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Enacting the Silence of Subaltern Women:
Julie Otsuka and the Japanese Picture Brides

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Abstract

It is by now a truth universally acknowledged that the world's *subaltern* women (in Gayatri Spivak's understanding of the term) cannot make their voices heard, that what we think we know about them are mostly stereotypes of our own making. It is likewise acknowledged that literature has a privileged status when it comes to representing these women, given its unique prerogative to retrieve their traces and convey their subjectivity through *imagining*. Literary texts which embark on this task can be seen as symbolic speech acts and, as such, they depend upon their illocutionary force for success in the public sphere.

In this thesis I have chosen to discuss *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka (2011) – a novel I perceive as a collective speech act – from the combined perspective of speech-act criticism (J. L. Austin, S. Petrey), subaltern studies (G. Spivak, G. Pandey) and feminist theory (M. P. Lara, S. Lanser). My analysis explores the interrelation between this little-known story of the first-generation Japanese women immigrants to the US and the sophisticated narrative strategy which sustains it, continually balancing between the women's heterogeneity and their shared experiences, especially their systematic silencing by the dominant population. Finally, the thesis discusses the novel's larger *illocutionary* implications for the public sphere, in particular how the reclaiming of the past creates new understandings of the present as well as opens up onto the future.

Keywords: Otsuka, *The Buddha in the Attic*, migrant literature, picture brides, subalternity, feminist theory, communal voice, speech-act criticism, illocutionary force.

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To do *a thing*, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech.

Gayatri Spivak

1. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the 1980s, Gayatri Spivak rose a storm in the academic world with an essay which inquired whether the dispossessed women of the third world, “subaltern women” or “women outside of the mode of production narrative,” as she called them, could make their voices heard, whether we knew anything more about them other than that they were a large group of silent victims: “If, as Jameson suggests, the mode of production narrative is the final reference, these women are insufficiently represented or representable in that narration. We can docket them, but we cannot grasp them at all” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 21).

After almost three decades of heated debates and arduous subaltern historiography, many have conceded that Spivak’s intuition was right. Not only have we largely failed in recovering the traces of the subaltern women of past times, but we can ascertain that today’s subalterns are equally inaudible, muted as they are by both patriarchy and hegemony. In these circumstances, Spivak locates the responsibility of representation in the intellectual, conscious though she is of the heterogeneity of the subaltern, the difficulty of recovering her traces and the danger of reinforcing existing stereotypes.¹ In more recent texts, Spivak points specifically towards “poetic sensibility as an othering mediator” which can take us out of this dilemma (“A Moral Dilemma” 231).

In a comprehensive study which draws its inspiration mainly from the works of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, Maria Pia Lara looks at women’s literature as an emancipatory project, an “illocutionary” intervention in the public sphere which can help shape the moral discourse of the present by shedding light on women’s past struggles. The narratives Lara invests with this task “depend on the capacity to construct imaginative ways of holding the attention of others, of ‘performing’ differences in such a

¹ “For the (gender-unspecified) ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject’s itinerary has not been left traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual.” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 40)

way that they embody the quality of plurality as it permeates the frames of the public sphere” (8).

This type of literary texts, collectively described by Lara as “projects of recognition,” largely equate with what Susan Lanser calls “fictions of authority”: narratives which combine “social identity and textual form” (15) to claim authority in the public sphere for certain marginalized groups. Drawing on the multiple meanings of the term “voice” and the symbolism invested in it by silenced communities, Lanser specifically explores the interrelationship between representation and narrative voice in novels by women writers, identifying three main types of voice. She discerns an unexplored potential in what she dubs “communal voice,” described as “a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community” (21). Lanser emphasizes that the narrative strategy she has in mind is not another essentializing tool, but one which expresses the plurality and heterogeneity of a given community.² At the same time, Lanser acknowledges that, at the time of writing the book (it came out in 1992), both theorizations and practical examples of communal voice are as yet scarce in Western prose.³

For this thesis, I have chosen for discussion *The Buddha in the Attic*⁴ by Japanese American author Julie Otsuka (2011), a narrative which responds in a novel way to feminists’ various anxieties of representation. It is the little-told and little-known story of the Japanese picture brides who immigrated to America in the early 1900s, recounted from the moment they set foot on the boat taking them to the United States, until the onset of World War II and the mass internment of the Japanese community. The novel gives voice to a group of women who were demonstrably silenced at all levels, and who were not able to leave behind more than disparate traces of their oppression and exclusion.

² “From among various forms of novelistic multiplicity, then, I am distinguishing the convergence of representation and narration that occurs when a collective or group protagonist is represented through formal strategies that allow the plurality itself to speak.” (Lanser 256)

³ “Because the dominant culture has not employed communal voice to any perceptible degree, and because distinctions about voice have been based primarily on the features of this dominant literature, there has been no narratological terminology for communal voice or for its various technical possibilities.” (Lanser 21)

⁴ The full title of Otsuka’s novel will hereafter be shortened to *Buddha*.

What sets this book apart from other like-minded projects is how it presents a historical narrative not as it has customarily been done, by focusing on a single individual or a small group of individuals, investing them with symbolic value, but by matching the collective story with a collective perspective, where all subjects are on an equal footing. Constantly shifting from one woman's experience to the next's, the novel captures the women's shared experiences as well as their individuality. Otsuka's picture bride is, at the same time, the woman who came from the city and the one who came from the country, the young and the middle-aged, the innocent virgin, the secret mother, and the closet lesbian, the one who will resign herself to her fate and the one who will rebel.

The book thus resonates with Spivak and other feminists' insistence on the heterogeneity of subaltern women, through a narrative strategy which very much approximates what Lanser had defined as "communal voice" two decades earlier:

On the boat **we** were mostly virgins. **We** had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall. **Some of us** had eaten nothing but rice gruel as young girls and had slightly bowed legs, and **some of us** were only fourteen years old and were still young girls ourselves. **Some of us** came from the city, and wore stylish city clothes, but **many more of us** came from the country and on the boat we wore the same old kimonos we'd been wearing for years-faded hand-me-downs from our sisters that had been patched and redyed many times. **Some of us** came from the mountains, and had never before seen the sea, except for in pictures, and **some of us** were the daughters of fishermen who had been around the sea all our lives. Perhaps we had lost a brother or father to the sea, or a fiancé, or perhaps someone we loved had jumped into the water one unhappy morning and simply swum away, and now it was time for us, too, to move on. (*Buddha* 3; emphasis added)

Narrated mostly in the first-person plural, the novel resembles a collective speech act, an eerie chorus from beyond the grave telling us a myriad stories that have never reached us before – either because they were never told or because they were muffled or because they were not heard at the time of their telling. In other words, it is a speech act which enacts a silence. This is a paradox worth exploring further and which seems best explored precisely from the perspective of speech-act criticism, whose main "tenets" are, to quote Sandy Petrey, "that language in society invariably enacts collective life and that literature

is invariably language in society” (165). This is also the implicit position of those theorists who discuss literature by historically marginalized groups in terms of its performance in the public sphere – as intervention, emancipatory project, reconstruction of collective memory, alternative historiography or else. Therefore, my analysis will also draw on their insights about the interrelation between ethics and aesthetics, and between representation and narration.

Considering a novel against its sociohistorical context is thus inherent to any discussion of literature as speech act. In Petrey’s words:

[Speech-act theory] shifts attention from what language *is* to what it *does* and sees a *social process* where other linguistic philosophies see a *formal structure*. From a speech-act perspective, all linguistic artifacts, including those that count as literary, must be understood in relation to the sociohistorical context of their production and reception. (3)

There are, to each speech act, a “constative” and a “performative” dimension: it is an opposition which J.L. Austin, the father of speech act theory, later reformulated as “locution” vs. “illocution.”⁵ We usually conceptualize the two terms as what language *says* as opposed to what it *does*, but in practice they often collapse into each other. “Far more than an adjunct to its informational content,” explains Petrey, “the performative character of the constative is inherent in the information itself” (34). In *Buddha’s* case, the constative is the collective story of a group of subaltern women who could not or were not allowed to speak. The performative is, at the same time, the enactment of their silence and the retrieval of their individual voices. I claim that *Buddha’s* constative or locutionary dimension corresponds roughly to its narrative, while its performative or illocutionary dimension is carried through mainly by the novel’s use of communal voice as mode of narration.

Accordingly, this thesis will explore the interaction between the story of the picture brides and the sophisticated narrative strategy which sustains it, inquiring about its *performative* or *illocutionary* implications for the public sphere, in particular how the reclaiming of the past creates new understandings of the present as well as opens up onto the future.

⁵ This distinction will be further detailed in section 6.

The conceptual framework at the foundation of this research will be more clearly outlined in the next section, and further detailed throughout the rest of the thesis. Section 3 is devoted to an overview of the historical events represented in *Buddha*. The bulk of the thesis will look at the novel as speech act, in its various aspects. Thus, sections 4 & 5 will focus on the constative aspect, with reference to the ethical theories developed by Emmanuel Levinas and Gayatri Spivak. Section 6 will combine speech-act theory and Lanser's narrative theory to discuss the novel's communal voice as illocutionary force. Section 7 will discuss the novel's illocutionary implications, especially with regard to its memorializing and ethico-political functions. Finally, the thesis will inquire what makes this particular speech act *felicitous*.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RATIONALE

In this section, I would like to say a few words about the thesis' various sources of inspiration and how they come together. I will also relate to previous studies of Otsuka's writing, to the extent they pertain to the present research. The starting-point of this thesis was my reading of *Buddha*, which struck me with the expressive force of its description of a female community's plurality and of the hegemonic mechanism which had effected the erasure of this plurality from history and public consciousness. In my view, the force of the novel was carried mainly by its complex narrative strategy, which I had not yet encountered in another work of fiction. I later found out there was a literary theorist who had already envisaged it, namely Susan Lanser, and dubbed it "communal voice."⁶ Lanser's conceptualization of communal voice as an intersection of social and textual practices got me to look closer at other theories that see literature as a way of representing marginalized groups. However, as I could not ignore the emotionality of my response to the novel, I finally figured that the foundation of my theoretical framework should be the one perspective concerned with literature's impact on society and its readers, which is speech-act criticism or performativity.

J. L. Austin, the scholar who lay the basis of this theory in the 1950s, famously excluded literature and other arts from his discussion of performative utterances, as a

⁶ See the Introduction for details. "Communal voice" is further described in section 6.

“non-serious” use of language.⁷ After his premature death, many prominent thinkers, starting with Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Stanley Fish, tried to prove him wrong. While they succeeded in recuperating literature as a valid research object for speech-act criticism, many did so by sidelining one of the essential principles of Austin’s theory: the embeddedness of all speech acts in their social contexts. For this reason, the present thesis is rooted in some of those theorists who observed this aspect in applying speech-act criticism to literature and society: Sandy Petrey, Jonathan Culler and Judith Butler. In arguing against Austin’s refusal to consider literature as speech act, Petrey invokes the highly conventionalized nature of literature, as well as its dependence on society for interpretation and success:

Since the illocutionary act’s defining feature is its conventionality, it’s impossible to understand how so thoroughly conventionalized a language form as literature can have “nothing to do with the illocutionary act.” [...] Austin’s expulsion of literature from the realm of speech acts ignores his own demonstrations that society establishes when speech fails to perform felicitously as well as when it succeeds. (52-53)

In choosing this branch of speech-act criticism, I also considered its convergence with various schools of thought which discuss literature in terms of intervention. To begin with, I took inspiration from a number of feminist thinkers – among them Hélène Cixous, Maria Pia Lara, Sara Ahmed and Gayatri Spivak herself – whose personal backgrounds give them a special insight into the lives of women who are doubly or triply marginal. Although divergent in some respects, all these thinkers see women’s writing as a speech act which has been a long time in the waiting.

One of the first texts proclaiming the potential for women’s literature to function as speech act and thereby revolutionize the male-dominated Western societies was Cixous’ essay and feminist manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Cixous then prophesized that writing is “an act [which] will also be marked by woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based

⁷ For an overview of the debate surrounding literature, see, for example, Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, Part II, or Loxley, *Performativity*, chapter 4.

on her suppression" (32). Cixous also stressed that the success of such an enterprise requires solidarity among women from totally different backgrounds:

Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. [...] Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. (34-35)

These ideas quickly found their way into the writings of many other feminists, developing in various directions. The three female theorists this thesis relies most on – Lanser, Lara, and Spivak – all condition the illocutionary success of women’s writing on balancing aesthetic and ethical considerations, although they conceptualize this point in different ways.

As a matter of fact, part of the rationale for this thesis is precisely the belief that women’s writing tries to cross literary boundaries and that discussing it in purely aesthetic terms subdues its force. Women’s writing often has an expressed militant, memorializing, and/or historiographic intention that requires us to see it in a larger context and consider the accomplishment of its intended effects. Such is the case with *Buddha*, which, beyond its intricate narrative strategy, gives us clear hints of its ambition to reach beyond literature. Thus, the book is fronted by a double epigraph from the “Book of Ecclesiasticus” and the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Mizuta Masahide. The former introduces the novel as a monument to the memory of those whose traces have been erased from history. The latter is a message of spiritual awakening, of agency regained – in my interpretation, precisely by virtue of this recollection of the past:

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

Barn’s burnt down—

now

I can see the moon.

— MASAhide

Furthermore, the book ends with an “Acknowledgements” section in which the author owns up to having based her work of fiction on specific historical sources: “This novel was inspired by the life stories of Japanese immigrants who came to America in the early 1900s. I have drawn upon a large number of historical sources [...]”

Nevertheless, these aspects are to be seen as purely informative. From the perspective of speech-act criticism, neither intention nor empirical verifiability is constitutive for the felicity of speech acts. Austin dubbed them the “intentional” and “descriptive” fallacies (11, 3), subordinating them to collective conventions. In Petrey’s words, “[e]ven when constative and referential coincide perfectly, it’s not this coincidence that makes truth felicitous. The decisive factor is still a collectivity’s stance” (39). For this reason, in contrast with previous studies of *Buddha*, the present thesis will not consider the author’s intentions as expressed in public interviews, nor will it assess the novel in terms of historical accuracy.

In fact, despite being based on real events, the novel itself steers clear of the referential trap. In between the epigraphs and the acknowledgements, we have the bulk of the novel which is symbolic rather than referential: there is only one boat carrying all picture brides to the United States, there is the collective *we* of these brides, breaking down into equally vague “many of us” / “some of us” / “others of us” / “a few of us” / “one of us,” while the husbands, the children and the whites are often designated by no more than a collective *they*. Proper names are used sparingly and mostly towards the end of the novel, with an emblematic – rather than representational – role.⁸ This is exactly the material for discussion from the perspective of speech-act criticism, which teaches us that “language’s liberation from the brute facts of objective reality is the *precondition* for its ability to perform the lived truths of collective existence” (Petrey 115).

