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## ***We* narration in Chang-rae Lee’s *On such a full sea* and Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the attic*: “Unnaturally” Asian American?**

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**Abstract:** This essay looks at two recent Asian American texts written in the first-person plural – namely Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the attic* (2011) and Chang-rae Lee’s *On such a full sea* (2014). Its main goal is to show that the ambiguities and tensions here generated by *we* narration prove particularly apt when it comes to calling into question essentialist views concerning the anatomy of community-building. But my contention is that these two *we* texts are particularly interesting at a theoretical level, too, in that they help us challenge the orthodoxies of traditional narrative theory – among which Gérard Genette’s all-too-rigid distinction between the homo- and heterodiegetic levels in a text, or the generalized assumption, which has been notably challenged by Mieke Bal, that every act of story-telling is necessarily indebted to ‘a’ narrator, and a narrator of anthropomorphic standards at that.

**Keywords:** *We* narration, Unnatural narratology, Asian American literature, Julie Otsuka, Chang-rae Lee

One of the most striking yet overlooked features of contemporary minority writings certainly pertains to the multiplication of “unlikely or impossible kinds of telling” (Richardson 2006: 37) – of the sort that an emergent field in narrative theory has subsumed under the rubric of unnatural narration. Because they complicate the “mimetic reductionism” (Alber et al. 2013: 1) that generally informs our understanding of story worlds and speech situations, *we* texts are unnatural in many ways. As Ruth Maxey remarks in her survey on the recent rise of *we* narration in a US context, the first-person plural narrator is “flexible and ambiguous”; it might represent a voice that is “inclusive and exclusive, everyone and no-one, all-seeing yet strictly limited” (2015: para. 2).

Looking at two recent Asian American texts written in the first-person plural – namely Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the attic* (2011) and Chang-rae Lee’s *On such*

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*a full sea* (2014) – this essay contends that the *we* form of these novels has intention, as it were, in that Otsuka's and Lee's "strategies of referential indeterminacy," as Monika Fludernik puts it in a related context (2011: 101), have the potential for interrogating received notions about Asian American identity. Even if I hasten to add that my cursory overview of Otsuka's *The Buddha in the attic* is only meant to better contextualize Lee's text, it is worth adding a few words to justify my choice to perform a joint analysis of these two novels, as their generic anatomies are quite different as far as realistic conventions are concerned. After all, while *The Buddha in the attic* excavates problematic chapters of Asian American history – that is, the little-known history of the picture brides having travelled from Japan to the U.S. and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II – Lee's novel is a dystopia set in a future American society called "the Association," complete with settings such as "B-Mor" obviously presenting a surreal iteration of present-day Baltimore. However, it is my contention that both of these recent texts are "contextual," to refer to Amit Marcus' call for linking *we* texts with the "historical conditions of [their] composition" (2008a: 46), in that they use the first-person plural with a view to exposing the suspended forms of assimilation experienced by Asian Americans in today's USA and to problematizing the criticism that the model minority is complicit in the maintenance of racial hierarchies and power structures.

The purpose of my essay is twofold. First, my goal is to show that the ambiguities and tensions generated by *we* narration in these two contemporary Asian American novels prove particularly apt when it comes to calling into questions essentialist views concerning the anatomy of community-building (or when it comes to revealing the ways in which individuals, including readers, are shaped by the amnesias of History). But these two *we* texts are particularly interesting at a theoretical level, too, given their strategies of selective individualization, address function, and shifting referentiality. So I also wish to examine how *we* narration in Lee's and Otsuka's texts helps challenge the orthodoxies of traditional narrative theory – among which Gérard Genette's all-too-rigid distinction between the extra- and intradiegetic levels in a text, or the generalized assumption, which has been notably challenged by Mieke Bal (2004), that every act of story-telling is necessarily indebted to a narrator, and a narrator of anthropomorphic standards at that.

