Coalitions Across the 'Last Frontier':

Potential for Collective Voice and Community within White Rural Masculinities

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Abstract

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In thinking critically about the use of the plural first person in contemporary fiction, there seems to be a hyper-focus on pronoun usage, and though this is certainly a political decision, there seems to be potential in acknowledging the more varied ways to use 'we' as a pronoun of resistance. Using David Jauss's concept of narrative distance, this paper seeks to explore the nuanced ways embodied perspectives can be manipulated in both Joan Chase's *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* and *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka. By situating both racial and feminine bodies across coalitions of difference (Morris), how can the first-person plural reflect the fracturing and intersectionality of identities? And, considering a white-washed, colonizing version of Alaskan history, one fraught with racial amnesia, what is the potential for anxieties about race, urban, and the feminine, especially in terms of the 'other' (Said)? This essay seeks to ask questions about why might a writer might choose to use the first-person plural perspective, and serves as a defense in considering how craft conversations must necessarily be bound up in issues of inequity, historical amnesia, and white set-tler-colonial legacies in the 'Last Frontier.'

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"ALASKA: Where women are men, the men are animals, and the animals are scared."

—a misheard/misquoted/appropriated /common saying in Alaskan communities

(particularly white ones)

Setting out to write a novel, (a novel? I whispered to myself, shrugging) I tried to hide from the idea that this could be a longer, long-term-committed relationship with no one other than myself, and initially, impulsively wrote a short story instead, a story about a commercial-fishing community in Alaska, one banded together by family ties and held together through loyalty and reserved and codified silence. I thought I could get away with writing a short story from the perspective of no less than "maybe 20-30?" perspectives, and I didn't want to label or name them, because labels or names weren't as important as their sometimes-not-distinct voices. It seemed important that they might borrow language from each other, believe the same things, feel the same ways about the events they were witnessing, especially since they spent ninety days at sea all together. In my experi-

ence, this kind of closeness (sleeping three feet from each other, eating together, working together, knowing far too much about each other's habits, character, values, and ideologies within an extended period of three months) is far too complicated to write about. I hoped to simplify it.

My solution was a roving first-person, in fragmented sections, told from many areas in the cove where the fishing accident took place. When workshop told me, no, this still wasn't working, they were still guessing at who each voice was, I thought: ah! I'll make it shorter! I was trying to find an easy solution to the problem of group identity without actually knowing my problem. What is my problem? Who they are as individuals doesn't matter, I kept insisting, and yet here I have them each writing (or speaking) their own individual sections, in voices that blend too closely together. It was important to me that, although they certainly all had individual lives, memories, and experiences, they were continually borrowing from each other: mannerisms, habits, ways of speaking, and ways of thinking, including memories, especially collective memory.

When I finally admitted to myself that this story was, indeed, novel-length, I still fought the idea of a complete and utter first-person-plural, or collective. I wanted to give my reader space, room to breathe. An earlier draft took on an alternating form: the collective first, then a close-to-distant third-person focused on the young female captain who causes the accident.

This meant the book, while only half-focused on the community of deckhands, also half-focused on the family. It gave voice to the captains, who had been my first 'them'—the direct opposite of the 'we.' I kept privileging the specific voices I didn't want speaking: namely, the performative, toxically-masculine voices that were dominant and violent within the commercial fishing community, and one especially prevalent in Alaska. In an attempt to quiet the voices I found so loud, I wanted to instead privilege the chorus of deckhands who are often replaceable labor and rarely become distinguished between one another, especially by the men that hire them. But in the end, this story is about women—and their voices, in the often-shifting and fracturing 'we' voice, must come to the forefront. This story is about women's survival, but even more so: this has everything to do with

Alaskans tendency towards nostalgia, our group identity that insists we are both unique and part of a special group.

What this meant in a novel, rather than in a short story, is that I had to directly address the many ways that the voice becomes fractured, nuanced, and the way it might take on voices of others. Early on in the novel, I try to establish the idea that the deckhands "mirror" their captains, that they adopt the ideologies as their equal and opposite shadows: that sometimes, the deckhands can't tell themselves from the others, and even worse, the 'they' gets subsumed within the 'we' sometimes (or, perhaps it's the other way around.) In the end, I cut half of the book in order to focus more clearly on the community: I changed the accident completely, cut the sections in third person, and instead use the idea of narrative distance to get closer and farther away from individual perspectives within closer dramatic arcs. There are no chapters, anymore. Rather than give the reader what I thought was necessary breathing room, I've decided: I don't want the reader to have any breaks. I want this to be in tension, taut—all throughout this short novel. More than anything, I want this project to be about anxiety: whiteness, maleness, ruralness. Subsumed beneath the 'we' is the threat of all the subsequent masculinities that might be possible outside of a dominant masculine narrative.

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In this paper, I first want to examine the existing literature on first-person plural collective 'we,' particularly examining why certain authors might use it, before examining why, specifically, women writers might use it. Amit Marcus's careful scholarship on the semantic fluidity of pronoun usage will help solidify the existing troubles audiences generally have with reading a plural-first. Using David Jauss's "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction Writing" as a lens to examine exemplary first-person works written by women, I will closely analyze the moments

in which we are closest to our narrators or, as I will claim, embodied or in-body of individual characters. When does the 'we' break down, shift, or fracture? Why?

By first examining the ways in which other exemplary collective first-person books use narrative distance to get closer and further away from individual, embodied perspectives, and by then exploring how an Alaskan "frontier masculinity" culture might complicate an individual's relationship to wilderness through community, I hope, in many ways, this paper might serve as a 'defense' of sorts: why I feel compelled to write between the 'we' against an 'I.' This will require a thorough understanding, both personal and critical, of the culture I examine, and more specifically, the ideologies and myths and place-making narratives that continually reshape selves, specifically the characters subsumed within a group identity.

In *What The Sea Will Take*, I utilize narrative distance to put the reader in tension throughout the book: when are we together, and when are we individual? When are we guilty, and how do we absolve, together—and individually? The splitting off and zooming in (and all other verbs for magnification) with individual characters' bodies reflects the direct tension settler-Alaskans experience while in tension with the land they stole. For any white Alaskan, there exists a complicated and fraught relationship between national identity and statehood mythologies, between self and other. Nostalgia and reality clash, as do community and individual. Reader: pay close attention. The distance is no accident.

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The Chorus of ancient Greek theatre's collective voice distinguished itself using elaborate language and syntax, varying their voice, often representing the views of their society—carrying certain moral and cultural standards. Their specific role was practical (first to distract or entertain the audience while the singular actor ran backstage to change) but also used as a specific rhetorical de-

vice (creating a more meaningful connection with the audience, even controlling their reactions, building up momentum or slowing other moments). New York Times' writer Laura Miller claims that the ancient Greek drama is "the root of our novel," and that one might claim "the history of Western literature so far has been a journey from the first-person plural to the first-person singular, the signature voice of our time." She also notes, accurately, that the solitary first-person narrator is the choice of most contemporary novelists—the ones she cites mostly male, mostly white.

Tara Nesbit holds that "Many contemporary first-person plural novels give voice to the previously overlooked," to render visible those groups of people who may have been made invisible in the fabric of American mainstream society, especially in literature. She posits that "In first-person plural fiction, indicated characters can dissolve into the background, as our relationships and responsibilities to our fellow humans are foregrounded." As Miller explains, "For male writers, the collective narrator is most often on the outside trying to peep in—usually at a woman or women—but female writers speak from the center of the mystery." In *The Virgin Suicides*, perhaps the most famous example of the collective 'we' narration, Jeffrey Eugenides perfectly encapsulates the obsessive and objectifying nature of the young men in the community, as the male gaze lands on the young women. Miller explains that "the communal inclinations of women, though often praised, are riddled with ambivalence, and that makes the first-person plural a particularly fraught choice for women writers." This seems true to me, though Miller never explains why this choice might be "fraught" or why it is necessarily ambivalent for women writers especially. I hope to answer this question throughout my paper, though I hope to extend this beyond just 'women writers'—who else might use the 'we' to talk back against a hegemonic male dominant narrative? And what other tools of resistance might be available?

