own identity. But, through the use of the fake documentary, Ozeki subverts the stereotypical images calling into question "the reliability of all images ... to tell another story".¹⁰

¹⁰ Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories: Fakeness in Asian American Media Practice", in Juhasz and Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony*, 197.

A Journey through Identity and Meaning Acquisition: Multiple Incipits, Different Narrators, Overlapping Images and Sounds

In realist texts, including classic documentaries, the incipit is traditionally a place of high semantic concentration and a fundamental locus where the moves and intentions of the text are introduced. *Halving the Bones* is composed of several different, a little puzzling, incipits as the documentary focuses on three main characters and their interrelated stories. Thus, the documentary presents a recursive return to the idea of “the beginning”, an origin which is always recalled and never reached. As I begin to show here and continue to discuss throughout this article, playing with the traditional conception of the incipit, Ozeki problematizes it, destabilizing its role and outcome – both the meaning acquisition and the accessibility of the origin – through multiplicity, recursiveness, and translation. On the diegetic level, the story Ozeki offers in her fake documentary begins with the bones of Ruth’s grandmother, which she keeps in an old tea can in a closet in her apartment in New York. When her grandmother died, five years before, Ruth went to Tokyo where the Japanese relatives performed the “hone wake” ceremony, “the dividing of the bones”. After the grandmother’s cremation (or reduction to the bones), they made a careful selection “with a pair of wooden chopsticks”, choosing “a bit of rib, a fragment of skull and another piece, too”, in order for Ruth to bring the bones back to her mother in Connecticut as a consolation for her loss. Her mother had not gone to the funeral in Japan because “it was bad timing”. Five years later, after three moves and a divorce, Ruth still has the bones. While her mother has never asked about them, Ruth decides that something must be done about the bones: “the idea of her grandmother, fragmented and ignored, has begun to bother her”. This is the beginning of Ruth’s journey through her grandmother’s documents and the personal belongings included in the box she had also taken with her from Japan: a journey through her family legacy and memory, as well as an actual journey to finally see her mother in Connecticut. “It was like having the bones was a catalyst, and suddenly I found myself thinking more and more about Mom, and I started to remember all these stories about her family”. The bones provide the pretext for the journey, not an uncommon trope for a documentary, to understand the roots of the filmmaker’s crisis. From here, the documentary offers a rich exploration of what it means to *be half*: seeking her roots and confronting the different possibilities in her family’s story become an experience that enables Ruth to sketch an identity based now on memories, now on cultural references, and finally on the encounter with both her mother and grandmother, which re-signifies all the previous elements. I would argue that at the end of her journeys, both geographical (to Japan, Connecticut, Hawaii) and metaphorical (into memory, heritage, the past, the parts of the self), Ruth does not join the dots of her maternal family line, but nevertheless her sense of her own place in life, which is another way of saying her identity, has changed. Finding a means of telling her own story in

her own way creates a partial healing for her split self, while memory is no longer sealed and untouchable, but functions as an echo informing the filmmaker's present.

On a textual level, the story begins with Hawaiian music played over color-painted images of the blue sea, palm trees, and sunsets, followed by a photograph of a Japanese child in a cardboard box that says "dole", and then the words that compose the subtitle appear on screen as typed on the spot: "making a family album?". While the camera focuses on Ruth sitting at a desk in her apartment typing at a computer, over the clicking of the keys we can still hear the faint Hawaiian guitar and then the first speaking voice begins to talk. The voice introduces Ruth with a sentence pronounced in Japanese and then repeated in a heavily Japanese-accented English. As Ruth looks through the content of the cardboard box from Japan, digging out photographs from the 1920s – a young Japanese man, dressed in a suit and a hat, standing next to a stalk of sugarcane, and an old "Imperial Japanese Government Passport", showing the pictures of two young Japanese children and of a young Japanese woman in a kimono – the Japanese-accented voice tells us about Ruth's halved condition, about her sense of incompleteness, and her dilemma about what to do with her grandmother's bones. Next, the music turns into a traditional Japanese song and we hear another female voice, speaking in an unaccented American English. The voice introduces herself as Ruth over a black-and-white image of a Japanese infant's face, upside down. Blaming her Japanese mother for the choice of her name, the voice explains why she does not like it: in Japanese Ruth becomes "Rusu" meaning "not at home" or "absent".¹¹ Ruth's name speaks to her feeling of being split between her father's Americanness and her mother's Japaneseness: "wherever I am", she says, "I am always different". Finally, over the same Japanese music, an old video, still in black-and-white, shows her mother walking toward the camera and entering in the family's house in Connecticut. Now Ruth introduces her mother through the American stereotype of Japanese women as "delicate flowers, or reeds bending in the wind, or clinging vines", a stereotype that her mother contradicts, as revealed both by Ruth's words, which describe her as "strong and pragmatic", "never shy about bodily functions", and never "modest about life", and the film's images, which show her in her striped, man-style pajama, brushing her teeth, combing her hair, and blowing her nose.

