

Reclaiming a Space in American History with the Collective Voices of the Japanese Picture Brides in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

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ABSTRACT

Julie Otsuka's 2011 novel *The Buddha in the Attic* documents the history of 'picture brides' who were some of the earliest Japanese female immigrants to the USA and whose narratives remain unwritten, forgotten, and erased. The collective voice of the picture brides in *Buddha* narrativises the women's collective loss and effectively delivers a transgressive gesture of resistance toward a national history that refuses to provide a space for those narratives. This paper focuses on *Buddha's* literary strategies of using the first-person plural narrative and the repetition of 'we', instead of the 'I' voice that show how the picture brides failed to be recognised as individual national subjects in the USA and at the same time shows that these voices refuse to be constrained in a singular narrative. This article argues that Otsuka uses a collective voice as a tool with which to inscribe the shared experience of loss, carving out narratives of the picture brides as a subversive alternative to mainstream versions of American history and further claim that collectivity can be a significantly powerful means of occupying a narrative space in the novel.

Keywords: World War II, diaspora, picture brides, historical fiction, collective loss

INTRODUCTION

As young women in their kimonos slowly disembarked from the ship that had seized their bodies for months, they were taking their very first steps onto American land. After exchanging photographs along with family genealogy, wealth, and education, the heads of family executed the marriage and the brides were betrothed, carrying only a little knowledge of what lay ahead. These young women, who were one of the early female Japanese immigrants to America, were called picture brides. While these women were among the earliest female Japanese immigrants¹ to the US, much of their life remains unknown. During the early 1900s, the most common way for Japanese women to enter America was through marriage. From 1885 to 1907 when mostly male emigrants left Japan for the U.S., their initial departure was promoted by the nation-state during a time in which the government of *Meiji* provided ways for the fallen rural Japanese to achieve material wealth and fulfilment that could not be found in their immediate surroundings. Japanese men 'preferred to go to the continental United States without [their] [wives]' (Azuma, 2005: 29), and remigrated from Hawaii to the American West based on their short-term contract of three years. While some women got married in Japan and immigrated to the US with their husbands, the picture bride ritual was considered the most common and most 'effective' way for Japanese women to get married and emigrate to the U.S. when taking into account the time and cost involved in the marriage.

In the USA, although the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Page Act of 1885 was targeted towards immigrants from China, racial antagonism towards Asians and Americans of Asian descent was widespread at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1906, the San Francisco Board of Education attempted to segregate Japanese and

¹ The history of Japanese diaspora, along with the term 'immigrants' to refer to the early pioneers at the American frontier, is complicated by the global politics that is intertwined with the colonial expansion of the Japanese empire, government treaties and laws that championed the influx of cheap Japanese labour force, and anti-Asian sentiments that were cemented into exclusionary tactics to prevent their settlement, leading to their detainment after the outbreak of the WWII. Tracing the transnational history of Japanese picture brides as early immigrants to the U.S. is to highlight their fluidity and multiplicity as 'transmigrants' as well as refusing to be confined within national histories but at the same time carving out narratives of the picture brides as a subversive alternative to the dominant narrative of American history represented by cultural memories embedded in White America.

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Korean American children from attending public schools, which led the Japanese government to enact the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907 and give the U.S. government the right to deny passports and entrance to Japanese immigrants, particularly that of labourers. Racist sentiments continued to rise and the exclusionary Immigration Act of 1924, despite applying quotas to all immigrants, barred immigration for Asian nationals in particular.

Despite many immigration laws that kept Asian nationals from entering the country, Japanese immigration continued to show rapid growth from the 1900s to the 1920s. Distinctively, the number of married Japanese women in the Japanese immigrant community dramatically increased:

In 1900 there were only 410 married women in immigrant society. This number increased to 5,581 by 1910 and leaped to 22,193 by 1920. These women enabled many immigrant men to enjoy a settled family life which socially reinforced the economic foundation of permanent settlement (Ichioka, 1988: 164).

The dramatic increase of married Japanese women in the 1900s cannot be explained without taking into account that there was an influx of Japanese women migrating to the U.S. despite these hostile immigration laws. Until 1924 when the quotas were enforced to more strictly restrict immigrants from Asia, Japanese women were able to gain an advantage of the loophole in the agreement and find their way into the U.S.

Julie Otsuka's 2011 novel *The Buddha in the Attic* documents the history of picture brides who were some of the earliest Japanese female immigrants to the U.S. and whose narratives remain unwritten, forgotten, and erased. As a third-generation Japanese American who has not lived through the trauma of incarceration but has embodied the memories of her mother and grandmother who has, Otsuka continues in the gesture to vocalise the silenced memories of the exiled through Japanese and Japanese Americans that still resonate today in the US. With powerful stories of the Japanese picture brides, Otsuka breaks the silence and intervenes in American history. Otsuka, however, was not the first to bring the memories of the picture brides to life by narrativising their journey to America. Yoshiko Uchida published a novel entitled *Picture Bride* in 1997 that vividly depicts the life of a young picture bride in 1917 that follows a fictional narrative of a 21-year-old Hana Omiya. Julie Otsuka's novel, on the other hand, portrays the lives of multiple Japanese picture brides during the time without introducing characters with names. *Buddha* demonstrates a distinct way of illustrating the lives of the picture brides by introducing disjointed narratives that braid together under the anonymous 'we' voice.

