

Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*:
The Japanese American Immigrant Experience and Racial Prejudice in the U.S.

Pamela Cisneros

Abstract

This paper examines Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* through feminist and postcolonial considerations of the Japanese American experience. Japanese women who emigrate to the U.S. as picture brides are the work's central focus. It is through a collectivist perspective that these women describe their contact with racial and gender discrimination while adapting to their roles as wives and mothers. In the narrative's first half, I apply Luce Irigaray's theory of women's identity being malleable within a patriarchal structure, depicting these women as powerless to change their lives because of their gender. This leads to disrespectful physical encounters with their husbands and American employers because of their bodies and ethnic differences, respectively. Motherhood also alters racial prejudice on an intergenerational level because of how the children perceive their parents' struggles. The novel even references the political agenda behind the Japanese American displacement and features a brief reflection from the neighbours in order to memorialize a little-known chapter of WWII's political transgressions.

Keywords

Japanese American, Julie Otsuka, women, racial prejudice, gender discrimination, Other, *The Buddha in the Attic*

Résumé

Cet article examine l'expérience japonaise-américaine dans *The Buddha in the Attic* de Julie Otsuka d'une perspective féministe et postcoloniale. Les femmes japonaises qui émigrent aux États-Unis en tant que photo-épouses sont au cœur de l'œuvre. C'est dans une perspective collectiviste que ces femmes décrivent leur contact avec la discrimination raciale et de genre tout en s'adaptant à leurs rôles d'épouse et de mère. Dans la première moitié du récit, j'applique la théorie de Luce Irigaray selon laquelle l'identité des femmes est malléable au sein d'une structure patriarcale, dépeignant ces femmes comme impuissantes à changer leurs vies vu leur sexe. Cela conduit à des rencontres physiques irrespectueuses avec leurs maris et leurs employeurs américains en raison de leur corps et de leurs différences ethniques. La maternité transforme également les préjugés raciaux au niveau intergénérationnel à cause de la façon dont les enfants perçoivent les luttes de leurs parents. Le roman fait même référence à l'agenda politique ayant causé le déplacement des Américains d'origine japonaise et présente une brève réflexion des voisins des Japonais afin de commémorer un chapitre peu connu des transgressions politiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

Mots-clés

Japonais américain, Julie Otsuka, femmes, préjugé racial, discrimination de genre, Autre, *The Buddha in the Attic*

The immigrant experience memorializes individual dreams and the acculturation of a people. Julie Otsuka's 2012 historical fiction novel *The Buddha in the Attic* follows a group of Japanese women who emigrate to the U.S. as picture brides and struggle to ascertain their self-identities as both women and new American citizens in the mid-20th century. Otsuka addresses evident paradoxes: opportunity and hardship; reality and the imaginary; hope and despair; past and future. Such contradictions illustrate the concept of the Other in this work through the shared experience that these women endure. I propose to apply a chapter of Luce Irigaray's feminist theory from her text *This Sex Which Is Not One*, where she explores the malleability of a woman's self-identity within a patriarchal structure. Irigaray's theory is relevant to the first half of Otsuka's work because the narrative's characters discover how gender discrimination, and their subsequent recognition through their bodily identity as women, accompanies their subjection to Othering as racialized immigrants. Moreover, these women inevitably encounter an intergenerational kind of racial prejudice through their roles as mothers. *The Buddha in the Attic* accentuates the commonality of prejudice and the struggle to assimilate to an American life despite sexist marriage practices and racially discriminatory government decrees. As a result of their personal growth into old age, Otsuka's collective of women confronts the consequences of immigrating to the U.S. and the subsequent resolution in which their neighbors adopt the role of onlooker to reflect on the political transgressions against Japanese Americans.