Although it isn't, a first-person plural narrative still feels rare: we could count on two hands the contemporary novels that tell from a collective 'we' perspective, authors like Jeffrey Eugenides, Joan Chase, Joshua Ferris, Joyce Carol Oates, Julie Otsuka, and Chang-Rae Lee. Perhaps this per-

spective is easier to sustain in shorter works—many popular authors have written at least one short story told from a plural first-person.

'We' plagues academic writing as a rhetorical nod to collaboration and collective thinking, even if false. Even our constitution begins: "We the people of the United States…" But perhaps this is exactly the problem of the assumption of the plural 'we'—American 'inclusivity' was hollow and shallow, birthed instead on colonial violence, genocide, slavery, and land theft. "We the people…" indicated who exactly, this We stood for: the white men signing the document. Recently, Claudia Rankine showed us in her book *Citizen* the ways in which a second-person point-of-view might reimagine black subjectivities as a pronoun of resistance. The collection of 'you' voices of seemingly innocuous anecdotes becomes more and more overwhelming—we recognize what, perhaps, it might be to live in a black body. As we are finally and continually coming to terms with the ways our "collective American" identity has been formed through violent exclusion and assimilation, it makes sense that "the desire to examine other Americas… beyond a perceived 'mainstream,' authoritarian, privileged version of national history—may have compelled writers to offer their own American 'we': an alternative 'one' out of the 'many.'" (Maxey, 12). It seems, then, that the collective first-person might offer its own potential sites of resistance, a talking-back against dominant discourses.

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What dominant discourses exist within Alaska? In "'The 'Real Alaskan': Nostalgia and Rural Masculinity in 'The Last Frontier,'" Maureen P. Hogan and Timothy Pursell attempt to deconstruct an Alaskan subjectivity "through the twin analytical lenses of ruralness and nostalgia" (63), first by examining a rural hegemonic masculinity "rooted in power and control over landscape and, distressingly, Native peoples—particularly women" (64) and then by breaking down the historical and con-

temporary relationship settler-Alaskans have with "wilderness." They ask, "How is masculinity constructed in Alaska? Where do these narratives of masculinity come from?"

Perhaps obviously, they come from understanding a past history to the land. Like any colonizer, I grew up knowing very little about the land I grew up on: yes, I knew of the hills and valleys, I knew the genus species and phylum names, and I knew about the body of water and mountains jutting out across our small bay. But no one in Alaska talks about this: whose land was this first? The fact that my community knows almost nothing collectively, other than that the community started with homesteaders, proves the historical amnesia that plagues colonized land and, more critically, colonized people.

Before kicking off this research, I was certainly in the dark about the relationship white American Alaskans have to their landscape-home. One of nostalgia, certainly. One of romanticization. My initial troubled relationship to this romanticization boiled down to looking at literature written by outsiders about Alaska: London, Krakaur, exploration stories of heroes. My relationship with my home was no different from others: fraught, complex, misunderstood. But as I began to unpack this romanticization, I realized that it wasn't just women missing from these narratives. What has been missing is a cold, hard look at Alaskan mythology, especially as rooted in dominant, frontier-settler stories of toxic, violent masculinity.

Hogan and Pursell are intricately invested in unpacking Alaskan mythologies of place: first through understanding a history of Alaskan conquest, and second through the pervading and changing world of the 21st century. First, though, we must understand the anxieties of dominant masculinity. "The masculine," they explain, "is always plural. As a set of social performances and practices, multiple masculinities arise in various cultural, social, and geographic contexts and at different historical moments." What matters is that changes in political economy, social movements, national idealism—all of these destabilize "what it means to be masculine over the decades." And thus, they

explain, "masculiniites are subject to negotiation and definition." Most importantly, perhaps, is the acknowledgement that although masculinities change, adapt, and are continually re-evolving, Hogan and Pursell explain that "not all masculinities are created equal. Some are systematically 'otherized' as less desirable (ethnic masculinities, working-class…queer, and feminine masculinities) while one become the cultural ideal or hegemonic masculinity." This process of negotiating a dominant masculinity is hidden, buried, and reinforced through individuals and institutions. "Through public consent," they explain, "hegemonic masculinity, the dominant masculinity of a culture, is taken up as 'common sense,'" or—what is known (66). And this dominant masculinity is continually performed and renegotiated in real, lived, communities around the state.

Peter L. Bayers explains, "During the Progressive Era, many white middle- and upper-middle-class males believed modern civilization was suffocating the rugged, masculine virtues exemplified by the virility of the frontiersman" (18). He explores how anxieties surfaced regarding "what they saw as the increasingly feminized version of masculinity—a threat some though would undermine the very values that sustained national identity" (18). By examining early texts, particularly those in the West and in Alaska, Bayers unpacks the ways these anxieties work through narrative retellings of exploitation and exploration. What feels most poignant to me in his book are the ways he carefully details Alaska not as an escape from, but as an extension of, national values regarding masculine identity: "The Far North functioned as a site of white flight, a new frontier where Anglo Saxon males could reenact conquest and reclaim their manliness" (24). In thorough detail, Bayers explains how male explorer's relationships specifically to mountains (and, by proxy, "wilderness") had everything to do with domination—which of course, by extension, also meant dominating the men, women, and children already living on that land.

Bayers explains that these narratives "foreground how visible and problematic Alaska Natives were to the white imagination and on the fact that the "heroic act" of conservation was also a

response to the threat Alaskan Natives posed to conceptions of frontier masculinity" (24). He goes on, "Alaska Natives did not just roll over to accommodate that culture," and found many sites of resistance against conquest that often go unremarked or subsumed under accounts made historical by the dominating culture. Bayers concludes that "although the frontier hero identifies with the attributes of the Indian, however, he is always conscious of his supposed racial superiority over the supposedly racially inferior Indian" (30), but the anxiety of understanding his place within the frontier are told through stories, or fantasies, which are "periodically disrupted by his memory of the present of "real" Alaska Natives who challenge the security of Progressive-Era masculinity and its idealized image of Alaska" (55). In other words, "To preserve the boundaries threatened by the reality of Alaska Natives and thus preserve the security of the white imagination," the stereotyping, erasure, and continued violence against Native peoples of Alaska have all contributed to the fraught positioning, and more importantly, the way white Alaskans understand themselves. This is a continual renegotiation, reflective of these very anxieties, that I like to call: Who is the real Alaskan? If it isn't the Alaskan Native, who is it? This original anxiety breeds and bleeds into other anxieties over originality, authenticity, and insider-outsider negotiation.

WHITE ANXIETY, URBAN ANXIETY

Bayers, in his consistent deconstruction of imperial ascent texts, notes that through these 'heroes' "…insistence that it is 'white man's country, 'the ghost of the Indian as the object of genocidal violence has returned inevitably to haunt'" (54) not only the landscapes, but the narratives told about them. Of course, this haunting marks the collective amnesia out of which a nation might

arise, "…by emphatically naming the country 'white"' the narratives become "anxiety-ridden, hoping to prevent the historical 'red' Alaska Native hovering in the recesses of his imagination from resurfacing to threaten his cherished fantasy of white frontier masculinity." (55) If the first encoded anxiety for white frontier masculinity is race (the Alaska Native 'othered,' subsumed, and erased from narratives about landscape), it's worth noting that those erased will inevitably come back to haunt any given text through constant renegotiation, more specifically, through performance of hegemonic, white, heterosexual masculinities. We might even examine a text solely for the anxieties it buries, ignores, and constantly performs. What other anxieties surface through these hauntings?

One thing that especially stood out to me about Hogan and Pursell's research is that they mention how historical and literary narratives of Alaska (London, Service, etc.), especially focused on the gold rush. They mention that Alaskan literature actually conflates "Canadian experiences with those actually tied to an Alaskan landscape," claiming that "the border is largely erased as the entire Arctic becomes conflated with Alaskan-ness" (77). A border is, of course, an artificial construct, but bringing in Canadian subjectivities to then examine Alaska in terms of both American and Arctic might help whittle down a new goal for a new Alaskan aesthetic in narrative and storytelling tradition.

In Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, she humorously explains: "I'd like to begin with a sweeping generalization and argue that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core." The symbol, she explains, "functions like a system of beliefs….which holds the country together." She hones in on a key difference between American literature symbolism and Canadian literature, postulating that "possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded…a line is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" ever-fresh virgin territory…" She takes this farther to state, "Most twentieth century American literature is about the gap between the promise and the actuality" (26).

The central symbol for Canada, on the other hand, is Survival. "For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of 'hostile' elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster…"(27), she holds. Atwood suggests that within Canadian literature there is, nearly always, an undercurrent of "almost intolerable anxiety" surrounding his survival. She explains, "Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival" (28). She explains that "sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle… It may even be life itself he fears" (28). She goes on to explain that this is, perhaps, the ultimate Canadian aesthetic—Canadian gloom will choose "tree as what falls on your head" over "tree as a symbol of growth" almost every time. Anxiety, it seems, will thread through every undercurrent of every text, especially those dealing directly with wilderness.

Crucially, hegemonic masculinity is socially constructed and a highly symbolic process, regarded by negotiations between all genders and complicated by intersections of race, gender, and social class. Hogan and Pursell write, "It is a fantasy but one with real discourses, practices, embodiments, and materiality attached to its pursuit" (66-67). In "Survival Narratives: Constructing an Intersectional Masculinity through Stories of the Rural/Urban Divide," Braden Leap explores how stories, specifically narratives men tell other men, reveal particular anxieties regarding rural masculinities. "By telling stories men effectively built, policed the boundaries of, and at least partially obtained what they consider to be an ideal: white, working to middle class, heterosexual masculinity that was supposedly particular to and characteristic of rural men" (13). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Leap's research encoded that although there are multiple masculinities, "dominant masculinity is practiced and/or celebrated by a majority of men and women in a particular contest, while subordinated masculinities…because of race, class, and/or sexuality" do not conform to the dominant ideal (13). The stories the men in Missouri (in Leap's research) told each other often pitted themselves against urban

men, as effeminate, strange, or dangerous—and each story still made out the white rural man as the rational, hard-working, good rural man. Leap explains "the tough guy, rebellious masculinity often espoused by men… was dominant and afforded them respect on the local level, but it also facilitated their subordination at the regional level because this masculinity made it harder for them to get jobs in the regional economy," something they saw as a threat to none other, of course, but their own masculinity—they couldn't provide, facing "downward economic pressures," which "complicated their abilities to construct respectable masculinities" (13). This feels in line with what we might from now on call a local-versus-national anxiety, one rooted in the ability to provide for one's family as the world changes course from a working-class or more industrial-driven economy to one global, technological, and urban.

Hogan and Pursell, too, explain that the threat to the rural masculine might not necessarily be the feminine, but that it may be the urban (68). They explore that "locally constructed masculinities must compete with the hegemonic masculinity of the larger culture," (68), namely: Alaskan and its connection to national consciousness. This is a particular anxiety prone to Alaskans: they are constantly negotiated the ironic space between "inside-outside discourse," as Hogan and Pursell explain that "…any place outside Alaska is referred to as Outside" and "implicit discourse contrasts outsiders with newcomers and real Alaskans" (71-72). In many ways, returning to Atwood, Alaska represents the bridge between both Survival and the Frontier—that the Frontier is something you survive, that inexorable anxiety blossoms from surviving something unknown. But Alaska isn't necessarily wild anymore, if it ever was, and wilderness is a dangerous construct—it represents a particular type of nostalgia built into settler-Alaskans in particular, a nostalgia that is often performed, encoded, and continually re-negotiated as global change and a global economy grip the anxieties of encroaching consumer culture for those escaping something.

Economic anxieties, bound up in racial anxieties, also inexorably tie both back to the landscape, and back to the feminine. The frontier hero insists that nature is both wild and consistently

dominated, that it is both untamable and tamed—by he. This positioning, of course, is impossible. He can't have it both ways: the wild can't be wild and tameable-by-I. The teetering between wild and made-tame reveals that anxieties about man's positioning within a landscape he doesn't understand. A reoccurring trope in nearly all frontier narratives is that initially, the lone frontier hero finds solace, freedom, and liberation from a society he deems threatening to his selfhood.

This freedom ideal had everything to do with the national narrative of colonial nostalgia. Hogan and Pursell note that "many people are drawn to Alaska because it allows them to liberate themselves from something else" (75), but freedom from what? Sex? Gender roles? Rather than creating a new script of utopian or socialist freedom (from such strict masculinities of 'the old world,') Alaskan ideologies went in the way or reclaiming traditional frontier freedoms. It was a freedom of nostalgia, of "getting back to something," whatever that means. Hogan and Pursell also recall that, "nostalgia is rarely about the past as actual experience, but rather (it is about) an imagined past romanticized through memory and desire and, as such, is really more about the deficient present" (69). They explain that in Alaska, "the histories of the frontier and white frontier settlement are elided with the extreme climate and distinctive landscapes…to provide a rich stage for nostalgic references that may serve… to assert gender norms based on supposedly historical relationships with the land and its history" (69). This relationship is hierarchical, and one of dominance, and what is subsumed is often the feminine, the urban, and the Native. In other words, "…this version of nature state nostalgia is primarily coded as masculine and privileges the representation, performance, and embodiment of a stereotypical rural male who can master and control nature in the wild frontier." As far as haunting goes, this masculinity is always rife with anxiety, as it "has either already been lost, is under threat, or is in need of recovery" (Hogan 71). The nostalgia is the recovery, and "since nostalgic imagery is consistently shaped in terms of positive experiences (even in terms of 'things were so much tougher back then'), it can serve to downplay or even erase unresolved traumas from the past as well as complicate current and future environmental, economic, and social problems" (Hogan 70).

What feels most urgent about understanding past Alaskan narratives is that, put simply, Alaskans participate in this consistent negotiation of self-within-wilderness, not only for their own self-building, but for outsiders: for tourists, and for economic safety in an extract-driven economy. Hogan and Pursell explain that "Alaskans *ourselves* are in many ways complicit with these dominant narratives even in the face of multiple, conflicted, and hybridized everyday ones. That is, the nature state narratives are intimately and intrinsically interpenetrated with our own identity constructions as real Alaskans, rugged individualists ready to battle nature" (71). We must maintain this version of "nature state nostalgia," one that is primarily a dominant masculine narrative, in order to maintain our sense of self (and selves). When we think about narrative, and anxieties, "the stories we tell ourselves locally about living in and experiencing Alaska as home exist in tension with and are constructed in discursive relation to mass media capitalism and by extension, a national identity" (Hogan 71), which is exactly why I want to think so critically about individualism versus communal voice in Alaskan contemporary fiction.

WE: A FRAUGHT PLACE-MAKING

Mythologies, nostalgia, and cultures of place haunt all writing, but especially the rural or the isolated. To me, this is the potential of the 'we' voice: to not just reflect the group dynamic or ideology, but to call attention to the ways individuals within this community perform loyalty, fracture and shatter, collaborate, and most especially, negotiate their own anxieties of selfhood within isolated communities dependent on each other for survival. What scripts do we follow within such tight-knit, ideologically-bound, but especially isolated communities? When does the 'I' subsume itself within the 'we,' and when does it renegotiate its individuality?

When people write craft essays about the communal first person perspective, they immediately limit the potential of understanding deeper political choices by discussing just the pronoun. Nesbit, Miller, and others have done great work discussing how the pronoun might affect our understanding of Americanness and individualism, especially in narratives about erasure, like in *Buddha in the Attic,* by Julie Otsuka. It's worth noting how the pronoun 'we' destablizes our understanding of certain bodies, particular bodies coded as racially othered (read: not white).

But perhaps even this isn't the right approach. Yes—the 'we' fractures, it reveals slippery natures of truth and loyalty, our communal bonds over individual ones. It also reveals a false binary between groups of people—inevitably creating an 'us' and a 'them,' a useful nod in fiction to inclusion, insider-communities, and who is considered an outsider.