Within the first seven minutes of the documentary, we have been offered several overlapping images and their counter-images, sounds and their echoes. Ozeki demonstrates how powerful a sound can be in changing the meaning of an image. The two combinations, Hawaiian soundtrack-Japanese voice-over and Japanese music-American unaccented voice, create a distortion in the visual-aural perception of the movie: does the music fail to match the voice that speaks, or maybe not? Similarly, the first narrator, whose accent suggests a non-native speaker and who later reveals herself to be Matsuye, Ruth's grandmother, tells us not just

¹¹ In her most recent novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), which is also a sort of fictional autobiography, Ozeki goes back to the problematics of her name and its meaning in both English and Japanese.

who Ruth is, but her deep thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, the second narrator, who speaks in the first person for Ruth, narrates about her mother and her identity, before starting to read the story of her grandmother from the latter's memoir. In *Halving the Bones*, therefore, meaning acquisition is a complex process: not only are sounds and images put in a problematic relationship, while the narrator is split in two or three voices, shaking our faith in the authority of the textual figure, but also writing and reading are converging activities. The documentary requires an understanding of a bilingual, bicultural context. Ozeki alerts the viewer that the sound in this documentary, both music and narration, can shift easily between English and Japanese, and that access to the linguistic code can generate meaning or its opposite, confusion and misunderstanding. At the same time, challenging the notion of a singular and fixed meaning that can be found in language, in words, in images, or in all of their combinations, Ozeki opens up to multiple and multi-directional translations. The alteration and manipulation of images and sounds emphasize translation as a process of reading and re-reading (and of writing and re-writing) performed by the filmmaker and her "characters", who extend the responsibility to the viewer as well. Translation here involves also translating English into English, as the grandmother's voice translates herself from Japanese, and Ruth retranslates her accented words into American English. But translation is necessarily foregrounded as a political issue, since translation is the primary struggle in a journey of whatever kind.

As Eve Oishi notes, even the title and subtitle of Ozeki's documentary evoke the multi-layered nature of any meaning. The subtitle – making a family album? – highlights that each story, included those based on images and documents, is in fact a construction, invention, and intervention produced by someone who *makes* the stories. If the question mark leaves us with the idea that the film is going to raise more questions than it will answer, the title itself contains a pun:

The pun in the title, "*Halving the Bones*," splits the visual and the aural reception of the title; it means different things if one is reading it or hearing it. This split between "halve" (to divide), and "have" (to own) echoes Ruth's own dilemma with what to do with the bones, but the troubling duality of the word also serves as the inaugural problem and force of her film the splitting ("halving") of meaning performed by the film, and implied by the very medium of representation, becomes the key to understanding ("having"), even in a contingent way, Lounsbury's elusive family and their stories.¹²

¹² Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories", 203-4.

Thus, the first few minutes of *Halving the Bones* make it clear that no text, image, or meaning is ever presented as pure representation of the profilmic and each one envisages the creative intervention of the filmmaker. Moreover, the first few scenes present and fix on the screen the three main characters of the documentary, Ruth, her grandmother, and her mother, metaphorically connected by their bones which are "tissue, they grow and change, and die with the body", still remaining, after the

Japanese funeral, within the family. What follows is their stories.

Coloring Geopolitical and Gender Images: The Gaps in the Story of Ruth's Grandparents

Even though the first story introduced in the documentary is the story of Ruth's mother's birth, misdiagnosed as a cancer, Ruth comments "the story really starts with my grandmother. My grandmother's name was Matsuye and before she died she wrote an account of her life". While it seems clear that Ruth is reading from her grandmother's memoir, the story is told again in accented English by Matsuye herself, who explains that she was born in 1982 in Tokyo, "capital of Empire of Japan", and at 17 she traveled to Hilo, Hawaii, as a picture bride. The decision of her heartbreaking departure was taken by her father who, being "fond of geography and deeply impressed with the vast size of the world", believed that "the destiny of Japan was beyond its borders and it was the duty of Japanese people to disseminate throughout the world". In Hawaii, she married a young man "of artistic and scientific disposition", who was a botanic student that sought his fortune in Hawaii and made his living by taking photographs of the many species of plants he could find on the island. Since "he needed a wife to assist him in his labor, this was described in his application for matrimony"; Matsuye becomes a photographer's assistant, whose task is to put color in her husband's photographs. During this explanation we see on the screen the same palm trees and landscape pictures we have seen at the opening of the documentary, but this time they show a stormy environment in black-and-white. While we hear a no more reassuring music, we understand that the initial pictures of a very appealing Hawaiian landscape are the ones tinted by Matsuye. Moreover, as Matsuye talks about her predetermined destiny, creepy images of women's head masks hanging on the wall alternate on the screen with old family pictures and images of classified natural items (dried plants, feathers, a framed butterfly), both in sepia color. The troubling combination of music and images casts doubt on Matsuye's claim that once she arrived on the island "it was love at first sight". As the color and the much happier Hawaiian music return, the camera focuses again on Ruth in her apartment, working on some photographs, repeating in her unaccented English her grandmother's last words about love, but revealing that it was a lie and that relatives told her differently.