The lives of Otsuka's characters find a purpose around the concept of picture brides, which refers to Japanese women who immigrated to the U.S. to find promises broken and deception commonplace. From 1885 to 1910, the "picture bride" marriage tradition emerged from feudal Japan's "aristocratic circles and ... samurai classes" and favoured the socioeconomic futures of men over women (Adachi & Lee 95). Photography was a convenient way to find a

potential Japanese partner, involving a “go-between” who researched each match’s “socioeconomic status, [education], and family histories” (95). In Otsuka’s narrative, the first impressions of these men’s photographs are favorable, notably attributed to the fact that they resembled their “brothers and fathers back home, only better dressed, in grey frock coats and fine Western three-piece suits” (4). The brides are conditioned to believe from their correspondence that their Japanese American husbands achieved economic and financial prosperity and their photos support such beliefs, depicting the men with material possessions such as “A-frame houses ... and Model T Fords” (4). The women trust these men given that they “promised to be there, waiting for [them], in San Francisco, when [they] sailed into port” (4). However, it is only after this initial revelation that the women question the state of their lives: “Would we love them? Would we recognize them from the pictures...?” (4). These doubts were historically well-founded because potential suitors often sent either “photos from years earlier ... or even photos of younger friends” to increase their chances of finding a wife (Adachi & Lee 95). Otsuka subsequently confirms such fears when the narrator reveals that their husband’s “photographs ... were twenty years old [and that] the letters ... had been written ... by people other than [their] husbands ... whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts” (18). These arranged marriages are revealed to be a system that oppresses women, benefiting men at the expense of these women experiencing irrevocable deceit as a result of their decision to marry and immigrate to the U.S.

From the beginning, the novel frames the storyline around Japanese picture brides traveling to San Francisco from Japan in order to pursue a viable quality of life. The novel’s emphasis on Othering presents itself through these women’s exploration of self-identity, highlighting both their gender and Japanese ethnicity. Wolfgang Stroebe and Chester A. Insko define the “stereotype” as a set of beliefs about the personal attributes “of an aspect of reality,

especially ... persons or social groups (6-7). In connection to Otsuka's work, the women rely on stereotypical imagery of the U.S. in their native Japan because they consider such information a reliable representation of their new world: "The women were loud and tall ... The language was ten times as difficult as our own and the customs were unfathomably strange. Books were read from back to front and soap was used in the bath" (Otsuka 7). Furthermore, the American treatment of women is a primary concern throughout the work's initial chapter given their attempts to remember a prior Japanese unspoken code of conduct: "*A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist*" (6, original emphasis). There remains, however, the supposition that they will achieve a better quality of life away from Japan in terms of gender norms: "And wherever you went the men held open the doors and tipped their hats and called out 'Ladies first'" (7). Otsuka describes their impressions as reliant on the idea that women are treated with more respect and are not expected to work at all compared to Japanese expectations to adhere to an agricultural working life where men are not held to these mannerism standards (7). They attempt to assimilate into American culture without drawing attention to themselves, but racial and cultural differences prevail.

Although the women observe each other's socioeconomic roots, whether that be women "from the city, [who] wore stylish city clothes, [or] from the country and ... wore the same old kimonos" (3), rather than "learn each other's names [they compared] photographs of [their] husbands" (3). The novel's first chapter introduces a collective of Japanese women who express excitement and uncertainty given their status as picture brides, but it is only when they finally meet their prospective Japanese American husbands that they realize the futility of their aspirations and subject themselves to a patriarchal authority. Additionally, they use stereotypes as coping mechanisms to lessen their concerns about their U.S. immigrant status temporarily.

Otsuka's narrator, who adopts "first person plural" perspective (Maxey 1) as well as a collective "stream of voices" (Monteiro 1), introduces the reader to these Japanese women who convey their naivety.