The multiplication of narrative experiments by postcolonial and minority writers has generally flown beneath the critical radar. With respect to the academic reception of contemporary Asian American literature, Sue-Im Lee laments the ruling assumptions that "'ethnic' interests are disparate from aesthetic interests" (2006: 5), and that "'artistic merit' and 'minority writers' are mutually exclusive terms" (Elliott quoted in Lee 2006: 6). The critic goes as far as to wonder

whether a generalized indifference to the aesthetic in late-twentieth-century literary analyses does not surreptitiously reinforce the belief that this category can only be “the bastion of Anglo-American cultural primacy” (2006: 6). The counter-productive and/or re-essentializing effects of maintaining a watertight divide between political/historical and aesthetic matters are also emphasized, not only by scholars working from within the field of postcolonial studies (Boehmer 2010; Hiddleston 2011), but also by theorists working from within the field of narratology (Prince 2008; Fludernik 1996). Brian Richardson thus remarks that narrative theorists have tended to ignore work by postcolonial and U.S. ethnic authors even if these writers have conducted “the most fascinating narrative experiments” – among which “the use of innovative kinds of narrator” (2011: 3). The theorist specifically alludes to postcolonial and minority authors who have “mov[ed] beyond traditional first- and third-person forms” (2011: 3) and have used *you* and *we* forms in ways that are “compelling both politically and narratologically” (2011: 4).

For Richardson, it is not only that, in texts such as Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), Edouard Glissant’s *La case du commandeur* (1981), Zakes Mda’s *Ways of dying* (1995), Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) or Richard Wright’s *12 million black voices* (1941), for instance, the *we* form gestures towards the creation of a collective consciousness that strives to unshackle itself from the tyrannies of colonialism and/or resist the tenets of white supremacy. It is also that this technique might express new communal solidarities while simultaneously endorsing and breaking the (culture-specific) conventions of the mimetic world, with the result that such a perspective challenges, in turn, the “hegemonic paradigm of the isolated Western consciousness” (2011: 5). Witness the scope of the *we* in Erdrich’s *Tracks*, which, at times, “include[s] the voices of the dead” (Richardson 2006: 58) and thus abolishes the distinction between what Herbert Spiegelberg (1975) calls the “we of copresence” and the “absentee we.”<sup>1</sup> Consider, too, the potentially unnatural range of the *we* in Mda’s *Ways of dying*, which justifies its declared omniscience either by maintaining that “the communal voice” espouses the perspective of “the all-seeing eye of the village gossip”<sup>2</sup> (1995: 12) or by suggesting that oral storytelling thrives on transcending the boundary between self and others. In an attempt to explore Bonnie Costello’s suggestion that *we* texts are

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1 For more *we* texts problematizing the impossible relaying of the voices of the dead, see for instance Divya Dwivedi’s and Henrik Skov Nielsen’s reading of Carsten Jensen’s *We, the drowned* (2006).

2 Amit Marcus offers an analysis of Amos Oz’s *Elsewhere, perhaps* (1973), in which his reading of gossip as “the agent of ‘we’ narration” is linked up to Richardson’s reading of Mda’s *Ways of dying* (see 2008a: 62).

linked to matters of mourning and commemoration, Ruth Maxey surveys the rise of first person plural narration in post-9/11 US literature and similarly emphasizes the volatility of the form. She remarks that, “linguistically, the first-person plural can involve and implicate the reader as addressee and it can be interpreted on a microcosmic or macrocosmic, specific or metonymic scale” (2015: para. 2) – at times, I would add, in cumulative and contradictory fashion. It is no wonder, then, that Richardson contends that first person plural narratives articulate an “essentially dialectical perspective that typically (and most successfully) plays with its own boundaries” (2006: 58).

This play with inclusion and exclusion is exacerbated in those cases where, as I will show specifically in my discussion of Lee’s *On such a full sea*, the collective first-person narrator is rooted in the fictional world yet gains access to events outside of its range of experience, thus blurring the boundary between first- and third-person narrations – and by extension, challenging the “either-or dichotomy of homodiegesis vs. heterodiegesis” (Fludernik 2011: 106) that has been generalized by Genette. For Manuel Jobert, the specificities of the first person plural appear to be best illustrated when returning to the category of person, which has been over-hastily presented by Wayne Booth as a non-issue (see 1983 [1961]: 150). Following Joly and O’Kelly, who argue that *I*, *you*, *s/he*, *it* and *they* are all “homogenous” pronouns in that their referents belong “either inside or outside the sphere of the self” (Jobert 2015: 539), Jobert draws attention to the specificity of *we*, which is “heterogeneous” because “it includes referents that are both inside *and* outside the sphere of the self” (539; emphasis mine). Such neither/nor or “dichotomy-resistant” (Alber et al. 2013: 7) nature of *we* might explain why *we* fictional narratives have a potential both for subverting what Amit Marcus calls the “Cartesian conception of consciousness” (2008a, 48) – namely the common-sense belief in a separate and sovereign consciousness – and for exposing the essentializing perceptions undergirding the maintenance of clear-cut boundaries between *we*-groups and *they*-groups. With respect to the latter matter, Marcus notes that:

[some *we* fictional narratives] employ the first-person plural in ways that defamiliarize perception and provoke readers to reconsider their automatized preconceptions of this collective label, such as which characters (or groups of people) are subsumed under it, what types of qualities they share [...], what separates the ‘we’ group from other groups, to what extent the properties of one group overlap with those of another, and according to what criteria moving from one group to another is possible. (2008b: 3)

Marcus’ understanding that *we* fictional narratives thrive on opening new vistas upon the instability, porousness and constructedness of the relation between *they*-groups and *we*-groups (2008b) as well as between *I* and *we* (2008a), suggests

that the form is especially well suited to articulate the exclusion-by-inclusion paradox faced by some minority groups in Western multicultural societies. Asian Americans represent a compelling instance of these minority groups in many ways. Indeed, they now appear to be included within what Inderpal Grewal (2005) calls the new ethnic and multicultural versions of the American dream, even if, on the other hand, the racial identity of this group still prevents them from being recognized, and at times from recognizing themselves, as fully integrated into a mainstream culture that still more or less covertly fastens whiteness to an ideal Americanness. Taking the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II as instances of the U.S. “history of institutionalized exclusions” against Asians, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han note that such exclusions are now “erased and managed” (2003: 347) by celebratory discourses of multiculturalism and by myths naturalizing American exceptionalism, among which the model minority stereotype. For the two critics, the stereotype is emblematic of Asian Americans’ paradoxical positionality within the U.S. power structure and race hierarchy, in that it ties this group to a positive representation at the same time as it “homogenizes widely disparate Asian and Asian American racial and ethnic groups by generalizing them all as economically or academically successful” (2003: 347). To the further extent that it gets internalized by Asian Americans as the only means of being recognized by mainstream society, the stereotype perversely works on a more subterranean level, in that it demands that Asian Americans follow prescribed and partial models of success (such as economic achievement or academic excellence) “in order *to be* at all” (2003: 350; emphasis in original). Unsurprisingly in such a context, Anne Anlin Cheng contends that Asian Americans occupy a “truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization” (2001: 23), not only because the model minority stereotype is often used to naturalize the failure of other racialized communities – specifically African Americans – to achieve the American Dream, but also because such a seemingly positive representation is configured by economic achievement only, thus denying Asian Americans full subjectivities. This refusal to grant Asian Americans full subjectivities is used, in turn, to further *other* Asian Americans by essentializing them as “inhumanely productive” – hence “pathological to the nation” (Eng and Han 2003: 345). What the success of the myth covers over, Eng and Han maintain, is the Asian American “lack of political and cultural representation,” the inability to “be recognized as ‘All American’” (2003: 351).

In many ways, Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the attic* can be seen as a precursor to Lee’s *On such a full sea*, in that it utilizes the first-person plural to disorient and re-orient dominant perceptions of model minority affluence and compliance. If Otsuka’s novel tackles head on the “US history of institutionalized exclusions against Asians” by referring directly to the internment of Japanese Americans

