

**Studies of the Face(less): Picture Brides and Facial Recognition in  
Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic***

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the ways in which Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) resists racializing surveillance through making use of what we call unidentifiable characterization. This technique, we assert, contributes to a complex portrayal of the internment of Japanese Americans, as it privileges the collective without oversimplifying or romanticizing that collective and not only avoids but also opposes overemphasizing the role of the individual, a role that requires intense visualization (that is, surveillance). As a result, we argue that *The Buddha* constitutes an anti-surveillance Asian American narrative that exposes the contradictory (to use Lisa Lowe's term) realities of the U.S. In analyzing such a narrative, we develop the term "faceless narrative," a text that resists surveillance and rejects visual identification of characters.*

**Keywords:** Asian-American fiction, contradictory narrative, Japanese Americans, racializing surveillance

## **1. Introduction**

In her novel *The Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka creates an influx of mini-narratives in which a group of widely diverse Japanese women, the picture brides, sail to the United States to meet their prospective husbands whom they only know from letters and pictures. Dreaming of better lives with their new husbands and hoping to escape their poverty-stricken towns, the brides brave the sea voyage. What occurs during and after the sea voyage is told in short sequences from the point of view of the first-person-plural 'we' from beginning to end and constitutes countless individual stories spanning three generations from the Japanese immigrant community. The culmination of those stories is a collective testimony of the United States' internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Otsuka consulted multiple historical sources in weaving her narrative of this collective testimony. In the Acknowledgments section that appears at the end of the novel, the author writes, "I have drawn upon a large number of historical sources and although there is not room here to mention them all, I would like to list those that were most important to me in my research. I am particularly indebted to Kazuo Ito's *Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants . . .*" (p.131).

The novel has been studied from various angles by different critics. For instance, Delphine Munos's "We narration in Chang-Rae Lee's *On such a full Sea* and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*: 'unnaturally' Asian American?" examines Otsuka's novel from the standpoint of narratology. She explains how the 'we' narrative helps the writer restore the histories of Japanese internment and the Exclusion Act into present memory and consciousness. Munos contends that this kind of narration challenges the rigid structures of narrative theory. In a similar vein, Lena Ahlin's "All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget': On Remembrance and Forgetting in Julie Otsuka's Novels" situates *The Buddha* in the field of memory studies. Both articles, therefore, examine Otsuka's narrative highlighting its stylistic features and how they convey the memory of the internment of Japanese Americans. JaeEun Yoo (2013) similarly highlights the function of Otsuka's 'we' narrative in "Lost in the Passage: (Japanese American) Women in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*." She points out how the narrative voice ironically reverses the homogenizing pressure of characterizing Asian Americans as a monolithic group. Moreover, Yoo's analysis centers around mother-daughter relationships in Otsuka's novel and concludes that the lack of mother-daughter connections signifies a warning against future losses if targeting minorities does not cease, highlighting the resonance between *The Buddha* and the post-9/11 political climate.

Picking up from where the previous reviews left off, this paper builds on such readings of the narrative structure but focuses on the collective testimony provided in the novel and its attendant sense of solidarity which Otsuka's *The Buddha* employs through its portrayal of and resistance to racializing surveillance. More specifically, the paper looks into the ways in which this novel resists such surveillance through deploying unidentifiable characterization (that is, characterization that does not mention characters' names and does not develop characters after the realistic fashion). We thus suggest that the narrative captures the nuances of the collective before and during the internment of Japanese American citizens without relying on the visual factor or emphasizing the identification of its characters. Drawing upon surveillance studies, we argue that *The Buddha* exemplifies a specific form of contradictory narrative: the anti-surveillance Asian American novel (Lisa Lowe defines "cultural contradiction" as the outcome of the contradictions of race, class, gender, and history between grand and mini-narratives (p.32)). We further argue that Otsuka's novel embodies an anti-surveillance narrative that opposes visual narration through multiple techniques: awareness of surveillance, plural narrative voice, contradictory characterization, and omission; all of which create what we call a faceless narrative; that is, a text that defies racialized identification.

In order to develop this argument, we highlight two motifs that set off the picture brides' voyage: constant mobility as well as visibility. On the one hand, constant mobility is echoed in the structure of the narrative itself, its being non-teleological and episodic. This structure, we would like to suggest, challenges the gaze of surveillance that tries to take in all the details about the characters and the events. On the other hand, the narrative gives primacy to visibility when it depicts

the brides' attachment to the photographs of their would-be husbands and the promise that these photographs carry. The narrators say, "On the boat the first thing we did . . . was compare photographs of our husbands" (p.3). Combining these two motifs, this paper offers a reading of *The Buddha* that frames the narrative's defiance to visual narration through the lens of contemporary surveillance studies. In what follows, we develop the term "faceless narrative" through surveillance studies. After that, we move on to discuss the features of that narrative and its potential strengths in resisting surveillance.