In addition to stereotypes on both sides, the women contend with an inevitable culture clash because perceptions of the fantastical American versus ordinary Japanese culture ultimately become the source of racial prejudice over time. For instance, the women worry about being subjected to the category of the Other, asking questions such as "would we be laughed at? Spat on? [Would] ... we not be taken seriously at all?" (Otsuka 7). These thoughts proliferate as they reflect on the eclectic nature of belongings—visual illustrations of their connection to their Japanese heritage. There are "colorful cotton kimonos" and "mirrors" (10) in terms of clothes and feminine accessories; "tiny brass Buddhas [and] ivory statues of the fox god" are now the remnants of their religion and culture as they pursue a new life (9). Japan remains present during their voyage and is a source of comfort in light of their new life abroad, notably through their dreams of "rice paddies, [from] which [they] ... had desperately wanted to escape" (5) alongside an encounter with a whale that they described as "*looking into the eye of the Buddha*" (13, original emphasis). However, the fact that their husbands are also of Japanese heritage causes them to believe it is a guarantee to future happiness.²⁴ The women's admittance of being enamoured with the idea of being "in America with [their] new husbands" overshadows the subsequent gender disparity they have yet to experience at this point (10-11). These women's past lives in Japan and their lack of knowledge about the U.S. interfere with one another. They worry about the ship's condition en route to America but decide that any worries about their

²⁴ In 1915, the Supreme Court defeated Japanese American Takao Ozawa's petition "to be classified as a 'free white person' ... [.] eliminating any path to citizenship for him and all other Japanese immigrants" (Adachi & Lee 53). The implementation of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952 made American citizenship accessible for Japanese immigrants (53).

future lives are unfounded because their new homes would give them the opportunity to take up new pastimes such as gardening and running a hotel (10). On the contrary, these reflections reinforce their unworldliness and reliance on their future husbands to provide them with a better life that they could not pursue on their own.

Irigaray's feminist approach can benefit Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* to demonstrate how the women are perceived as submissive and racially different as a result of their circumstances during the early years of their marriages, before they become mothers. Irigaray et al.'s 1985 text *This Sex Which Is Not One* features the chapter "Women on the Market", which argues that women are considered inferior to men because "society ... is based upon the exchange of women" (170). Otsuka begins to interweave this notion through the men's immediate perceptions of their wives as commodities in light of the arranged marriages (Adachi & Lee 95) and the women's indifferent compliance with gender norms based on their actions towards them. Irigaray et. al suggest that society depends on "women's bodies" in order for "social life and culture" to thrive and men, as the only participants in this "transaction", proliferate women's inferiority (171). Additionally, the fact that men "do not enter into any exchanges *with* [women]" continues to enforce this gender disparity (172, original emphasis). This lack of communication recalls once more the circumstances of these marriages (Otsuka 3). In particular, the only attention women receive is with respect to their physicality which must be treated as an "*abstraction*" because their individuality and even their "femininity" are ignored in totality (Irigaray et al. 175, original emphasis).

For instance, the women are treated as commodities rather than individuals when their husbands immediately take advantage of them. On their wedding nights, the men do not acknowledge their wives with respect but, instead, subject them to non-consensual sex that the

women feel obligated to follow through with now that they are married: “That night our new husbands took us quickly. They took us calmly. They took us gently, but firmly, and without saying a word” (Otsuka 19). This experience is described as a collective one and the use of “we” not only signals the shared experience but also emphasizes that “the women’s individuality is erased” (Maxey 10). Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro argues that Otsuka’s narrative in this section iterates “the phrase ‘they took us’” in order to highlight that these women “are mainly identified with a [sexual and] reproductive apparatus”, accentuating the “asset” role that men ascribe to them (5). Otsuka describes these sexual encounters as non-consensual and even as instances of extreme physical and emotional violence. Although some women “did not let [their husbands] touch [them] again for three years”, other women admitted that they “knew [they] would always want them” (22). In this particular shared moment, a woman’s essence and decision over her own body do not belong to her. The language here even stresses that their husbands regard their wives as belongings, which concludes with the realization that “in the morning when [they] woke [they] were theirs” (22). In doing so, the first night that these women spend with their husbands foreshadows their future struggles not only as immigrants but first and foremost as women.