As already mentioned, my analysis of how *Buddha*’s language *performs* will pay special attention to the novel’s mode of narration, relying on Lanser’s conceptualization of communal voice and its implications beyond fiction.

⁸ In my view, these aspects make up the illocutionary force of the novel and will therefore be detailed in section 6.

In her mapping of the narrativity of women's fiction, Lanser pays special attention to one aspect which cuts across all modes of narration: "the distinction between private voice (narration directed toward a narratee who is a fictional character) and public voice (narration directed toward a narratee 'outside' the fiction who is analogous to the historical reader)" (15). I see Otsuka's novel as a clear case of public voice, addressing a 21st century reader who might belong to the majority population or to a minority, but who is nonetheless supposed to internalize the story from the perspective of the present. This interpretation is inextricably linked to my view of the novel as speech act, where the speaker is constituted by the Japanese picture brides, and the hearer by contemporary descendants of both the Japanese and the white majority, each with their own lessons to learn. I will come back to this topic but for now, suffice it to say that this is the reason why, throughout the thesis, I venture to convey my personal reading of the novel in the name of a collective *we*, one which is meant to mirror the narrating *we* of the novel.

However, prior to discussing *Buddha's* performative aspects, there is the constative dimension which needs to be looked at. At this point, I would like to enlarge upon the third theoretical pillar of my thesis, which provided me with some valuable insights into the sociohistorical collectivities and events represented in the novel. I am referring to the school of subaltern studies, which has shown us how little we know about the lives and agency of unprivileged third-world women and how we could go about in order to retrieve some voices from the past.

A key concept which I found very useful for my own analysis is the term "subaltern" itself, first used by Antonio Gramsci in the European context. Over the past few decades, subalternity has been reconceptualized mainly in reference to (post-)colonial subjects and third-world migrants who are excluded from the hegemonic discourse or, to rephrase Spivak, who are in a position from which one cannot speak or fails to make oneself heard: "the subaltern cannot speak,' means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act" ("Subaltern Talk" 302).⁹

⁹ Elsewhere, Spivak defines the essence of subalternity as "to be removed from all lines of social mobility" ("Scattered Speculations" 475). A broader definition comes from historian Gyanendra Pandey: "In one frame, these are histories of the homeless, the uninsured and marginalised (and I repeat that these terms are not to be understood in a merely literal way; they are always relative, as we know very well); in another, of materially more comfortable citizens who are even so not allowed to be part of the polis, that is to say, citizens in the classic sense." (4738)

The notion of “subaltern” sometimes intersects with Levinas’ concept of “the Other,” and it happens that the former is substituted for the latter even in subaltern studies. One common dimension is their alterity, which makes them ungraspable for the self. Still, while “the other” is mostly used to express alterity and “the Other”¹⁰ also denotes a position of marginality and subordination, the “subaltern” is something much more extreme, “a position without identity” (Spivak, “Scattered Speculations” 476). This is how Spivak herself explains the difference:

[...] *subaltern* is not just a classy word for “oppressed,” for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. [...] In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. [...] Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word “subaltern.” (de Kock interview 45)

I claim that, at least under the period covered by *Buddha*, the Japanese migrants to the US had subaltern status. The historical overview in the next section will explain in detail why. For now, suffice it to say that not even constitutional provisions (around 70% of the Japanese forcibly removed from the West Coast after Pearl Harbor were American citizens) or ethical considerations (40% of the evacuees were elderly people and children, including orphans living in American orphanages or foster homes) prevented them from being rounded up and interned at the onset of World War II, their houses confiscated, their businesses closed down, their education and careers put on hold.

Sections 4 & 5 will show that in *Buddha*, too, the Japanese community is represented as subaltern, although the novel makes this point by literary, rather than by legalistic or statistical means. I will elaborate this aspect by drawing on the ethical theories of Levinas and Spivak to show how Otsuka’s picture brides are gradually pushed

¹⁰ The term is used in the acceptance given it by Emmanuel Levinas. My upper- and lower-case spelling of other and Other follows Richard A. Cohen’s translation of *Time and the Other* which, in turn, is meant to highlight the difference in the original French, between “autrui” (Other) and “autre” (other). “Autrui,” Cohen tells us, “refers to the personal other, the other person; *autre* refers to otherness in general, to alterity” (30). However, according to the translator, the original spelling and usage are not always consistent with this distinction, and such instances might appear in the quotes used in this thesis. This applies even to more recent theorists who have employed Levinas’ concepts and who are quoted here.

into subalternity. As explained by historian Gyanendra Pandey in the following passage, this concept is a productive way of looking at certain groups of citizens of Western countries in order to understand the mechanism by which their traces were erased, and continue to be erased, from history:

The words subaltern and subalternity of course reinforce what the quest of a critical historiography – Marxist, feminist, anti-colonial, subalternist, minority – has long been about: the endeavour to recover lives, and possibilities, and politics that have been marginalised, distorted, suppressed and sometimes even forgotten. They allow us to reinforce the point that not all “citizens” (or human beings) are born equal, that many remain “second class” even when granted the formal status of citizens, and that many are denied formal citizenship altogether – today, and of course over most of human history. (4736)

How Otsuka’s novel goes about in order to “recover lives, and possibilities, and politics that have been marginalised, distorted, suppressed and sometimes even forgotten” makes up an important part of my argument, and will be discussed from different angles throughout the thesis.

In view of my own analysis, I will briefly review previous studies of Otsuka’s writing and discuss how they pertain to the present research. *Buddha* was Otsuka’s second novel and it enjoyed wide international reception: it won several prestigious literary prizes and was translated into 22 languages. Yet, aside from the numerous articles and shorter essays, I am aware of only three academic studies which discuss the novel. Interestingly, most of what has been written so far addresses my own object of interest: the question of voice.

One article I find particularly insightful was penned by TaraShea Nesbit, an author who applied Otsuka’s narrative strategy in a novel of her own, *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014). The article traces the use of the first-person plural narration in literature, starting with the chorus in Greek drama and coming down to our times. Within this category of works, Nesbit distinguishes between a collective voice speaking in unison to express group identity, as is the case in several novels by male writers, among them Joseph Conrad and Jeffrey Eugenides, and what she calls a “differentiated first-person plural,” as in *Buddha*, which strikes a balance between individuals and the groups they belong to. The term largely overlaps that of communal voice but, as I consider Lanser’s

conceptualization more comprehensive, I will keep using the latter in my own discussion of *Buddha's* narrative strategy.

An academic study by Monika Fludernik which has just come out explores the historical use of collective narration in more detail, setting apart Otsuka's and Nesbit's novels and juxtaposing them with each other. The focus of the analysis is the paradox of reconstructing a collective historical reality by deploying a narrative strategy perceived as "fictional" (the *we* of the two novels denotes symbolic collectivities rather than women who all knew each other in real life and acted in any concerted fashion):

While fictional *we*-texts therefore overstep the limits of realistically possible collective narratives, creating a *we*-voice that could not have a real-world equivalent, they, at the same time, manage to convey important information by means of these violations of natural storytelling scenarios, reimagining the plight of a whole generation of Japanese immigrant women or depicting female war-time experiences in order to question the war effort and its practical and ideological basis. (153)

A similar mapping of collective narration, this time limited to American prose fiction, belongs to Ruth Maxey. Maxey draws attention to a rise in the use of this type of voice since 9/11, which she puts down to its "political significance" (1). In her compelling, though very brief analysis of *Buddha*, Maxey explores the novel's political implications, hinting at the illocutionary force of its communal voice as a way of competing with conventional historiography:

The story of the picture brides is given greater political and rhetorical power through its collective narration—its specificities requiring a special narrative voice—and also because it has been rendered fictionally. This produces an artistic, dramatic work with a wider reach than the many historical sources upon which it is based. (9)

Maxey's main focus is on the novel as "a work of memorialization" (9). A similar reading is advanced, in a short essay, by Ursula K. Le Guin, who was a child living in California at the time of the mass removal of Japanese Americans and, as such, belonged to the *they* of Otsuka's novel who are forced to re-evaluate their own role in the events: "My

unawareness, my incomprehension of the event at the time, has troubled and informed my mind for many years. It's up to me, as a white American, to deal with that ignorance and denial. Julie Otsuka can't do it for me" (270).

The most comprehensive scholarly study of *Buddha* was penned by Manuel Jobert and amounts to a detailed stylistic analysis of the novel's narrative strategy, figural speech and tense use. While offering many insights, this paper focuses mainly on the novel's perpetual balancing between collectivity and individuality. I will come back to these various analyses later in the thesis, as most of them pertain directly to the question of voice, discussed in section 6.

Surprising as it is that there are not more academic studies about *Buddha*, it should be noted that Otsuka's debut, *When the Emperor Was Divine*¹¹ (2002), attracted much more scholarly attention. A possible explanation might be the fact that *Emperor*, too addresses the internment of Japanese Americans and that, besides having had the privilege of the first-born, the timing of its publishing (only one year after 9/11) drew immediate parallels to the islamophobia triggered by the attacks on the Twin Towers. It is thus possible that those commentators interested primarily in the historical dimension of Otsuka's writing felt the topic had been exhausted by *Emperor*. However, this is far from the truth, partly because *Emperor* has a different narrative approach than *Buddha*, focusing on the experience of a single family, partly because, although prior to *Buddha*, it begins where the other leaves off, which is at the moment of the evacuations.

Out of these considerations, I do not see these studies as particularly relevant to this thesis and its object of research. Nonetheless, I would like to briefly mention an academic essay by literary theorist Marni J. Gauthier, who argues that the historical fiction to have emerged in the West since the 1990s is the direct result of a "dynamic of amnesia and truth telling" (151) in these societies. According to this view, the current climate of historical amnesia and denial should not dissuade fiction writers from reclaiming marginalized episodes of history. On the contrary, it is in such hostile contexts that emancipatory narratives can gain the illocutionary force to expose injustice. Writing about *Emperor*, Gauthier claims that:

¹¹ The title of the novel will hereafter be shortened to *Emperor*.

The American public has responded to the narrative in the context of the War on Terror through which the US government again, “in the interest of national security,” declared a group of people “enemy combatants,” exiled them to prison camps, and stripped them of habeas corpus. (165-166)

Gauthier, just like Maxey, also makes the point that the expressive force of literature is of the utmost importance even in cases where official historiography has done its duty of accounting for traumatic events. Referring to the 1982 report of the US Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, which officially denounced the government’s wrongdoing in interning Japanese Americans four decades earlier, Gauthier notes that “the report did not act as a catalyst for former internees to share their stories” and that Otsuka’s first novel was a “breakthrough” in this regard,

perform(ing) a cultural work of truth telling that the US commission could not. As the first Japanese American-authored novel on the internment experience to be widely read and to have generated a large-scale collective dialogue about its subject, the novel has, in a very real sense, **unsilenced the topic**. (165; emphasis added)

While pointing mainly at the thematic content, Gauthier’s insight resonates with my own view of Otsuka’s second novel as speech act. As we have seen, previous discussions of *Buddha* have tended to focus either on its narrative or its historical aspect. In this thesis, I hope to bring the two together in a mutually enriching way, with the help of the theoretical tools detailed at the beginning of this section. However, before proceeding with my analysis of the novel, I would like to give a brief account of its historical background.

3. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This section offers an overview of the real events which, by the avowal of the author herself, inspired the writing of *Buddha*. My account draws on different historians and is intended as background material for the discussion of the novel, especially as the

historical circumstances it refers to are still considered little-known even in the United States.¹² At the same time, I wish to stress that it is not my intention to analyze the novel against historical accounts or assess it in terms of historical accuracy. Austin famously teaches us that the felicity of speech acts does not presuppose propositional truth, except in isolated cases and then not in the strictly referential sense (45); transferred to literature, this insight makes referentiality irrelevant to a discussion of *Buddha* from the perspective of speech-act criticism. Equally importantly, faithfulness to reality is quite difficult to establish in the case of literary language, besides being a criterion which can counteract its illocutionary force. Petrey, who has specialized in applying Austin's principles to realist fiction, provides the following explanation for the relationship between literary language and its possible referent in the real world:

When we *do* things with words, the referent is neither captured nor alienated; it's produced through a process that contradicts both the historicist assumption that written description is perfect and the deconstructionist conviction that writing is supra-historical. (120)

The term "picture brides" refers to the tens of thousands of Japanese women who immigrated to the US and Canada between 1908 and 1920, by marrying Japanese men who had already settled in these countries and who encountered huge difficulties in starting a family, both because of strong racial prejudice and the disproportionate male-female ratio that had been brought about by predominantly male immigration. The marriages were arranged by matchmakers, through the exchange of pictures and letters, and continued a matchmaking tradition which had existed in Japan since the 16th century (Nakamura, Girdner and Loftis 54-56).

In an essay based on interviews conducted in the 1980s with a few surviving first-generation Japanese American women and their daughters, anthropologist Malve von Hassell suggests that the main overall motivation for the picture brides to leave Japan was the increasingly patriarchal climate following the Meiji Restoration: "From the late

¹² In one of the most recent studies about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, historian Greg Robinson claims that "the camps remain oddly obscure in popular American memory: most ordinary people I have spoken to have never even heard of them" (3). The history of Japanese American immigration to the US is by all accounts even less familiar to the larger American population.

1870s through the turn of the century, the image and role of women was constantly being redefined, sharpened, and fashioned into a tightly fitting harness increasingly harder for women to evade” (554). To this were added various individual motivations. Whatever these were, marriage was the only option for women who wished to emigrate, not least because of the very restrictive US and Canadian legislation of the time with regard to Asians.

By most accounts, many of the picture brides found on arrival on the US soil that their husbands had little connection to the persons they had consented to marry. According to information compounded by Kelli Y. Nakamura for the online Densho Encyclopedia,

Besides sending disingenuous photographs, Japanese men often exaggerated their own attractiveness as future husbands to enable parents or relatives to find wives more easily: sharecroppers described themselves as landowning farmers, small shopkeepers as wealthy merchants, and hotel bellboys as elevator engineers. Few men were culpable of more than hyperboles; they relayed utterly false information about themselves. Picture brides had no way of verifying information before meeting their spouses. In general, they believed what they heard from go-betweens until they arrived in the United States and learned otherwise.