## 2. Faceless narratives and surveillance studies

Surveillance is a subject that is increasingly raising concerns about the laborious and elaborate processes through which it encroaches upon citizens' rights to privacy, which are being sacrificed for a system whose effectiveness is questionable at best (Stutzer and Zehnder 2013). These concerns, however, leave out those with contingent citizenship status: the undocumented or undocumentable. In "Borderline Identities: The Enrolment of Bodies in the Technological Reconstruction of Borders," Irma Van der Ploeg (2006) argues that surveillance technologies function as a gatekeeping tool against certain "suspects." In turn, these technologies "transform geographical borders into lived and embodied identities" since certain suspect identities are barred from entrance (p.179). As a result, certain groups might be threatened by biometric data collection at the U.S. border, where systems such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service's IDENT are used to identify illegal migrants. Ploeg elaborates by assessing the high risk that individuals face as they are registered into data bases such as IDENT or "Lookout": "[B]eing a Muslim, Arabic, a suspected terrorist, a political publicist, an illegal recidivist, a look-alike of a face on a watch list, or a citizen from a refugee-generating state may result in significant decreases in freedom of movement and dignified treatment" (p.193). In other words, surveillance systems embody a different kind of threat for immigrants among other groups of "suspects." For immigrants, surveillance does not merely threaten their right to privacy but to existence.

In the context of Asian American racialization and surveillance, Lisa Nakamura (2009) investigates the use of biometric technologies such as Facial Recognition Systems (FRS) as depicted by visual surveillance narratives in "Interfaces of Identity: Oriental Traitors and Telematic Profiling in *24*." These technologies include the use of high-tech surveillance apparatus in uncovering suspected "oriental" "terrorists" of Asian descent as "the enemy within" (p.110). Nakamura contends that this trope is overplayed in TV shows such as *24*, whose viewers draw "pleasure out of paranoia and drama out of identification." Therefore, the driving element in such shows is uncovering "hidden identities." As Nakamura asserts, "These identities are often racialized as Asian or Asian American in this program (though not exclusively so), partly because the concept of the Asian as the permanent foreigner has such power in US politics" (p.111). The appeal of these spectacles results from viewers' fears "of the 'unassimilable Asians'," "undetectable terrorists," and "insecure data borders" (p.115).

Nakamura further describes how these Orientalist notions are rooted in history and how modern surveillance technologies have not provided solutions for them. Instead, they have worsened. For instance, the article mentions how the categorization of Middle-Eastern/Muslim/Arab has been racialized after 9/11 and how cultural productions like 24 “fuse [this type of profiling] with the category of ‘East Asian,’ encompassing China, Japan, and Korea, thus redeploying older and more general Orientalist tropes” (p.128). Expanding on 24’s use of identification technology, Nakamura contends that such narratives glorify the use of invasive surveillance mechanisms as a “positivistic” and “objective” means of asserting the truth about “foreign infiltrators who look, act, and can pass as loyal.” In fact, these technologies, according to “biometrics historian Simon Cole ... reif[y] the very crude racial categories that helped produce it.” In essence, the visuals of identification and surveillance make use of “the power of both cinema and science to reveal hidden identities” of often Asian characters suspected of disloyalty (p.110). Moreover, the optics of such media revolve around the viewer’s desire to reveal the identity of the suspect and revel in the knowledge that they had correctly anticipated that identity.

This racialization process is not only discursive, but it also covers up material histories exacerbated by the law, as shown in the case of Japanese Americans. Anupam Chander’s “Legalized Racism: The Internment of Japanese Americans” (2001) provides a background of the laws that enabled the United States’ internment of Japanese immigrants. The article refers to a group of lawyers solicited by the United States’ Department of Justice who argued for the constitutionality of the interment: “Since the Occidental eye cannot readily distinguish one Japanese resident from another, effective surveillance of the movements of particular Japanese residents suspected of disloyalty is extremely difficult if not practically impossible” (qtd. in Chander p.6). The justifying claim evokes the urgency for heightened surveillance through emphasizing the sameness of Japanese immigrants and their Japanese American descendants. Further, this perceived sameness makes it more difficult for “the Occidental gaze” to distinguish the loyal from the traitor among them. This claim is built, therefore, on the Japanese immigrants’ assumed threat to the state and therefore their being categorized as ‘suspects.’ This category of the ‘suspect’ group allowed for the legal transgressions that took place as a result of this exclusion and that included physical assaults, loss of properties, and even loss of lives.

It is clear then that inherent to surveillance systems is a contradiction that gains a new dimension when the conditions of immigration are taken into consideration. Lowe (1996) recognizes this special meaning of contradiction as the gap or difference between the grand narratives promulgated by the U.S. government and local narratives produced by people of different racial, gendered, and historical backgrounds, especially immigrants (p.32). In the preface to *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Lowe highlights the importance of understanding Asian immigration to the U.S. and the role that it has played in race formations in the United States. She goes on to outline the contradictions that arise from the conditional process of guaranteeing those immigrants citizenship but not their full rights as citizens.

Excluding Asian Americans from the developmental narrative of the United States, asserts Lowe, motivates alternative Asian cultural sites, among which is the Asian American literary tradition.