But as David Jauss points out in his essay, "From Long-Shorts to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction," "the techniques that truly constitute point of view are inevitably multiple and shifting." He claims that, rather than examining simple pronouns and pronoun shifts, "point of view is more a matter of where the language is coming from than it is of person." He claims that the subtle shifting of perspective is narrative distance, not point of view, and this shifting can and should be manipulated by the author for a desired effect (either moral, emotional, or intellectual) and response of the reader. In many ways, to examine narrative distance we must first look at bodies: whose body are we in? Are we behind them, are we looking at them, or are we in them? This approach to point-of-view, at once holistic and much more micro, will be paramount to examining the ways in which narrative distance shifts in first-person-plural novels. The 'we' is unstable, but it also follows the same rules of closer and farther that Jauss details. Whose bodies are we in? Can we be in multiple at once? How do the boundaries between individual bodies blend? Using Jauss, I'll examine two novels by asking the following questions: How do these authors maintain control of sometimes-troubling and unstable pronouns? When, and why might, these authors choose certain shifts in distance to control the reader's response? And to what effect?

Amit Marcus shows the ethical culpabilities inherent in the plural 'we.' Similarly to Jauss, he believes this is a conception of consciousness, not pronouns. He first explains that all texts are "contextually bounded," citing Roland Barthes' exploration of the birth of an impersonal third-person perspective as an attempt to naturalize an entire class and race, to make bourgeois ideology seem irrefutable. Adelaide Morris discusses how, for female writers, a shift from "she" to "I" actually "enacts the crucial feminist shift" which allowed women writers to experience themselves as subjects, rather than objects (13). Marcus explains that "Western social philosophers are divided into individualists…and holists," though both "refuse to accept the personification of social groups" (49). By contrast, "in certain non-Western cultures…the idea of a separate consciousness is perceived as a fatal error…since it threatens the solidarity and cohesiveness of the community" (50). Unsurprisingly, we are culturally bound to our own subjectivities. It seems fair to conclude that, as a Western culture and a distinctly individualistic American culture, it makes sense that we are impartial to an individual's voice, not a collective one. We want to believe we are unique, and yet. It seems that if we want to understand what, particularly, makes us unique—we must first understand the collection of institutional, national, and personal forces that cause and rupture our multiple senses of self. We must also understand our relationships to place and land, which for a particular Alaskan relationship, feels linked irrefutably to sense of self.

Wisely, Marcus addresses the danger of writing as representative of an entire group. He posits that "the first person plural displays growing discontent with the established ideology and disillusionment with the myth(s)" of any given community. When done successfully, this choice must show "awareness of conflicts between the individual will and the achievement of collective goals" rather than simply "foster first-person plural narration that celebrates collective identity" (60). In other words, using the 'we' perspective should reveal an insidiousness about collective identity, allow us to call out the forces that shape and shatter the self. It must be used carefully and intentionally—

and it has potential to mimic content through form, showing a structure through enacting the experience on the reader.

Both Marcus and Jauss will be useful in unpacking the careful and line-by-line shifts of the 'we' perspective in *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* by Joan Chase and *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka. By using Jauss's essay on narrative distance as a formative text to move away from simplistically looking at pronouns, and by using Marcus to show the ethical culpabilities inherent in the plural 'we,' I hope to offer a new way to examine the plural first-person through specific narrative moves of distance, in order to show where and most especially why we are closer or further from specific characters. I'll examine when blurs between bodies indicate a dissolve between individual characters (or groups of characters), between reader and writer, and most especially between the self and the othered. In what Morris calls "coalitions" of surviving bodies in face of violence, I'll then unpack my own understanding of an Alaskan mythology, one that acknowledges our own complicity and fraught-ness of existing between two conflicting renegotiating of the self: the individual, and the collective community at large. Both, perhaps, are necessary to survival, especially for an identity so tied to nostalgia and romanticization of a white-washed history.

ON PRONOUN AMBIGUITY

Carefully studying pronouns in literature can be most revealing. In a 2003 study published in the Annual Review of Psychology, researchers found "that during a shared crisis, people come together. Several studies have demonstrated that after a large-scale trauma individuals drop in their use of the word 'I' and increase in their use of 'we'" (Pennebaker 565). Pronouns, like prepositions, are syntactically ambiguous: they require a shared frame of reference, as well as an understanding "of the relative, real, or symbolic location" (570) of the speaker, or narrator. In other words, there must

already be a developed collective agreement between characters, and perhaps more importantly, between reader and writer.

Adelaide Morris explains that "…pronouns, like all narrative strategies, carry out the tasks Jane Tompkins has termed 'cultural work.'" She aptly explores the importance of pronoun usage, claiming that the "pronouns we select to stand in for us both respond to and shape our position in the social order: they react to specific historical pressures; they articulate problems and propose solutions; they summon others toward us or shove them away" (11). It is Maxey who explores how the collective 'we' can actually dissolve the wall between character and reader, implicating "the reader as addressee." She says "'We' is, like the pronoun 'you,' flexible and ambiguous" (1). Perhaps more importantly, she also explores what the collective voice has the potential to do, saying that the 'we' voice "can suggest any kind of collectivity: gendered, generational, racialized, religious, ideological, social, national. Thus, the choice of a particular personal pronoun is inherently political" (1).

In "We Are You: The Plural and the Dual in 'We' Fictional Narratives," Amit Marcus examines this semantic fluidity. He quickly distinguishes between dual (two voices) and plural (three or more), and holds that plural first person always proves more difficult. He claims that the collective first person is automatically "a hybrid form," that the pronoun 'we' is, by definition, "the combination of an 'I' with a second-person or a third-person (singular or plural)" (1). Because "everyday language tends to conceal this instability," (2) there is potential for fictional narratives to accentuate it, "highlighting the relationship of the individual 'I' to the 'we' group." (2). Pronouns never refer to a fixed object, and so even the 'you' and 'I' remains contextually fixed, with multiple and shifting definitions throughout a given narrative. This ambiguity has a lot to offer, since "one speaker (may speak) on behalf of others whose identity remains vague," often shifting responsibility, blame, or guilt. Marcus says that "some fictional narratives use a combination" of these shifting ambiguities "to subvert the initial dichotomy between a certain group of people…in order to linger on the features that construct the identity of the 'we' community," thereby which "frequently demonstrating

the instability of this community" (3). My examples below perform this, and more.

In these two novels, there are direct and distinct nods to not only the fracturing of the communities into subgroups but explicit explorations of what it means to be under the same emotional state, critiquing the danger of collective ideology. Often, the authors focus on action and dialog rather than interiority or flashback. All three novels shift the 'us' and 'them,' but they prepare readers for this shift. Marcus explains that when this voice fragments, "these 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 are subsumed under it, what types of qualities they share… (and) what separates the 'we' group from other groups, to what extent the properties of one group overlap with those of another…" (3). The tightest group of plural narrators are those of *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia*, in which two sets of sisters, cousins, are collectively narrating their coming-of-age on a rural Ohio farm. On the other end, *The Buddha in the Attic* envelops an entire generation of Japanese-American women as mail order brides who come to America, and are eventually sent away to concentration camps during WWII. By examining these seemingly-opposite uses of the plural first person, I hope to explore how narrative shifts might be employed to indicate political iterations of self-building.

Marcus explains that "the larger the 'we' group is, the more difficult it is reliably to detect the mental states of each separate member. One of the implications of this difference is that a personalized narrator who claims to know the thoughts and beliefs of a large group of people is more prone to unreliability than a personalized narrator who asserts knowledge of the thoughts and beliefs of just one other person" (14). There's a danger to this choice, though. "Within a plural 'we,' each individual (including the narrator) is conceived as replaceable in principle and unimportant in him- or herself" (15) which feels especially true in *The Buddha in the Attic*, which refuses to pin down specific characters for readers to get attached to. *During the Reign* purposefully centralizes women, and instead

peripheralizes male characters. No doubt that this takes work as a reader—but the real danger is that, then, these characters are just generalized, that they are nameless and faceless and, most especially—disposable. In two books written by women about peripheral or marginal women, this is a calculated risk that must carefully control the distance between character and reader. When the action of the telling requires such collaboration, showing those disagreements in the telling helps fracture, making the reporting unbelievable and so, somehow, more believable. In the shifting perspective of *Buddha in the Attic*, "the plural 'we' may assist the narrator in avoiding his or her personal responsibility" (Marcus 5) and, through careful rhetorical moves, an author might actually mimic the content of the stories through the form—making the collective voice dubious, or able to be erased.