during World War II at the end of the book, it also draws attention to gendered aspects of Japanese migration to the US, in ways that make up for the fact that *issei* women hardly ever “[made] it into the pages of the pages of the history books,” in Otsuka’s own words (2012: para. 4). Characterizing a group of nameless Japanese picture brides who arrive in the U.S. at the start of the 20th century, the anatomy of Otsuka’s *we* is unambiguously sustained throughout seven out of the eight chapters of the novel, causing Maxey to remark that the first-person plural narrator accentuates a sense of “narrative confinement” and literalizes the notion that the picture brides are “in the same boat” (2015: para. 29). Otsuka herself emphasizes the unity of the *we* in an interview by calling her first-person narrator a “choral narrator” (2012: para. 1). She hastens to add, however, that “using the first-person plural allowed [her] to tell a much larger story than [she] could have told otherwise” (2012: para. 1), which also implicitly points towards the “polyphonic” (Jobert 2015: 541) nature of such *we* – that is, the notion that the first person plural narrator represents “the synthesis of a plurality of individual voices” (Jobert 2015: 541). For Jobert, Otsuka’s *we* “stretches the resources of narrative conventions almost to breaking point” (Jobert 2015:541), in that it is repeatedly used in conjunction with phrases such as “some of us,” “most of us,” “a few of us,” “one of us” – even with the “almost oxymoric” (Jobert 2015: 545) “others of us” (Otsuka 2011: 33). This simultaneously allows for a sense of group cohesion, for the emergence of sub-groups, and even at times, for selective individualization: “Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi [...] Many more of us were from Kagoshima [...] One of us was from Kumamoto” (Otsuka 2011: 8). Both undermining the homogenization of Asian Americans by mainstream culture and expressing a sense of communal solidarity, Otsuka’s *we* moves on to reference a group of increasingly individualized (yet still nameless) women who bear children to near-strangers and acclimatize to physically strenuous work, until they are forced by the U.S. authorities to relocate to internment camps in the wake of Pearl Harbor. But perhaps the most fascinating way in which Otsuka actualizes the destabilizing and transgressive potential of the first-person plural pronoun takes place in the last chapter of the book, “A disappearance,” which features a dramatic shift in referentiality. At that point the *we* suddenly designates a community of nameless white people who cannot shake off feelings of uneasiness as they pass by the vacant houses of their former Japanese neighbors, even if they claim to know nothing about the conditions of their neighbors’ “disappearance.” As Jobert and Maxey remark, the paradox is that proper names are first introduced in the text at that point by those sympathetic to the Japanese, which emphasizes the suggestion that *The Buddha in the attic* is a “work of memorialization” (Maxey 2015: para. 28), one that demands that “both sides become aware of the importance of coming to terms with the

past” (Jobert 2015: 550). Excavating problematic chapters of Asian American history in a contemporary era when a celebratory model minority discourse prevails in the U.S., Otsuka utilizes the *we* form’s politics of selective individualization and potentially shifting referentiality to comment on quite different anatomies of community-building. While in the Japanese women’s case, the *we* signals the emergence of a collective consciousness – which does not preclude individualization in the face of extreme duress – on the other hand, the *we* of the white community appears to be based on depersonalizing forms of collective denial. This last point is reminiscent of Fludernik, who remarks, after Marcus, that one of the most compelling contrapuntal functions of *we* narratives is “to shift responsibility to others in order to hide behind a collective” (2011: 116).

Published a few years after Otsuka’s novel, Chang-rae Lee’s *On such a full sea* can be seen to displace in the near future current issues about Asian American exemplarity, even if, through Fan, its female protagonist, and more so, through its *we* narrator, the novel gradually shifts the terrain of analysis to the psychic costs as well as to the conditions of emergence – and maintenance – of such exemplarity for different social groups, including dominant ones. Commenting on the work of American science fiction author Philip K. Dick, David Seed writes that,

In contrast with utopias, which sometimes narrate their own construction, dystopias tend to be presented as already in place, and the narration usually follows that of a deconstruction of the existing regime through the actions of a protagonist who is a misfit, somehow skewed [...] in his relation to the operative status quo. (2011: 88)

Seed’s remark holds true for Lee’s dystopia, in which Fan, a sixteen-year old fish-tank diver living in the immigrant labor colony of B-Mor, challenges the taut cohesion of her exemplary community and the cloistered tripartite structure of a futuristic America by setting alone on a journey in search of Reg, her missing boyfriend and the father of her unborn child. If Fan’s journey out of B-Mor and across the lawless “open counties” and the privileged Charter villages registers “the deconstruction of the existing regime,” to reprise Seed’s formulation, it is partly because it straddles three distinct locations whose strict separateness along the lines of class is instrumental to the cohesion of B-Mor identity. Sandwiched between the Charters, who are “untouchably wealthy” (Lee 2014: 106) in their walled villages, and the open counties people, who live “beyond the gates” (Lee 2014: 13) of B-Mor in squalid conditions, the workers of B-Mor, who grow unpolluted resources for the Charters, have learnt to make do with the fact that “there is no leaping of worlds in this world” (Lee 2014: 51) – that is, no possibility for upward mobility – notably by rationalizing their relative privilege through endless comparisons with the open counties people. As the collective *we* of the B-Mor

workers states at the beginning of the text: "simply imaging ourselves existing beyond the gates is enough to induce a swampy tingle in the underarms, a gaining chill in the gut" (Lee 2014: 13).