Part of this tradition is subversive Asian American literature, which does not offer to resolve the problems of exclusion from the dominant narrative. Rather, it problematizes these exclusions further and presents them back as questions for that dominant narrative. Hence, this dynamic results in contradictory narrative forms which deviate from traditional linear and developmental narration. Nevertheless, according to Lowe, these contradictory literary forms should not be subsumed under the modernist or postmodernist tradition. Lowe explains that “[t]he effects of these works are more radically grasped in terms of their constant interrogations of the discrepancies between canonical historical narratives and what Walter Benjamin would term the material catastrophes that those histories obscure” (p.100). In other words, contradictory literary forms excavate otherwise forgotten material histories producing narrative techniques that grapple with those histories. Or alternatively, Asian American contradictory forms are literary representations of the people and issues that the grand, developmental narratives fail to address.

*The Buddha* is an example of such a contradictory form. In opposition to visual surveillance narratives like *24*, *The Buddha* protects its characters from the gaze of surveillance through the narrative voice which blends the characters into one unidentifiable collective. This technique is crucial to the narration that effectively shatters the Orientalist trope of assuming that Asians be not only homogenous but also identical, a trope on the basis of which the internment was justified. Because of that protection, we suggest that *The Buddha* is a faceless narrative.

Faceless narratives, we postulate, are texts that oppose facial recognition technologies and any other method of visually fraught racialized identification. Faceless narratives, as such, lay bare the mechanisms of racialized surveillance through emphasizing acts of identification. At the same time, they provide ample spaces for concealment and misidentification, spaces that can be read as rich sites of resistance. This is not to say that such narratives show that Asian Americans are faceless or homogeneous. On the contrary, our reading suggests that this facelessness, or lack of identification, is strategic. That is, it stages the surveillance that is based on racial profiling and points to possibilities for resisting it without effacing individual differences or cultural histories. In the next section, we explore manifestations of such surveillance in *The Buddha*.

### **3. Manifestations of surveillance in *The Buddha in the Attic***

*The Buddha* is heavy with references to surveillance. As the narrative progresses, surveillance becomes inescapable for the Japanese immigrants. The sixth chapter, “Traitors,” describes three kinds of surveillance strategies which are employed in order to comb out the traitors: official state-led surveillance, neighborhood watch, and self-surveillance. Yet, the group of immigrants continuously tries to escape surveillance’s scrutinizing gaze reporting that, “we stayed inside with our shades drawn and listened to the news of the war on the radio. We removed our names

from our mailboxes. We brought in our shoes from the front porch” (p.81). With rumors of an incriminating list spreading like wildfire among the small community, the narrative takes a turn to the severely uncertain. As Japanese men suspected of collaborating with Japan against the United States in the Second World War begin to disappear, stories of their likely disappearance spread: “*Perhaps* there had been a raid in the next county over” (p.82; emphasis added). Trying to prepare for the worst, one woman decides to pack an emergency bag for her husband to take along once his turn comes. That she cannot shake off the feeling that something is missing such as, “one small but crucial item that, on some unknown date in some unknown court in the future, would serve as incontestable proof of her husband’s innocence” (p.83) illustrates the impossibility of the task that she is up against: preparing for the unknown. The information (or disinformation) about the contents of the list are rife with contradictions: “Only people who belonged to our race were on the list. There were Germans and Italians on the list, but their names appeared toward the bottom” (p.84). Such rumors serve as reminders of the gazes fixated on the Japanese immigrants and signify their being watched. Another reminder of surveillance lies with their neighbors who “began to look at [them] differently” (p.84).

Nakamura observes similar patterns of racialization and the ways in which notions of gender and race are reformulated in a growingly online world through the lens of Visual Culture Studies in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (2007). Some of this paradigm’s concerns according to Susan Buck-Morss are “the reproduction of the image, the society of the spectacle, envisioning the Other, scopopic regimes, the simulacrum, the fetish, the (male) gaze, the machine eye” (qtd. in Nakamura: p.7). In tracing back their reproductions on the internet, Nakamura cites historical instances of racializing Asian Americans and the erasure of different cultures that the process involves. To Nakamura, “This elision of cultural differences between different groups from Asia produces misrecognitions that often anger Asian Americans; one of these manifestations is the cliché ‘they all look the same’” (p.75).

Commenting on how the same pattern of suspecting and surveilling that the Japanese immigrants experienced post-Pearl Harbor was being repeated, Otsuka writes, “I wrote *Buddha* very much in the light of what is going on in this country now, post-9/11: how, overnight, Arabs and Muslims have suddenly become ‘the enemy’ and are being targeted for investigation and interrogation” (qtd. in Yoo: p. 102). It is no surprise then that the part of the narrative that depicts the atmosphere of suspicion once the attacks of Pearl Harbor occur carries an uncanny resemblance to the aftermath of 9/11 on Muslim immigrants, Arabs, and South Asians or those who are perceived to be members of any of these groups. In the Acknowledgements section, Otsuka writes, “Several lines of the mayor’s dialogue on page 124 were taken from a Department of Defense news briefing given by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on October 12, 2001” (p.132). Quoting the post-9/11 Secretary of Defense testifies to the deep resemblance between the stigmatization of both Muslims and Arabs on the one hand and Japanese Americans on the other. One example of this resemblance is carried through the portrayal of the result of instigating profiling that leads to adverse attacks not only on the targeted group but

those who ‘look like’ them. Highlighting the faulty nature of the visual, the narrative details an attack on a Chinese man that ends in death. The narrative voice reports, “*They mistook him for one of us*” (p.89). This murder is reminiscent of the many post-9/11 crimes committed against Sikhs, who stereotypically look like Arabs and Muslims.