As these women become accustomed to their marriages, they battle gender inequality in their daily lives and despite the kindness that certain individuals impart, the experience intersects with racial prejudice. Otsuka describes how these women begin to fulfill the traditional domestic role of a housewife, but also begin to repress their femininity. They transform into vestiges of themselves to the point that they recognize how this state of existence infiltrates their marriages: “We cooked for them. We cleaned for them ... 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” (37). This behavior of indifference then becomes more evident when their letters to their families in Japan turn into lies about their own realities, defining their life abroad as the epitome of all the happiness and success to which they aspired. They boast to friends and family about their newfound successes in “*a nice house in town,*” but they hide the truth concerning the fact that they essentially became domestic servants, an occupation that is considered back home as “the lowliest job a woman would have [in Japan]” (45, original emphasis). These false stories continue to juxtapose their realities through the experience of being Othered. They resist coming to terms with their contemporary world despite their admittance that they want to be treated as equals rather than individuals who “do the work that no self-respecting American would do” (29). Japanese Americans find themselves living in “the space of the invisible” where they amplify their feelings of marginalization, refusing to “be noticed” in a society that cannot treat them as American citizens because of their ethnicity (Monteiro 6). This desire for equality also manifests itself in how the Japanese women wish to emulate American women in terms of their appearance, “[their] ... endearing ways” and personalities, especially their “confidence which [the Japanese women] lacked” (Otsuka 39). Additionally, they dream of achieving material and societal success—an American woman’s ideal life. This dream takes the form of residing in a better home complete with accessible water and “a servant who brought ... breakfast every morning ... and swept all the rooms by hand” (40). In reality, many of these Japanese American husbands are extremely poor and the only place they can afford for their wives to live is “in the servants’ quarters of the big houses in Atherton and Berkley” (37-38), in exchange for labouring in the gardens of these homes belonging to affluent Caucasian families. The amplified version of luxury remains a fantasy for their wives.

Although their initial experiences as domestic servants are positive, the Japanese women

retain their status as the Other when they work under the conditions that the Caucasian husbands and wives stipulate. The American wives Americanize the Japanese women, and “[praise] ... [their] hardworking ways ... They claimed to like [them] much more than they did any of the others” (40-41). This friendliness eventually becomes genuine, given how these Japanese women assume the role of unofficial therapists for their American counterparts, listening to “their deep, darkest secrets” and helping them divert their husband’s attention from secret marital affairs, and looking after the children as if they were their own (40-41). Furthermore, this impression of acceptance becomes a complex social realm to navigate. American women provide a world of privilege and opportunity in return for the Japanese women’s domestic labour which results in the latter taking English classes or even the promise of being “left ... a fortune” after the death of their American employers (42). The best experience, however, is the opportunity to play the role of a homeowner and it is only then that these women are at peace: “We felt, for once, like ourselves” (42). In spite of this freedom, the women also contend with the repercussions of losing their job stability, choosing to remain truthful when they make mistakes or failing to resist their penchant for “*pretty things*” even out of nostalgia when one woman steals “[a] porcelain vase that was the same shade of green as [their] mother’s jade Buddha” (43, original emphasis). In addition, racial discrimination never disappears from their lives in the U.S. They are relegated to the background as they look after their employers’ homes and are sometimes “dismissed ... without any warning” or explanation (43-44). The lack of transparency is associated with matters such as the inability to carry out their work properly or even “understanding their English, which bore no resemblance to ... [the] books” (43-44). The friendly though unfavorable integration into American society that the Japanese women experience turns into animosity. Racism inevitably exposes the limitations of their job security.