The use of the collective voice is a unique literary strategy that raises questions about the role of historical fiction and fictional testimonies in their attempt to testify and remember collectively. *Buddha* uses a collective voice that leaves the picture brides and their narratives anonymous, raising questions about what it means to narrate collectively and what is lost or left at the end of the narrative. The repetition of 'we,' instead of the 'I' voice in *Buddha* demonstrates the ways in which the picture brides fail to be recognised as individual national subjects and, at the same time, shows that these voices refuse to be constrained in the singular. In this article, I argue that Otsuka uses the collective voice as a tool with which to inscribe the shared experience of the Japanese picture brides and their loss to further demonstrate that collectivity can be a significantly powerful means of occupying a narrative space in a novel. Although I am aware of the ways in which collectivity for Asian/Americans² as the racial Other is tied to the history of assimilation and failure of successful integration to White America, this article is not interested in redeeming individual agency or individuality as a way of gaining American identity and citizenship. Instead, this article looks at the ways in which Otsuka plays with the relationship between collectivity and individuality, challenging whether the collective, generalised image of the picture brides is in fact the reader's unconscious at work to make sweeping generalisations of Asian/Americans as a homogenous group.

I also acknowledge that writing about Japanese picture brides as neither a generation who has experienced the loss and trauma of dislocation and incarceration during the early 20th century, nor a descendant of the Japanese picture brides, may raise potential questions on the authenticity of my historical and literary representation. As an Asian but not an American, an 'alien' living in the US who is not a legal citizen, I do not boldly claim myself as a part of the 'we' voice of the Japanese picture brides. Instead, my responsibility as a literary scholar is to amplify the voices of the misrepresented and underrepresented Asian/American women in American history during a time in which anti-Asian sentiment continues to threaten the lives of Asian/Americans in the US - regardless of one's status of legal citizenship, turning Asian/American literature into an unfinished political project towards American citizenship, beyond the legal perimeters. In *Buddha*, the stories that are narrated, using the first-person plural 'we' voice, bring attention to how literature becomes a battle site for historical representations and methods to occupy those spaces. The collective voice of the picture brides not only signifies Otsuka's alternative way of narrating

² Except for instances in which there is a need to distinguish Asian immigrants who were not considered American citizens during a specific time in history, I use the term 'Asian/American' acknowledging the complicated history of Asians and Americans of Asian ancestry in the US and in agreement with David Palumbo-Liu's argument that the term 'marks both the distinction installed between "Asian" and "American" and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement' (Palumbo-Liu, 1999: 1).

national history but the collectivised narrative that comes to exceed the sum of individual narratives, which, in turn, suggests the power of collectivity in reclaiming a historical narrative for individuals whose voices have been muted by repressive, ghettoising social forces performatively locking American history into a narrowly defined, hegemonic set piece.

INVESTING IN A HISTORY OF LOSS

Buddha is a narrative about remembering and memorialising those whose lives have been erased from history, this is a story about those who have perished, and therefore, been forgotten. Otsuka makes it clear in the epigram that *Buddha* is a narrative about remembrance and memorialising those who disappeared from history:

There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported. And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.

— Ecclesiasticus 44:8–9 (Otsuka, 2013).

The epigram calls attention to the line that exists between those who have left a name behind and those who have not. In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler refers to this line as ‘grievability’ that distinguishes certain forms of lives and deaths as grievable and others as ‘unthinkable and un-grievable’ (Butler, 2004: xiv). Butler argues that this form of national melancholia, the inability to mourn certain losses, results from ‘the erasure from public representation of the names, images, and narrative of those the US has killed’ (Butler, 2004: xiv). The public imagery of the sovereign nation is constituted upon the active forgetting of those who have no memorial. Memorialising is a way of constructing history and national histories are sites of politicised facts in which historical events are subsumed into narratives that engage with stories told subjectively by victors. As a way of talking about the existence and absence of memories that get engraved in national narratives, Marita Sturken, for instance, argues that the forgetting of the past in one culture is ‘often highly organized and strategic’ (Sturken, 1997: 8) in order to build a coherent nationalistic narrative. Forgetting is an active process required to sustain the imagined nation that subsists through this perpetual state of melancholia.

Along with many muted voices and forgotten stories that attain little recognition in American history, Otsuka allows access to narratives that have been lost by rewriting American history with the collective voice of the ‘invisible unsung women’ (Yuhas, 2012: 1) who ‘didn’t make it into the pages of the history books’ (Yuhas, 2012: 1). *Buddha* illustrates the loss experienced by the picture brides that begins and ends with their two forced migrations—arrival in America and, thereafter, the forced dislocations from their new neighbourhood homes in America to internment camps (Calisphere: University of California, 2005). During World War II, Japanese and Japanese Americans were subject to extreme political suspicion under Executive Order 9066, which laid out the premise for incarceration and its policies of indefinite detention was authorised for the protection of US citizens ‘against espionage and against sabotage’ during World War II. It further outlined how:

... any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion (The United States, Executive Office of the President, 1942: 1407).