*The Buddha* references another set of accusations according to which Asian Americans are traitors who use advanced technological means in their plot to harm civilians. The group reports, “They said that our gardeners were all hiding shortwave radio transmitters in their garden hoses” (p.86). The result of these accusations and their combatting with racializing surveillance is that the Japanese immigrants begin to annihilate any trace of their cultural identity stating, “[W]e began burning our things: old bank statements and diaries, Buddhist family altars, wooden chopsticks, paper lanterns. . . We set fire to our white silk wedding kimonos” (p.87).

Such acts of wanting to deflect any association with Japan, ‘the enemy,’ say more about surveillance than a personal sense of shame that the group exhibits. In particular, the narrative’s depiction of its narrators’ futile attempts to evade suspicion reflects the workings of racializing surveillance which profiles them based on associations with their ethnicity and culture, that are an inextricable part of them. Thus, the narrative here is referring to the racializing surveillance’s recirculation and repackaging of racism regardless of how sophisticated and justifiable surveillance appears from outside. Moreover, the effect of using such mechanisms also becomes evident: annihilating the ‘out-sider’ or the parts of them that appear different from the (racial) norm. In turn, the Japanese immigrants begin to internalize the racialization and out-casting, both of which they attribute to their own failure to fully assimilate in their host community’s culture explaining, “[W]e wondered why we had insisted for so long on clinging to our strange, foreign ways. We’ve made them hate us” (p.87).

Amid the spreading rumors and fears of how Japan might attack next, the narrative depicts the role that the media had in encouraging citizens to participate in practices of surveilling their fellow Japanese-descended townsmen. The narrative reports that “keen-eyed citizens were being asked to inform the authorities of any fifth columnists who might dwell in our midst. Because anyone, we were reminded, could be a spy. Your butler, your gardener, your florist, your maid” (pp.89-90). The shift in pronoun use from first-person to second like the use of the pronoun ‘your’ in this example subtly reveals the audience of the media’s messages. In other words, it simultaneously reveals who should do the surveilling: the “white” citizens and who to view and treat as possible traitors: the Japanese immigrants working as butlers, gardeners, or florists. Nakamura cites historical counterparts of the media’s messages in *Digitizing Race*. One of those examples in which the media reproduced racializing rhetoric appears in *Life* magazine. Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the magazine published an article titled “How to Tell Japs from Chinese” (p.84). The two-page spread included pictures as well as descriptions that presumably aim to aid readers in telling the two groups apart. Nakamura sees this as an attempt to prove that “the ‘truth’ about race, particularly regarding ‘Orientals’

lies within the systematic and scientific study of the face" (p.84), concluding that "*Life* reassured its audience that cultural difference could also be identified *visually*" (p.84; emphasis added).

Along with the official and public acts of surveillance, a third kind that "Traitors" refers to in the novel is the Japanese immigrants' participation in self-surveillance: "Some nights our husbands lay awake for hours going over their pasts again and again, searching for proof that their names, too, might be on the list" (p.90). In their search for this self-incriminating evidence, the group begins to go over their behaviors including their political speech (p.90). Failing to point to the crime they have committed, the plural narrators allude to the arbitrariness of racializing surveillance wondering, "Was it their [husbands'] face, in fact, for which they were guilty? Did it fail to please in some way? Worse yet, did it offend?" (p.91). Showing the failings of early practices of facial recognition and identifying of 'traitors,' these examples exhibit the narrative's awareness of the detrimental effects of such invasive practices. Furthermore, the lack of emphasis on identification in the narrative's depiction of this group becomes a clearer act of contradicting the surveillance of identification.

State surveillance resurfaces in the narrative when the immigrants are "ordered to register with the authorities" (p.91). As the men on "the list" begin to disappear, they leave instructions for their wives which include avoiding suspicion and ensuring their visibility in hopes of maintaining their safety. These instructions include carrying "alien identification," staying out of discussions of the war, and speaking exclusively in English, all of which aim to increase their visibility and the efficiency of their surveillance. Informers also infiltrate the community working as eyes of the state from within like the example of "Ruriko's husband" who was "[b]ankrolled by the government to keep an eye on members of the local Buddhist church" (p.97). The narrating chorus describes these informers as being motivated by greed or the desire to settle old feuds and as a result their claims are unreliable at best (Reviews such as Higgins' often refer to the narrative voice as "a chorus of the women's voices" (Higgins 2011)).