The women also learn to come to terms with their realities through their experiences of (sometimes unwanted) marital affairs because of men who treat them as an Othered commodity. However, these women consciously process the disrespect they receive and eventually turn to their own communities in order to belong. Gender degradation and class status contribute to these women being targeted. When they continue their work as domestic servants, their gender is degraded as they become mistresses to American husbands who echo their own husbands' disregard for their individuality and are unconcerned for their well-being (45-47). These American men present the Othering of Japanese women from an exotic perspective, reviving the colonizer-subject relationship (Monteiro 6). The affairs reflect the "Hottentot Venus" in which the women fulfill "men's fascination to explore them as 'the unknown'" (6-7). This leaves the women vulnerable but self-aware "that they do not even need to understand [English] ... to know the men's intentions" (7). Additionally, Otsuka's characters assume "the form of commodities [through] ... a physical or natural form, and a value form" (Irigaray et al. 176-177). The natural form focuses on a woman's appearance while the value form is malleable because "*she can be exchanged*" (176-177, original emphasis); as a result, men assign women their "value" (176-177). Irigaray et al. further postulate that men's refusal to consider women as individuals means that women do not assume a self-sufficient identity distinct from the "natural form: that of exchange value" unless "[their] nature ... only ... [relates] to another commodity" or another woman (180). Men prevent women from assuming "any possible identity" because they adhere to a one-sided and biased interpretation of women as "commodities rather than as people" (187-188). These affairs reinforce the Japanese women's objectified status. However, the resulting emotional turmoil enables the Japanese wives to find a different sense of purpose within their own heritage towns (Otsuka 51-52). Women could go about their daily errands in these Japanese

heritage towns, but this sense of belonging disappears when they leave their homes and are subject to racial prejudice (51-52). Disrespect becomes the norm again. The mistreatment extends even to the children and wives of these American men who tell them “to move away ... when [they] were standing too close” (52). At the same time, the women recognize they are trapped because of their husbands as a result of economic hardship and their conformity towards the familiar: “Who would weep for them? Who would turn the other cheek for them and then one day—because we were tired, because we were old, because we could forgive them? *Only a fool*” (53-54, original emphasis). They conform to a superficial life rather than end their marriages, which reiterates the lack of respect they receive as women and citizens.

When these women become mothers, their new identity saves them from their previous treatment as commodities and enables them to live independently within new Japanese-influenced communities. Nevertheless, motherhood presents another kind of Othering about reaching a common ground with their children. The narrative illustrates the difficulties involved in childbirth and recalls the traditional role of women to bear children (Monteiro 5). A myriad of experiences accompanies these women as they become mothers either alone or with the help of their husbands, friends, and doctors. Otsuka emphasizes the era’s significance when the children’s names equalize promising futures beyond their parents’ livelihoods: “We gave birth to Nobuo and Shojiro and Ayako... We gave birth to babies that were American citizens and in whose names we could finally lease land” (58-59). An unlikely contributor to this new dream is the development of Japantowns across the U.S. which become sanctuaries that lessen American anti-Japanese discord. Japanese immigrants developed these towns or “*nihonmachis*” complete with the necessary establishments, “residences, businesses, and ... community organizations such as temples, churches, and social associations” to mitigate racial prejudice against their

people and children (Adachi & Lee 41). Animosity did not belong in these eclectic neighborhoods (Monteiro 7). These communities are reminiscent of life in Japan: “We bought our groceries at Fujioka Grocery ... We bought our dresses at Yada Ladies’ Shop and our shoes at Asahi Shoe ... We went to the public bathhouse every Saturday and gossiped with our neighbors and friends” (Otsuka 50-51). They find comfort in a community free from racial discrimination, concluding that the “four-block-long stretch of town ... was more Japanese than the village [they’d] left behind in Japan” (52). Even so, this lifestyle is not without its familial difficulties in relation to the next generation.

The children establish close bonds with their mothers at a young age, enabling the women to feel less alone because their children were “worried when ... [they] were tired [,] ... when they were sad, [and] when [their] knees were bothering [them]” despite the fact that their mothers needed to work (Otsuka 62-64). Additionally, these children embrace their American lives. They play with their friends, and like their mothers, dream of “leaving home, one day for the ... world beyond” (66). However, the mothers warn their children of racial prejudice, continuing a deep-rooted awareness of racial discrimination as well as of Japanese stereotypes against Americans and other Asians: “Don’t be loud like the Americans. Stay away from the Chinese. *They don’t like us.* Watch out for the Koreans. *They hate us*” (69, original emphasis). The children also internalize their ethnic differences which impact every facet of their lives: “They learned to find protectors. They learned to hide their anger ... They learned that some people are born luckier than others and that things ... do not always go as you plan” (77-78). Nevertheless, this lifestyle does not ruin their dreams of higher education, prestigious careers, and normalcy (79). Their futures are accessible at the expense of the harsh racial prejudice and gender discrimination their mothers endured.