This order directly caused 112,000 civilians of Japanese ancestry [of which two-thirds were American citizens] to be forcibly relocated and incarcerated at internment camps. The failure of the state to protect its citizens raises the question of who is defined as a ‘citizen’ in America when some of its legitimate citizens were stigmatised as agents of ‘espionage’ and ‘sabotage.’ It is only when construing citizenship beyond its legal definitions, and through the interrogation of Orientalist discourses that turn Asian/Americans into the Other, that we come to understand not only the loss, displacement, and fragmentation but also the sense of betrayal and abandonment that must have been experienced by Asian/Americans who were denizens and citizens at the time. Such Orientalist discourses overbore the legal definitions of citizenship, turning Asian/Americans into a threatening Other. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, defines Orientalism as ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (Said, 2003: 3), indicating the ways in which the nation provides itself with seemingly legitimate grounds to preserve the Western civilization from invasion. The nation’s Oriental mission to bring ‘order and civility’ continues in the US in the forms of the cultural misrepresentation of Asian and Asian Americans as subhumans in history textbooks, literature, media, and popular images.

A nation legitimises itself by situating racial Others in the margins, if not erasing them from the national narrative, it requires that citizens also actively participate in the imaginative procedures of racialisation. Racialisation

for Asian/Americans has meant being converted into the stereotype of the 'Orient' by immigration laws that barred them from successful assimilation, media representation that ridicules or exoticises them by making them into the racial Other, and Asian/Americans themselves who have been conditioned to respond to those stereotypes. In the introduction to Chinese and Japanese literature of *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, Frank Chin *et al.* note, 'What America published was, with rare exception, not only offensive to Chinese and Japanese America but was *actively inoffensive* to white sensibilities' (Chin *et al.*, 2019: 4). In response to the mainstream representation of Asian/Americans, Asian/American writers have worked within and against institutionalised racism, making Asian/American literature often a project of reclaiming and recovering the loss experienced by these racialised subjects. Similarly, Patricia Chu emphasises the role of Asian/American literature as a source that 'imaginatively transform[s] readers and protagonists into national subjects by erasing or containing their particular difference' (Chu, 2000: 3) to show how literature works as a means of asserting one's relationship to the nation and reclaiming their citizenship.

Although critics such as King-Kok Cheung, Lisa Lowe, Oscar Campomanes, Shirley Lim, and R. Radhakrishnan acknowledge that the major shift to 'heterogeneity and diaspora' (Cheung, 1997: 1) has occurred in Asian American literary scholarship, the shift does not negate the demand for the earlier exigencies to 'claim America' and understand loss experienced by subjects within the national boundaries. Rather, the commitment to taking the exiles and diasporic subjects into the field of Asian/American literature raises the need to invest in loss and displacement, beyond national borders. As a result, there has been a plethora of Asian/American literature and scholarship that has dealt with racialised loss, which to an extent has been pointed out as the limits of Asian/American literature. For instance, Colleen Lye criticises that Asian/American literary culture is 'still understood as a reaction-formation to American racism' (Lye, 2005: 454), arguing that Asian/American scholarship must move beyond discourses on loss and mourning.

Then the question is why must we persist in the investigation of racialised loss when decades of Asian/American studies scholarship has already invested so much energy into loss, displacement, and melancholia? Despite the limitations of focusing on loss and mourning, I believe that it is still too soon to move on from talking about this loss. The effort to persist in the narrative of loss is not to acquiesce in the subjection but to further unveil the lost narratives that otherwise perish. Melancholia has worked as a compelling concept for understanding the conditions of loss for people of colour and other groups that have been marginalised in the US. Asian/American scholars have departed from Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' and used melancholia as a theoretical tool to interrogate the process of assimilation and racialisation in the US. Unlike Freud who defined melancholia as a 'pathological disposition' (Freud, 1948: 243) of the individual unconscious, cultural critics Anne Anlin Cheng and David L. Eng, and psychotherapist Shinhee Han developed a theory of racial melancholia as key to addressing group identification associated with the white culture's rejection of the racial other in the process of assimilation. Eng and Han point out that the ideals of whiteness have been unattainable for racial minorities, seeing how melancholia functions on a national level as 'an unresolved process that might usefully describe the unstable immigration and suspended assimilation of Asian Americans into the national fabric' (Eng and Han, 2000: 671). Similarly, Cheng criticises that the nation operated within a 'melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection' (Cheng, 2001: 10) – the idea that the nation rejects the racial other but has a constant attachment with the racialised subject that has been suspended. In this sense, loss is more than grief experienced by the suspended individuals; it is a history inscribed on bodies.