In plural-first-person novels, patterns begin to emerge. Maxey explains that collective 'we' novels "are often relatively brief. They deploy pronomial shifts—with "I" almost always absent—and polyphony; they are often recursive in structure; and they face a particular challenge in how to conclude" (11). She explains that a 'we' voice is "unreliable, with its experimentalism and relative unusualness drawing attention to its metafictional qualities and calling into question any claims to truth" (11). But more importantly, "'We' is both universal and highly specific, temporally and spatially. It is both the voice of established authority and of radicalism and it also relates to a more generalized need to render visible people and communities which have suffered invisibility or marginalization…America as a white, male, heterosexual domain is reclaimed and remade. In mobilizing a communal voice, a fictionalized community can gain in strength. But that show of power often hides a more precarious sense of status and belonging" (Morris 11).

DURING THE REIGN

I start with Joan Chase's 1983 novel not only because the collective plural is tightly con-

trolled by the perspective of four young girls, but because it was one of the first novels of its kind—before, even, *The Virgin Suicides* made debut as inarguably the most famous example of collective first-person. *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia*, actually, starts out far outside the bodies of any characters, and in a move that feels emblematic of Chase's writing style, our first introduction to the 'we' voice is wedged in the middle of a paragraph in the middle of the second page with, "When we lived there…" and then again, we move away—getting a birds-eye view of the farm and the characters within it. Chase explains, "There were the four of us then, two his own daughters, two his nieces, all of us born within two years of each other. Uncle Dan treated the four of us the very same and sometimes we thought we were the same—same blood, same rights of inheritance" (2).

Chase aptly fragments the timeline of the narrative, as most of these hybrid forms are interested in exploring cause and effect within small communities, especially over time. For example in this first section, they explain, "Those years two of us, Uncle Dan's nieces, daughters of Gram's dead daughter, Grace, ate an early dinner with Gram…" (7), when the 'we' becomes dual—Celia and Jenny have dinner with their parents (always Uncle Dan and Aunt Libby), but then it recombines whenever the girls are back together. Grace is already dead in this first section, but the following sections follow her slow and eventual decline. In many ways, this move proves that the story is not actually about her death or her decline—that is not the suspense of the piece.

The first section, titled just "Celia" helps us see one of the girls much more clearly than the others. Perhaps it is more useful to discuss how the plural first-person fractures and recombines, molding back together like clay, unbaked—but it feels useful to first explore why Chase might have put this particular section first. Celia is, in many ways, marked: she's the oldest and so the first to develop, and so the first to be served and to serve herself up to men. Chase writes, "Celia's change separated her from the rest of us. She seemed indifferent, didn't need us anymore. We fell back, a little in awe… But it was no use, that desire; we could not reach her, or be content without her. So we watched her life ravenously while waiting for her to make some slip. But increasingly from afar,

as though we were only strangers from the town. Outsiders." (10). Celia's relationships are examined and critiqued by the other girls, who in turn objectify and at the same time want to be her. Perhaps this choice early on suggests to readers that in this hyper-masculine world, upon womanhood, the body become individual and so therefore objectified, even by and especially by other women. Celia grows increasingly aware of the power of her body over men and boys, and the other girls watch, a bit horrified and certainly desiring that "power." In one scene, the girls watch through the window at the shadows of Celia and her boyfriend, Corley, while they eat ice cream: "At first we could scarcely make them out where they were on the floor, bound in one shape"—suggesting, perhaps, that once the group has cast out (purposefully or not) a body, that body becomes objectified and othered, but in that othering has now coupled with another, making a new 'we'— "We licked our ice cream and carefully, silently dissolved the cones, tasting nothing as it melted away down inside us. Tasting instead Corley's mouth on ours, its burning wild lathering sweetness" (17). This is Chase's big trick: we are in the bodies of the girls, a close direct interior monologue, according to Jauss, when suddenly—all distance between characters have dissolved, and we are in multiple bodies at once. There are no boundaries, which is likely why so many authors have called the first-person plural "uncanny." The girls pine, "just then we felt we had everything that Celia had, through her" (30).

Perhaps more important than our identification with Celia is our dis-identification with her. Early on, Chase establishes that although this is told from the perspective of the girls, the story is really about ancestry and the lives of girls and women in the wake of unspeakable violence. Often, the 'we' also includes their mothers, or aunts, and these are moments necessary to survival. For example, Aunt Libby tells the girls a story of when a husband came home late from drinking, explaining "Only this time he caught her and took hold of her and held her hand against the lantern globe until the flesh just melted. I remember seeing the mark of it when I was little.' The mark of a man. Our own flesh burned" (19). This passage exemplifies the moving not only through time and space but across the boundaries of body. This story is told about a cousin, a name we don't recognize, but

we mix up stories of the girls' grandparents and their parents and, in many ways, what their own futures will be—not just exploring but enacting the cycles of trauma through formal choices of perspective. Aunt Libby tells the story, and the girls, thirsty for anything juicy, phrase their shock in an obliquely sexual way—'our own flesh burned.' Through this careful phrasing and shifting, we are completely dislodged: who is speaker and who is listener when all these experiences live in bodies as trauma and are passed through genetic and domestic space? Is love, then, forever and always tied to violence, in past and in present and in future?

In the end, Celia becomes a fallen woman—she is scorned in love, returns home, marries her second or third "choice," and develops "a persistent allergy to pollens and grasses" and her blue eyes "lost a portion of sight, were streaked with irritated vessels that accentuated the paleness of her skin…" (47). Not shockingly, the 'power' she thought she had over men was extractable, an non-renewable resource: tied to her beauty, and so, easy to lose. Her story is the story of many women before her and many after—and though the women try to warn her, the rest of the girls watch, saying "To us Celia was almost like another aunt, her life settling into a foreseeable pattern…" (47). By placing this section at the beginning, whatever 'wildness' we experience from the girls as children is suddenly tainted by the understanding that this world they grow up in has one role for them, and even their most ferocious will end up 'like another aunt.'

Part Two, named "Granddad," is where the collective 'we' really comes into consciousness. The girls explain, "For as long as we could remember we had been together in the house which established the center of the known world," that "…there were the four of us—Celia and Jenny, who were sisters, Anne and Katie, sisters too, like our mothers, who were sisters. Sometimes we watched each other, knew differences. But most of the time it was as though the four of us were one and we lived in days that gathered into one stream of time, undifferentiated and communal" (49). This feels like an explicit nod, not only to justifying her use of the 'we' voice, but to acknowledge the ways it might fracture, or when.

Almost immediately, it does fracture—we're given small details of each of the girls, perhaps to initially individuate them, as always told through a gaze of the other girls, using language of their parents and grandparents: "Anne with her red hair and most of the time her face red, because she was what Gram called a wild hyena, forever excited, talking all the time, flashing with anger" (53). If we examine this through simple pronouns, this specific sentence is told in third person. But looking through the angle of Jauss, who says "The points of view that keep us outside a character require the narrator to use his language, not his character's, whereas the points of view that allow us to be inside a character require the narrator to use the character's language, at least some of the time," this immediately becomes more complicated, perhaps even blurring the lines he establishes for narrative distance. Are we in the perspective of the girls? Or are we watching Anne also *through the language* (and this, Jauss explains, is paramount) of another narrator, their Gram? Soon, we're back in the voice of the girls: "It was the city dummies who came to visit us sometimes who made mistakes," they brag as they fling themselves off hay and into dark wild spaces, "We would never fall" (54). We slip into the voice of their Gram (also the voice of their aunts and mothers, often indistinguishable) when the women objectify or are cruel to each other.