If Matsuye's life is determined by the communion of interests between her father and her husband, both fond of science and foreign places, while she, obedient to both, does not seem to have a choice of her own, Ozeki complicates this simple association between the two men. Matsuye's father embodies the Japanese imperialistic and patriarchal ideology according to which Japanese people have the duty to colonize the world, but his first son is kept in Japan as his heir, while his daughter is sent abroad. Her husband's story, on the other hand, locates

him in a different geopolitical context: he emigrated to Hilo, “when Hawaii was still a monarchy”, to work on the sugarcane plantations as an indentured servant. It is only because he was talented and “a strange man” with almost magical abilities (such as being able to stick skewers through his body or walk over sharp swords without bleeding), that he succeeded in becoming a photographer, a poet, and a collector: “he catalogued exotica and was drawn by twisted forms in nature. He was a young man, he had a camera and a brand new wife. People say I am like him”. At this point, Ruth shows us a few home videos, titled in French, that her grandfather made in Hawaii. Commented by Ruth and then by Matsuye, the videos show Matsuye walking, always alone, around their house: the camera frames her body always from a far distance and we mostly see the woman’s back or her profile. The two women’s narrations once again tell different stories: on the one hand, Ruth comments the scenes saying that her grandmother was “a young bride recently imported from Tokyo”, and that she hated Hilo since “there was nothing, no civilization, no entertainment, no culture, yabanna kuni, a ‘country of savages’ she called it. Savages, palm trees, and a husband she married through a photograph”. Ruth adds that through these movies she had tried to imagine what must have been Matsuye’s life when she was young: “I have watched these movies over and over again trying to find a clue in her face or in her posture”, she explains, even though the video never shows Matsuye’s face and her body is mostly hidden by plants, but “the account she wrote of her life is a little help, she spent her life tinting photographs and she applied the same technique to her autobiography”. On the other hand, already questioned by Ruth, Matsuye’s narrative recounts, over a lively, Japanese pop song, that she began to love the island with its wild natural beauty and that, being still a child, “the island was full of magic for me and I found my freedom there”.

This section ends with the camera focused on two bird cages while Matsuye tells us the story of how she sadly embarked on a ship to go back to Tokyo in order to have her stomach cancer removed. One more time here, Ruth questions the accuracy of her grandmother’s memoir: “Here again she appears to stray from the truth”, she says, revealing how once on board, Matsuye realized that she was four months pregnant with her daughter Masako. Ruth confesses her own suspects that her grandmother made up the whole cancer story to escape from Hawaii, and reluctantly returned to Hilo several years later because “it was her duty and she had no choice”. If Ruth’s grandfather is forced by economic necessity to become a Hawaiian, he also makes the deliberate choice to redefine his role as a worker in that economy. Although claiming an artistic identity along with her grandfather, Ruth has put a personal as well as historical distance between Matsuye’s father and husband, Ozeki does not erase the gender dynamics in her grandparents’ relationship and in their respective opportunities for agency: he finds his place in the American Dream, accumulating wealth through his hard work and personal talent; Ruth’s grandmother did not choose to go to Hilo, nor did she choose her

husband or her profession. However, Matsuye is never portrayed as the performer of domestic tasks or the bearer of Asian traditions and rituals, as in the most classic representation of the picture bride. On the contrary, she finds a way to go back to Tokyo and then to return to the United States where, during the war, when her husband is interned, she is able to support herself by coloring photographs and makes enough money to send some to her husband in the camp. While the video shows again images of a young Matsuye in a light dress walking on the beach, Ruth explains:

she was tough and pragmatic, like most Japanese women, and she did her best to live where she had to live and love what was available. And it's to her credit that she succeeded and chose to remember her life this way. Perhaps her memories weren't altogether accurate, but when she died at the age of 95 in an old people's home in a bleak suburb of Tokyo, Hawaii was still the paradise she painted it to be. Those are the facts but the problem remains: what are you supposed to do with a can of bones?