Understanding loss and displacement as experienced by the picture brides is a way of reimagining the picture brides' history of migration. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong maintains that Japanese Americans have established a historically distinct spatial expression that is characterised by their dislocation (Wong, 1993: 120). In *Buddha*, as the women embark on a boat to America, they regard their homes in Japan as a past that they leave behind, recognising that 'there was no going back' (Otsuka, 2013: 12). The boat is always moving and nothing is guaranteed on the other end of the voyage, the expedition itself being perilous and precarious. They were sent off without any knowledge of their destination. In *Asian American Literature*, Elaine Kim states that the lives of the *Issei* (first-generation) immigrants are in a state of 'perpetual limbo' as their status remains 'suspended between two worlds, neither of which they could claim as their own' (Kim, 1982: 128). Immigration for these women is not a successful transition from an old home to a new settlement but an unyielding break that cuts ties to their families back at home, having suspended them from integrating into a new society. In fact, many picture brides did not immigrate to the US with the intention of settling down permanently but instead were initially driven by the monetary gain that would better the conditions of their families once they return to their homes in Japan.

After their arrival in America, however, the picture brides lose their connection with their families back at home. The picture brides recognise the broken familial ties when they note '[they] knew [the mothers] could not hear [them]' (Otsuka, 2013: 34). Although some of the picture brides dream that they would be able to go back to their homes after saving up enough money, the dream that they have of reuniting with their families is futile. In the dream, the picture brides remain the little girls that they were when they left their homeland:

And when we'd saved up enough money to help our parents live a more comfortable life we would pack up our things and go back home to Japan. It would be autumn, and our fathers would be out threshing in the big loquat tree and the old lotus pond, where we used to catch tadpoles in spring. Our dogs would come running up to us. Our neighbors would wave. Our mothers would be sitting by the well with their sleeves tied up, washing the evening's rice. And when they saw us they would just stand up and stare. "Little girl," they would say to us, "where in the world have you been?" (Otsuka, 2013: 53).

As it was difficult for the picture brides to maintain their connection with their families in Japan, the dreams that the picture brides have of their home also remains the same, since their departure. Time also remains suspended in the dreams of the picture brides, *Buddha* reflects the suspension, displacement, and isolation that the picture brides experience with their migration to America.

Otsuka's depictions of the picture brides trace their narrative from a point at which we see them first approaching the place that will all too soon marginalise these non-American subjects, non-white racial Others; readers watch these Japanese women on the boat as the boat slowly approaches America. The fragmented voices become a collective entity as each chapter of the novel is a collection of the women's totemic experiences in the US, such as 'first night', 'encountering the neighbours' 'giving birth' and so on. Unlike the chapters with titles like 'First Night,' 'Whites,' 'Babies,' and 'Children' that concisely summarise theme and content, the title of the first chapter—'Come, Japanese!'—does not adequately reflect the women's experience on the boat coming to America. 'Come, Japanese!' simply happens to be one of the books that the women carry with them. It is also an exception to the rest of the titles, for the picture brides are not the ones who seem to be the agents of the title, and it is deliberately ambiguous as to who is summoning the picture brides. The positional discrepancy once again raises the issue of agency over one's historical narrative: can the picture brides claim the narrative as theirs, despite having lost authority over the title of the chapter? If so, how do they reclaim their narrative and assert it within a specifically American history?

ERASURE OF SPACE WITHIN THE NATION/NARRATIVE

In order to gain access to a part of American history that has been muted, it is necessary to first interrogate the history of the citizenry within sovereign spaces, that is, those places which are 'juridically legislated, territorially situated, and culturally embodied' (Lowe, 1996: 2). The history of space being turned into place entails a history of permissions being overwritten across terrains, so that only legalised citizens are permitted to reside within the borders of the nation, those without citizenship remaining tentative others, as tenants, susceptible to deportation and exile. Examining how space was circumscribed for Asian Americans within official history allows for some insight into the ways in which citizenship is tied to the right to occupy land. At the beginning of the 20th century, Alien Land Laws were enacted in the American West to prohibit Japanese immigrants from ownership of agricultural land. The laws were implemented with the intent to hinder the settlement of immigrants of Japanese immigrants but later expanded to other Asian nationals such as Chinese, Indian, and Korean immigrants.

With California first passing its Alien Land Law in 1913, the Supreme Court approved the state's decision to deny Japanese immigrants from owning agricultural land. When farming was the predominant occupation for Japanese immigrants during this time, the Supreme Court's ruling reflects a nationwide fear prevalent at the time of being conquered by the 'Yellow Peril', the Alien Land Laws were enacted as a response to protect the nation-state. The fear of the Yellow Peril began with the Chinese immigrants who landed in California during the 1800s Gold Rush, and then transgressed to Japanese immigrants with the decrease of Chinese immigrants after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The animosity displayed towards the Asian Other continued to grow with legal, political, sociocultural systems that worked to protect white America from allegedly being 'invaded' by Asian immigrants. In the House and Senate document published in 1921, Alien Land Law specified Japanese immigrants as 'ineligible to citizenship' (The United States, 1921: 4) and argued that it was an economic imperative to prohibit Japanese immigrants from owning land:

It is the duty of our Government to protect itself and its citizens from foreign invasion and commercial and industrial exploitation, whether they come in the shape of bombarding men-of-war and devastating armies or in the shape of passenger and freight ships carrying cheap labor and cheap goods.