This is perhaps Chase's most consistent and successful move, and in moments of violence and grief, the girls splinter—only to come together again, remolding. When Aunt Grace dies, her daughters are of course most changed, and this splinters the 'we' into two dual voices, both pairs of sisters. Throughout that section, the girls are indistinguishable: they all say goodbye together. They see her, "in her slurred and distorted voice, her tongue lacerated, tried to ask us about school, our friends, to show her interest. She could scarcely get the words formed and it was as if already we called to each other from separate worlds" (171). This 'we' is a subtle shift away—it includes Grace, rather than just the girls, a bridge between the living and the almost-dead. Soon after Grace dies, "We ran, calling the women. Gram was the first one to reach the stairs and when we caught up, Anne was lying on the floor face down, in her clenched fist a wad of Katie's hair, her fist pounding

and pounding on the floor. Katie's neck was flaming where Anne's hands had strangled and at first she couldn't get a breath" (174). This scene is more like a film—the other two girls open the door to the sisters, the door closes, opens, and within the scene the two sisters distinguish themselves from each other. Chase follows up as their grandmother pulls them apart, "She looked over at Anne and Katie. Her daughter, their mother, was dead" (175), linking all of the women inextricably to each other through their grief and pain.

Perhaps most pressing in this novel is the casual, insidious violence the girls survive. Chase, unlike Otsuka, doesn't emphasize these violences, but sneaks them in the middle of paragraphs where we must hunt for them, enacting the silence surrounding the experiences. For example, their cousin Rossie is "after us for peep shows all the time" (57). The girls explain, in an unbothered tone, "Even though Celia was oldest, Anne was more developed than the rest of us, who had hardly started. When she went into the bathroom she shut the door, would have locked it if she could. Rolfe Barker, a boy from down the highway, had taken her into a back room once and put his hands on her; had made her bleed. It was wildness in her that had made her sneak off with him into that far back room. Then he'd forced her. We were thinking of that now and the rats, swollen big as cats, that swam in the grain bins, maybe blood trickling in their fur, human blood, like on the posters tacked up at the fairgrounds" (57). Implicit in the middle of that sentence is horrific sexual violence, yet already as the girls try to unpack it, they blame Anne for "wildness in her," as if they already understand the language of victim blaming, the language their Aunts and grandmother have taught them. They are scared, though, knowing the violence that waits of them—and the imagery of the dead and floating rats paired with the missing posters of children like themselves moves us away, making the distance between us and their collective hurt and fear that much more dramatic. We feel their disassociation through the further stretch of narrative distance.

Danger everywhere, yes, but even from themselves—they slap, smack, bruise, draw blood. They play strip poker and swear, swing and spit and tromp through graveyards of dead farm ani-

mals, flesh rotting, bones cracking beneath their feet, swimming in mud and manure, climbing too high in trees. The wild farmlands are their domain, and they, too, are wild, made central. In one early scene, their cousin watches them fighting and comes out of nowhere: "Then Rossie was there; he'd probably been spying the whole time. He whacked Anne's breath out of her with one powerful sock so that she fell on the ground, not moving except to double up her knees, gagging out of her mouth. Then Rossie kicked her chest, his brown boots falling like smashing rocks. 'Filthy slut. Whore,' he said, looking down on her" (60). In this scene, notice we are not watching from Anne's perspective, nor is the 'we' being beat. Instead, Anne's body has fractured from the group as the other girls watch from above. Immediately after, the girls all cradle Anne, and Jenny "like a mother, protecting us when no one else would" (60) but together they feel an enormous "sorrow for her swept over us" (61). Only in these moments do we see their vulnerability and, in turn, their solidarity with one another, and the 'us' has been remolded back together, indistinguishable.

These initial scenes outside prepare us for what comes later in the novel. In his craft essay "Consider the Orange," Benjamin Percy explains how rhyming action within a setting can have a profound and subversive affect on readers. He suggests that this rhyming action, returning to a place of great foreboding, might "help to stabilize the digressive, achronological structure" (25) of a piece. Before we know what we're looking for, the girls are outside, all alone with their Uncle Neil. While nothing particularly horrifying happens, the action of the scene makes us hold our breath. Phrases like "We tremble, waiting in line" (108) and "We have been seduced, spoiled for him. We deserve punishment. We cannot meet his eyes" (109) put us on edge. And, like in other instances, Neil watches them from the peripheries of their consciousness (though we never shift to his perspective): "When we hear the rock chuck into the water beside us, we sit up. We don't see anything but we know he is here. Feel him. Somewhere, hiding" (111). The shift happens at the crux of the scene—when they finally encounter him, he nearly disappears:

> "We wheel around. There it is, the leaping blue, and we race after his retreating form. And then he trips or falls somehow and we are upon him. We jump on top of him…and pinch the loose skin by his belt. He puts his arms around us and rolls over the ground…and laughs so that we can feel his body shaking, with his hard legs wrapped around us. 'Did my little girls get mad at their daddy?' he whispers… Sky and trees dissolve behind his enclosing shoulders" (111).

Although perhaps this is all out of fatherly play, we can't help but read the entire scene as sinister and dangerous—that Neil is on the verge of violence towards his daughters and nieces, and we hold our breath, waiting. Rhyming action sets the tone for this scene, yet the narrative distance zooms back out, holding us at arm's length and dissolving consciousness of all. The wild farmland might be their domain, but men are always lurking on the outskirts, watching from the edges of the periphery—men, their male cousins, their fathers and uncles, Grandad, hired hands.

THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC

In *The Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka takes on the first-person plural with the largest 'cluster' so far, by inhabiting the voices of a generation of Japanese-American women, first brought over to America on boats as mail order brides, migrant workers and mothers, and then removed to concentration camps during WWII. Because the voice is all-encompassing of such a large group, 'we' necessitates the most sweeping fractures and shifting perspectives, as well as the farthest distance, tightly controlled by form. For example, Otsuka uses repetition in her first section, entitled "Come, Japanese!"—each sentence begins with "On the boat…". Lulled into an ocean of sound, the effect becomes tumultuous after pages of the same beginning phrase. Otsuka wisely splits the collective 'we' early on, and soon we have a building of repetitive phrases like All of us / Some of us / One of us. She uses italics to interrupt the collective voice, as if that indicates dialog or thoughts—

though sometimes it comes from elsewhere, like the women's mothers giving advice. We quickly realize the italics serve as a clue to spoken or thought dialog—direct, individual lines from individual people. This form changes throughout the book, though, as the women learn silence through 'docility' and obedience—but on the boat, in this first section, they are most free.

Early on there's a specific nod to the enacting of the experience for them on the boat: "Some of us were so dizzy we could not even walk, and lay in our berths in a dull stupor, unable to remember our own names, not to mention those of our new husbands" (5). Below deck, they become an unnamed mass, exchangeable with each other, and their purpose of becoming wives is lost, along with any other identity. In some ways this experience in their first erasure. When Ostuka uses 'Some of us,' we see the groups already beginning to fracture based on place-identity: "Some of us on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day…" (7), though we can't tell whether these are identity markers or perhaps just stereotypes by other 'we' voices. Likewise, when Otsuka uses 'One of us,' the phrases are even more specific and detailed, and she writes, "We complained about Kazuko's aloofness, Chiyo's throat clearing, Fusayo's incessant humming…" (10). Rather than their similarities, it is their differences (and their differences they can't stand, no less) that individuates their specific experience.

The danger in such a sweeping generalized voice of a group of women oppressed by a multitude of forces is that the form might enact that erasure. Otsuka hones in more closely as often as she can, and employs a repetition of the phrase 'perhaps' to individualize and lessen the gap in narrative distance. "Perhaps the real reason we were sailing to America… Or perhaps we were leaving behind a young daughter who had been born to a man whose face we could now barely recall…" (11), and soon we slip into a rhythm: 'perhaps' will signify individual experiences, as if in conjecture. Soon, though, and as if imitating the ocean's constant sway and shudder, we're back to "On the boat we had no idea we would dream of our daughter ever night until the day that we died"

(12). What feels most poignant about this section is the conclusion it reaches, when they explain, "Sometimes we found ourselves saying things we had never said to anyone, and once we got started it was impossible to stop, and sometimes we grew suddenly silent and lay tangled in each other's arms until dawn…" (17). There is an intense and palpable intimacy between the women, and in the darkness their secrets come between them, solidifying their unity and also allowing for their collective survival of the conditions they've been subjected to. This 'speaking' acknowledges the voices they still have, so as to dramatize the loss of voice throughout the rest of the piece.