In light of their early exposure to racial prejudice, the children, now older, model an indifferent attitude towards Japanese culture and localize their experience in accordance with Dominique Groulx and Louis Porcher's definition of the "Other" (32-33). This occurs through the distinctions they create with their mothers who are now "issei" or "first-generation" Japanese American citizens, a term clarified by Jane H. Yamashiro (765-766). Otsuka's narrator contributes to this severance through the use of "they" as a modified narrative structure, highlighting a "struggle between the permanence of old traditions and the creation of new traditions" (Monteiro 7). These children develop a tense cultural dynamic with their parents, as the narrator describes how they "spent their days ... living in [English], whose twenty-six letters still eluded [their mothers]" (Otsuka 73). Likewise, they exercise racial disparity and resentment against their parents, ridiculing their "heavy accents" and wanting "different and better mothers who did not look so worn out" alongside "real fathers with briefcases" (75-76). The children's haunting animosity towards their parents also illustrates how Otsuka's narrative style "exposes the clash between public and private, the individual and the communal, freedom and conformity" (Maxey 1) because of the variation between first, second, and third-person pronouns alongside the diversity of life experiences within the Japanese American community (Monteiro 2). Consequently, the indifference these mothers experience from the next generation does not convince them to rob the children of their peaceful lives given "the darkness coming" (Otsuka 79) in which racial prejudice produces overt hatred towards the Japanese.

Discrimination reaches a critical point in the narrative's second half, presenting both nationality as a source of fear for Japanese American families and even an abrupt narrative switch to an American speaker who reflects upon the irrational attitudes towards these immigrants and the town's changes after the government's removal of the Japanese community

to internment camps following Japan's Pearl Harbour offensive. A.L. Kagedan states that the action of Othering proliferates when this "also relate[s] to ... grievances toward a minority that are linked to security, the economy, or social and cultural life" (69). Likewise, the American government hides results from "investigations about potential disloyalty on the part of American Japanese" which concludes that Japanese immigrants are indeed "loyal to their adopted country" (73).²⁵ Lee Adachi and Jonathan H. X. Lee echo this discrepancy, stating that "internment was unfounded [because there] was not a single documented instance of espionage, sabotage, or other fifth column activity on the part of either American-born Japanese or resident Japanese noncitizens" (35). Still, the government chooses not to prevent emerging "anti-Japanese sentiments" among Americans (73). Otsuka adopts a fictional approach to the growing anti-Japanese sentiment in her novel. Her narrator recounts how a routinely edited "list ... drawn up hastily, on the morning of the [Pearl Harbour] attack" seeks to identify and take away Japanese citizens at a moment's notice (83). As a result of this government decree, Japanese families begin to hide their presence: they "[removed their] names from ... mailboxes ... brought in [their] shoes from the front porch ... [and] did not send [their] children to school" (81). They also erase physical indicators of their Japanese heritage, including "diaries, Buddhist family altars, wooden chopsticks, paper lanterns, ... anything that might suggest [the] husbands had enemy ties" (86-87) to avoid being Othered as "the enemy" (89). These actions succeed prior "stories in the papers" that portrayed Japanese American citizens as allegiant to Japan given that, reportedly, "[their] children ... bragged to their classmates that 'something big' was about to happen" and "[Japanese American] parents had celebrated the news of the attack for days" (85). On the contrary, the husbands' self-doubt concerning any "mistake they had made ... which they

²⁵ Adachi and Lee clarify that the American government's suspicions and subsequent "[uprooting]" of Japanese families included children (102). Accommodations for Japanese children included the creation of "[makeshift] schools, sports activities, and even ... the Scouts ... to give the children some semblance of normality" (102).

were not aware [of]" confuses them regardless (91). Every family renounces their heritage at least in appearance.