While it is very likely that the women had not always been completely candid either, historians describe them as generally having a certain level of education and holding a wide range of skills. Regardless, these were largely irrelevant for their new life situation in the US, partly because Japanese aliens were allowed few employment options, partly because their husbands had already staked out their roles, depending on their own occupations:

Because of universal primary education in Japan, these women were generally quite literate – much more so than their white counterparts – and many of them had trained as teachers, virtually the only profession open to women in Japan. However, they were relegated by racial discrimination and dominant ideas about gender to working alongside their husbands as farmers as shopkeepers, as well as running households and caring for children. (Robinson 16)

In her own account, von Hassell insists on the heterogeneity of the first generation of Japanese American women: “there were important differences in social class and educational background and in religious orientation” (553). Still, they all came from an environment where women were actively involved in ensuring the well-being of their families and even in certain aspects of public life. This female culture – von Hassell points out – contrasted sharply to the submissiveness expected of women by the patriarchal structures in Japan and, later on, in the US:

[...] *issei* women came from a background filled with contradictions in which a clear image of the proper role and place of women, justified and bolstered by a value system of increasing importance to Meiji Japan, was in conflict with the reality of women's lives. (556)

The reaction of the American population to the arrival of the picture brides seems to have been ambivalent. Initially, their presence was welcome as it deflected the risk of the much-hated interracial marriages, as well as provided a reliable and hardworking labor force. All the same, the relatively large influx of Japanese women in a short period of time and the initial higher birthrate within the Japanese community than within the white population, raised fears that the latter might gradually be outnumbered. While the American to Japanese ratio did not justify such fears, the pressure exerted on the authorities by Californians led to further tightening of the legislation and to the official discontinuation, around 1920, of picture bride immigration (Girdner and Loftis 56-7, Robinson 16). According to historians Girdner and Loftis, because of the importance of family and children in Japanese culture, this led to numerous suicides among bachelors who had not yet managed to bring over Japanese wives and had very low prospects of finding partners in the discriminatory climate of the West Coast.

Not much is known about the private lives of the picture brides during their first two decades in the US, especially with regard to the group that settled on the West Coast of the United States, to which Otsuka's novel refers (there are a few more accounts about the women who settled in Hawaii and Canada). Most historians writing about Japanese Americans have focused on matters of public life, which has entailed a focus on the community's male figures.

In her own short study, von Hassell argues that the picture brides, just like their mothers and sisters in Japan, were very active in their own private realms, while cultivating an outward image which conformed with the expectations of the outside world:

Throughout, the image of the proper wife and proper marriage relationship which the *issei* women had been taught in Japan was maintained. Submissiveness in demeanor, speech, and silences was carefully staged. *Issei* women succeeded in maintaining a culturally acceptable image of themselves in the eyes of their families and community (and in their own eyes) while playing a critical and active role in keeping their families afloat. (557)

The term “Issei” refers to the first generation of Japanese Americans, irrespective of gender. As US legislation of the time did not permit the naturalization of Asian immigrants, the Issei remained “aliens” their whole lives, which in its turn meant that they could not vote, own agricultural land or be licensed to certain professions. As a result, most Issei worked at low-paid jobs, as laborers and domestics,¹³ the women alongside the men. Even though their prowess was widely recognized, especially when it came to agriculture and the flower industry, Issei had to resort to different stratagems in order to be able to start their own businesses. A handful of Issei worked as teachers, journalists or ministers within their own ethnic communities, which was the only possibility of practicing these professions (Robinson 10). Their precarious economic situation notwithstanding, the Japanese were hardly a burden for the American public welfare system. Girdner and Loftis affirm that Japanese families helped each other rather than resort to public assistance, and largely managed to avoid the relief rolls even during the Great Depression (88).

American-born children of Japanese immigrants, known as “Nisei,” were entitled to citizen status which gave them many more rights than their parents. Yet, they too were subjected to different forms of racial discrimination, from being refused admittance to certain theaters, swimming pools, and barbershops, to legislation which allowed their forced enrolment in segregated schools (Girdner and Loftis 75).

¹³ According to Girdner and Loftis, “Approximately two-thirds (of Issei) were engaged in agriculture, 7 per cent in fishing, 10 per cent in retail trades and professions” (95).

It was precisely through education that the strongest attempts were made to bar Nisei from fully integrating into American society. Institutions of higher education often had restrictive quotas for people of Japanese descent, and those who managed to get in faced different forms of harassment. Girdner and Loftis suggest that prejudice was all the stronger against Nisei girls, with colleges actively discouraging them from even enrolling (95). Historians also agree on the huge difficulties for college graduates to find employment to match their qualifications. Girdner and Loftis state that they sometimes “could not even get in the door for an interview” (94), while Robinson recounts that “[t]rained engineers and teachers were forced to take jobs farming or selling fruit” (27) – a claim backed by employment statistics of the time.

In spite of this hostile climate, historians insist that the Japanese “demonstrated an ardent desire to adapt themselves to the customs and life of their new home” (Robinson 11), a desire which, in its most extreme manifestations, included the use of the English language in the interaction between Japanese parents and children and in the conversion to Christianity. The interviews conducted by von Hassell reveal that Issei women went so far as “to withhold aspects of Japanese culture from their American-born children [as] [t]hey did not want to burden their children in their efforts to succeed in U.S. society” (560). This was done at the expense of parents-children relationships, as the children’s loose grip on their parents’ language and culture created a certain distance between the two generations and further isolated the Issei women who, according to van Hassell, were seen as the community’s “culture bearers” (560). Van Hassell suggests that “the fragmentation of both the inside world of the community and that of *issei* women” (560), which had begun with the birth of Nisei children, culminated in “[t]he experiences of evacuation and internment during the war [...] [which] [f]or many *issei* women [...] represented the dissolution of the family” (565).

While almost two thirds of *Buddha* span the first two decades of the picture brides’ lives on the American West Coast, the last part refers to a period of only four months, from December 8, 1941, when the United States entered World War II as a result of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, until March 1942, when all Japanese Americans on the coastal area, regardless of citizenship, were rounded up and transferred to internment camps where they remained for the whole duration of the war. At the time, the mass removal of the Japanese was motivated by citing reasons of national security.

However, most historians now trace the roots of the Japanese internment to the prewar years, when hostility against this community, whether of racial or economic reasons, built up both among the authorities and the large population, constantly feeding itself on false rumors and an unsubstantiated narrative of Japanese unassimilability. *The Great Betrayal* by Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis, one of the first books which dealt with the topic, drawing on numerous interviews with Japanese Americans and non-Japanese Americans alike, states that,

antagonism towards West Coast Japanese was by no means solely the result of the war with Japan. International events only aggravated long-standing racial hostility. Like other manifestations of racism, the antagonism derived psychologically from a basic fear and suspicion of strangers. [...] Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the history of Caucasian-Japanese relations on the Pacific coast was characterized by economic conflict (33).

Writing a few decades later and from a more legalistic and theoretical perspective, historian Mae Ngai draws a similar conclusion: “A half-century of exclusion policy had already legally and culturally construed Asian Americans as unalterably foreign; war, hot and cold, imbued that foreignness with political implications of an unprecedented nature” (169).

One of the arguments usually cited to prove that the internment of the Japanese was a foregone conclusion is the construction of camps for the mass confinement of aliens up to a year before America entered the war. Although these were temporarily used for the detention of some German and Italian nationals, their real target all along seems to have been the population of Japanese ancestry, both aliens and citizens. Thus, one month before Pearl Harbor, the Attorney General at the time spoke to the press about the possible “segregation” and “protection” of up to 150,000 Japanese in case of a military conflict with Japan (Robinson 48-49).

Another clear indication of the prewar anti-Japanese sentiment is the fact that the government prepared suspect lists long before the war broke out, mainly on the basis of people’s membership or involvement in various civic organizations. In the wake of Pearl Harbor, these lists were used to make mass arrests, notwithstanding the lack of indicting evidence:

The 2,192 Japanese aliens arrested by the Justice Department in the days after Pearl Harbor comprised virtually the entire political, social, cultural, and business leadership of Japanese American communities – Buddhist priests, martial arts instructors, Japanese language teachers, members of theater companies, chamber-of-commerce leaders, employees of Japanese companies, and editors of the Japanese language press, as well as leaders of the Japanese Association of America and patriotic organizations. They either remained in detention or were “paroled” to the internment camps with the general Japanese American population. (Ngai 176)

Robinson argues that the targeting of community leaders was an efficient way of “paralyz[ing] Japanese American community structures” (61), thereby pre-empting a coordinated opposition to the other retaliatory measures that were to follow. These included collectively declaring all Issei (with the exception of naturalized World War I veterans) “enemy aliens,” freezing their bank accounts, carrying out random house raids, imposing curfews, and other restrictions (Robinson 61).

In parallel, the question of the disloyalty of Japanese Americans was thoroughly investigated both through independent reports and by several official agencies, such as the FBI, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), and repeatedly discounted as unfounded. The commitment of the long resident Japanese American population to its adoptive country seems to have been evident even to Japan, whose espionage efforts are documented to have consciously avoided the recruitment of people of Japanese ancestry, especially Nisei (Robinson 55).

Although these findings were known at the highest level of US government, they did little to allay negative feelings about the Japanese, nor did they stop certain officials from spreading ostensibly false rumors of Japanese American sabotage. Such stories were quickly picked up by the press and made available to the large population, who played its own part in circulating them further and pressuring the authorities to remove all Japanese Americans from the coastal region. According to Robinson, requests of mass removals were not least economically motivated:

In this climate, an outcry arose among circles of West Coast whites for the expulsion from the West Coast of all Japanese Americans, irrespective of

citizenship. The center of agitation was California, which dwarfed its neighbors in size and wealth, and housed the largest interest groups. There nativist and commercial associations, eager to dispose of the long-despised Japanese American population, take over their fertile lands, and eliminate the economic competition they represented, stepped in to encourage and take advantage of popular insecurity. (Robinson 72)

In the circumstances, the numerous public efforts of Japanese Americans to proclaim their loyalty to the US, going as far as renouncing Japanese citizenship, remained without impact. Despite the ostensible lack of incriminating evidence, the pressure exerted by press propaganda and the concerted campaigns of different lobbying groups and powerful public officials, finally led to the issuing by President Franklin Roosevelt of Executive Order 9066. Without any explicit mention of the Japanese, the order allowed a legal way for their mass removal, by granting the military authorities the power to create defense zones and evacuate any civilians who were deemed a possible security threat.

The order was carried through in March 1942, without any coordinated opposition from civic organizations or other minority groups, aside from a petition initiated by the Socialist Party and signed by about two hundred public intellectuals (Robinson 109). The evacuation extended over 90 days and involved the displacement of between 110,000 and 120,000 Japanese Americans, 70,000 of which had citizen status and as such were supposed to be protected by habeas corpus. Also to be noted is that about forty percent of the evacuees were children or senior citizens and thus hardly capable of sabotage. Initially, the evacuees were distributed among fifteen "assembly centers" where living conditions resembled those in prison facilities, and living quarters generally consisted of converted animals pens (Robinson 131-132).

According to Robinson, the original intention of the authorities had been to arrange for the gradual release and resettlement of the evacuees in inland communities (140-1). However, the widespread anti-Japanese hysteria among the large population, which found its confirmation in the evacuations themselves, along with the refusal of local authorities to accept Japanese migrants, reversed these plans, leading to the mass confinement of those removed from the West Coast for the whole duration of the war. Starting in June of 1942, the detainees were transferred from the temporary assembly centers to ten different guarded military facilities established for the most part in

desolate, uninhabitable desert areas and generally referred to by the authorities as “relocation centers,” although slips of tongue, most notably by President Roosevelt himself, revealed them as “concentration camps” (Robinson VIII).

Apart from the human costs of internment, most evacuees lost everything they owned – whether because they were forced to dispose of their property very quickly and for shameful prices, or because their property was requisitioned, or because it was vandalized while the rightful owners were in detention. William Manchester, one of the first historians to write about this episode, estimated the financial losses of the Issei to “seventy million dollars in farm acreage and equipment, thirty-five million in fruits and vegetables, nearly a half-billion in annual income, and savings, stocks, and bonds beyond reckoning” (300-301). Citing more recent research, Robinson puts the estimate at “between 67 and 116 million dollars” at the 1945 currency value (124).

The unconstitutionality of the internment, although recognized in official circles already at the time, was not publicly acknowledged until 1988, when the US Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which included an official apology and some financial compensation for the surviving victims. Today, historians concur in referring to the internment of Japanese Americans as “the worst civil rights violation by the federal government during the twentieth century” (Robinson 1), “a black page in [US] history” (Girdner and Loftis IX).

In an article about the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066, law professor Erwin Chemerinsky sees the internment of Japanese Americans as part of a larger “pattern of reacting to crises by restricting liberties [which] began early in American history” and which affected different minorities in different eras. Chemerinsky also states that:

During World War II, not one Japanese-American was ever accused, indicted, or convicted of espionage or any crime against national security. There is no basis for believing that the country was made safer by virtue of interning the Japanese-Americans during World War II. (169)

Overall, historians concur in describing the life of the Japanese Americans during the first half of the 20th century – the period roughly covered by *Buddha* – as a series of incremental, uncalled-for aggressions suffered at the hands of institutions as well as of

the general population, culminating in mass confinement. The Japanese Americans' lack of say in decisions which vitally affected their community demonstrates their lack of identity in American society.¹⁴

Within this already extremely exposed group, Issei women seem to have been the most vulnerable and least visible, notwithstanding their crucial role in the survival of the community. As discussed above, historical accounts point to cumulative reasons related to gender prejudice, the women's lack of roots in the new country and their weak command of English. These issues resonate strongly with the constative aspects of Otsuka's novel, which refer precisely to the systematic isolation and silencing of the picture brides. My analysis of the novel will therefore begin by looking at how *Buddha* constructs this complex mechanism of othering and oppression. Methodologically, I will draw upon Levinas' insights about the ethics of interpersonal relationships, especially when radical alterity is involved, as well as on Spivak and other feminists' theories about the silencing of women's voices throughout history.

4. THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL: THE IMPENETRABLE MYSTERY OF THE OTHER

This section discusses the trajectory of the female collectivity of Otsuka's novel, from hopeful immigrants to silent deportees, by drawing on Levinas' influential ideas about *o/Otherness* as detailed in *Time and the Other*. What particularly interests me is Levinas' conceptualization of time and history as directly dependent on intersubjective relationships, the failure of which is equated with death: "The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history" (79). At the same time, Levinas insists that human interaction is "not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place"; on the contrary, he conceives of the relationship with the alterity of others as "a relationship with Mystery" (75), a mystery which is to be embraced if one is to avoid devastating consequences both for the self and for the other.