The suggestion that B-Mors exemplify model – even hyper-model – workers is emphasized in many ways in the text, from their extreme, depersonalizing work ethic – "it's the laboring that gives you shape" (Lee 2014: 5) – through their numb contentment about how well they "fit in the wider ecology" (Lee 2014: 171), to their reliance on, at times addiction to, a monotonous way of life, where "routine is the method, and the reason, and the reward" (Lee 2014: 164). In *Yellow*, Frank H. Wu ironizes on the work of scholars such as Philip E. Vernon who fall back on stereotypes about Asian behavior and list "distinctively Asian" elements that supposedly account for their "educational and occupational success" (2002: 45) – among which "adherence to accepted conventions of social behavior, cohesion [...] with kin and the family ancestors," "loyalty and obedience to the authorities" as well as "the need for hard work in order to gain success and honor the family" (Vernon quoted in Wu, 45). As characterized through the first-person plural narrator, B-Mors significantly tick most of Vernon's boxes, all the more so as Lee's workers live in households made up of several generations and present themselves as "a most practical group" (Lee 2014: 296) that uncritically "abide by directorate regulations" (Lee 2014: 147). If we add that they occupy an in-between position between the *haves* (the Charters) and the *have-nots* (the open counties people) and more importantly, that they are the descendants of migrants from "New China," the scene is set for readers to other B-Mors as stereotypical Asian American model citizens. What is fascinating is that this frame of expectations – which also feeds upon the generalized and somewhat patronizing assumption that writings by minority authors should retain some form of biographical connection with their authors' background of racial and cultural otherness (see Brouillette 2007 for more on this) – gets increasingly problematized by the shifting referentiality of the *we*. As I want to show below, the *we* form of the text gradually comes to challenge the traditional discourse/story Genettian dichotomy, "in ways that defamiliarize perception and provoke readers to reconsider their automatized preconceptions" about the anatomy of the *we*, to return to Marcus' formulation. Recasting the act of reading as one of conflicting and simultaneous identification and dis/identification with the *we* of the text, Lee's strategy of ambiguous referentiality offers a fine instance of those "unanticipated passes" that Doris Sommer sees as being mobilized by minority writers to challenge assumptions of readerly competence, thus causing "even bullish readers" to stop and "ponder the move" (1999: xii).

In keeping with most dystopian novels foregrounding the resistance of one individual to oppressive organizations, issues about the mindless aspects of



close-knit group identity and the very meaning of individuality are raised very early in Lee's novel. In the first pages of the narrative, the *we* narrator presents its community as a group of self-contained workers for whom "there's little else that's more important than having a schedule, and better yet, counting on that schedule" (Lee 2014: 2). Daring those wishing "to shake [the] walls [of B-Mor]" to "come forward," even to bring up "the tale of Fan" (Lee 2014: 2) if they like, the first-person plural narrator first appears to defensively vindicate its communal anatomy by asserting the primacy of the group over the individual, going as far as to challenge the very relevance of the latter category. "We are not drones or robots," the *we* narrator pre-emptively states, "and never will be. The question, then, is whether being an 'individual' makes a difference anymore. That it can matter at all. And if not, whether we in fact care" (Lee 2014: 3). Rooted as it is "*here* in B-Mor" (Lee 2014: 2; emphasis mine), the *we* unambiguously qualifies at that early stage as what narrative theorists such as Fludernik call an "exclusive we" (2011: 114) – namely an [I+ he/she they] group that does not include a *you* or an addressee. The suggestion that *we* narration safely references the workers of B-Mor and excludes an extradiegetic addressee is also emphasized by the fact that the first-person plural narrator self-identifies with descendants of migrants from China (later referred to as New China), which excludes most readers from the lot. As suggested above, in the first chapters of the book, the *we* of Lee's novel accumulates hints that its impeccable work ethic and *esprit de corps* distinguishes its group as composed of model, even hyper-model citizens, which further nudges readers into reading the *we* as a displacement of model-minority collective consciousness. This process of readerly othering is taken to an extreme at the very end of Chapter 2, as the flip side of B-Mors' *esprit de corps* is revealed to be blind allegiance to authority and a generalized abdication of thinking and feeling. At that point, the collective narrator reminisces about how, following on Reg's disappearance and Fan's consequent departure, the relatives of subsequent missing persons took for granted the notifications that the disappeared had been "officially *dispatched*" (Lee 2014: 20; emphasis in original) and refrained from inquiring further about the matter, "simply act[ing] as if their loved one[s] had died" (Lee 2014: 20). The narrative of the sham memorial ceremonies that follow these disappearances – ceremonies during which B-Mors are invited to view non-existent bodies but still don their mourning costumes and "do everything [they]'re supposed to do" (Lee 2014: 20) – adds to the reader's feeling of judgmental distaste towards this parody of model-minority conformism and servility. Paradoxically enough, however, the storytelling of these sham funerals also appears to constitute an implicit acknowledgement that there is something inhumane in refusing to grant any value to the individual, as it triggers some backpedaling on the smug rationalizations first wielded by the *we* narrator to defend group cohe-