If the conclusion of the first section is, perhaps, the only brief moment of intimacy between these women, the next section shatters those connections. "First Night" also uses repetition, but in way that feels more like a slap across the face than the slow ocean waves. This second section details 'the taking': the shacks, the rooms, the positions, the circumstances. "That night," Otsuka begins, "our new husbands took us quickly" (19). Nearly every sentence thereafter begins "They took us," and though we are in a collective perspective, it varies the many detailed and descriptive moments of marital rape: "They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days… They took us violently, with their fists…They took us by surprise…They took us politely…shyly… with groans…" (19-21). Although only four pages long, this section builds and builds through the repetition of 'They took us' until we cannot breathe, waiting for the release. The varied experiences helps individuate the women, but the repetition unites them, not only in their shared and collective trauma, but creates a rhythm in the text not unlike the mimicry of a sexual act—violence intertwined. And, in the final moment, we are meant to believe 'The first night' is definitely not a moment in time, but throughout the rest of their lives. As if in release, Otsuka finishes, "They took us swiftly, repeatedly, and all throughout the night, and in the morning when we woke we were theirs" (22). Unlike the first section, we have our first distinguishable 'they'—the husbands—which will change throughout, but it initially very aptly describes the power imbalance of the arrangement, and helps regulate the dominance and violence enacted on the bodies of the collective 'we.'

The next section quickly re-establishes and shifts the 'we' and 'they.' "Whites" demonstrates the immediate dichotomy between the Japanese and the white American population, which helps build upon the initial gender violence against the women to racial violence and segregation. Immediately, the bodies of the Japanese are under the white gaze: "They admired us for our strong backs and nimble hands. Our stamina. Our discipline. Our docile dispositions" and then a switch to show the subtle racism of capitalist gains: "We had all the virtues of the Chinese…but none of their vices. We were faster than the Filipinos and less arrogant than the Hindus. We were more disciplined than the Koreans. We were soberer than the Mexicans…We were the best breed of worker they had ever hired in their lives" (29). Fascinatingly, although this is told from a 'we' perspective, the narrative perspective is actually closer to the 'they.' Like Jauss says, "point of view is more a matter of where the language is coming from than it is of person." In other words, although we are technically in a first-person collective, the perspective is upon the bodies of the collective, told through the eyes (and, perhaps, the mouths) of those watching, hiring, and enacting violence on—ie the white farm owners. This obviously complicates the first-person collective, and mimics an inner monologue, instead, of the 'them'—closest to those in power. She even switches the pronoun, though not the perspective, writing "They did not want us as neighbors in their valleys. They did not want us as friends…" which complicates the perspective even more, and then again, "We cared only about money. Our farming methods were poor" (35), slipping directly into commentary about the 'we' through the eyes of the 'they,' which is clearly tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic, interrogating an insidious and quiet racism of the collective 'they.' Perhaps Otsuka is preparing us for her final move in the book, here, but we do wonder why she might privilege the white gaze over what, instead, the Japanese might see. It pays off in the end, when she leaves us asking: who is allowed to speak or tell histories when these stories are erased and white-washed? In many ways, rather than get so close as to erase the borders between mother and daughter bodies, Otsuka shows how racial bodies can't be

reconciled. Language and narrative distance can't bridge the gap when such signifiers of power are enacted.

In an intense move to signify the intersection of gender and race, Otsuka shifts the gaze from white to white-and-male: "Sometimes the boss would approach us from behind while we were bending over his fields and whisper…And even though we had no idea what he was saying we knew exactly what he meant" (32). Here, we are close in the female Japanese body, and we feel the threat of violence, no longer through the gaze of the oppressor. The next shift comes soon after, announcing the ways the body must double-survive. "It was their women who taught us the things we most needed to know" Otsuka explains, following up again with a repetitive phrase: How to…How to…How to. "We loved them. We hated them. We wanted to *be* them" (39) feels like a specific nod to the intersectionality of whiteness and womanhood. Here, Otsuka critiques the complex racial relationships in domestic spheres by showing that a collective sisterhood, a 70s feminist subjectivity, is ultimately false and unattainable. Although the Japanese want solidarity, they will never have it. Perhaps the most palpable critique happens when she portrays the white women as children, themselves, stating "They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily" (40) but "…when they called out for us in the middle of the night we went to them and lay with them until morning. 'Hush, hush,' we said to them. And, 'Please don't cry.'" (41). Here, Otsuka plays with the idea of motherhood as a uniting force—the white women treat the Japanese women like children by renaming and assimilating them, but they in fact require care as if they are children themselves. The we/them dichotomy is complicated, slippery, and alliances are unclear: who is between, for, and against? But still, we remain clear with whose bodies we inhabit. Never do we question whether we are in a white body or a Japanese body—race isn't embodied, perhaps, without a present gaze. As Rankine explores throughout *Citizen* Zora Neale Hurston's words as appropriated by Glenn Ligon: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." To understand the shifting racial 'othering,' there must be a gaze of power present, and in Otsuka's work, this gaze may be white and it may

be male, but it also might be white and female. She shows quite clearly that Morris's "coalitions" are impossible in this particular time.

The next section, "Babies" uses repetition for variance between the multiple stories of the birth of their children. "We gave birth under oak trees, in summer, in 113-degree heat. We gave birth beside wood stoves in one-room shacks on the coldest nights of the year" (55) Otsuka writes, quickly illuminating the more and more varied differences and experiences. Although the section relies heavily on the repetition 'we gave birth,' it also shows more poignantly their lives through detailed descriptions of place. It also operates outside of time in a more blatantly obvious way, because multiple children are had and the women vary in ages and places and time—which, paired with 'we gave birth' repeated over and over, begins to have a cumulative affect on readers. As if mimicking rhyming action from 'they took us,' we now see the consequences of the marital rape: "We gave birth to so many babies that our uterus slipped out and we had to wear a special girdle to keep it inside…" (59). At this point in the story, we recognize that the repetition allows for variance, but it also has an overwhelming effect—these women, although invisible, cannot be stamped out because of the sheer number of them. It also makes us ask how they survived—the building, the brick after brick of sadness, trauma, and abuse, it's as if the form actually induces the feeling of the narrative itself.

"Babies" doesn't rely on a they/we dichotomy, and in fact, the they disappears—but it quickly returns in the next section, "Children." Now, their children have become the 'they,' but the 'we' has become just as powerless—at first, the children are young: "We laid them down… We left them… We placed them" (61) all over the farm, in gullies and ditches. Then the children grow, and can play, but they enact the same trauma on each other that their parents live through: "They went out into the barn after supper with their kerosene lanterns and played mama and papa in the loft. *Now slap your belly and make a sound like you're dying*" (65), the italics now indicating what the children say to each other. These moments make us wonder about perspective in perhaps more troubling

ways, as the shift doesn't quite feel tightly controlled. This moment feels especially pronounced, like we might need an answer for how a mother might know this. There are more successful ways, using gossip, for example, if the women hear things from other women. But this particular moment made me wonder how they had access to the private play of their children, seemingly alone in the barn. The mothers also witness the assimilation and self-hate of their children, as well as watch the toxic white supremacist masculinity take root and take hold in especially their boys, which takes a more gossiping, though sad, tone. In many ways this they/we dichotomy shows the greater isolation the women have, as they rarely feel or come close to their children in the same ways that Chase enacted.

It seems in smaller, especially rural communities, 'we' could be better controlled in that section—but Otsuka quickly shows us how gossip functions within a group in her next section, entitled "Traitors," which details the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Unlike other sections, repetition isn't used consistently, and the 'we' almost takes on the voice of gossip, as we're unclear who is speaking. They ask, "What did we know, exactly, about the list? The list had been drawn up hastily, on the morning of the attack. The list had been drawn up more than one year ago. The list had been in existence for almost ten years" (83), a nod to the 'truth,' what Marcus explores about the unreliability and reliability of a collective first-person narrator. In acknowledging the unreliability, it's possible this voice becomes even more reliable and believable.