Whether it is the grandmother's unreliable memory, her imagination, or the granddaughter's reconstructions and approximations, Ruth's conclusive words in this section of the documentary relaunch the idea of invention and coloring as a further, most important means of agency. Ruth also connects her grandmother's story back to both the narrative of her mother's birth with which the grandmother's story had started, and her own journey to bring the bones to her mother.

The second story, in fact, is a return to the beginning. Once again, we are told the story of the cancer, but this time it is Masako herself who discusses it in an interview conducted by her daughter. Looking straight into the camera on a medium close-up (the camera focuses on her head and shoulders), Masako talks about the inventive nature of memory, which can never be accurate because unconsciously people "want to color it, and make it more interesting". While she is still musing on memory, the documentary shows Ruth packing her car and starting her trip to Connecticut. Before getting to her mother, Ruth tries to explain her intentions to the viewers, but ends up introducing another level of uncertainty. She acknowledges:

up until now I haven't been a hundred per cent accurate, there are a couple of things that I made up, like my grandmother's autobiography for example. She never really wrote one, so I made it up from the real family stories I heard from her and also from my other relatives. I did sort of the same thing with these home movies. I have seen a photo of my grandfather holding a movie camera, so I know he really did make movies but his camera and films were all confiscated after Pearl Harbor. I made up these things because I never really knew my grandparents, and now they are dead and I didn't have very much to go on. I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them.

Anyway I just want to set the record straight, even though I made up the way I represented them, the facts of their life are all true, and I did have my grandmother's bones in my closet for the last five years and now they are in the car and I am going home to deliver them to Mom.

Ruth's fictional representations attempt to account for her memories of events she never witnessed and the impossibility of getting to know those events through the people that did witness them. Also, Ruth's in(ter)ventions are dictated by a more personal necessity on her side to connect herself with her origins and to expose intimacies of experience with her family. Finally, her fictional work seeks to fill in the historical gaps in a way that does not merely cover the gaps, as if Japanese American history represented only an omission from a straighter historical account. Ruth has to fabricate memories exactly because "the facts of their life are all true": her grandfather's movies were confiscated when he was interned, and there are no letters exchanged between him and his wife and daughter to help her understand who her grandparents were, because all the family members were classified as enemy aliens and were not allowed to keep their correspondence. Therefore, Ruth's in(ter)ventions bring histories and meaning into being, specifically as they integrate and problematize the historical gaps. As Oishi explains, by inventing her grandparents' lives, Ozeki "makes visible the historical circumstances that prevented the evidence from being made or from surviving".¹³ ¹³ Ibid., 206. Moreover, I argue that the grandmother's story, which is presented as the starting point for the family history, is revealed here to be a fictional one, a fabricated, desired but unretrievable, origin. Thus, Ruth's in(ter)vention serves both to disclose the historical geopolitical, economic, and gender dynamics in the past lives of Japanese migrants and to connect those lives to the reality of Japanese American people in the present, specifically, as I am going to discuss in the next paragraph, to the reality of the other two women in the documentary and to their relationship.

Stereotypes, Intimacies, Personal Wishes: Masako's Gaze at Her Own Story

After Ruth has "set the record straight" and admitted that she feels nervous about meeting her mother because they have been avoiding each other for years, the story goes back to Masako. Posing again as in a classic interview, Masako begins one more time to mention the story of her birth as a tumor, and explains how her daughter Ruth believed in that story and how the tumor story affected her whole life. In fact, the tumor determined her birth in Japan, otherwise she would have been an American citizen, and she declares: "the fact that I was born in Japan made all the difference in my life". The materiality of the Japanese woman's life, which was never evoked for Matsuye, now invests Masako: we watch a black-and-white movie of Masako in her kitchen attentively intent to stuffing a turkey for Thanksgiving or alternatively taking care of a baby, while Ruth's voice-over narrates

Masako's life explaining that she gave up her career to become a wife and a mother. The images we see, then, tell us of a passive and servile Japanese woman, reinstating the American racist and gendered representation. Meanwhile, over some black-and-white cartoons (about a rooster that becomes a vulture with the Japanese rising Sun in the background, and a boat that explodes leaving the screen to a sign that says "regrettable incident please"), Ruth lists the other American stereotypes about Japanese people: "the Yellow Peril, the malignant Japanese that had to be excised, the inscrutable Japanese that couldn't be trusted. I have seen these images all my life and I believed them". However, Ruth has already undermined twice the stereotypes behind the Western image of the Japanese woman, precisely by introducing her mother as "tough and pragmatic" and recalling her characterization when she narrates about her grandmother's personal life choices. But here the portrayal of her mother is enriched with more details: after Masako graduated from high school in Hawaii, she could not get a job like the American girls, so she went back to school first in Japan and then in the United States, where she obtained a Ph.D. from Yale. Similarly to her mother Matsuye, Masako did not surrender to the historical, cultural, and political circumstances of her life: she built up a career for herself before becoming a mother at the age of 42, and if Ruth doubts that the trade off made her happy, nothing allows us to suppose that it was not Masako's own choice.