sion at all costs by condemning Fan's "lamentable" (Lee 2014: 3) departure from B-Mor. Ironically bringing back notions of selfhood(s) at the very moment when it makes a last-ditch attempt to convince itself that B-Mors have done "the job of becoming their best *selves*" (Lee 2014: 21; emphasis mine), the *we* narrator starts telling "the story of Fan" in the next Chapters – the very story it had challenged outsiders to bring up as an ultimate test-case of the cohesion of its "cloistered" yet "intimate" (Lee 2014: 268) community.

From a narratological point of view, the most striking feature of the *we* segments dealing with Fan's journey is that these segments are told from an ambiguous – perhaps even impossible or unnatural – point of view. Even as it makes it clear that the only document relating to Fan's journey is "the surveillance vid of her exit" (Lee 2014: 186) from B-Mor, the *we* narrator indeed comments on Fan's journeys as she stays in the open counties and in a Charter village called Seneca, both places B-Mors can never hope to visit (save from the very rare few youths from B-Mor who, like Fan's brother Bo Liwei, get promoted to join a Charter village and are consequently "consigned to a status like that of the heroic dead" [Lee 2014: 296] by their peers). It is worth mentioning at that point that Lee's novel might be speculative, it remains that its storyworld is essentially mimetic, causing *The New Yorker* reviewer Joanna Biggs to remark that "at first, the pleasure of Lee's dystopia lies in recognizing contemporary America in the future Association" (2014: para. 2). Which is to say that the only realistic/mimetic possibility for the *we* narrator to tell Fan's journey outside the gates of B-Mor is through imagination, by "building upon what is known" (Lee 2014: 33) – a possibility which, interestingly enough, comes to be simultaneously confirmed *and* denied in the text. In fact, at the same time as the collective narrator acknowledges that "we reshape the story even when we believe we are simply repeating it" (Lee 2014: 186) – that this communal endeavor is "an irrepressible vine whose hold becomes stronger than the originating stock and sometimes even topples it, replacing it together" (Lee 2014: 186) – the *we* narrator still insists that it *knows* the different stages of Fan's journey even if it clearly falls outside its range of experience.

The paradox of claiming to know what could never have been learnt is exacerbated by the fact that, at many points in the text, the *we* narrator asserts a retrospective knowledge of Fan's journey across the Association, apparently oblivious that Fan never returns to B-Mor and consequently could never entrusted her story to anyone there. For instance, as Fan is hit by a car in the open counties and gets transported unconscious to a place referred to as the Smokes, the *we* adds, in true first-person retrospective fashion: "we did not know [where she was headed to] then but of course do now" (Lee 2014: 37). Phrases such as "we now know" (Lee 2014: 114) likewise abound in the text, which places such a *we* at the

crossroads between a third-person narrator and an *I* reminiscing a past experience, in keeping with Richardson's suggestion that *we* narration always threatens to enact "the collapsing of the boundary between the first and the third persons" (2006: 48). Arguably, the many shifts from first-person plural to third-person narration enact such a collapsing, as most Chapters start and close with a *we* segment, yet also feature longer passages told in the third person – passages into which additional *we* segments are inserted, as if the collective *we* of B-Mor workers was always lurking behind the scenes. Because the telling of Fan's journey boils down to a shared mental event which is apparently impervious to real-life parameters, it may be likened to a collective daydream. This daydream may bear witness to the (impossible) telepathic-like connections among the members of the B-Mor community, or even between B-Mors and Fan, who increasingly comes to be celebrated as "our Fan" (Lee 2014: 183) as she gets sold, locked up, then betrayed by different Charters (among whom her "Chartered" brother Bo Liwei), before possibly relocating to the open counties. Interestingly for my purposes, in his study of Hebrew *we* texts, Marcus contends that the motif of the shared dream has become "the paradigmatic case" (2008a: 50) of intimate interpersonal connections created by choice (as between couples) or by coercion (as between prisoners). As Marcus notes, this recurrent feature of *we* texts stands in transgression of Western traditions, according to which the dream is understood to be "a sphere of private consciousness completely inaccessible to others" (2008a: 50). Lee's novel literally exemplifies Marcus' remark as Fan spends her first night in the open counties. At that point, the *we* narrator maintains that Fan and the B-Mor collectivity shared the same dream of being caught in a trap underwater, which suggests a form of enmeshment that nonetheless offers new insights into the parallel plights of the protagonist and that of her community: "[Fan] dreamed hard and vividly, *as we have*, that the thick ropes on which she lay were the fronts of a sea plant that ensnared her as she drifted to the bottom" (Lee 2014: 37; emphasis mine). In a related yet much more realistic way, as Fan escapes the clutches of her "Chartered" brother (who is the head of a company aptly named Assimil) and exits Seneca for good at the very end of the book, the first-person plural narrator puts forwards the hypothesis that "we will have to dream" (Lee 2014: 351) so as to be able to picture Fan's final destination – one that is ascertained not to be B-Mor but is perhaps "much closer than we know" (Lee 2014: 352).