¹⁴ The occasional civic battles which were won or at least settled by the Japanese American community took place before the start of the military conflict between Japan and the US and benefited significantly from Japan's diplomatic intervention.

Buddha is divided into 8 chapters: *Come, Japanese!* – about a group of women escaping to a new place (“On the boat we”), *First Night* – about their arrival on American soil and being taken into possession, symbolically and literally (“That night our new husbands took us”), *Whites* – about trying to make a living alongside the dominant white population (“We settled on the edges of their towns, when they would let us”), *Babies* (“We gave birth”) and *The Children* (“We laid them down gently”) – about having, raising and losing children, *Traitors* – about becoming the enemy (“The rumors began to reach us on the second day of the war”), *Last Day* – about being deported (“Some of us left”). In the last chapter, entitled *A Disappearance* (“The Japanese have disappeared from our town”), the narrative perspective is shifted to the white population.

As evident in the first line of each chapter, transcribed above, these life events are invariably related as encounters between *we* and *they*. Already in Chapter One we witness the gradual formation of the novel’s *we*,¹⁵ the collectivity of women who cross the ocean together and who remain invisibly bound to each other even after they get off the boat. This collective bond is the strongest we will see throughout the novel, and it is forged by a shared background and shared hopes of a better and freer life, by friendship as well as by antipathy, by rivalry as well as by lesbian love.

According to Le Guin, the reasons why the *we* of the female collectivity does not disappear with its physical dispersion, nor does it expand to include others, have to do with how these *others* see and treat the picture brides:

The picture brides had no way to know that American racial prejudice would isolate them with their husbands and that for the rest of their lives they would be “we” only to one another, “we” the Japanese in America. To white Americans they would always be Them. [...] Later, as they go on with their hard, poor lives, slaving at “stoop labor” in the fields of California, working in the kitchens of the labor camps or of middle-class employers, the absolute otherness of the whites still doesn’t join them with their husbands. Even when their children are born, though at first they are very close, always, heartbreakingly, they too are not “us.” (269)

¹⁵ Towards the end of the novel, the children and husbands are absorbed into the *we* of the female community. This narrative shift will be discussed in detail in section 6.

In highlighting the novel's division between *we* and *they*, Le Guin seems to contrast the picture brides and their husbands with the majority population and the Nisei children, whose aspirations of becoming "white" cause them to slowly distance themselves from their parents. In my view, the estrangement of the women extends to the men as well. On the boat, many of the brides fret with anticipation about meeting their new husbands. They compare each other's pictures and build each her own vision of the future, based on what they think they know about the men and their confident look, "as though they were ready to take on the world" (4). Yet, the first physical encounter between the brides and their husbands, where the former fail to recognize the latter, marks an alienation which for many will persist throughout their lives: "ON THE BOAT we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were" (18). In time, the brides' idealized mental image of their adoptive country will prove just as inaccurate as the pictures by which they had agreed to marry: "*This is America*, we would say to ourselves, *there is no need to worry*. And we would be wrong"¹⁶ (18).

Since the story is narrated in terms of encounters and relationships, I think it is important to look at these more closely and discuss why its protagonists largely remain in opposing positions: picture brides versus husbands, Japanese women versus whites, mothers versus children. In this context, Levinas' theory of interpersonal relationships, also known as the philosophy of the "face-to-face," seems particularly relevant. As explained by Levinasian scholar Michael L. Morgan, "[f]or Levinas, each of us is a subject in the world encountered by another person," because "[t]he world we live in is social before it is a world at all" (121).

In discussing the various dimensions of interpersonal existence, Levinas lists sexuality/eros, fecundity/paternity,¹⁷ and death as the main elements which "introduce a duality into existence, a duality that concerns the very existing of each subject" (92). I am well aware that Levinas' subject is coded as (a privileged) male, as evident in his use of a gendered vocabulary, already discussed at length by numerous scholars and writers, starting with Simone de Beauvoir. However, as Levinas' whole philosophy goes against exclusion, I see no reason why notions such as "eros" and "fecundity" could not be

¹⁶ The italics belong to the author and are used to introduce short individual accounts in direct speech, where the speaker can be an individual or a group, part of the female collectivity or of the other groups represented in the novel. This technique is discussed more in detail in section 6.

¹⁷ Levinas himself uses these terms interchangeably.

appropriated for feminist use,¹⁸ more precisely to describe a subject marked as female subaltern. These two dimensions of existence are also the ones described by Levinas as “victory over death” (90), meaning situations which do not annihilate the self.

The beings closest to the subject are, of course, one’s children. “Paternity,” Levinas tells us, “is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me” (91). In applying this notion to the relationship between mothers and children as described in *Buddha*, we notice how the young children are one with their mothers, showing an instinctive understanding of their silent suffering: “They worried about us when we were tired. They worried about us when we were sad. They knew, without our telling them, when our knees were bothering us or it was our time of the month” (62). Then, as time goes by, the children slowly turn into strangers – more specifically, they do everything in their power to turn into the white self:

ONE BY ONE all the old words we had taught them began to disappear from their heads. [...] They spent their days now living in the new language, whose twenty-six letters still eluded us even though we had been in America for years. [...] THEY GAVE THEMSELVES new names we had not chosen for them and could barely pronounce. [...] SOON we could barely recognize them. They were taller than we were, and heavier. They were loud beyond belief. [...] They preferred their own company to ours and pretended not to understand a word that we said. [...] MOSTLY, they were ashamed of us. Our floppy straw hats and threadbare clothes. Our heavy accents. (72-75)

This transformation, while hurtful and divisive, is nonetheless deceiving: rejecting their parents will not help the children be accepted by the coveted white world. They will become strangers to their parents while remaining their parents, whose otherness they are forced to inherit. Levinas’ statement “I *am* in some way my child” (91) gains a strange new meaning in the Issei women’s ambivalent awareness that their children’s attempts

¹⁸ Tina Chanter is one of the scholars who argued – very convincingly, in my view – for looking beyond Levinas’ gendered vocabulary: “Levinas states quite clearly, at the end of the section in *Totalité et infini* called ‘The Home and Possession’ that his description of the discreet welcome of the feminine which the separated being receives in habitation does not imply the ‘empirical’ presence of the ‘human being of ‘feminine sex’” (TeI, p. 131; TI, p. 158). If that is the case, then there is no reason to suppose, I suggest, that paternity implies the empirical presence of a human being of the masculine sex” (46-47).

to craft themselves a new identity have come to naught: “they knew that no matter what they did they would never really fit in. *We’re just a bunch of Buddhaheads*” (77). Still, Le Guin is right in suggesting that the children’s identity struggles alienate their mothers, contributing to their isolation.

The other two dimensions of alterity mentioned by Levinas – eros and death – are not as easily identifiable in the novel. Some of the women can never love their husbands because they are gay, some cannot love them because they are already in love with somebody else, some are never given a chance to love them. For all these women, their husbands remain total strangers, embodying “death” rather than “sexuality,” where “death” is to be read as a metaphor for the events which “crush”¹⁹ the self:

[...] when we woke up we found ourselves lying beside a strange man in a strange land in a hot crowded shed that was filled with the grunts and sighs of others. Sometimes that man reached out for us in his sleep with his thick, gnarled hands and we tried not to pull away. (30)

Even more important than the absence of love, for many of the women marriage is just as restrictive of their freedom as is their poor migrant status. Although they range from teenagers to women heading into middle age, from virgins to sexually experienced, as wives they are all expected to perform according to the same norms. Likewise, there are, among them, those who are highly educated and those who cannot read, those already trained in housework and those used to agricultural work. However, whether, in their adoptive country, they will end up as housewives, working in the fields, as maids, or running their own businesses, does not depend on their own abilities and desires, but on where their husbands’ occupations will take them:

Home was wherever the crops were ripe and ready for picking. Home was wherever our husbands were. (25)

or

We waited tables seven days a week at our husbands’ lunch counters and noodle shops, where we knew all the regulars by heart. [...] We cleaned the rooms of our

¹⁹ The term is used repeatedly by Levinas. The question of not letting oneself “be crushed by the other” is equated with “the preservation of the ego in transcendence” (77).

husbands' cheap boarding houses, and twice a day we cooked meals for their guests. (51)

On the other hand, the husbands' profile is much more unitary: most of them are simply much older, poorer, less educated, or completely different from the persons they claimed to be when wooing their future wives across the ocean. Moreover, many of them behave as if they were the women's first bosses on the scale of subordination, dictating everything from their sleeping hours, to their sexual activity, to their relationship with their children, to their livelihoods:

In the evening, no matter how tired we were when we came in from the fields, they sat down and read the paper while we cooked dinner for the children and stayed up washing and mending piles of clothes until late. They never let us go to sleep before them. They never let us rise after the sun. *You'll set a bad example for the children.* They never gave us even five minutes of rest. They were silent, weathered men who tramped in and out of the house in their muddy overalls muttering to themselves [...] (63)

Thus, the relationship between husbands and wives becomes a power struggle, which is exactly what Levinas tells us an erotic relationship should not be: "It is only by showing in what way eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in eros" (88). Levinas then goes on to call an erotic relationship characterized by "grasping," "possessing" or "knowing" as "a failure" (90).

The collective self of the picture brides is further imperiled in the interaction with the white population, on whose mercy depends their very survival. This type of relationship is profoundly asymmetrical and can therefore only be described from the position of the stronger, privileged subject, on whose shoulders lies the ethical responsibility. It is the relationship with the radical other, the other "as Other," who can no longer be "known through sympathy":

The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity. The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, "the widow and the orphan," whereas I am the rich or the powerful. (83-84)

The capitalized “Other” is exactly what the Japanese are to their American hosts. The encounter with radical alterity is a type of relationship which, more than any other, is subsumed under what Levinas calls the “relationship with a Mystery” (75). Otsuka comes back, again and again, to this mutual mystery, in describing the fears, suspicions, and prejudices of the Americans towards the Japanese, as well as the fears, suspicions, and prejudices of the Japanese towards the Americans.

The Japanese cannot stop wondering at the strange ways of the Americans, asking themselves what they talk about, dream about, to whom they pray and how they make love (25). Whenever they become the victims of hate crimes, they assume all Americans hate them. They become more and more self-conscious about their own ways and start fearing the very encounter with “the Whites,” whose alterity takes mythic proportions: “STAY AWAY FROM THEM, we were warned. Approach them with caution, if you must. [...] Expect the worst, but do not be surprised by moments of kindness” (25).

Americans, on the other hand, sway between praising the Japanese as “the best breed of worker they had ever hired” (29), and worrying they intend to overturn the status quo: “We were an unbeatable, unstoppable economic machine and if our progress was not checked the entire western United States would soon become the next Asiatic outpost and colony” (35). Thus, to quote a reflection by Pandey about subaltern citizens in general, the Japanese are forever caught between the equally uncomfortable positions as “potential resource and potential danger” (4737).

Somewhere in between admiring and fearing the work stamina of the Japanese, in between employing their services and dreading their ambitions, the Americans start taking notice of the unequal gender relations among them. Although these echo the patriarchy within the hegemonic population, and although the hard work of the Japanese women as maids, dry cleaners, farmers, prostitutes, etc. benefits Americans themselves, the responsibility for their exploitation is laid exclusively on the Japanese men: “Our husbands worked us like slaves. *They import those girls from Japan as free labour*” (35).

This reaction reminds one of Spivak’s famed characterization of the relationship between the imperialist subject and the subject of imperialism as “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 49). What the Americans overlook is that there are Japanese women who dare say no to their husbands: “They took

us clumsily, and we did not let them touch us again for three years” (22). Even more importantly, there are Japanese women who dare say no to their white bosses:

SOMETIMES the boss would approach us from behind while we were bending over his fields and whisper a few words into our ears. And even though we had no idea what he was saying we knew exactly what he meant. “Me no speak English,” we’d reply. Or, “So sorry, Boss, but no.” (32)

In judging the work morale of the Japanese, Americans are also ignorant of the fact that Japanese women may prefer to toil on farms rather than be ordered around in white households:

“I was a fool to follow you out into the country,” we said to our husband. Or, “You are wasting my youth.” But when he asked us if we would rather be working as a maid in the city, smiling and bowing and saying nothing but “Yes, ma’am, yes, ma’am,” all day long, we had to admit that the answer was no. (35)

In short, white Americans fail to recognize the fact that the Japanese women’s submissiveness is often a conscious strategy of survival, triggered into being not only by their husbands, but also by the dominant population:

We spoke seldom. We ate little. We were gentle. We were good. We never caused any trouble and allowed them to do with us as they pleased. We let them praise us when they were happy with us. We let them yell at us when they were mad. We let them give us things we did not really want, or need. *If I don’t take that old sweater she’ll accuse me of being too proud.* (44)

Nor does the majority make any effort to lift the Japanese women out of their subaltern position. Occasionally, the Japanese will be met with gestures of genuine kindness – a doctor assisting a birth free of charge (56), mistresses inviting their maids to sit down at the lunch table, buying them a gift, or enrolling them in an English class (42) – but these

appear as acts of “charity” rather than of “justice”²⁰ and as such they do little to change the relationship with the Japanese as Other in its foundations.

Interestingly, it is in the rare instances of interracial eroticism or love that the dynamics of this relationship somewhat changes. White married men initiating affairs with their Japanese maids regard the women’s exoticism with fascination rather than suspicion:

SOME OF THEM asked us to speak a few words in Japanese for them just to hear the sound of our voice. *It doesn't matter what you say.* Some of them asked us to put on our finest silk kimonos for them and walk slowly up and down their spines. [...] Some of them asked us to tell them our real names, which they then whispered to us again and again until we no longer knew who we were. *Midori. Midori. Midori.*
(46)

However, the unspoken ethnic hierarchy within the larger community almost always compromises the potential of such relationships. As objects of desire for white men, Japanese women may perform as prostitutes and secret lovers, but they are rarely accepted as equals and embraced as life companions or wives.