#### **4. Anti-surveillance in *The Buddha in the Attic***

The group of women with which the narrative begins leave for the United States with the rest of their lives hanging by a photograph. Before the second chapter starts, nonetheless, they discover that the men they had signed up to marry were "the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for [them] down below on the dock," and that they "bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the photographs." Moreover, they discover "[t]hat the photographs [they] had been sent were twenty years old" (p.18). This contradiction between their expectations and reality is only the first of many to follow, as the women discover the difficulties in the type of lives they will be leading. The deception that the brides suffer speaks to the unreliability of photographic realism from which the narrative deviates, creating the first instance of facelessness or how the novel compels us to look beyond the sur(face). While *The Buddha* is rich with vivid descriptions, they do not paint a complete picture of the accounts that the brides narrate. Rather, the

narrative presents multiple incomplete views of the bride's and their descendants' collective experiences.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the novel subverts the gaze of surveillance by depending on the glimpses into the characters' lives instead of surveilling the details that identify them.

Another major device through which *The Buddha* resists the readers' gaze of surveillance is its portrayal of the characters. The description of characters starts out in one seemingly harmonious direction, but as readers follow along, they find it to be diverging into varied multi-directional lines. Use of this technique includes—but is not limited to—the description of the brides themselves as the collective narrative voice describes them. The use of the pronoun 'we' in the narrative ironically serves to portray the heterogeneity of the group from the first sentence which reads, "On the boat, we were mostly virgins" (p.3). In this and many other examples that come after it, the narrative presents a seemingly shared experience only to go on and show how differently the group shares it if they do at all. The word "mostly" in the novel's first sentence creates that space of uncertainty that the narrative hangs onto all the way through. Thus, the narrative voice simultaneously conveys the heterogeneous nature of the group and the homogenizing effect of the racializing surveillance that ends in their internment. Each of the novel's eight chapters begins on a seemingly unifying image. The premise that this image holds is then broken down using the same introductory phrase. For instance, the first chapter, "Come, Japanese!" launches with the phrase, "On the boat" (p.3). That same little phrase is used over and over to convey the array of backgrounds from which the brides come, the sacrifices they have made before leaving, and the different expectations they have of their new lives.

These differences are most evident, ironically, in the use of the pronoun "we." As the group relates, "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" (p.3). Before they reach land, the brides' experiences are shaped by the interplay of class and gender. The narrators explain, "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" (p.3). The narrative depicts their attempts to shrink and fit more clearly into the overly feminized personas that their new roles demand. Of this process the brides tell readers, "*Most* of us spoke like ladies *most* of the time, with our voices pitched high, and pretended to know much less than we did. . . Because how many times had our mothers told us: Walk like the city, not like the farm!" (p.6; emphasis added). Despite this apparent conformity, their performance is intended to hide their differences.

The novel initially maintains the lives of the women that begin narrating it as its focal point. However, as they reach their new homes and racialization comes into the picture, the narrative voice occasionally expands to include not only the group of women and girls but also their husbands and the families that they form later on. After the husbands become a reality rather than a fantasy, the pronoun "they" now refers to the narrators' white employers and neighbors, who see the group of Japanese immigrants as a collective of laborers regardless of gender. In

the same vein, the narrative alternates between depicting the racializing surveillance that the brides and their families experience, and their difficult experiences as women on the receiving end of (gendered) abuses from men inside their communities as well as men from their varying workplaces such as farms, homes, or brothels. The second chapter of the novel, "First Night," encapsulates the essence of what unites the women narrators by relating their sexual encounters that invariably verge on abuse and how these "first night" experiences establish the order for a life of working to serve these men. The group of women announce conclusively, "and in the morning when we woke we were theirs" (p.22).

Outside the confines of their homes, however, both women and men serve as a moving labor force for the white people in the area, according to the third chapter entitled "Whites." They relate their journey thus: "We wandered from one labor camp to the next in their hot dusty valleys...and side by side with our new husbands, we worked their land" (p.23). The use of 'we' as a narrator here effectively speaks of their collective suffering without privileging one voice over the other. Therefore, the technique instead elevates their communal experience in such a way as to include both genders. One of the few uniting moments in the novel occurs when the women describe their work conditions: "All of us ached while we worked," and, "If our husband's had told us the truth in their letters [ . . . ] we never would have come to America to do the work no self-respecting American would do" (p.29). Despite their numerous differences and the attention that the novel gives to their diversity, the treatment they received whether in their jobs or society was equally unfair.

The narrative alludes to this process of racialization that the Japanese immigrants experience from the moment the group of women step off the boat until they are rounded up and taken away into internment camps. This process includes the out-casting of the Japanese community by comparing them to other 'undesirable' immigrants:

[According to "white" citizens,] [w]e 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 (p.29).

In "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping," (2002), Erika Lee explores the ways in which the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 shaped the gatekeeping discourse around immigration in the United States. Lee demonstrates how the desirability of immigrants came to be measured against the 'yellow peril' that Chinese immigrants posed. By setting a precedent for excluding immigrants, the Act set out Chinese immigrants as the models by which to measure the desirability (and "whiteness") of other immigrant groups (p.37). Therefore, the above passage foreshadows how this extra diligent group will become liable to suspicion and exclusion from other immigrant groups through their labor practices. In other words, it tells of how they come to be set apart from

other groups as a form of exploiting their labor as well as a way to ‘contain’ them later on.