Throughout the whole interview Masako, the Japanese woman who contradicts the stereotypes, looks straight into the camera. The second story in *Halving the Bones* consists of relatively conventional interviews with Ozeki's real mother: she speaks to an off-screen interviewer in fluent, though accented English, and we never hear Ruth interject a question, but these interviews are intercut with Ruth's own thoughts and with footage of her mother at work inside the house. Ozeki frames her mother in the private space of her house, and this intimate location allows the viewer an entrance into the inner life of both mother and daughter. Thus, Masako's look into the camera is as direct and critical as her gaze at her own political existence. Ruth's own perspectives and her mother's stories of the past come to occupy the same space at one and the same time. Far from the journalistic style or the detached approach of the classic documentary tradition, this emotional approach to her mother's narration creates intimacy among the characters and between the characters and the viewer, while at the same time questioning the stereotype of Asians as emotionless, inscrutable people. What follows is, in fact, a more dialogical sequence in which Ruth has finally arrived at her mother's house and the two of them go through all the items included in the cardboard box that belonged to Matsuye, the third absent woman. They dig out and discuss Matsuye's old jacket, parts of a handwritten letter, Matsuye's passport, some pictures of Matsuye, Masako and her brother, the chronological chart of Masako's father's relatives, along with some other documents that reveal how his first arrival in Honolulu took place on the fourth of July, 1896, at the age of 16. Finally, Masako

and Ruth read his journal, where he used to write poems about his experience in the concentration camp in Houston in 1942. While mother and daughter look at these memories from the past, try to read Japanese characters, decode them, and learn hidden details of their family's past, their relationship consolidates again. In the end, Ruth is able to collect a few pieces of information about the family: her grandfather was released from internment camp in April, 1946, after four years of imprisonment; disenchanted with Hawaii and the United States, in 1960 he decided to move his family back to Japan, where he died a few years later. Similarly, watching the video Ruth made of herself performing a ceremony over her grandparents' grave in Tokyo, Masako is able to see for the first time the place where her parents are resting, and Ruth comments: "I thought the cemetery went quite well, as we actually visited it there together, it had a proper solemn atmosphere, Mom seemed to get the feeling of it even though she doesn't like very much graveyards". Three incongruous images and sounds once again emerge in this sequence: Masako's reactions at the sight of the memories from her parents' past along with Ruth's happiness at her mother's unexpected joy, the two women's lighthearted and giggling conversations, and the personal tragedies behind the box of stuff from Japan.

In the third part of the documentary, Ruth finally gives her mother the bones, performing the cathartic act that initiated her journey and her quest. Masako utters lively exclamations over the beauty of the tea can that preserves the bones and the coloration of the bones that look as if painted. Over Masako's laughs and affectionate gaze, Ruth tells her about a memory she has of visiting her grandmother in Japan before she died. Ruth *believes* that on that occasion Matsuye told her that she did not want to be buried in Japan, but she wanted her bones to be brought back to Hawaii and thrown into the ocean. Earlier Ruth had already told us about her visits to her grandmother in Japan in the final years of her life and about her posthumous wish. But then she had confessed: "my Japanese wasn't that good at the time, and I might have been completely mistaken about what she'd said". Again, the linguistic code fails to produce stable meanings and translation appears to be a fundamental step in the process of understanding. At the same time, the endless instability of meaning opens up to different possibilities. Ruth ends up asking her mother what she wants to be done with the bones. Masako's specific instructions occupy the section of the film called "Mom's wishes (a projection)". Here, the Hawaiian music returns and we see images of shores, falls, and the coastline, followed by images of Ruth traveling in Hawaii and meeting her mother's old friends. The snapshots are intercut with Masako's conversation with her daughter in her apartment, where she expresses the desire to keep her mother's bones with her until she herself dies, after which she would like to have her ashes or bones mixed with her mother's. Only at that point Ruth should bring them both to Hilo and throw them both into the ocean. As her mother talks, we see Ruth performing her wish on the spot: standing on a cliff, she throws ashes from a bag