The West is being invaded. The process of invasion has been aptly termed 'peaceful penetration.' The invasion is by an alien people. They are a people unassimilable by marriage. They are a people who are a race unto themselves, and by virtue of that very fact ever will be a race and a nation unto themselves, it matters not what may be the land of their birth. (The United States, 1921: 4)

By specifying and distinguishing Japanese immigrants as unassimilable aliens, Congress provides the rationale for the racist agenda. The urgent language being used in the document reflects dominant fears of Japanese immigrants taking control over land on the West coast during the time. The fear that the Japanese immigrants would eventually dominate the American West allowed this sinister image of the 'Yellow Peril' to disseminate and justify discriminating against immigrants of Asian descent. The fear that many white Americans had towards the Japanese immigrants inevitably revolved around the issue of land ownership and occupancy, which became a central issue of citizenship.

The law applied exclusively to *Issei* immigrants who were not legal citizens of the U.S. however families found ways around this law. In the chapter 'Babies,' *Buddha* demonstrates the ways in which the picture brides and their families managed to own land under their *Nisei* (second-generation) children's names who were US-born citizens when they 'gave birth to babies that were American citizens and in whose names [they] could finally lease land' (Otsuka, 2013: 58). *Buddha* shows how the denial of land ownership is closely tied to the rejection of legal citizenship by highlighting the discursive practices of the Yellow Peril. In *Buddha*, the picture brides are aware of their inability to assimilate into the dominant society and white hostility when they note, '[The whites] did not want us as neighbors in their valleys. They did not want us as friends. We lived in unsightly shacks and could not speak plain English' (Otsuka, 2013: 35). Instead of being able to successfully integrate into the white society, the Japanese immigrants remain isolated in their unsightly shacks.

While the widespread fear of the Yellow Peril provided legal and political grounds for the state to prohibit Japanese immigrants from land ownership and occupancy, the myth of the model minority worked towards inhibiting access to the dominant society. Being a model minority does not produce a positive image of the racial Other but instead pressures individuals to self-discipline themselves and conform, for example to work harder for a cheaper wage. Although the term 'model minority' has been disseminated into US society since the mid-1960s, the history of the problematic term traces back to the turn of the twentieth century and the ways in which the Japanese immigrant community responded to the threat of being racialised as the 'Yellow Peril.'

U.S. racialised discourse continuously maintained its hostility towards 'Oriental' minorities, but also shifted its hostility towards one specific immigrant group or another depending on global politics. Exclusionary politics that targeted the Chinese in the mid-1800s gradually moved onto Japanese and other Asiatic ethnic groups. In the early 20th century, when the Japanese Exclusion policy was not actively in force, the primary social agenda of the Japanese community was 'to avoid the fate of Chinese in the United States—legal-political illegitimacy, cultural degradation, and social marginality' (Wu, 2014: 19). Japanese minorities strived to resemble middle-class White American values and attempted to separate themselves apart from the Chinese. In *Buddha*, the Japanese picture brides struggle to show their distinct civility and morality, segregating themselves from other immigrant groups:

We were faster than the Filipinos and less arrogant than the Hindus. We were more disciplined than the Koreans. We were more soberer than the Mexicans. We were cheaper to feed than the Okies and Arkies, both the light and the dark. *A Japanese can live on a teaspoonful of rice a day.* We were the best breed of worker they had ever hired in their lives (Otsuka, 2013: 29).

By working harder than other immigrant groups, the picture brides embrace the values of *Issei* visionaries in the hopes of successful integration. Well aware of the dangers that may fall upon them should they be seen as the Yellow Peril, the picture brides continue to make themselves small and invisible before the white society:

Whenever we left J-town and wandered through the broad, clean streets of their cities we tried not to draw attention to ourselves. We dressed like they did. We walked like they did. We made sure not to travel in large groups. We made ourselves small for them—*If you stay in your place they'll leave you alone*—and did our best not to offend. Still, they gave us a hard time (Otsuka, 2013: 52).

The picture brides try to mimic the White American ways; they avoid traveling in large groups in order to avoid being seen as a threat.

By the 1940s, the Japanese Exclusion regime was solidified and the media began to actively produce hostile images of the Japanese in the U.S. In an issue of 1941 *Time Magazine*, an article titled 'How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs' referred to the Chinese immigrants as friends while portraying the Japanese as enemies. In *Buddha*, the picture brides are constantly pushed to the margins of society. The picture brides and their families are only allowed to 'settle on the edges of [the white people's] towns' (Otsuka, 2013: 23), and when they were not allowed to reside in even the restricted parts of the towns they 'traveled on' (Otsuka, 2013: 23). The picture brides are rarely provided with the space that they feel safe and at peace. It is only when the whole house is empty and quiet that the picture brides can affirm, 'We felt calmer then. Less afraid. We felt, for once, like ourselves' (Otsuka, 2013: 42). The moment that the picture brides hold ownership of their house and agency of self is evanescent. Despite

their struggles, the Japanese picture brides were not able to avoid the similar fate of the Chinese Exclusion and became a symbol of the Yellow Peril.