The passage in the novel that begins with “They did not want us as neighbors in their valleys” (p.35) marks another subtle shift in the tone of narration. Told from the perspective of the surrounding communities, this passage gives reason after another for white citizens’ fear of the Japanese immigrants. The narrative reports the suspicion and discomfort of the “white” neighbors and their growing desire to surveil their Japanese neighbors who live in “unsightly shacks” and whose English they find incomprehensible (p.35) along with their machine-like work ethic. These complaints construct an inhuman image of the Japanese community as an enemy whose survival (way of life, labor, and culture) is framed as an act of threatening aggression. The passage ends with an explicit declaration of that threat: “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” (p.35). The exaggerations in the fearful<sup>3</sup> tone of the “white” neighbors tell us more about the frustration with Japanese Americans’ perceived invisibility signaled by the double meaning of the word ‘unsightly’ that is used to describe their dwellings as well as their language which is inaccessible to the “white” gaze. The constructed threat thus motivates real violent (re)actions by “them,” as the narrative refers to “white” citizens. Unlike the perceived animosity of the Japanese immigrants, however, the attacks on them go undetected by the gaze of surveillance. Readers are told, “And even though we found footsteps in the dirt the following morning, and many scattered matchsticks, when we called the sheriff to come out and take a look he told us there were no clues worth following” (p.36).

The relationship between the group of immigrants and their “white” neighbors is filled with contradictions: “We loved them. We hated them. We wanted to be them” (p.39). The narrative further explores these contradictions through the oppositional characterization of the two groups:

Their pale, luminous skin, which disguised all seven blemishes of the face. Their odd but endearing ways, which never ceased to amuse—their love of A.I. sauce and high, pointy-toed shoes, their funny, turned-out walk... They seemed so at home in the world. So at ease. They had a confidence that we lacked. And much better hair. So many colors. And we regretted that we could not be more like them. (p.39)

All of the mostly visual characteristics described above stand against the backdrop of what the Japanese immigrants consider ordinary and contribute to the lack of confidence and belonging that they feel in their new homes. The closest that the group of women get to this feeling of ease is in the absence of the homeowners and their children whose homes they are tasked with upkeeping. These are the moments when “Nobody was watching us then. Nobody was talking to us. Nobody was sneaking up on us from behind as we were cleaning her fixtures to see if we’d missed any spots. The whole house was empty. Quiet. Ours” (p.42). Only in the absence of the “white” gaze personified inside the house by “white” women or

“their women” (p.38) could this group retain a sense of peace. The gaze of these “white” neighbors and bosses then constructs a confining image with which Japanese immigrants struggle. In this sense, white citizens operate as watchmen in the most closed settings providing eyes for the state where its officially appointed representatives might not be present.

### **5. Name(s) and shame: Naming and surveillance in *The Buddha in the Attic***

Describing the realizations of the hierarchical relationship between ‘they’ and ‘we’, Lisa Lowe (1996) uses the word ‘domesticate’ as one of the ways in which that unassimilable ‘Oriental’ figure can be treated. She stresses that “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the Orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally ‘foreign’ origins antipathetic to the modern American society that ‘discovers,’ ‘welcomes,’ and ‘domesticates’ them” (5). The act of renaming immigrants appears in Otsuka’s narrative as an example of domestication, a part of the in-house surveillance that the immigrant group is under. However, another illustration of the narrative’s faceless quality lies in how it defiantly manipulates naming in a way that resists surveillance of its characters through un(der)-naming and over-naming.

The characterization in *The Buddha* follows two patterns when it comes to naming: characters are either left unnamed or names are heaped too vastly and quickly after one another to be traceable. The first pattern of leaving names out of the characterization is the most prevalent in the narrative, for it allows the characters to blend seamlessly into the collective voice. The second pattern appears on a few occasions where the narrative voice creates a cluster of characters’ names in a way that privileges none over the other. The first occurrence of this clustering of names is presented in the third chapter, “Whites,” in regards to “white” women renaming the Japanese houseworkers. The narrators say, “They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl” (p.40). In this example, the new names which are assigned by those with more power are divorced from the Japanese women’s cultural identities.

Another instance where names are quickly cast on the reader in such short bursts that defy tracing appears in describing the second generation of Japanese immigrants and the children that the picture brides give birth to in “Babies.” The sentences of the fourth chapter begin with “We gave birth to” and go on to describe the different birth experience that each woman has had from location to timing and from naming to complications, among various other details. The passage below is quoted at length to demonstrate the wealth of experiences as well as the variety of names that are associated with those experiences.

We gave birth to Misuzu, who came out with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck like a rosary, and we knew she would one day be a priestess. It’s a sign from *The Buddha*. We gave birth to Daisuke, who had long earlobes, and we knew he would one day be rich. We gave birth to Masaji, who came to us late, in our forty-fifth year, just when we had given up all hope of ever producing an heir. I thought I’d dropped my last egg

long ago. We gave birth to Fujiko, who instantly seemed to recognize the sound of her father's voice. He used to sing to her every night in the womb. We gave birth to Yukiko, whose name means "snow." We gave birth to Asano, who had thick thighs and a short neck and would have made a much better boy. We gave birth to Kamechiyo, who was so ugly we feared we would never be able to find her a mate. (p.58)

The sheer number of successive names coupled with the lack of priming of any character over the other in the narrative preserves these characters from the reader's gaze of surveillance.