into the ocean. Her mother's wish has been projected immediately onto the screen, making us think that her mother died and Ozeki is editing past and present visual materials in her posthumous documentary. However, as the scene of Ruth throwing the ashes into the ocean fades, it leaves place to a quick black-and-white snapshot of Matsuye putting her feet into the water from one of the fake grandfather's home videos, and then the film moves to images of Ruth walking on the same shore in the present. Matsuye's voice comes back one last time to cast doubt on Ruth's command of Japanese and their mutual ability to understand each other: "I have no idea if she understands me at all. I wonder, will she remember me after I am gone?". Closing her role with a question, Matsuye connects this final part to the beginning of the documentary, when Ruth's quest is established through both the possibility of making a family album, as suggested by the subtitle, and the dilemma about what to do with the bones. Herself questioning the authenticity of her granddaughter's performance, Matsuye's last words reveal, as Peter Feng maintains, that cinema is "a technology not of reality but of fantasy: rather than depict the way things are, it shows us the way things could be".¹⁴

¹⁴ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 2.

"Family relationships are like family stories": A Documentary to Re/produce the Messiness of History, Genealogy, and Identity in Ruth's Present

In the final part of this article, I am going to focus on some thematic and textual devices and techniques that Ozeki implements in her documentary in order to mess up the preexisting cultural categories and the documentary tradition. Throughout her film, Ozeki's creative act consists of documenting history and memories, cultural stereotypes, past and present family stories, the characters' ideas and feelings. Textually structured through repetition, doubling, and the continuous circling back to an origin which is impossible to grasp once and for all, the documentary brings up a process of generative messing up that reflects on the ongoing system of racism, the double bind behind gender dynamics, as well as on the need for home and a meaningful mother-daughter relationship. Finally, the documentary reaches back to itself, reflecting on the artistic process. The fictional nature of both the cinematic medium and Ozeki's specific story continues, in fact, to unravel through the credits. Over another Hawaiian song, as we watch a moving picture of Ruth as a little child, we read the actors' names and learn the role they played in the documentary. Among the actors that played all the family members – "baby Ruth", "young Mom", "young grandma", "young dad", and "Masako Lounsbury (mom)" – we get the confirmation that Masako has appeared on screen "as herself", but find out that "young grandma" was actually impersonated by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury. Therefore, not only has Ruth's voice spoken for herself and it has been reading/fabricating Matsuye's thoughts throughout the documentary, but Ozeki has been the actor playing both herself and Matsuye. Linda Peckham writes that "if an actress playing the character of a real person in

the style of documentary then appears in a documentary as herself, the question ‘who is speaking?’ becomes a much more radical question of identity itself, or at least a questioning of the demarcation of (a) subjectivity with respect to history”.¹⁵ The “fake” subject points to the absence of the “real” speaker, an absence that holds in itself the connotations of internment, censorship, and death, but also the determination of the filmmaker to *make* a witness of herself, translating human experience into a text, into record, and into history. Ozeki does not have full access to authentic, private and public, historical materials, therefore she makes her own images and keeps them in a productive tension with her own video, as the result of her own re-constructions. Thus, her autobiographical documentary is an act of *responsibility*: Ozeki assumes responsibility for her family’s story, answering or deferring the questions it generates through her own imagination and her own body, with no surrogates, and of course, in so doing, she confesses her limitations.

¹⁵ Linda Peckham, “Surname Viet Given Name Nam: Spreading Rumors and Ex/Changing Histories”, in Peter Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 240.

On a more personal level, it is evident now that Ruth has been the stand-in for her grandmother in her grandfather’s fake movies, the ones Ruth first declares to have watched over and over again in an effort to understand her grandmother’s life, and then admits to having actually made them herself: “I thought I would understand them better if I just pretended to be them”. Ruth decides to inhabit her grandmother’s reality in order to claim Matsuye’s experience as if it were her own. By shooting her grandmother’s life many years later, Ozeki forces the viewer to ask her/himself what has really changed other than the specific historical policies. Obviously Ruth still feels embedded in the racist discourse she has inherited from her mother’s side of the family. On several occasions, Ruth explains how different she had felt growing up, and how she had always blamed her mother for these feelings. She even confesses that “on some levels I really did think of Mom as manifesting certain characteristics of a cancer. The metaphor contained something that I recognized, a deeply rooted conflation of sickness and race”. Later Ruth adds that she felt as if she shared those characteristics:

Cancer invades the body, mine was different from everyone else’s in Connecticut and it was obviously because of Mom, her genes in my body had prevailed. So, you see, it was this Eurocentric and primitive understanding of history and genetics that left me susceptible to a metaphoric confusion about my mother’s origins, she started life as a tumor, and cancerous she’d spread. I was her offspring and hardly benign.