However much Marcus helps reading the co-production of Fan's story as a dream-like or telepathic-like shared mental event that connects not only the community of B-Mors among themselves, but also B-Mors to their new *un*-model-minority heroine, it is worth noting that this interpretation only illuminates some of the ontological ambiguities inherent in the *we* segments of Lee's novel. For

even if most of these segments suggest that the narrative of Fan's journey is, after all, an intersubjective endeavor that generally eschews omniscience (the first-person plural narrator may have access to some of Fan's dreams yet it endlessly speculates about Fan's thoughts, specifically her reasons for leaving B-Mor (cf. Lee 2014: 78, 157)) – it remains that, until the very end of the book, a few passages still point towards the possibility of omniscience, in ways that defy any sense of ontological stability. Consider for instance the passage in which the protagonist escapes the Charter house where she was held captive as a human pet with "the Girls." This is a moment when the *we* comments on the mural drawn by one of the Girls in the wake of Fan's escape by asserting a form of all-embracing knowledge: "That Fan did not see any of [what we see in the mural] is not so ironic, for all along her journey we've *observed* more of her than she'll ever know" (Lee 2014: 255; emphasis mine).

Then again, perhaps placing the onus on readers to find a sense of ontological stability in a world whose coherence is made to resemble an ever-receding horizon may be the whole point of Lee's *we* narration. In that sense, Lee's first-person plural narrator shows some degree of similarity with the *we* in Mda's *Ways of dying*, which legitimizes its all-seeing perspective by virtue of the fact that "the community is the owner of the story" – and what is more, that "it can tell it any way it deems it fit" (1995: 12). What is interesting is that Mda's *we* goes as far as to turn the tables on the reader: "we would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells the story if *you* had not wondered how we became so omniscient" (1995: 12; emphasis mine). This is another point in common with Lee's collective narrator, which – perhaps in a more covert way – ventures that stories have no proprietors, no origins and no endings and that they might have the potential to "place" their readers through the very frames of expectations that they maintain or subvert: "A tale, like the universe [...] expands ceaselessly each time you examine it, until there is finally no telling exactly where it begins, or ends, or *where it places you now*" (Lee 2014: 61; emphasis mine). To pick up my hypothesis that Lee's novel nudges its readers into interpreting the collective voice as a displacement of model-minority collective consciousness before pulling the rug out from under, it is significant that the one thing that B-Mors remember as the initial reason why "Fan captured their imagination" (Lee 2014: 32) is an enigmatic phrase addressed to her community at large during a funeral: "where *you* are" (Lee 2014: 31; emphasis mine).

Marie-Laure Ryan contends that there is an "instinctive reaction to think *me* when we hear *you*" (2001: 138; emphasis in original), so it is perhaps unsurprising that B-Mors return to the enigma of Fan's words and that of her departure again and again, increasingly so as the Charters' fixation on their health and obsession with finding a cure for the "C-illness" triggers a brutally paranoid rejection of B-