When asked about the lack of names in her previous novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), depicting another glimpse at Japanese immigrants during WWII, Otsuka provides two reasons for this stylistic choice in two different interviews. The writer describes the characters that she depicts as ones "from whom everything has been taken...their homes, their dignity, their freedom, their sense of self," however, "one thing you cannot take away from someone is their name." Ultimately explaining the choice, Otsuka says, "I think I just wanted to leave them some tiny shred of self." When the interviewer—who has also experienced internment as a child—reveals a practice in the internment camp of creating self-identifying name tags in Japanese, the author jokes that "names are one step above the government issued ID number" (Otsuka 2013). Both the author and the interviewer agree on how affirming small gestures of reclaiming identity speaks to the harm that identification technology indiscriminately brings to its subjects/suspects. The other reason that explains the choice at least at the beginning of the narrative is because the author "[does not] want it to be clear to the reader that they are reading about a Japanese American woman." She adds, "I happen to be writing about Japanese Americans but I think I could have been writing about any ethnic group at any point in history. . .that had been expelled and sent away" (Otsuka 2014). Authorial intent aside, the choice of un(der)-naming or over-naming itself operates as a shield that protects the selfhood of the characters from the gaze of surveillance.

The same effect of distributing even power to the novel's characters is also reflected in the choice of epigraph in which the writer quotes the Bible: "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" (p.1). This is further emphasized by leaving out the names of the characters for the most part. In turn, the narrative memorializes the named and unnamed, for they make up the voices that narrate it.

## 6. Omission as contradiction

After emphasizing the practices of surveillance leading up to it, the narrative only passingly refers to the evacuation order and instead highlights the slight relief that it brings to one character. "Traitors" ends with the ultimate effect of the removal and displacement of the group: "And we knew it would only be a matter of time until all traces of us were gone" (p.104). One image in "Last Day" captures the emphasis on resilience in retelling the unfortunate event. The picture of the laughing

Buddha, from which the novel takes its title, appears among the description of items that the characters decide to take with them or leave behind as they are taken away. Refusing to be erased, “Haruko [leaves] a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day” (p.109). Like Haruko’s small yet hopeful gesture, the narrative hides within its folds carefully placed moments of vulnerability and joy. In so doing, *The Buddha* opens up the space for a degree of safety that the victims of internment were not afforded. The attic then represents a space beyond visibility that the characters take shelter in, an obscured space that counters surveillance.

On the flip side, the final of the novel’s chapters, “A Disappearance,” shifts the narrative point of view to reflect the “white” townsmen that remain after the Japanese immigrants are forced out of their towns. “A Disappearance” presents a variety of reactions that range from the anxious to the indifferent. One running technique, however, is the chapter’s liberal use of unanswered questions. The invocation of safety here is particularly interesting in that it informs us who is guaranteed safety by surveillance and who is deprived of it:

Our mayor has assured us there is no need for alarm. “The Japanese are in a *safe* place,” he is quoted as saying in this morning’s *Star Tribune*. He is not at liberty, however, to reveal where that place is. “They wouldn’t be *safe* now, would they, if I told you where they were.” But what place could be *safer*, some of us ask, than right here, in our own town? (p.116; emphasis added)

Other members of the community, nonetheless, are not so concerned, for the Japanese gave off a feeling of “trying to hide” (p.119). This justification for surveillance hinges on the suspect (racial) status of the selected group and offers in turn an approach of forced visibility on them so that they will not be able to hide from the gaze of surveillance anymore. The narrative goes against this justification when it rejects to make its characters visible one last time and thus maintaining its facelessness until the end.

In their “demand [for] answers” (p.123), the white neighbors repeatedly enquire about their whereabouts reflecting that attitude of the reader who expects these enquiries to be resolved before the novel concludes. Both parallel parties hold expectations of being allowed the chance to consume a piece of the forced visibility imposed on the group of immigrants in internment camps. The readers like the neighbors demand a glimpse of all of these Japanese immigrants in one place finally unable to hide from their gaze, but their demands are importantly left unattained. Thus, by subverting these expectations the narrative prioritizes sheltering its characters’ privacy to gaining the acceptance of the reader using the shock factor. The omission is of a stage on which the characters appear in full, comprehensible view to reenact the horrors flung upon them by their internment and its aftermath. In clear contradistinction with the visual narratives that Nakamura analyzes in which:

[i]dentification technologies are reserved for the most shocking revelations, the highest narrative arcs, and the most impressive digital visual effects in 24. They are the money shots of the program, and they work in this way because of the postterror national culture, as depicted in this and other televisual media post-9/11 (p.128).