While we can understand the film as a “fake”, a copy of someone else’s life located in the past, nonetheless, each scene resonates in Ruth’s present. Ozeki extensively uses the technique of repetition not only to undermine one of the documentary’s main features, the incipit, and its capacity to convey meanings, as I discussed previously, but also to create a back-and-forth structure between two time periods, two nations, as well as between the multiple parts that compose *Halving the Bones*. On numerous occasions, the documentary circles back to topical

events in the family. If on the one hand this strategy illustrates that personal memory is malleable and any personal interpretation of the events is necessarily subjective, on the other hand the compulsion to repeat signals both Ruth's desire for an intimate connection with her family and her generational need to claim historical moments she might have not physically experienced, but of which she is somehow a product. Even though Ruth has no material access to the events that have shaped her grandparents' and her mother's life, yet their meanings have created her. Questioning who and what deserves historical preservation and narration is what provoked the repetitive strategies of her documentarian project.

After the credits, the documentary ends with Ozeki's dedication to her parents: "this film is dedicated to my Mom and Dad, who are alive & well and living in Connecticut..." The already suspected scene of Ruth throwing the ashes into the ocean is thus revealed as a fake one, but, as Eve Oishi notes:

no more and no less than any of the previous evidence that has been found, borrowed, or created. As the title suggests, the endless 'halving' and separating of the meat of myth from the bone of truth becomes a way of owning it, of creating a connection between people and the past. This process reveals and articulates the reasons why those connections are both irretrievably lost and always being imagined anew.¹⁶

¹⁶ Eve Oishi, "Screen Memories", 208.

Being a paradoxical and fluid space, far from homogeneous, family stories enter circulation as family memories through oral telling and retelling. Therefore, they are always fragmentary, associative, abridged, disorderly, and often attach themselves to photographs and home movies. *Halving the Bones* overlaps Ruth's own imagined narratives on the uncertain images from the past. In the impossibility of bringing order to the past as well as to the present through recovering and remembering, Ozeki adopts the creative *messiness* of the endless layers of new narratives and new meanings as the only strategy to make sense of her history and to feel kinship and belonging with her family. Thus, documenting, as much as remembering, is a generative, creative, fictionalizing act. In her own documentary, Ozeki can tell a story that she needs to know, one that is at once true and fake, and therefore beyond, but also linked to, reality and all that the real facts authorize and disguise. Ozeki suggests that identity and history, events and their representations, become most authentic and empowering when mediated through imagination and fictional narrations.

Talking about the distant relationship with her mother, Ruth reflects: "I think family relationships are like family stories, you have to practice them to keep them alive". In *Halving the Bones* the theme of home, roots, and motherhood is prevalent and is significantly linked to Ozeki's overall literary and cultural project. In the documentary, Ozeki builds on this theme by using the same narrator to tell about Ruth's personal thoughts, and her mother's and grandmother's personal history,

playing with the idea of doublings and triplings, playing with the conflation of identity and signification. The documentary mostly speaks from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker, who eventually acknowledges her subjective position. But, the stories are narrated starting from a series of photographs which evoke the lives of the maternal side of her family. The stories are also narrated through the three women's recollections, reconstructions, and inventions related to both Japan and Hawaii, and to a Japanese American identity that Ruth never wanted (or was never able) to assume as her own. At the same time, Ruth cannot help feeling implicated in her mother's and grandmother's stories as both *others'* and *her own*. As this feeling simultaneously of departure and belonging mirrors Ruth's split self, her being "half", and her meaningful name, *Halving the Bones* initiates a more extensive reflection on motherhood. While Ruth feels disconnected from her own mother to the point of losing contact with her for years, in an interview Masako laments how obstructed was the relationship between her and her mother, Matsuye, who always refused to tell her daughter about her troublesome past, while she opened up much more with Ruth. Just before this interview, as Ruth's voice wonders why her mother has never asked her about Matsuye's, her own mother's, bones, we see a few snapshots from an old black-and-white home movie, representing Ruth and Masako together in the kitchen but each on one side of the room, so that their backs are against each other and mother and daughter do not exchange a look. After Masako's interview, we hear again Ruth's comments and she says: "Maybe it's just too much to expect that your mother would suddenly open up to you after so little contact all these years. I guess this is all about just paying attention to your habits with people". *Halving the Bones* is precisely Ozeki's effort to remedy the distance. The documentary, thus, participates in a process of healing, allowing a kind of communion through the act of recreating and reimagining. Yet, Ozeki makes it clear that this is a partial healing, an attempt at mother-daughter reconciliation. Ruth continues her reflections on mother-daughter relationships:

The more I thought about it, the harder it was for me to accept that Mom wouldn't go to her own mother's funeral just because she couldn't bend her leg. It sounded so pragmatic but I guess it made sense, she has been separated from her parents for most of her life, first by the tumor and then by the war. Over the years, she forgot what it is like to be a daughter, I wanted to make sure it didn't happen to me, that's why I was giving her the bones.