Summing up, it appears as if both Japanese and Americans perceive the radical alterity of the other as a threat. Nevertheless, this perception is much more problematic for the side which feels threatened in its power and which has the power to act on its fears. “The Other,” warns Levinas, “is not a being we encounter that menaces us or wants to lay hold of us. The feat of being refractory to our power is not a power greater than ours” (87). In *Buddha’s* case, while the anxieties of the Japanese make them retreat even more within their own communities, families and selves, the anxieties of the Americans spur them to come after the Japanese, and are used to legitimize acts of violence and displacement:

Sometimes they drove by our farm shacks and sprayed our windows with buckshot, or set our chicken coops on fire. Sometimes they dynamited our packing

²⁰ Levinas points to the difference between the two: “Does not the essential difference between charity and justice come from the preference of charity for the other, even when, from the point of view of justice, no preference is any longer possible?” (84)

sheds. Sometimes they burned down our fields just as they were beginning to ripen and we lost our entire earnings for that year. (36)

Ultimately, it is the Japanese women who take it hardest, crushed as they are by this double encounter with their dominant husbands and the violent white supremacists. The metaphor of life-in-death starts haunting the novel long before there is talk of evacuations:

ONE OF US blamed them for everything and wished that they were dead. One of us blamed them for everything and wished that she were dead. Others of us learned to live without thinking of them at all. We threw ourselves into our work and became obsessed with the thought of pulling one more weed. We put away our mirrors. We stopped combing our hair. We forgot about makeup. [...] We forgot about Buddha. We forgot about God. We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed. *I fear my soul has died.* [...] We cooked for them. We cleaned for them. We helped them chop wood. But it was not we who were cooking and cleaning and chopping, it was somebody else. And often our husbands did not even notice we'd disappeared. (36-37)

In the passage above, of which I have only rendered a fragment, the referent of *they* slips continually between the husbands and the whites, suggesting their shared responsibility in effacing the self of the Japanese woman. Paraphrasing Levinas, one could say there is little in the lives of these women which speaks of “the preservation of the ego” (77) or of “vanquishing death” (81).

That being said, it is undoubtedly the failure of the relationship between the Japanese and the white Americans which takes on truly violent forms, where death and annihilation cease to be metaphors and become reality. Rephrasing Levinas, Morgan explains that “real violence is ‘ignoring this opposition, ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze,’ and this means denying its plea to live and to be acknowledged, aided, and sustained, to ignore its suffering, to kill the face and the other person, and hence to avoid all responsibility” (68).

Similarly, in *Buddha*, the hegemonic population invoke the alterity of the Japanese in order to deny their plea to live peacefully beside them. They make little attempt to *imagine* this alterity or at least accept it. They are not even content when the Japanese try

to make it invisible. They are only content when it has been completely erased from their narrative:

THERE ARE CERTAIN MEMBERS of our community, however, who were more than a little relieved to see the Japanese go. [...] “There was just so much about them we didn’t know,” says one mother of five. “It made me uneasy. I always felt like there was something they were trying to hide.” When asked if he had felt safe living across the street from the Miyamotos, a worker at the ice factory replies, “Not really.” (118-119)

It is only a good while after the disappearance of the Japanese that members of the majority population begin to reflect on the justification for their fear and whether they have been complicit in murder: “We wonder if it wasn’t somehow all our fault. Perhaps we should have petitioned the mayor. The governor. The President himself. *Please let them stay*. Or simply knocked on their doors and offered to help. If only, we say to ourselves, we’d *known*” (122).

In a passage from the introduction to *Time and the Other* which strongly resonates with Otsuka’s novel, Levinasian translator and scholar Richard A. Cohen acknowledges the disruption represented by “the irreducible *alterity* of the Other,” while insisting that “the *I*” nonetheless has an ethical responsibility towards the Other. Such responsibility, Cohen explains, calls for a “subjectivity for-the-other, that is to say, a subjectivity which ‘fears murder more than death,’ which recognizes itself as murderous and the Other as vulnerable or destitute, the object of the subject’s actual or potential violence, the object of irresponsibility and injustice” (17).

Tellingly, rather than dwelling – at least post-factum – on their own responsibility in the removal of the Japanese or trying to bring them back, most white Americans in *Buddha* worry about having to find new nannies, cooks, gardeners and maids to fill in the vacancies created overnight (119). Thus, the relationship with the Other continues to be characterized by power rather than by intersubjectivity, with the inevitable risk that the Chinese, Hindus, Mexicans and Philippines who take over the jobs of the Japanese will sooner or later encounter a fate similar to theirs.

As we have seen in this section, the trajectory of the first-generation Japanese American women from the moment they arrive in the US, as “picture brides,” to their

removal to an undisclosed location, as “enemy aliens,” validates Le Guin’s argument that it is the women who are “othered” by their husbands, their children and, above all, the dominant white population, it is the women who are turned from *we* into *they*, from subject into object. In fact, the effacement in the last chapter of the whole Japanese community takes the ethical discussion to a whole new level, showing the possibly catastrophic consequences of the failure of the face-to-face.

What Levinas describes as averting one’s gaze from the radical alterity of the Other is tantamount to a refusal to see and listen to the Other, thereby pushing her into subalternity, which means pushing her into a position without identity. In other words, there is a clear relatedness between Levinas’ ideas of the failure of the face-to-face and Spivak’s argument that “the subaltern cannot speak.” For *Buddha*, the implication is that the picture brides are not merely the Other, but a community of subalterns silenced at all levels. Informed by subaltern studies and feminist criticism, the next section will discuss the complexity of the silencing mechanism, which includes discriminating, stereotyping, and threatening with a view to rendering the subalterns mute and invisible, and culminating with their very erasure from history.

5. THE SUBALTERN’S SILENCE AND SILENCING THE SUBALTERN

As already mentioned in the Introduction, Spivak once argued that the main mark of subalternity is silence. Further discussions of her contested statement revealed that what she had referred to was not only the subaltern’s failure to speak, but also the subaltern’s failure to make herself heard, the muffling of her voice by her contemporaries and/or descendants. Nevertheless, one has to find a way of reconciling the impenetrability of the subaltern with the necessity of representing her, and Spivak herself suggests “*measuring silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation*” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 48). Inspired by the ideas of Arendt and Benhabib, Lara puts forward a similar approach for bringing the overall problematics of women into the public sphere: “This new hermeneutical model – *searching through silences and redirecting them towards a new viewpoint* – refracts the problems of the private lives of women into a public discourse about the interpretation of needs” (160; emphasis added).

How this can be concretely done in literature is the subject of King-Kok Cheung's book *Articulate Silences*, which looks at three novels by Asian American female authors Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa, and the different ways in which they articulate the idea of silence. Referring to the same socio-cultural context as the one of Otsuka's novel, Cheung argues that:

[s]ilence can be imposed by the family in an attempt to maintain dignity or secrecy, by the ethnic community in adherence to cultural etiquette, or by the dominant culture in an effort to prevent any voicing of minority experiences. [...] [The writers analyzed] articulate – question, report, expose – the silences imposed on themselves and their peoples, whether in the form of feminine and cultural decorum, external or self-censorship, or historical or political invisibility; at the same time they reveal, through their own manners of telling and through their characters, that silences – textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations (as against moral, historical, religious, or political authority) – can also be articulate. (3-4)

It seems to me that Cheung's lines could very well pass as a description of Otsuka's own way of enacting silence and I will devote the present section to proving it, as well as to discussing what the implications are in *Buddha's* case.

This is a novel which, through its very title, signals a doubly-imposed silence, on the migrant and on the woman. The two references – to Buddhism (stigmatized in the beginnings of the Asian migration to the US for no other reason than its unfamiliarity²¹) and the shameful, locked-up secret of a mentally sick wife²² – also speak tacitly of prejudice. So right there, in the title, we have the tension between silence and speech, as well as an implied promise for the paradox to be further explored between the covers of the book.

The novel's collectivity of picture brides travelling to America on the same boat is far from silent. It is made up of hopeful, curious women, eager to engage with each other and the world, reflecting on every aspect of their lives and always asking questions.

²¹ Cf. Yu, 469.

²² This is, in all likelihood, a double reference to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the landmark feminist treatise *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose title alludes to Brontë's novel.

However, the world they leave behind seems imbued with a culture of silence. As the young women prepare to leave for their new husbands and homes in America, the most valuable life lessons their mothers wish to pass on are about submission and self-effacement: “*Hold your teacup with both hands, stay out of the sun, never say more than you have to*” or “*A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist*” (6). Once on American soil, the task of “educating” the women in the foreign ways of their adoptive country is taken over by their husbands, whose message sounds eerily familiar: “Say ‘Yes, sir,’ or ‘No, sir,’ and do as you’re told. Better yet, say nothing at all. You now belong to the invisible world” (26).

This time, the lesson catches on: the effervescence of the new beginnings dampens as soon as the women get off the boat. Once they disperse to the homes of their husbands, their voices persist only as a collective, inner voice; taken individually, they seem to descend more and more into silence. The inner voice reveals it as the silence of women who have nobody to talk to and whom nobody sees: “*Does anyone even know I am here?*” (30) and “*I fear my soul has died*” (37).

It is also the silence of women whose hopes are increasingly banished into their dreams, and whose dreams often turn into nightmares. Thus, in the beginning, no matter how harsh the realities, the women always have the dreams to turn to:

[...] we lay quietly and in the darkness and told each other about our days. *I beat the rugs. I boiled the sheets. I dug up the devil grass with my farmer’s knife from the south side of the lawn.* And when we were finished we pulled up the covers and closed our eyes and dreamed of better times to come. (40)

Soon after, reality invades the dreams, too, leaving the women no place of refuge:

We worked in basement laundries in Japantowns in the most run-down sections of their cities [...] and every morning before dawn we rose before dawn with our husbands and we washed and we boiled and we scrubbed. And at night when we put down our brushes and climbed into bed we dreamed we were still washing, as we would every night for years. (50)

To a certain extent, the withdrawal of the picture brides into themselves has to do with language. Since they can hardly make themselves understood in English and in order to

avoid any missteps, many women relinquish all representation to their husbands, which accentuates their subaltern status and their isolation: *“Be patient. Stay calm. But for now, our husbands told us, please leave the talking to me. For they already spoke the English language. They understood the American ways”* (27). In teaching them English, the husbands start with the basic words needed for survival – such as “water” (23) – but, trained as they are in silence, some women cannot even bring themselves to utter the simple words which can keep them alive. Weighed down by the hard work, the unloving and abusive husbands, and the prejudices of the majority, some women take their self-effacement to the extreme: *“We put away our mirrors. We stopped combing our hair. We forgot about makeup. Whenever I powder my nose it just looks like frost on a mountain”* (37).

At the same time, making oneself invisible slowly becomes a strategy for survival triggered by the prejudices of the majority population and practiced by all members of the community, irrespective of gender:

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. (52)

Later, the consciousness of difference and the fear of reprisals will perpetuate the same attitude among the next generation:

AT SCHOOL they sat in the back of the classroom in their homemade clothes with the Mexicans and spoke in timid, faltering voices. They never raised their hands. They never smiled. At recess they huddled together in a corner of the school yard and whispered among themselves in their secret, shameful language. (72)

This is not to imply that the self-imposed silence of the Japanese can be reduced to cultural quirkiness, linguistic misunderstandings, the dynamics of gender relations or paranoia. Above all, self-effacement is what is expected of the Japanese in the new world and for the women it is doubly motivated (the white women’s advice about good wifely behavior echoes the one received back in Japan: *“Don’t ask him where he’s been or what*

time he'll be coming home and make sure he is happy in bed" – 39). Even apparent proofs of friendship, such as a mistress confiding in her Japanese maid, are based on the expectation of silence: "When they were unhappy and had no one to talk to they told us their deep, darkest secrets" (40). A subaltern job might include anything from mopping the floors to covering the couple's infidelities:

When they fell in love with a man who was not their husband we kept an eye on their children while they went out to meet that man in the middle of the day. "Do I look all right?" they asked us. And, "Is my skirt too tight?" [...] "You look beautiful," we said to them, and then we sent them on their way. And when their husbands came home in the evening at the usual hour we pretended not to know a thing. (41)

Regardless of the Japanese' own choice to keep themselves in the shadows, the dominant population are little inclined to see their new countrymen and women as individuals: "MOST OF THEM took little notice of us at all" (44). In the US of the 1920s, the Japanese are a compact group, one category of subalterns among many others, all of them classified in economic terms, according to their efficiency and usefulness:

We had all the virtues of **the Chinese**—we were hardworking, we were patient, we were unfailingly polite—but none of their vices—we didn't gamble or smoke opium, we didn't brawl, we never spat. We were faster than **the Filipinos** and less arrogant than **the Hindus**. We were more disciplined than **the Koreans**. We were soberer than **the Mexicans**. We were cheaper to feed than **the Okies and Arkies**, both the light and the dark. (29; emphasis added)

Buddha shows us how the members of the Japanese minority (as well as of other minorities) are repeatedly stereotyped and objectified by the majority, their individuality and any attempt at agency thereby erased. In an essay about subaltern citizens, Pandey stresses the interrelation between the issue of representation and the recognition of difference:

For 200 years and more, the struggles of oppressed and subordinated were seen as struggles for recognition as equals. [...] In the later decades of the 20th century,

the battle was extended self-consciously to encompass another demand – the demand for a recognition of difference – as the awareness grew that differences of gender, of communal practices and ways of being, even of incommensurable languages and beliefs, have provided the very ground for the diversity, density and richness of human experience. (4739-4740)

Indeed, the silencing of the Japanese immigrants in *Buddha* starts with the very negation of difference and of the right to difference. This applies both to the dissimilarity of the Japanese culture from the American one, and to the diversity of the Japanese community. One, apparently benign, aspect regards the whites' renaming of their Japanese servants with familiar, American names (which, however, does not entail they are thenceforth regarded as Americans): "THEY GAVE US new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl. They marveled at our tiny figures and our long, shiny black hair. They praised us for our hardworking ways" (40).

The pattern is later repeated in schools, where white teachers and students take advantage of their hegemonic position to *re-name* and *nickname* the Japanese children. In some cases, these abuses appear good-natured: "Etsuko was given the name Esther by her teacher, Mr. Slater, on her first day of school. 'It's his mother's name,' she explained. To which we replied, 'So is yours.'" (73); in others, they border on viciousness, reinforcing the majority's stereotypes and turning different minorities against each other: "Saburo was called Chinky by all the others because he looked just like a Chinaman. Toshitachi was called Harlem because his skin was so dark" (73).

In times of crisis, as was the attack on Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, the long-congealed prejudices are whipped up into a frenzy which suddenly casts the Other as the ultimate, collective, enemy: "anyone, we were reminded, could be a spy. Your butler, your gardener, your florist, your maid" (90). In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explains the similar phenomenon which took place in the wake of September 11 as a repetition of stereotypes which "works by generating the other as the object of fear, a fear which is then taken on by the other, as its own" (76).