However, the American government continues to enforce strict measures against the Japanese community. The narrator describes how their "contraband" is taken, their livelihoods are reduced to nothing such as ten "dollars for a new stove ... bought for two hundred the year before" (Otsuka 101), and targeted lockdown procedures thwart potential Japanese military offences (91-92). In these bleak circumstances, the Japanese also experience betrayal and dishonesty from people who become "informers" to oust their former neighbors and friends for money (96-97). Safety is unguaranteed thanks to the newspaper's misinformation. Disagreements begin to spread concerning the conditions behind the "mass removals" of Japanese citizens as well as whether their homes and businesses would either "be confiscated" or left to the husband's wives and children in name only (93-94). However, these clarifications were futile because the women and children were taken away after the men (94-95). They find themselves incapable of escaping suspicion and lack answers even as they are taken away from their American lives. The narrative's subsequent chapter displays Otsuka's "first person plural" speaker (Maxey 1) within the myriad of intergenerational Japanese American families from across the U.S. in order to stress the gravity of their displacement.²⁶ Everyone is forced to leave their homes and personal belongings behind no matter their social status, livelihoods, and dreams (Otsuka 106-109). Otsuka's presentation of these Japanese American characters resembles a parade in which husbands and wives recount their pasts, followed by their "older daughters ...

²⁶ The total number of Japanese Americans interned during World War II is estimated to be "approximately 120,000 individuals" (Adachi & Lee 33).

[and] ... sons” and younger children, even orphans (109-115). Everyone is led to an undisclosed location later described as “a safe place” (115) to take part in a Japanese American exodus.²⁷

The Buddha in the Attic’s final chapter accentuates the aftermath of the Japanese community’s uprooting and the lack of remembrance through a Caucasian narrator. This narrator accedes to the racial prejudice that the Japanese Americans endured from their former neighbours who distinctly addressed them as “the Japanese” (Otsuka 115) and denounced their ethnicity but also secretly reveals a hidden empathy towards them, “[wondering] if [the Japanese American departure] wasn’t somehow all [their] fault” (122). Although their Japanese ethnicity partially contributed to their quality of life, the narrator also acknowledges them as outliers of a distant past and victimized by war, given that their former properties are now abandoned. Urban areas change because of the Americanized expropriation of Japanese businesses, notably Harada Grocery where on “its front window hangs a handwritten sign [no one] can remember having seen there before—*God be with you until we meet again*” (115, original emphasis). In spite of the community’s early reluctance to accept the deportation rumours of Japanese immigrants to internment camps, Lena Ahlin argues that there is no genuine prioritization of the truth given that “the initial concern ... turns into apprehensive questions [resurrecting] the common stereotypes of the Japanese as treacherous, sly and violent” because there is no acknowledgement of the dangers and acceptance of racial prejudice (95). This perspective evidently increases through the pronoun usage of “‘we’ ... to signify a different collectivity” (Maxey 10). A modern life overtakes the past. This narrator describes a superficial interest for Japanese culture as a result of former Japanese American homes being ransacked, presenting an ironic scenario where new

²⁷ Adachi and Lee stipulate that Japanese immigrants and their children were sent to one of “10 ‘War Relocation Camps’ primarily located along the West Coast” (33-34).

fashion trends such as “chopstick hair ornaments” (Otsuka 122) capitalize on a culture once regarded as inferior and later considered undesired.²⁸