Unfolding, the documentary shows that the three women have much in common. Throughout the film, Ruth is engaged in describing herself as similar to her grandfather in all possible ways, thus distancing herself from her female ancestors. However, in the end, we learn not only that Ruth has embodied her grandmother all along, but Matsuye's voice, which as we now know belongs to Ruth, claims that Ruth "is a big girl and seems to take after her father. She does not visit me often, which is perhaps due to the name she has been called. In the

English language, it may be a very fine name, but in Japanese ‘Rusu’ means ‘absent’ or ‘not at home’. She takes after her mother and me in this way”. It is only by gathering together multiple images and voices of women in the documentary that a dialogue can be established between them; only by including the silent interstices, the contradictions in the way women see themselves and one another, can a history be traced. The film is part of a process of reconciliation through the discovery of the fact that despite their differences, their potential for unity lies in what they share in their mother-daughter relationships. Even though at the end of her journey to meet her mother, Ruth notices the discrepancies in their personalities, she is able to say:

Mom lives entirely in the present and I have to respect that. Still, I was satisfied with what she and I had done. Unpacking grandma’s things and taking care of her remains gave us something that we could do together. It made our relationship important again, and we found a closeness that we never lost. Mom lives in the present but I don’t, I spend a lot of time poking around in the past or imagining the future.

Going through the signs of Matsuye’s past, of fixity and dispersion, Ruth and her mother create postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch intends the term:

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation It characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1997), 22.

Thus, *Halving the Bones*, composed of all the photographs, documents, home videos, letters, books, objects that belonged to their family and that witness to its history, presents a narrative which is already written into Ruth’s and her mother’s gaze through memory, recognition, repetition, ritual, and imagination. The photographs and videos infiltrate their present, making them laugh, get nostalgic, recount fragments of the story outside the frame, finally allowing them to recover their *affiliative look*.¹⁸

The Name’s Issue: The Epilogue

Halving the Bones ends with one last section called “epilogue (a Lounsbury)”, introduced by the same picture of a Japanese child in a cardboard box that says “dole” that we had seen at the very beginning of the documentary. Ruth’s voice narrates that before leaving Hawaii, she paid a visit to Pearl Harbor, which surprisingly is one of Honolulu’s major attractions especially for Japanese tourists

¹⁸ Hirsch describes the affiliative look saying: “recognising an image as *familial* elicits ... a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an *affiliative* look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative ... it is idiosyncratic, untheorisable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our own sense of particularity”. Ibid., 93.

with a camera. We see Ruth visiting the place and hear her describing it: over there, there is a gift shop where you can buy souvenirs of the war, and a tour that starts with a black-and-white movie about the bombing and proceeds with a boat trip to the memorial built to keep the record of the *U.S.S. Arizona*, which was sunk by the Japanese, killing over a thousand men on board. As Ruth reflects on the men's bodies "sealed in a watery grave" at the bottom of the Ocean, she visits the shrine room at the far end of the memorial. Here, she notices that the marble tablet, on which are inscribed all the names of the men whose bodies are interred, memorializes also a "T. W. Lounsbury". Wondering if that is a relative of her father's, Ruth realizes: "This was a disturbing discovery. In my search to come to terms with my mother and her past, I neglected my father's side of the family entirely". The very final scenes bring Ruth back to her past, showing another home movie. This time the movie is about Ruth as a little child, playing with a baseball glove together with her father. Ruth's voice lingers one more time on the troubling issue of her name. She says:

First of all, this business about being named Ruth, I know I sort of blamed my Mom for it, but it really wasn't her fault at all. My Dad's family came from upstate New York, so naturally he was a big Yankee's fan, and the truth of the matter is that when I was born the big consolation for me not being a boy was that he got to name me Ruth, you know, after the Babe. He wanted me to be an all American kid.

This final overturning of meaning is especially relevant since it changes the meaning of Ruth's identity as she herself has intended it and presented it to us up to this point. This move subverts the idea that it was because of her mother's Japanese genes that Ruth has felt condemned to be different and unsettled, reassessing the responsibilities between her parents in generating her as "half". Moreover, saying that her father wanted her to be a boy and an all American one, Ruth repositions the gendered and racial perspective in the gaze of her American white father. By challenging a fixed, essentialized Japanese American identity, *Halving the Bones* attempts to redefine personal and cultural identity not as a matter of simple inheritance, but as an active cultural construct. The making of Asian American cultural identity is, as Lisa Lowe writes, "a much 'messier' process than unmediated vertical transmission from one generation to another".¹⁹

¹⁹ Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences", *Diaspora*, 1.1 (Spring 1991), 27.