Indeed, dumbfounded as they are by the absurdity of the accusations of malicious intent brought up against them – such as signaling to enemy planes, flooding roads, bombing dams and bridges – the Japanese conclude that the blame lies in their own

failure to suppress their difference: “we wondered why we had insisted for so long on clinging to our strange, foreign ways. *We’ve made them hate us*” (87).

In public discourse, the immigrants’ loyalty to the US is now explicitly equated with the erasure of one’s roots. Fear of persecutions – there is talk of “lists” and mysterious incarcerations – drive the Japanese to voluntarily relinquish the last outward marks of their identity: private correspondence, ethnic clothing, family heirlooms; even cultural gestures which are a mark of respect towards the other, such as bowing, become offensive. At the level of language, this self-annihilation is manifested in the abandonment of Japanese and its replacement with English in all forms of communication, or even total silence. In the manual of survival of the third world immigrant subaltern, the ultimate lesson is to try and make oneself mute and invisible:

Once a week, on Fridays, we put up our hair and went into town to go shopping, but did not stop to say hello to one another when we met on the street. *They’ll think we’re exchanging secrets.* We rarely visited each other after dark in J-town because of the curfew. We did not linger long after services at church. *Now whenever I speak to someone, I have to ask myself, “Is this someone who will betray me?”* (98)

This resonates with Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of people’s response to fear as “shrinkage” of the body:

Fear of “the world” as the scene of a future injury works as a form of violence in the present, which shrinks bodies in a state of afraidness, a shrinkage which may involve a refusal to leave the enclosed spaces of home, or a refusal to inhabit what is outside in ways that anticipate injury. (70)

In the case of the Japanese, this self-subtraction from public life does nothing to at least safeguard their privacy – the bare knowledge of their existence is deemed threatening. In describing the evacuations – which amounts to the complete erasure of the Japanese from American public life – the emphasis is once again on silence, articulated through verbs suggestive of trauma, denoting feelings such as stupefaction and shock:

Some of us left weeping. And some of us left singing. One of us left with her hand over her mouth and hysterically laughing. A few of us left drunk. Others of us left quietly, with our heads bowed, embarrassed and ashamed. [...] Most of us left speaking mostly English, so as not to anger the crowds that had gathered to watch us go. Many of us had lost everything and left saying nothing at all. (105)

In the last chapter, entitled “A Disappearance,” the narrating voice has been taken over by the dominant population and the *we* of the Japanese has become *they*. The silencing has been completed: there are no Japanese left to speak for themselves, only the white Americans who draw the conclusions and then put a lid on this chapter of history. For efficiency, the erasure of the Japanese from collective consciousness has been brought about without a noise, taking care not to make a public show of the evacuations, giving no concrete information of the evacuees’ whereabouts, encouraging the spreading of negative rumors meant to smother any possible pangs of conscience among the dominant population.

Among the few who *mourn* the disappearance of the Japanese are the children. They worry for the fate of their classmates and construct fantastic scenarios which can help them process their mysterious disappearance: “Over at Lincoln Elementary an entire class of second graders has become convinced that their Japanese schoolmates have gotten lost in the forest.” Interestingly, they seem to instinctively blame their parents: “They talk back to us more than usual. They refuse to do their homework. They are anxious. They fuss” (118). For them, the students who no longer answer to roll – Lester Nakano, Oscar Tajima, Alice Okamoto, Delores Niwa – are just like themselves, but in hearing their names we are confronted with the hypocrisy of the school’s attempt to Americanize them.

The only members of the Japanese families who are exempt from relocation and immediately welcomed into American society are the pets. Their “distress” opens up wells of sympathy that their owners never qualified for:

WE BEGIN TO RECEIVE reports of lights left on in some of the Japanese houses, and animals in distress. A listless canary glimpsed through the Fujimotos’ front window. Dying koi in a pond over at the Yamaguchis’. And everywhere, the dogs. We offer them bowls of water, pieces of bread, leftover scraps from our tables, the butcher sends over a fresh cut of filet mignon. (119)

As for the various objects the Japanese leave behind, most of them tokens of their cultural roots and formerly feared as menacing symbols of a mysterious, un-American lifestyle, they are now disconnected from the memory of their rightful owners and recycled for the majority's use. After decades of expecting the Japanese to "perform" as Americans and still rejecting their claim to become part of the community, their paper scrolls, lanterns, Oriental rugs, even their chopsticks become spoils of war and cherished signs of a murky exoticism.

[...] out on Third Avenue, in the pawn and secondhand shops, exotic items from the Far East briefly surface before making their way into some of our homes. A stone lantern appears among the azaleas in a prizewinning garden on Mapleridge Road. A painted paper scroll replaces a picture of a naked bather in a living room on Elm. On block after block, Oriental rugs materialize beneath our feet. And on the west side of town, among the more fashionable set of young mothers who daily frequent the park, chopstick hair ornaments have suddenly become all the rage. "I try not to think about where they came from," says one mother as she rocks her baby back and forth on a bench in the shade. "Sometimes it's better not to know." (121-122)

This concrete appropriation of everything Japanese is part of the process of erasing all marks of the evacuees: "Flowers by Kay is now Foley's Spirit Shop. Harada Grocery has been taken over by a Chinese man named Wong" (129). Once the pets, jobs, heirlooms, houses and businesses of the Japanese have been taken care of, the process of forgetting them can begin. However, the erasure is only fully completed through the elimination of the Japanese from official records:

WITH EACH PASSING DAY the notices²³ on the telephone poles grow increasingly faint. And then, one morning, there is not a single notice to be found, and for a moment the town feels oddly naked, and it is almost as if the Japanese were never here at all. (121)

²³ The passage refers to the official notices of evacuation.

The ending touches on the issue of collective amnesia, gradually installing itself after the ground has been swept clean of any traces that the Japanese ever existed:

BY THE FIRST FROST their faces begin to blend and blur in our minds. Their names start to elude us. [...] A YEAR ON and almost all traces of the Japanese have disappeared from our town. [...] We speak of them rarely now, if at all. (128-129)

In the past two sections, I have looked at the way in which the first generation of Japanese female migrants to the US are represented in *Buddha*, arguing that, from the moment they arrive, they are denied their identity and, therefore, their voice, both by their husbands and by the dominant white population; that their difference is disapproved of and later demonized, until they are completely reduced to silence. In the Introduction, I also made the claim that Otsuka's novel enacts this silence as the subaltern's silence, and the time has come to discuss how it is done.

6. NARRATIVE VOICE, SUBALTERN VOICE

From the perspective of speech-act criticism, my analysis of *Buddha* has so far amounted to looking at the novel's *constative* aspects or at the novel as *locution*. In his series of lectures *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin described the "locutionary act" as "roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense" (108).

This was to be distinguished from the "illocutionary act," described as "the way in which a sentence is used to express an attitude with a certain function or 'force' (called illocutionary force)" (108). Austin saw the two as different aspects of the same utterance,²⁴ where the locution was the "performance of an act *of* saying something" and the illocution, the "performance of an act *in* saying something" (99).

The functions of language which Austin dubbed "illocutionary forces" and which referred to the ability of an utterance to assert, command, advise, promise, etc. have been given larger meaning in the application of his theories to literature. Petrey, who explored

²⁴ "In general, the locutionary act as much as the illocutionary is an abstraction only: every genuine speech act is both" (Austin 146).

the topic in several books, especially in the analysis of realist novels, claims that “poetic language too operates as an illocutionary force” (81), which I take to mean that a literary text’s illocutionary force is inscribed in its figurative and narrative strategies. At the same time, Petrey is true to Austin in regarding literary texts as any other speech act, that is, embedded in their social context, which entails that their illocutionary force comes from and acts upon society’s conventions: “poetic language is identical to illocutionary force in being a social construct rather than a trans-social quality” (80).

So what is the illocutionary force of Julie Otsuka’s novel and how is it carried through? As briefly discussed in sections 1 & 2, one aspect which makes *Buddha* stand out is its choice of narrative voice, and my contention is that this is also the novel’s main carrier of illocutionary force. The polyphony of voices clamoring to tell us a myriad stories about silence is a compelling way of conveying that silence; it is also an appeal to the reader to listen to what the female protagonists need to tell us.

In discussing the story “The Breast Giver” by Mahasweta Devi, about an Indian subaltern woman called Jashoda, Spivak notes that the story can be seen as

the result of an obstinate misunderstanding of the rhetorical question that transforms the condition of the (im)-possibility of answering—of telling the story—into the condition of its possibility. Every production of experience, thought, knowledge, all humanistic disciplinary production, perhaps especially the representation of the subaltern in history or literature, has this double bind at its origin. (“A Literary Representation” 263)

In *Buddha*, the fundamental impossibility of recovering an endless string of testimonies which were lost in time, the impossibility of making a group portrait of the Japanese picture brides which includes everyone, is turned into the possibility of at least conveying this multiplicity, I would even say – again borrowing a word from Spivak’s vocabulary – of *imagining* this multiplicity. In what follows, I will try to show how this is done through Otsuka’s sophisticated use of narrative voice.

Incidentally, the paradox underlying the usage of the term *voice* to denote the narrator of a literary text points both to its function as speech act and to the possibilities of inscribing a text’s illocutionary force in its mode of narration. On the same note, Susan

Lanser – the first literary theorist who conceptualized a communal narrative strategy²⁵ – suggests that the symbolism of the term opens up special potentialities to those groups whom society has denied a voice: “Despite compelling interrogations of ‘voice’ as a humanist fiction, for the collectively and personally silenced the term has become a trope of identity and power: as Luce Irigaray suggests, to find a voice (*voix*) is to find a way (*voie*)” (3).

Lanser identifies and discusses three main types of narrative voice as used by women’s fiction to claim “authority,” by which she means, “to construct and publicly represent female subjectivity and redefine the ‘feminine,’ and to constitute as a discursive subject a female body politic” (22). Two of these, called by Lanser “authorial voice” and “personal voice,” denote modes of narration which have already been widely used in literature. The third, “communal voice,” refers to “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” (21). By Lanser’s own admission, communal voice is “a category of underdeveloped possibilities,” which she associates mainly with “marginal or suppressed communities” (21).

Within this mode, Lanser distinguishes between three narrative possibilities: “a *singular* form in which one narrator speaks for a collective, a *simultaneous* form in which a plural ‘we’ narrates, and a *sequential* form in which individual members of a group narrate in turn” (21). The forms which can be identified in *Buddha* are the “simultaneous” and “sequential” types (concrete examples follow below). In Lanser’s view, the use of these two particular forms comes with “different ideological implications”: “simultaneous communal voice challenges the convention that feelings, perceptions, and thoughts are necessarily individual, while sequential voice threatens conventions of novelistic ‘coherence’ and continuity” (256).

In the following I will show that, in its continuous alternation between and, also, variation of simultaneous and sequential voice, *Buddha* maintains a constant tension between collectivity and subjectivity, between the need for group solidarity and the imperative of individual recognition. The book begins in the simultaneous form, with what might look like a stereotypical image of a group of young Japanese women of the early 1900s, crossing the ocean to get married: “On the boat we were mostly virgins. We

²⁵ Lanser’s pioneer work has also been acknowledged by Fludernik: “One of the earliest narratologists to focus on a ‘communal voice’ was Susan Lanser, who discusses a whole range of women’s fictions in which the first-person narrator is part of a community for which she provides a voice (what she calls the “communal ‘I’” in *Fictions of Authority*, ch. 13)” (146).

had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall” (3). However, any possible expectations of a unitary narrative are thwarted already in the first sentence by the surreptitious presence of “mostly,” which suggests that, despite their similar height, feet and hair color, these women are far from a compact, homogeneous group. In fact, once the women’s similar physical features – their distinctive mark in the eyes of the Western world, often mistaken for a shared identity – are acknowledged and gotten out of the way, the simultaneous form shifts to a hybrid one which gives the word to different groups of individuals from within the collective, each of them foregrounding a different experience or point of view: “some of us [...], while others of us [...]" (5), it’s how it goes, or, “some of us [...], and some of us [...], but many more of us [...]" (8), on and on. While the voice still speaks for several women at once, the *we* gradually expands into a constellation of sets partially intersecting each other in innumerable ways, to the point where every individual may be part of several groups, but no two individuals are the same. Eventually, the voice shifts from simultaneous to sequential, closing in on one woman at a time: “the oldest of us [...], the youngest of us [...], one of us [...], one of us [...], one of us [...]" (8).

Occasionally, such individual voices, belonging not only to the women, but even to the husbands, the children or the dominant population, are let into the story, allowed to take center stage in order to tell us a particular thought or experience in direct speech. It is a forum open to all the participants in the story, in which they can voice their opinions on an equal footing and without mediation (it is only in such instances that the first-person singular is ever used). These pithy accounts, which are always italicized, are used with different functions. Most often, they illustrate a sentence in the third-person and make for a forceful way of imbuing it with subjectivity and agency. When used in reference to the women, they sometimes enact what Spivak once described as the subaltern’s “failure of speech”: “They took us even though we insulted them – *You are worth less than the little finger of your mother* – and screamed out for help (nobody came)” (20).