Still, culpability prevails amongst the American neighbours who are troubled by the Japanese who “[watch them] from the shadows, ... [watch their] faces for ... grief or remorse” while the mayor’s assurances that the Japanese “left ... without rancour” contributes to a mistrust concerning the official narrative about their fate (124-125). However, the community’s redevelopments place the Japanese in a state of such “oblivion” that their existence is forgotten altogether (Ahlin 96) and the narrator resorts to their own memory to reach a logical conclusion. The novel’s final passage highlights the replacement of former Japanese-owned businesses and the eventual reappearance of Japanese families across the U.S. (Otsuka 129) although the narrator accepts the inevitable: “[We] shall probably not meet [the Japanese Americans] again in this world” (129).²⁹ Ruth Maxey states that their reflection recalls Otsuka’s epitaph inclusion of Ecclesiasticus 44-8-9 because a Christian religious text is an opportune point of convergence for this American era (9).³⁰ Consequently, the narrator’s sense of regret signals the impossibility of intercultural dialogue because the Japanese American community will never return to its pre-war existence.

Finally, Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* presents the fictional trajectory of Japanese picture brides, offering an immersive experience into the sexism and racial disparity

²⁸ The Americans here partake in cultural appropriation, “[adopting] “the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one ... ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society” (“cultural” *OED Online*).

²⁹ Otsuka briefly mentions the Japanese Americans leaving these internment camps, which occurred upon their closure across the West Coast in 1945, finally allowing “Japanese Americans ... to return to the evacuated areas (Wu & Izumi). Frank H. Wu and Carol Izumi state that before 1945, the War Relocation Authority intended to move Japanese Americans away from the West Coast to disperse their communities. During World War II, the former properties of Japanese Americans “were simply taken over by other farmers and families” and allowed a select few “to return to their property [,] restore their farms [,] and reestablish their businesses” (Adachi & Lee 110).

³⁰ Otsuka cites Ecclesiasticus 44-8-9 in her novel’s prelude: “There be of them, that have left a name behind, 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.”

that they and their American families encounter. I have shown that gender-based discrimination and women's commodification are substantive to their immigrant experience by applying Irigaray et al.'s feminist ideas to Otsuka's novel. Furthermore, their roles as mothers face great strain as they support their children's dreams amidst tense political interests. The Japanese American children revive the women's social standing as peripheral U.S. citizens. These women demonstrate their ability to process both aspects throughout their lives, protecting their children alongside their overall well-being in a country that emphasizes nationalism. The outright distinction made between Americans and immigrants ultimately leads to this dark and overlooked chapter in American history.

Works Cited

- Adachi, Lee, and Jonathan H. X. Lee. "Part 1: Context of Japanese Emigration: Coming to America." *Japanese Americans: The History and Culture of a People*, ABC-CLIO, 2017, pp. 1–106.
- Ahlin, Lena. "'All We Wanted to Do, Now That We Were Back in the World, Was Forget': On Remembrance and Forgetting in Julie Otsuka's Novels." *American Studies in Scandinavia*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2015, pp. 81–101.
- "cultural, adj. and n." OED Online, Oxford UP, Dec. 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/45742. Accessed 10 February 2021.
- Groux, Dominique, and Louis Porcher. "Autrui." *L'altérité*, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 32–33.
- Irigaray, Luce, et al. "Women on the Market." *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell UP, 1985, pp. 170–191.
- Kagedan, A.L. "Chapter 4: Wartime Othering: The Enemy Within." *The Politics of Othering in the United States and Canada*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 69–81.
- Maxey, Ruth. "The Rise of the 'We' Narrator in Modern American Fiction." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1–15.
- Monteiro, Flávia Rodrigues. "Voices That Matter: The Attic Echoes Through the House." *Estudos Feministas*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–10.
- Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- Stroebe, Wolfgang, and Chester A. Insko. "Social Stereotypes: Concept and Measurement." *Stereotyping and Prejudice: Changing Conceptions*, edited by Daniel Bar-Tal et al., Springer, 1989, pp. 4–12.

Wu, Frank H., and Carol Izumi. "Internment Camps, Japanese American." *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Mary Y. Danico, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 534–537.

Yamashiro, Jane H. "Issei." *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, edited by Richard T. Schaefer, vol. 1, 2008, pp. 765–766.