Mor products. In fact, the more the sharp decline in the price of fish threatens to expose B-Mor's utter dependency on the dominant class, the more the *we* narrator turns to Fan in imagination, adding to its initial sense that she is "looking after us, perhaps even advising us about something crucial" (Lee 2014: 31). What is interesting is that the economic crisis, which is likened by the *we* narrator to an "existential threat" (Lee 2014:104) for the community, compromises the possibility of seeing a handful of B-Mor youths get "Chartered" (Lee 2014:302) – or is it assimilated? – every year, a point where the *we* narrator gradually appropriates Fan's disorienting deployment of *you* address to further muddy the (ontological) waters. Specifically, if the second person is first used in a diegetic way as a means of expressing the unexpected and uncharacteristic effects that the crisis triggers in B-Mors – ranging from small acts of rebellion, through domestic violence against the elderly, to the odd compulsion that *you* experiences of shaving its head (Lee 2014:229) – the second person also operates, at times, in apostrophic fashion, by encoding the reaction of a *you* who, like B-Mors, yearns for Fan as a means of escaping its condition (cf. Lee 2014: 210, 243). Of course, in addition to unsettling the boundary between the actual and the fictional – a boundary that has been a "cornerstone" of classical narratology, as Marcus reminds us (2008b: 6) – this strategy to forge a rush of intimacy between B-Mors and an extradiegetic addressee constructs the latter as a similarly entrenched and cloistered being – as one of those who, unlike Fan, finds "world enough in a frame" (Lee 2014: 219).

That the rhetoric of address brings about moments of identification which subsequently redefine the boundaries of the *we*-group is nowhere more evident than in the passage in which the first-person narrator comments on "the Girls," a group of seven similarly-looking females who have accustomed themselves to their condition of human pets to such an extent that they cannot conceive of experiences other than their routine. By venturing that "perhaps [...] we B-Mors – and perhaps *your people* too – are merely the Girls writ large" (Lee 2014: 246; emphasis mine), the collective narrator makes it implicit that the referential scope of the *we* might be less B-Mor-specific than initially thought. Superimposing the possibility of *inclusive we* onto the initial assumption of *exclusive we* via "the irresistible invitation" to feel addressed that *you* always extends to the reader (Kacandes 1993: 139), Lee's complex narrative strategy compels readers to backtrack and appropriate tokens of alienation that they had hitherto safely displaced onto (ethnic) others. It is significant in that sense that Lee's first-person plural imposes on the reader an addressee role in a juncture of crisis and recession, a context causing the collective narrator to finally call into question the order of things: "for what are we aiming for, in the end? To be more like Charters? To have built, each of us, some private fortress impenetrable to everyone save a few cousin achievers?" (Lee 2014: 309). As the recession subsides, and the (potentially-

inclusive) *we* robotically returns to “take [its] places at the wheel, or wall, or line, having somewhere forgotten that we can look up” (Lee 2014:219), readers can only sense that *On such a full sea* hits close to home in a contemporary context within which the 2007–2009 Great Recession now feels, like the period of disturbance in *B-Mor*, as if “we just slept though it” (Lee 2014:337).

In conclusion, I would like to point out that while Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the attic* actualizes the destabilizing and transgressive potential of the first-person plural pronoun in order to question the extent to which mainstream Americanness is also framed by amnesia, guilt, and denial – what Toni Morrison calls “the ghost in the machine” (1988: 136) in a different yet related context – Lee’s *we* text also ambiguates the (slippery) distinction between *exclusive we* and *inclusive we* to question the presuppositions majority readers bring to the act of reading. Undoubtedly, both *we* texts end up turning the tables on mainstream readers to problematize received notions about Asian American identity, in ways that validate Marcus’ suggestion that *we* fictional narratives are often “fraught with political significance” (2008b: 15). However, as I hoped to have shown, *On such a full sea* distinguishes itself from *The Buddha in the attic* by the fact that it keeps its readers on their toes as it suggests moments of identification – of inclusiveness – with no ultimate resolution. True though it is that Otsuka’s *we* “stretches the resources of narrative conventions almost to breaking point,” to return to Jobert, the “lessons in listening for surprises” (1999: xi) that Doris Sommer perceives to be constitutive of minority writers’ “rhetoric of particularism” get more easily neutralized (shall I say naturalized?) in *The Buddha in the attic* than in Lee’s novel. Even if Sommer remarks that the “stops signs” utilized by minority writers so as to mark cultural distance have “no rhetorical names” (1999: x), I would like to suggest that unnatural (or contradictory/impossible) modes of telling such as the ones used in Lee’s text may well participate in a “rhetoric of particularism,” in that their “transcend[ing] [of] standard human limitations of knowledge and ability” (Alber et al. 2013: 6) holds readers’ pretense of mastery at arm’s length.

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