Sometimes the narrating *we* returns, reassuringly, only to be subverted by the accompanying presence of “perhaps”: “Perhaps the real reason we were sailing to America was [...], or perhaps we were leaving behind [...]" (11). Sometimes the *we* points to an everyday fact of life, like educating one’s kids or dreaming, giving the reader the treacherous impression of a unifying experience; but then it all breaks down into so many

different lessons or dreams that any certainties or generalizations are, once again, exposed as meaningless:

At night we dreamed of our husbands. **We dreamed of** new wooden sandals and endless bolts of indigo silk and of living, one day, in a house with a chimney. **We dreamed** we were lovely and tall. **We dreamed** we were back in the rice paddies, which we had so desperately wanted to escape. The rice paddy dreams were always nightmares. **We dreamed** of our older and prettier sisters who had been sold to the geisha houses by our fathers so that the rest of us might eat, and when we woke we were gasping for air. (4-5; emphasis added)

At other times, an apparently linear narrative meanders around so many divergent markers of place that we are forced to admit that the referent of *we* changes with every sentence, and we will never pin it down:

We picked their strawberries **in Watsonville**. We picked their grapes **in Fresno and Denair**. We got down on our knees and dug up their potatoes with garden forks **on Bacon Island in the Delta**, where the earth was spongy and soft. **On the Holland Tract** we sorted their green beans. (23; emphasis added)

After a while, the constantly shifting referent makes us lose confidence in the *we's* very possibility of cohesion, and this instability spreads to the other groups, at least when the picture brides speak. Sometimes the subject (and agent) is another – *they*, the husbands, *they*, the “Whites,” or *they*, the children – and it is from the variation within this *they* that we infer the variation within the *we* and the countless configurations of the reality these women encounter:

That night our new husbands **took us quickly**. They **took us calmly**. They **took us gently, but firmly, and without saying a word**. They assumed we were the virgins the matchmakers had promised them we were and they **took us with exquisite care**. *Now let me know if it hurts*. They **took us flat on our backs** on the bare floor of the Minute Motel. They **took us downtown**, in second-rate rooms at the Kumamoto Inn. They **took us in the best hotels** in San Francisco that a yellow man could set foot in at the time. The Kinokuniya Hotel. The Mikado. The Hotel

Ogawa. They **took us for granted** and assumed we would do for them whatever it was we were told. *Please turn toward the wall and drop down on your hands and knees.* (19; bold emphasis added)

However, in my view the point of this strategy is not to incorporate all the participants in this story and all their experiences, but quite the contrary, to show that this is impossible to achieve. Irrespective of the type of focalization she chooses, Otsuka constantly refuses to pin down her protagonists. With every sentence, which adds one more voice or one more aspect to the story of the picture brides, the author destabilizes any impression the reader may have of getting to know these women. This technique constantly challenges the clichés circulating among the dominant population, its tendency to see the Japanese as an indiscriminate mass with similar facial features and unpronounceable names:

SOME OF US on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing. Some of us were farmers' daughters from Yamaguchi with thick wrists and broad shoulders who had never gone to bed after nine. Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi and had only recently seen our first train. Some of us were from Tokyo, and had seen everything, and spoke beautiful Japanese, and did not mix much with any of the others. (8)

This strategy is also a way of exposing negative stereotypes which generalize from particular cases: "A few of us stole from them. [...] Others of us, though tempted, kept our hands to ourselves" (43).

On the other hand, the choice of quantifiers ("most of us" / "many more of us" / "a few of us" / "one of us") rather than names (only used occasionally in the first five chapters) to show the women's heterogeneity and the multiplicity of their experience reminds us of their lack of voice and of what Spivak, in referring to subalternity, called "a position without identity" ("Scattered Speculations" 476). Tellingly, it is in the desire to escape their subaltern situation that the feelings of the women converge: "ONE DAY, we promised ourselves, we would leave them. We would work hard and save up enough money to go to some other place" (52). Still, as a token of their diversity, the dream of

freedom takes on a different shape for each and every one of them: “We would start all over again. Open our own fruit stand. Our own trading company. Our own first-class hotel. [...] We would learn things. Do things. Build an orphanage. Build a temple. Take our first ride on the train” (53).

The women’s intuition proves right. However they may differ from each other, whatever their individual value, their belonging to the same ethnic group is enough for the white majority to obliterate their differences and punish them collectively, for a guilt not proven in anybody. They are sent on to their common fate with no other name than “the Japanese”: “*Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry*” (117), the official evacuation notices go. Following their disappearance, most of the whites refer to them – as long as they still refer to them – as “the Japanese.”

This development is also made apparent at the level of voice. Thus, as discussed above, in the beginning the novel brings out both the women’s multiplicity of feeling and personality, as well as their multiplicity of experience, and for a while it seems like life may lead them in all possible directions. Later, though, as the story proceeds towards the implacable end, the simultaneous voice is used in certain passages specifically to emphasize the common fate awaiting all members of the community: “We swept our floors. We packed our bags. We gathered up our children and from every town in every valley and every city up and down the coast, we left” (103).

The coalescing *we* at the end of the novel can also be seen as a sign of group solidarity in the face of political persecutions. As the whole Japanese community is being closed in on, the women finally accept the fact that the men are part of their lives: “We felt closer to our husbands, now, than we ever had before” (96). This is a sad, but practical truth for the same women who, referring to their husbands, had once made the collective confession: “SECRETLY, we hoped to be rescued from them” (31). Now, *they*, the husbands creep silently into the *we* of the women, helping them confront the bigger danger of *they*, the whites. The referent of *we* becomes more and more ambiguous, finally cutting across generations and gender lines, while the communal voice describing the deportations includes, for the first time, the experiences of children and men. The *we* is now declined even as “an old man” / “a newborn baby” / “a boy in short pants” / “families from Oakland” / “families from Fresno” / “the Tanakas of Gardena” / “the Tanakas of Delano” / “the Kobayashis of Biola” / “the Suzukis of Lompoc” / “the Nishimotis of San Carlos” / “the Igarashis of Preston” (105-106).

The appellations distinguishing families with the same name depending on the location of their American homes highlight the double identity of the evacuees, as both Japanese and American. Furthermore, this eventual calling out of the Japanese by their proper names just as they are being wiped out from American society serves a memorializing function, while also contrasting their individuality with their unmerited, impersonal fate. Some examples foreground the personal tragedies: “Masayo left after saying good-bye to her youngest son, Masamichi, at the hospital in San Bruno, where he would be dead of the mumps by the end of the week” (108); others show how willing to integrate many of the Japanese actually are, underlining the uprootedness caused by the evacuations:

Sachiko left practicing her ABCs as though it were just another ordinary day. [...] Atsuko left heartbroken after saying farewell to all the trees in the orchard. *I planted them as saplings.* [...] Satsuyo left looking for her neighbors, Bob and Florence Eldridge, who had promised to come say good-bye. (108)

There was a pharmacist from Stockton who left after making payments on his life insurance policy for the next two and a half years. (111)

The absurdity of their displacement, after decades of trying to fit in, leaves many stupefied:

Futaye, who had the best vocabulary of all of us, left speechless. (108)

Chiyoko, who had always insisted that we call her Charlotte, left insisting that we call her Chiyoko. *I've changed my mind one last time.* (109)

The accumulating use of the third-person in describing the evacuations is also a way of transitioning to the last chapter of the novel, where the *we* of the Japanese has been completely taken over by the white population who now ponder their disappearance. Implicitly referring to the novel as a speech act, Jobert describes the chapter in the following way:

The Japanese have become third-person pronouns and nouns and are thus excluded from the interlocutory relation previously established with readers.

The Japanese voice has been muffled and has become an object of commentary.
(549)

The narrative shift of the last chapter, already discussed from another perspective in section 4, has been the main bone of contention among the novel's commentators. Thus, while Fludernik opines that "Otsuka's most exciting trick is that of shifting narratorial perspective at the end of the novel" (152), others – such as Le Guin – regret not being able to follow the women into the camps:

I can only wish [Otsuka] had gone all the way with her heroines into the exile from exile, to those bitter desert and mountain prison-towns, where few of "us" went even in imagination, until those who returned began to bear witness. (270)

Another interesting observation in this regard is ventured by Maxey, who sees this abrupt shift as Otsuka's way of "comment[ing] on a continuing mainstream ignorance towards this episode in US history" (10). Thus, Maxey translates a narratorial move into political content, thereby investing it with illocutionary force.

In fact, many commentators have – more or less explicitly - described *Buddha* as a speech act with political undertones, whose expressive force resides in its collective voice. Jobert, for instance, sums up the novel as follows:

[...] the narrator becomes the mouthpiece of Japanese immigrants, and the use of the first-person plural is the linguistic evidence of this ideological stance. This narrative device – Otsuka calls it a "choral narrator" (Otsuka and Yuhas 2012) – is maintained until the last chapter where the picture brides seem to be given a single voice. This voice clearly denounces the fate of these women and condemns the American policy of the time. But this voice is also the synthesis of a plurality of individual voices. It becomes so polyphonic that it stretches the resources of narrative conventions almost to breaking point. (541)

The objection that communal narration threatens novelistic conventions has been raised before, not only in relation to Otsuka (see Lanser 263). Maxey, too argues that sustaining a whole work of fiction in the first-person plural is difficult to achieve, and the possible reason why the few works that have attempted it so far are relatively brief (11). She also

seems to agree with other commentators that the use of communal voice comes at the expense of the characters' psychological depth, while stressing that, "In Otsuka's hands, *we* is nonetheless rich and polysemic: it is by turns semi-mythical, wise, panoramic and chilling" (10).

As hinted at in the beginning of this section, the perpetual tension between the collective and the individual is also a tension between the question of solidarity, embedded in the very use of communal voice, and the equally important issue of individual recognition. In *Buddha*, we can see this in how the first-person plural is played against the *we*'s infinite declensions. Similarly, the use of quantifiers in the first part of the novel, while pointing to the picture brides' namelessness in American society, also reminds us that they are, for better or for worse, part of this female community of migrants: "one **of us**" / "a few **of us**" / "some **of us**" / "many **of us**" / "others **of us**" (emphasis added).

The omniscience of the narrating *we* suggests that the women who came off the boat and scattered all over the West Coast somehow remained connected to each other by an invisible spiritual thread, despite their loneliness and individual troubles: "One of us filled the sleeves of her white silk wedding kimono with stones and wandered out into the sea, and we still say a prayer for her every day" (47). This short passage displays a contrast between its locutionary content (a married Japanese woman who is working as a maid and has let herself be seduced by her white master sees her act as such a transgression that she returns her own body to the sea which brought her over) and its illocutionary meaning (despite her falling in love with a white man, the woman remains part of a community which is united both in its shared identity and in its differences).

Even from an overall perspective, the narrative strategy (which I see as the novel's *illocution*) and the story it is deployed to tell us (the novel's *locution*) seem at odds with each other: *in* having the Japanese women tell us their stories of alterity and isolation, the novel's illocutionary force brings forth their collective spiritual bond; *in* having the women tell us about the different ways in which they were stereotyped and silenced, the illocutionary force retrieves their voices and performs their multiplicity. This is also consistent with Lanser's view about the interdependence and mutual completion of narrative and voice: "voice not only constructs and controls narrative but also enacts more-or-less visibly a 'plot' of its own. Perhaps this 'plot' has a particular importance for

those whose voices have not been able simply to take for granted their discursive rights” (277-278).

In this section, I departed from Petrey’s premise that “a speech-act vision requires that we focus [...] on the text’s illocutionary force” (70) to discuss in detail Otsuka’s use of communal voice, which I consider to be *Buddha*’s main carrier of illocutionary force. In the last section of the thesis, I will look at some of the illocutionary or performative implications of the novel from a broader perspective, and inquire whether conditions are met for a felicitous speech act.

But how is one to identify the performative effects of a literary text? In a comprehensive essay which looks at the issue by considering both Austin’s original theory as well as various literary approaches derived from it, Jonathan Culler proposes that, “[f]or each work, one can try to specify what it and its parts accomplish, just as one can try to spell out what is promised in a particular act of promising. This, one might say, is the Austinian version of the literary event” (516). In *Buddha*’s case, such “promises” are encapsulated in its two epigraphs, which illuminate the importance of remembering the victims of the past, on the one hand, and of reconfiguring the present, on the other.²⁶ I suggest that we consider these two aspects the main “accomplishments” or performative effects of the novel. Borrowing two of Lara’s terms, I will refer to them as “recognition” and “solidarity.”²⁷

7. RECOGNITION AND SOLIDARITY, OR THE PAST IN RELATION TO THE PRESENT

We will start the analysis of *Buddha*’s performative effects by considering the novel’s memorializing function, which is also its most evident accomplishment. Our discussion has already shown how the novel’s locutionary and illocutionary dimensions come together to construct the forgotten community of Issei women, especially with regard to heterogeneity and silence – two aspects which supposedly defy the finite and concrete nature of the written text.

This function is also the one most frequently discussed by the novel’s commentators, although in different ways. While praising the complexity of Otsuka’s

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the epigraphs, see section 2.

²⁷ Here, the term expands to include solidarity with today’s subalterns.

portrayal of the picture brides, most critics describe it in terms evocative of photography or documentary work. Thus, Maxey writes that the novel “reflects a community in its sheer volume and renders the invisible visible to mainstream America” (9), while Fludernik lauds it for “its evocation of concrete individual experiences that serve to bolster, rather than detract from, the collective story of Japanese women immigrants (*issei*) and their sad fate” (151). In her own commentary of *Buddha’s* narrative strategy, fellow novelist Nesbit observes that Otsuka deploys it so as to foreground the constructedness of the story:

[...] the first-person plural simultaneously represents the way these women might recall their own stories – it was like this for us – while reminding the reader of the constructed nature of the story, and by extension, the constructed nature of history. One cannot get narratively comfortable reading these differentiated first-person plural stories: an experience is at first created, and then, as if on a chalkboard, erased, and rewritten by another woman's experience.

Le Guin raises a related issue by pointing out the fact that the *we* of the novel – the *we* which constructs the female collectivity – “is an artificial literary construct that does not include an ‘I’” (268-9). Le Guin is certainly right – as already mentioned, the *I* appears only in the italicized snatches, and not always having a picture bride as referent – so one is made to wonder about Otsuka’s choice of pronouns as well as about her legitimacy in constructing this narrating community. In my view, an *I* would be in a superior position vis-à-vis all the individual *shes* embraced by the *we*, establishing a hierarchy that would ruin the whole idea of communal voice. On the other hand, Otsuka would have had the option of declining the *we* as an endless number of *I*'s instead of an endless number of *one of us's*, but the use of the third person singular to individuate also goes to preserve the mystery of the subaltern woman, this woman whom we should try to grasp, but who is bound to remain ungraspable.

Furthermore, the *we* that does not include an *I* is another way for Otsuka to remain transparent about her mediation. The experience she recounts is not her own, it belongs to a generation that, at the time of the writing of the novel, no longer has any survivors. Besides, the novelist is not herself a subaltern. Although of Japanese ancestry and coming from a family who lived through the trauma of internment, Otsuka is removed from the

experience of the picture brides by the several layers made up by time, her own American upbringing and elite education, her perfect command of English, and her worldwide audience of readers. Otsuka has had no direct access to the experience of the picture brides, she simply reconstructs their stories, constantly reminding us that they can never be fully grasped and that they can never be exhausted.

Otsuka's project reminds me of Spivak's description of her own work of translating Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi into English, which she refers to as "an embrace" ("Translator's Preface" 290) and a way to "establish ethical singularity with the subaltern" (279). Spivak is fully aware that translating a text about Indian subaltern women into the language of the oppressor, for an audience (at least partly) made up by the children of former oppressors, is an almost impossible task, carrying the risks of leaving some of the "secrets" of the original text hidden. But then ethics itself "is the experience of the impossible" (280), and no less necessary for that matter.