AMERICAN HISTORY: HOW TO OCCUPY, (RE)CLAIM, AND NARRATIVISE

Asian/American history has been misrepresented and underrepresented throughout US culture, on the pages of history textbooks and outside the classroom in public arts, popular images, media, and national monuments. In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian American History and Culture*, Gary Okihiro maintains that Asian/American history is ‘more than an assemblage of dates’ (Okihiro, 2014: 93). Examining the ways in which Asian/American family memoirs provide access to memories and past that would otherwise be absent, Okihiro defines Asian/American history as the aspiration ‘to speak in the vernacular by including the activities of the ordinary and lowly, and plunge unapologetically into the teeming sea of human experience and daily life’ (Okihiro, 2014: 93). Similarly, Rocío G. Davis notes the importance of Asian/American autobiographies as a source that ‘crosses the frontier into history and promotes collective memory’ (Davis, 2011: 3) to show the ways in which forms of personal writings can produce intersections between the personal and the public by engaging in specific moments in history. Taking a personal and local approach to history by looking at how collective memories are constructed or erased from the dominant historical narratives is a way of weaving the histories that would otherwise remain forgotten into the existing dominant narrative, initiating an intergenerational and a transnational connection with the oppressed, abjected, and diasporic subjects formerly excluded.

For Asian/American women writers, however, they are often burdened with the role to fulfil historical accuracy when narrativising their experiences. In *Articulate Silences*, King-Kok Cheung emphasises the burden that falls upon Asian/American women writers who become responsible as a ‘spokesperson for the ethnic group as a whole’ (Cheung, 1995: 12) to accurately represent and reproduce the history of the Asian/American communities. Instead of accepting historical fiction written by Asian/American women writers as one version of the author’s historical revision, they are pressured into being ‘representative’. Since the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* in the 1990s, this provoked debates on authenticity and critiques of *The Woman Warrior* created conflicts between Chinese American male critics including Frank Chin and feminist scholars including King-Kok Cheung (Cheung, 1990: 234–251). Years later, in *Chinese American Literature Without Borders*, Cheung revisits the debate between Chin and feminist scholars and seeks for a kind of reconciliation between Chin and Kingston by acknowledging the struggles Asian American men and women faced in negotiating issues of race, gender, and sexuality in the New World. Although the debate on historical and cultural authenticity is no longer rigorously ongoing in Asian/American literary scholarship, Asian/American writers continue to seek ways to record and document their version of history utilising distinct literary strategies and genres.

Asian/American literature ‘shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state’ (Lowe, 1996: 29). As a way of mapping the landscape of American racial conflict and contradictory conditions of racial representation, Asian American literature has developed unique literary forms and styles. For instance, Amy Tang argues that focusing on an analysis of literary form works as ‘a gateway to—rather than a retreat from—historical inquiry’ (Tang, 2016: 30). The stylised aesthetics or strategies of historicising and politicising Asian American experience produces varying affective responses to the narrative, thus providing new ways into reading and problematising national history.

Narrating the stories of the picture brides by using the collective ‘we’ voice, *Buddha* establishes a distinct way of narrativising the history of loss experienced by the racialised and gendered bodies that have been denied citizenship in the US. An odd declaration made by the picture brides opens the narrative of *Buddha*: ‘On the boat we were mostly virgins’ (Otsuka, 2013: 3). With only some exceptions, paragraphs in the first chapter begin with the phrase ‘on the boat,’ describing the lives of the women on the boat anonymously using this collective voice. For Asian/Americans, collectivity has been used as a problematic framework that indicates the absence of individuality (seen as a distinctively American trait). Yuko Kawai notes that the dominant stereotyping of Japanese/Americans has erased individuality and forced a collective by ‘exaggerating and fixing difference in order to make a substantial and concrete other’ (Kawai, 2005: 123). This is despite American Asian immigrants finding ways to assert their ‘Americanness.’ Otsuka’s choice of narrative style continues a literary gesture of *Sansei* (third-generation) writers who linked their work to political agendas, ‘reject[ing] traditional forms in favor of styles forged from their own experiences or those of other people of color in the United States as well as internationally’ (Yogi, 1997: 140). The collective voice works toward narrativising these immigrant experiences and delivers a transgressive gesture of resistance toward a national history that refuses to provide a space for those narratives.