Instead of resolving the anxieties that surround the neighbor's questions and readers' uncertainties, the narrative departs on a haunting note when the same neighbors announce: "All we know is that the Japanese are out there somewhere, in one place or another, and we shall probably not meet them again in this world" (p.129). To draw another parallel, the reader, like the townsmen narrating this chapter, is not to meet and reconcile with the Japanese immigrants again in the world of the novel. In "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," (1972), William Spanos asserts that it is the task of the contemporary writer to refrain from resolving the anxieties of the reader<sup>4</sup> by creating detective-like stories where all the questions are answered satisfactorily at the end. Instead, he considers works that lean closer to uncertainty rather than absolute knowledge to be more fitting for the contemporary moment and that representing such anxieties is an "image-breaking enterprise" (p.168). This omission in *The Buddha* contradicts a visual narrative that seeks to "gratify 'curiosities,' or the desire for spectacle, sensation, and information" of its viewer or reader (Nakamura 2009: p. 114).

Non-teleologically, the novel ends with the questions posed by the white neighbors who are unable to gaze onto the Japanese as a result of their internment. The resulting discomfort of leaving the questions of the neighbors and the readers unanswered and the final scene empty of the Japanese immigrants has caused discomfort for "white" readers as well as critics (Maxey 2015: p. 10). One such critic is Ursula K. Le Guin (2012), who expresses her discomfort at the lack of conclusion having witnessed the "trouble[ing]" historical event from a perspective similar to the white townspeople's in the novel. She acknowledges, however, "It's up to me, as a white American, to deal with it now...and I only wish [Otsuka] had gone all the way with her heroines into the exile from exile...where few of 'us' went even in imagination." In her review, Le Guin seems to struggle with the ending in which the writer places the weight of the characters' constant exile on the shoulders of the reader. Choosing not to depict the scenes of internment therefore constitutes the narrative's final resistance of the gaze of surveillance by refusing to enact the horrific events and consequently denying the reader a satisfying catharsis. This act is contradictory to the readers expectations of a final scene that satisfies their curiosities and absolves them of the buildup of charged emotions that precede the internment.

## 7. Conclusion

Through her writerly practice, Otsuka deploys the same tools of surveillance to create a faceless narrative. What the narrative does then is contradict that kind of

surveillance by telling an alternative account with threads in so many directions that it becomes impossible for the reader to trace them all. *The Buddha in the Attic* not only reaches back to a historical moment that is very much connected to the present where the characters' ethnicity is the only variable but the systemic exclusion is the same, but it also teaches us how to narrate such moments without jeopardizing their subjects.

Surveillance assumes the air of keeping certain spaces safe while paradoxically jeopardizing the safety of those it deems threatening by excluding them from the rest of society and grouping them into homogenized categories. By highlighting narratives that successfully undermine surveillance such as *The Buddha*, this paper aims to amplify the ways in which these narratives create spaces where it is safe for their characters to exist, to live fully, and even to suffer without compromising their dignity. As mentioned above, these ways include resisting surveillance through language, characterization, and narration. These accounts merit highlighting, as they tell their stories not in spite of threats such as surveillance, racialization, and wars but through these material circumstances which shape the lives of many racialized peoples across the world. By understanding these deviations or contradictions as more than merely aesthetic but formal efforts to resist threats to racialized individuals such as surveillance, one can appropriately place these works in their respective historical, cultural, and political contexts. More broadly, these narratives and others like them do not strip-search their characters to vindicate them in their reader's eyes. Anti-surveillance novels as have been discussed here do not empty their characters' baggage—emotional or otherwise—for the reader's entertainment. Considering our increasingly surveilled moment and the breaches that the different mechanisms of surveillance commit, this area of research becomes of high priority. Drawing on similar themes in the novel at hand, the paper has attempted to contribute to the growing criticism of surveillance by reflecting on the techniques by which the anti-surveillance novel redirects the gaze of the reader in ways that preserve the dignity and power of the minorities in question.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“The United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act on 6 May 1882. This law prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years and barred all Chinese immigrants from naturalized citizenship. Demonstrating the class bias in the law, merchants, teachers, students, travelers, and diplomats were exempt from exclusion” (Lee 2002: p36).

<sup>2</sup> Reviews of the novel pick up on this particular feature. For instance, Michael Upchurch's review calls the novel a “fascinating paradox” due to its wealth of details despite being made of 129 pages only. Furthermore, Upchurch aptly likens the narrative to a “pointillist painting, [as] it's composed of bright spots of color: vignettes that bring whole lives to light in a line or two, adding up to a vibrant group portrait.”

<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmad dedicates a full chapter to the weaponizing of fears in her *Cultural Politics of Emotions* titled “The Effective Politics of Fear.” She explains, “The present hence becomes preserved by defending the community against the imagined others, who may take form in ways that cannot be anticipated...Such a defense is generated by anxiety and fear for the future, and justifies the elimination of that which fails to materialise in the form of the norm as a struggle for survival” (p.88).

<sup>4</sup> In “Zionist Detection through Indirection in Jonathan Wilson’s *A Palestine Affair*,” Mahmoud Zidan explores how the detective form can be used to “bury” the anxieties of the reader rather than confront them like the novel at hand does.

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