Similarly, Otsuka translates different accounts of and about the picture brides into her own fictionalized, collective narrative, transmuting them from Japanese into what, for the first generation of Japanese American women, remained the language of the oppressor and the language in which they were betrayed by their children. While rendering the chorus of female voices in fluent, poetic English which we can imagine to be an approximate translation of how it might have sounded in the original Japanese, the account sometimes erupts into the broken English of the discriminated migrant, reminding us of the ambivalence of this language: "So sorry!" (52), "*Every sing oh right?*" (75). Every now and then, there are also mysterious Japanese words breaking out through the English texture, evocative of the secrets which will remain forever uncovered: "*Nemure, nemure*" (38), "*Sakura, sakura*" (106).

In other words, Otsuka is transparent about her distance to the story of the picture brides and the many layers of mediation involved in bringing it to the readers. Thus, both in its locutionary (as related to vocabulary) and illocutionary (as related to voice) aspects, *Buddha* teaches the same lesson as Levinas, Spivak, and many others: the need to *imagine* and *embrace* the subaltern even if this appears to be an impossible task. Despite its limitations, the literary representation of the subaltern is also a first step towards

representation in the political sense of the word,²⁸ where the mediation of the intellectual is hopefully no longer needed and which is meant to overcome one's subaltern status. We could thus say that political representation is a performative effect of felicitous literary representations of marginalized groups. Lanser, too hints at the interrelation between these two types of representation when talking about "the political possibilities of constituting a collective female voice through narrative" (22).

One could object that there is no political battle to be won by reviving, however compellingly, events that took place a century ago, but many feminists strongly disagree. Lara pays a direct tribute to the importance of memorializing literature, when writing that:

It is through recollection that we actively appropriate the past. But this appropriation is always an interpretation of the past, a selective and imaginative retelling of it from the outlook of the present. The past is a tribute to the very meaning of the present. (43)

Lara argues that such projects carry an illocutionary force which enacts change in the public sphere. Her understanding of literature's "illocutionary force" enlarges upon an earlier conceptualization developed by Jürgen Habermas and is worth discussing in the context of Otsuka's novel.

As we saw in the previous section, Petrey seems to suggest that any literary text can be analyzed as a speech act, as long as one does not lose sight of its social situatedness: "to consider literature as illocution is also to consider the societies from which it comes and in which it circulates" (70). Lara, however, goes one step further, defining illocutionary acts in literature as "emancipatory narratives [which] mediate between particular group identities and universalistic moral claims, providing new frameworks that allow those who are not members of the group to expand their own self-conceptions and their definitions of civil society" (3). For Lara – whose notions of the moral and of public space draw on Habermas' discourse ethics,²⁹ literature is one of the

²⁸ Here we are reminded of the distinction made by Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak," between the two, equally necessary dimensions of representation: *darstellen* – "representation or rhetoric as tropology" – and *vertreten* – amounting to political representation (30).

²⁹ Habermasian scholar Thomas McCarthy summarizes Habermas' moral theory as follows: "Discourse ethics' [...] is a reconstruction of Immanuel Kant's idea of practical reason that turns on a reformulation of his categorical imperative: Rather than prescribing to others as valid norms that I can will to be universal

participants in public discourse, where it depends on its illocutionary force for “changing prejudice and transforming the symbolic order” (157). Conversely, “discourses which aim at exclusion and separation cannot be considered illocutionary; rather than having a moral ambition, ‘polluted’ discourses assert the superiority of their particularities” (3). Lara thus restricts the discussion of literature as speech act to those texts which have an inclusive moral content, going as far as to condition their felicity on their capacity to impact society in a positive way.

In Lara’s view, women’s literature was the historical initiator of this emancipatory movement, later extending to literature by other marginalized groups. Her concrete examples of illocutionary texts point to “women reconstructing other women’s lives as personal projects of identity” (49), not least by illuminating past narratives for a better understanding and a reshaping of the present. From this perspective, *Buddha’s* memorializing and ethico-political functions are inextricably linked. On the one hand, the novel is “a project of identity/recognition”³⁰ disclosing the plight of Issei women and giving them a (symbolic) voice in American public space; on the other, it constitutes an exposure of the mechanics of othering which is still in place and a call to solidarity with all subaltern women. Thus, Lara’s model allows us to see *Buddha* as an ethico-political intervention highlighting the dangers of the American self’s refusal of the face-to-face with the poor, migrant Other, pushed into a position of subalternity. As briefly touched on in previous sections, this interpretation is implicit in all approaches discussing Otsuka’s novel in the context of the rising islamophobia post 9/11.

We have so far looked at the memorializing and ethico-political functions of the novel, which is far from exhausting its performative effects. An equally interesting topic would be to look at *Buddha* as a form of subaltern historiography and the way in which its illocutionary force makes up for the aporias of this discipline: “the paucity of evidence, the ‘fragmentation’ of the archive, the story that has come to us simply as ‘the residuum of a dismembered past’” (Guha 138–139). Unfortunately, this topic is too complex to be done justice to in this thesis.

Nevertheless, before concluding this discussion of *Buddha* as speech act, it would be interesting to inquire whether we can consider it “felicitous” and what it is that makes

laws, I must submit norms to others for purposes of discursively testing their putative universality. [...] Normative validity, construed as rational acceptability, is thus tied to argumentation processes governed by a principle of universalization.”

³⁰ Lara uses these terms interchangeably.

it felicitous. Austin insisted that performative statements cannot be described as “true or false” / “right or wrong,” but are to be deemed as either “felicitous” or “infelicitous” (Lectures I & II). However, his felicity criteria were formulated for official speech situations such as marriage ceremonies or court trials and are not easily applicable to literature. Seen in general terms, one could nevertheless say that Austin regarded observance of convention and reception as constitutive rules, while excluding intention and empirical verifiability as, at most, regulative (Lecture IX).

The question of convention or procedure has been debated by different literary theorists, one of the most interesting contributions belonging to Jonathan Culler, who considers the issue from different angles. Thus, explains Culler, if we apply Austin's theories literally, “[t]he felicitousness of a literary utterance might [...] involve its relation to the conventions of a genre” (508). Still, given our expectation that literature should break with convention, Culler suggests we take a hint from Judith Butler's influential theory of the performativity of gender, according to which the individual's construction of identity should always strive to undermine accepted norms by small, but significant changes to daily rituals.³¹ To Culler's argument I would like to add that the expectation of a literary work's originality constitutes a convention in its own right (possibly the only immutable convention of the literary genre) and, as such, it (paradoxically) supports the view that the felicity of literary acts should be measured precisely by their capacity to break with convention.

In any case, Culler combines Butler's model with Jacques Derrida's view³² that the performative aim of literature should be to interrogate social and political structures, arguing that the application of these principles to literature could help us “conceive of this unusual performativity that interrogates by repeating foundational acts—in a repetition that can have critical value, as it animates and alters forms that it repeats” (517).

This proposition, with its emphasis on the consistent interrogation and alteration of conventions which pertain to aesthetic as well as to ethical aspects, resonates strongly with Lara's view of the “performative constructions of women's identity” through

³¹ Butler conceives of gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). However, she perceives the possibility of change in repeatedly “subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (*Gender Trouble* 46).

³² As detailed in “This Strange Institution Called Literature” (1992).

literature: “The performative³³ way of generating spaces for women’s demands for recognition was acquired in a daily struggle to redefine ‘our’ habits and to transform our institutions and culture at the same time” (73). Interestingly, although open to admitting any literary text into the realm of speech acts, Petrey too suggests that altering conventions makes for felicitous speech acts, and that literary and social conventions are interrelated: “To remain in society is to live its constative representations as well as its performative conventions; to transform conventions and representations is to transform society. Language bears within it all the things it does” (126).

This understanding relates to many feminists’ view that women’s fiction changes patriarchal and hegemonic discourse from within, through the double move of representing new narratives and of subverting established novelistic conventions, cementing these changes in text after text. As I have tried to argue throughout this thesis, *Buddha* is a perfect example of a “performative construction of female identity,” through its combined use of subject matter and communal voice. Although Otsuka is not the first to have used *we*-narration in Anglophone literature – she was famously preceded by Faulkner, Conrad, Eugenides and others (cf. Maxey and Fludernik) – she is, to my understanding, the first to have sustained it throughout a whole novel and to have done so in a “differentiated”³⁴ way. In this, she resorted to a literary strategy previously employed preponderantly by male writers to express a unitary group voice, altering it for opposite purposes: the construction of a marginalized female community, portrayed in its heterogeneity and vulnerability. In addition, as previously mentioned, Otsuka seems already to have inspired other women writers, such as Nesbit, to explore the expressive and political force of this technique.

Concluding this argument, we can thus establish that *Buddha* is a felicitous speech act from the “conventional” perspective. Reception, the other aspect deemed vital by Austin, is explained as follows:

Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed. This is to be distinguished from saying that the illocutionary act is the achieving of a certain effect. I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain

³³ Because of her reference to repetitive acts, it seems to me that Lara uses the word “performative” here with a double meaning, in Austin’s as well as in Butler’s understanding.

³⁴ The formulation belongs to Nesbit, as already mentioned in section 2.

sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out. [...] Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution. So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of *uptake*. (115-116)

Lara underscores the same point when affirming that the success of women's identity projects over the past few decades is partly attributable to the readers and to a changed reception of the ethical discourse:

They have stimulated the appearance of new subaltern publics that have given positive feedback to these narrative claims demanding that "general interest" be focused on new stories about justice and solidarity. (73)

This general observation seems to apply to Otsuka as well, if we judge by the global dissemination and success of her novels. Seen in this light, *Buddha* is undoubtedly a felicitous speech act enacting the silence of subaltern women, past and present, and, at the same time, consolidating new ways of understanding and writing about subalternity.

Still, at the macro-level of American society in the spring of 2017, the ethical discourse seems suddenly muffled and the potential for emancipatory literature to achieve "perlocutionary"³⁵ effects – that is, to trigger positive social change – looks rather bleak, too. Thus, while Spivak once lamented the subaltern's failure of speech, one has now come to wonder about the apparent failure of speech of literature itself. Obviously, this remark is not limited to *Buddha*, nor does it place responsibility on literature. It is, rather, a fear that literature is on its way to being subalternized.

Perhaps more optimistic commentators³⁶ are right in arguing that such periods of political darkness as the one we are now crossing are only temporary and that literature's illocutionary force gathers momentum in inimical contexts. Thus, in discussing the rise of *we*-narratives after 9/11, Maxey suggests that:

³⁵ Austin defines perlocutionary acts as "what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading" (108). While it is true that, for Austin, illocutionary acts *per se* are not automatically invalidated by perlocutionary behavior, their felicity can be compromised.

³⁶ See section 2 and the discussion of Gauthier and Maxey's arguments.

The desire to examine other Americas beyond the specific socio-religious values of Bush's Republicanism—or beyond a perceived “mainstream,” authoritarian, privileged version of national history—may have compelled writers to offer their own American “we”: an alternative “one” out of the “many.” (12)

If so, the solution can only be in the performative practice of literature, in Butler's understanding of the term. That is, just like in Otsuka's novel, we need a vast and diverse chorus of literary voices to use their illocutionary force in the public sphere. Otherwise, literature's possibility to speak out – which, until recently, seemed to have become a truism – will once again turn into wishful thinking.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Mediating between silence and speech has been a long-standing preoccupation for literature by women and other historically marginalized groups, and every text which has attempted this is important, each in its own way. For practical reasons, this thesis has focused on one only: Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*. But how is one to decode a text's silence? In *Buddha's* case, the title suggests stylistics, while the intersection between the subject matter and the communal mode of narration points to speech act criticism, but also to feminist theory, subaltern theory, and other schools of thought which assert the imperative for literature to expose the silencing mechanism of white male supremacy.

The hypothesis of this thesis was that *Buddha* is a speech act with a symbolic meaning, enacting the silence of the Japanese picture brides, as subaltern women. The topic was discussed from the combined methodological perspective mentioned above, by looking at the interaction between the novel's locutionary and illocutionary aspects (identified as narrative and voice), considering its effects and inquiring whether this is a “felicitous” speech act.

The analysis has revealed a constant tension between narrative and voice, played out in the opposition between the heterogeneity of the female community and the uniformity of the silencing mechanism they are subjected to. The weight placed by the novel on this symbolic aspect which pertains to the condition of subaltern women in

general allowed us to consider its manifest memorializing function on a par with its wider performative effects. Thus, analyzed in its sociohistorical context – as should be the case with any speech act – the novel can be seen as demanding recognition for the Japanese picture brides as well as reclaiming agency for today’s subalterns, whether they be hijab bearers, Hispanic domestics or other silenced collectivities of female migrants. As a speech act, the novel is deemed felicitous due to its construction of female subaltern identity through the skillful subversion of novelistic conventions, in a way which creates new understandings of the present as well as opens up onto the future.

Buddha is a book of many paradoxes. Despite its brevity, it is incredibly complex and there were many other aspects of it I would have liked to explore, but felt that they belonged in different theses. I have already mentioned the historiographic aspect. I also regret not having talked about the novel’s poetic, almost incantatory quality that several commentators have remarked upon, but that none has so far done justice to. I also wish I had had the space to discuss this novel in relation to others which also make use of communal voice in order to (re)construct female communities.

Hopefully, more attention will be paid in future to the narrative strategies employed as illocutionary force in contemporary women’s literature. Above all, there is an undeniable need for more relational and comparative approaches to this topic. Since the feminist manifestos of the 70s and their exhortation that women break silence, it has become a cliché to conceive of women’s literature as a speech act, although one which has been theorized about more than it has been applied to practical examples. Still, women’s literature of the past decades has offered manifold examples of stories which have surprised not only through their content, but by subverting established literary conventions and – should we paraphrase Butler – by *making narrative trouble*.

This is precisely the reason why I chose to write about this particular novel and why I chose this particular perspective over others. Both had suffered serious neglect. Thus, despite *Buddha*’s impressive international success with both readers and critics, all analyses of the novel that I could find amount to a few pages each. Inevitably, given their shortness, they privilege one aspect over others.

However, I would like to argue that my contribution resides not only in taking up an unjustly neglected topic, or in the thorough exploration of the interaction between *Buddha*’s literary and political aspects, but above all in the novel theoretical approach. In my view, the application of speech-act theory to literature could use some company from

other schools of criticism, the more so as it seems to have silently seeped into several of them, as I have tried to demonstrate.

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