Otsuka refuses to have the stories of the picture brides generalised into a single narrative. In *Buddha*, it is the moment in which the women get off the boat and stand on American soil that they realise that they have been

deceived. The fantasies that these women had created about their new American lives were shattered as they witness that their prospective husbands they had married upon coming to America lied to them about their age, occupation, and wealth. As such, the first chapter titled 'Come, Japanese!' begins with a fraudulent invitation to the American Dream. Out of the many items that the women carry with them in their trunks, 'Come, Japanese!', 'Guidance for Going to America,' and 'Ten Ways to Please a Man' are the books that the women bring on the boat. From these books, the picture brides imagine America as an ideal place where 'the women [do] not have to work in the field' (Otsuka, 2013: 7) and there is 'plenty of rice and firewood for all' (Otsuka, 2013: 7). However, as soon as they get off the boat, they realise that they have been deceived by their husbands, and the America they were promised and imagined does not exist. The reality that awaited them was often the opposite of their expectations, filled with harsh labour that drove some of them to into loveless marriages, often accompanied by sexual and physical violence that ended in death. Declaring '*This is America*' (Otsuka, 2013: 18), the picture brides claim ownership of their narrative, making *Buddha* a reclamation of the picture brides' stories. With this declaration, Otsuka opens up a space within which these women begin to actively write their own history of loss instead of the American Dream foisted upon them.

The voices on the boat are not coherent enough to tell a singular story but become a collective story through the narrative's development and thematic relevance. Otsuka first presents the image of the picture brides with the collective voice: 'We had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall' (Otsuka, 2013: 3). Then in the next sentence, she lists the different features that the young women have, describing that some of them have 'slightly bowed legs' (Otsuka, 2013: 3). She also shows a wide range of classes by showing that while some of the women wear 'stylish city clothes' (Otsuka, 2013: 3), others wear the 'same old kimonos [they]'d been wearing for years' (Otsuka, 2013: 3). The picture brides range diversely in terms of age, the youngest being twelve and the oldest thirty-seven, and come from all parts of Japan with different class backgrounds. Although she uses the collective voice, she averts from generalising the women as homogenous and monolithic by making subtle variations of the women's appearances, juxtaposing unique, distinct lives lived and experienced by the picture brides. Shifting through 'we,' 'some of us,' and 'one of us,' she creates multiple exceptions to the collective image that has been established by the initial homogenisation of the picture brides. Otsuka allows the women's voices to braid together. Otsuka shifts back and forth from 'we,' 'some of us,' and 'one of us' and the repetitions of these words at the beginning of the sentences create a thematic echo. *Buddha* shows a gestalt in which the collectivised testimonies become a powerful historical narrative greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Each sentence is dedicated to telling one woman's narrative and it is the echo of the individual sentences that make up the collective paragraph. Diverse individual experiences come together through the collective voice and the repetition of 'we' adds more power to the individual voices. The collective voice, in the end, becomes a tool to amplify the voices of the individuals.

THE PRECARIOUS INDIVIDUAL, A COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

Buddha shows the ways in which the picture brides reclaim the narrative and take over the white American version of history that began deceitfully with the book 'Come, Japanese!' by using the collective voice to force a narrative space. Although their effort to occupy ends on a bleak note with the picture brides and their families disappearing one by one, *Buddha* demonstrates the power of collective memories that disturb the White American narratives of national coherence. *Buddha* becomes a collection of anonymous individual narratives, making it impossible for the readers to follow a specific individual character or a singular narrative. As those without names in history perish 'as though they had never been,' the anonymity of the picture brides raises important questions on whose stories get told in the American history textbooks and how one can accurately build a relationship with the past to remember.

Rarely, there are few instances in the text in which the picture brides are given names. The Japanese picture brides establish a different relationship with the white women in the neighbourhood. The women also call the picture brides by names - but with the new American names they gave to them: 'They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl' (Otsuka, 2013: 40). The white women help with assimilation by teaching them practical household skills - what they 'most needed to know' (Otsuka, 2013: 38) - such as ways to turn on the stove, make the bed, answer a door, and everything that an American housewife is to do. However, it soon becomes clear for the picture brides that they cannot 'be' (Otsuka, 2013: 39) the white women, for teaching them the skills they could use in the house does not mean that the picture brides can simply 'be' (Otsuka, 2013: 39) American wives. The Americanised names that are given to them only ends up highlighting the racialised bodies that could not be 'taught' to change. The image of their 'tiny figures and long, shiny black hair' (Otsuka, 2013: 40), creates an ironic disparity between the two.

The different spaces in which the white women and the picture brides reside shows the failure of the picture brides to assimilate into American society. While the white women 'seemed so at home in the world' (Otsuka, 2013: 39), the picture brides remain in the background:

We were there when they needed us and when they did not, poof, we were gone. We stayed in the background, quietly mopping their floors, waxing their furniture, bathing their children, cleaning the parts of their houses that nobody but us could see (Otsuka, 2013: 44).

The picture brides became another source of labour, and they often used the skills taught to them to help with chores around the house. The white women 'took little notice' (Otsuka, 2013: 44) of the Japanese picture brides and the picture brides who were once given names in the narrative become anonymous.

Similarly, in the chapters 'Babies' and 'The Children,' *Buddha* illustrates the difference between the *Issei* parents and their *Nisei* children with the use of names. For instance, in the chapter 'Babies,' the Japanese mothers who give birth to their American babies remain nameless. The first part of the chapter focuses on the women's act of giving birth as to where, how, and when they gave birth, and the remaining half of the chapter lists the names of the new-born babies. *Buddha* shows the unyielding gap between these two generations when the children choose to abandon the Japanese names given to them at birth and adopt American names for themselves - which the picture brides 'could barely pronounce' (Otsuka, 2013: 73). Shifting from the 'we' voice for the first time and using 'one' to capture the lives of the children, *Buddha* displays a sense of individuality that is granted to the *Nisei* children who are US-born citizens unlike their parents:

One swore she would one day marry a preacher so she wouldn't have to pick berries on Sundays. One wanted to save up enough money to buy his own farm. One wanted to become a tomato grower like his father . . . One wanted to become a doctor. One wanted to become his sister. One wanted to become a gangster. One wanted to become a star. And even though we saw darkness coming we said nothing and let them dream on (Otsuka, 2013: 78–79).

While the transition from the collective 'we' to an individual 'one' is worth noting, the children's narratives also remain anonymous and denied a space in American history. With nothing but a blank canvas on page 80, the narratives of the *Nisei* children get erased from the text. The moment in which these *Nisei* children narrate their stories as individuals is temporary, the individual narratives of the children soon disappear into a blank page as if they have never existed at all, their narratives erased from pages of history books.

In 'Traitors,' Otsuka marks a significant historical transition with the outbreak of World War II that affected not only the Japanese picture brides but their U.S.-born children as well. *Buddha* illustrates detainment by showing the destruction of homes and properties owned by the picture brides. Demolition that began in the margins of the neighbourhood progresses into the centre and closer to their homes. First, gravestones topple over in their neighbourhood cemeteries, barn doors fly open, and tin roofs rattle. Then we see the insides of their homes destroyed when the picture brides describe, '[c]urtains ripped. Glass shattered. Wedding dresses smashed to the floor' (104). The picture brides know it is only a matter of time before they themselves disappear.

One by one, the picture brides, their families, and neighbours are removed from their homes and detained. It is only after having been marked as 'traitors,' the names of the picture brides begin to appear incessantly:

Chiyomi's husband began going to sleep with his clothes on, just in case tonight was the night. Because the most shameful thing, he had told her, would be to be taken away in his pajamas. (Eiko's husband had been taken away in his pajamas. Asako's husband had become obsessed with his shoes. *He polishes them every night to a high shine and lines them up at the foot of the bed.* Yuriko's husband, a traveling fertilizer salesman who had been less than faithful to her over the years, could only fall asleep now if she was right there by his side. . . . Masumi's husband suffered from nightmares (Otsuka, 2013: 87–88).

With more Japanese/Americans detained in camps, the picture brides notice that the 'numbers continued to dwindle' (94), yet as they disappear from the neighbourhood, more names are added to the list of people forcefully removed from their homes:

Mineko's husband was gone. Takeko's husband was gone. Mitsue's husband was gone. They found a bullet in the dirt behind his woodshed. Omiyo's husband was pulled over on the highway for being out on the road five minutes after curfew. Hanayo's husband was arrested at his own dinner table for reasons unknown. 'The worst thing he ever did was get a parking ticket,' she said. And Shimako's husband, a truck driver for the Union Fruit Company whom none of us had ever heard utter a word, was

apprehended in the dairy aisle of the local grocery for being a spy for the enemy high command (Otsuka, 2013: 94–95).

The narratives are no longer anonymous.

The next chapter, 'Last Day,' is narrated in one long paragraph without any spaces between paragraphs. Otsuka structures the last chapter to demonstrate how the picture brides can no longer occupy sufficient narrative space. Each departure of the picture bride and their families is narrated individually and the readers follow the story of each individual woman until they disappear into history. The picture brides become detached from their communities as they get detained in camps and disappear from the neighbourhood. Otsuka cleverly shows the gradual process of removal in four steps by starting the narrative in different repetitive phrases —'Some of us,' 'One man,' the picture bride's individual names, and 'There was.' The chapter begins with repeating 'Some of us,' moves on to 'One man,' and to providing each of the picture brides with individual names for each story. In the end, the narrative begins with 'There was' to indicate that all the picture brides and their families have been removed from the neighbourhood. The stories of the picture brides are concluded by an unknown narrator – presumably by one or several White American residents who were not impacted by the incarceration of the Japanese/Americans. With the narrators completely shifting from the picture brides to the neighbours, the picture brides and their voices has completely disappeared.

In the last chapter, the remaining neighbours reminisce about the picture brides and their families, but the picture brides are soon forgotten as new people begin to move into their houses. *Buddha* ends with a kind of narrative amnesia when the chapter ends on an apathetic tone: 'All we know is that the Japanese are out there somewhere, in one place or another, and we shall probably not meet them again in this world (Otsuka, 2013: 129). The title of the last chapter—'A Disappearance'—illustrates that the disappearance of the picture brides is not the only story that has gone missing, suggesting to readers that there have been and will be more disappearances in American history. By ending the text on this bleak note, showing the difficulties of the picture brides temporarily reclaiming their narrative and yet losing their voices in the end, Otsuka urges for a collective effort in remembering the stories of the picture brides. The readers become a crucial part of remembering the collective loss and amplifying the collective voices of the picture brides, in order to reconfigure a more inclusive narrative of American history.

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