If the overwhelming sense of erasure, invisibility, and fracturing of stories hasn't already convinced us, Otsuka shows us a scene where the Japanese actually burn everything—letters, books, chopsticks, paper lanterns, diaries… anything that might suggest they are 'foreign.' These are the same items the women brought with them on the boats, which creates a doubling back of rhyming action, as we recognize the items as being crucial in their identity preservation, now being burned at the threat of state violence. The other racial categories they were seemingly 'better than,' (ie. Chinese, Korean) are now desirable categories—showing, subtly, how racial signifiers shift and fracture in the same way that the 'we' voice might: in other words, 'desirable' is determined by those with

power, by whiteness. Interestingly, this section solidifies or molds back together the original dichotomy of husbands and new wives, and "We felt closer to our husbands, now, than we ever had before" (96) perhaps suggesting another unifying force against oppression, that survival trumps personal violence (like marital rape). Although these women have spent most of their lives (potentially) hating their husbands, they are suddenly generous and forgiving of them, knowing they may "be removed" at any time.

It is in this section, too, that the tone shifts again—closer, perhaps, to the language of the state. For example, although they often say 'our men,' they also use the verb 'removed,' and often say 'all people of our descent,' rather than naming what they are. This removal of names takes the language of the evacuation out of the mouths of the persecutors, rather than those being removed. For example, "Because the fishermen, it was said, were not really fishermen, but secret officers of the enemy's imperial navy" (98) takes away 'they' so that it feels like irrefutable fact. 'It was said' is crafted using a pronoun (with the referent missing) and the passive tense of 'to say,' removing not only the speaker of the rumor but the action the speaker might take. In many ways, this careful control of perspective and language feels outside of either the 'we' or 'they,' perhaps indicating that in the end, government control has the absolute authority. Jauss would argue that because the language is not the language of the 'we,' we're farther away. The distance is necessary in the dramatization of such a violent act of erasure. In many of these stories it seems the most dramatic moments must be told through the language of someone else, and the 'we' can adopt, then, the distance to the situation that requires survival. If told through the 'we,' perhaps these events actually become unspeakable.

But Otsuka makes a few final and jubilant moves to show the Japanese in their own ways, in their own language patterns. "Last Day" shows the disturbingly specific movement of each individual out of the city. Otsuka returns, effectively, to the phrasing 'Some of us'/'One of us' but punctuates it with, now, the familiar voice of gossip, using 'One man' and 'One woman.' This move indi-

vidualizes each life, with the objects they leave behind, what they choose to wear, what they say as they go. It also names them specifically, last names and first names, relationships to each drawn very visibly. In our last moment with the Japanese women, Otsuka zooms in closely on a girl: "She stopped once to say goodbye to the people lined up on the sidewalk and then, with a quick flick of her wrist, she waved them away and began skipping. She left laughing. She left without looking back" (114). This tone is suddenly triumphant, perhaps the only breath we've been allowed to take since the boats, as if a sweet relief comes in giving up the fight. In some ways, we need this close narrative distance and third-person perspective. We trust it, and in many ways it feels closer than any other 'we' or 'they.' It also prepares us for the next section, with the departure from the perspective from the Japanese, to the white neighbors left behind.

Maxey mentions "This sense of narrative confinement through a relentlessly communal voice ensures that the women in *The Buddha in the Attic* have no identity outside the group. Such a device reflects their urgent need for solidarity and belonging in the fact of suffering…" (9-10), but she also critiques Otsuka's choice: "…the women's individuality is erased…criticized by some commentators, arguably because it repeats the historical dehumanization of Japanese Americans through internment" (10). It's true that the 'us' and 'them' is now reversed, and Maxey wisely notes that this shift is maximizing the erasure of the Japanese in a specific, localized area like California. She also notes that most of these critiques come from white reviewers. Perhaps worth mentioning here, though, is Otsuka's tone shift or, more correctly, tone departure. No longer is she piling on bricks of trauma and violence, instead she nearly takes on a tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic critique of the kind of sentimentality the white voices exude. "Sacrifices must be made!" the young mothers exclaim when they donate rubber to 'the cause' of the war. I even wonder if, when 'others' start moving in where the Japanese were, and the comment is "Country folk. Not our kind" (126) makes a quiet nod to Kate Walbert's *Our Kind*, a book which often fails to note the complicity in white violence. Otsuka

wants to critique whiteness in an explicit way, using that same sarcastic tone to highlight the clueless ness of those 'left behind.'

In many ways, she shows the erasure through metaphor, showing us "the official notices nailed to the telephone poles…but already they are beginning to tatter and fade." The white people comment, "It never occurred to us to stop and read them. 'They weren't for us,' we say" (117). This cheeky tone critiques the neo-liberal 'innocence,' illuminating the cluelessness and helpless denial of realities and histories one is directly benefitting from. The notices become a way to show that time has passed, and enacts the process of historical amnesia: "It is almost as if the Japanese were never here at all" (121). This isn't enough, though, for Otsuka enacts even the appropriation of the 'exotic orient,' saying that the objects from their homes make "their way into some of our homes" (131) and then, suddenly, its as if they've always been in their homes, and one mother says "I try not to think about where it came from…Sometimes its better not to know" (122). Need she say more? Otsuka enacts erasure and historical white-washing, and voicing only the white neighbors left behind solidifies that erasure, but none of them become truly detailed and individualized like some of these last Japanese characters do.

In what might become most emblematic of this entire generation, Otsuka writes "A few of them…are still with us," and she hones in on "A thirty-nine-year-old woman at the asylum…who wanders the halls…mumbling to herself in Japanese, which nobody else can understand. The only words of English she knows are 'water' and 'Go home.' Twenty years ago, the doctor tells us, her two young children were killed in a fire…"(120). This rhyming action is most satisfying for us, as we see one particular individual: an unnamed (erased) age-specific woman, but we know her story. We know it because we have come along on her journey, and the specific nods to the only words they knew as child-brides ("water" and "go home") and then the perhaps universal story of losing children and a husband, Otsuka has centralized an individual while allowing her to become a ghost left behind in an institutional building, objectified by the white people who watch her. In a final nail in

our coffin, Otsuka writes "The Japanese have left us and we don't know where they are" (128). The construction of this sentence is worth unpacking—'have left us' centers the 'us' and places blame on the Japanese, giving the white people being 'left' zero responsibility or culpability or blame.

Perhaps the most jarring constructions of the collective 'we' in speaking for such a large group are the shifts in ownership and the placement of time. Whenever the collective voice uses phrases like 'our husband' or, as above, 'our uterus,' we are jarred between a first and third person. This may have been taken care of if, for example, Otsuka has used 'our husbands' or 'our uteruses,' which feels more general but grammatically more succinct. The other moments moved us away from the past—"One of us filled the sleeve of her white silk wedding kimono with stones and wandered out into the sea, and we still say a prayer for her every day" (47) and "Haruko left a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day" (109). Both of these moments shift into a future tense, 'to this day' and 'we still…every day' are jarring. In other ways, Otsuka has been so intentional about repetition and rhyming action, yet these brief moments don't feel often enough to suggest what they might want to suggest—survival, even in the most horrific situations.

SURVIVAL

Survival, then, seems to be the common thread between both novels, as well as invoking closer and farther narrative distance to dramatize specific, often violent, moments. To varying degrees, each of the women in these stories is trying to survive in a world continually enacting violence on her (their/our) body (bodies), with both delving into various examples of sexual assault and danger of men against female bodies. In both Chase and Otsuka's novels, survival becomes a theme through collective and generational trauma. Marcus explains that "…the 'we' group… helps the in-

dividual survive in extreme conditions. Conversely, faculties of consciousness, such as feeling, believing, wishing, and remembering are perceived as a threat: they weaken one's instinct to survive…" (51). In other words, many of the enacted silences surrounding these women's traumas, in both *During the Reign* and *Buddha*, are methods of survival. Marcus goes on to explain, "…even when extreme conditions no longer exist, survivors tend to avoid introspection, probably because they are afraid to reveal that their moral and emotional faculties have been severely damaged" (52). In some ways, the women can't even talk or look at their trauma, for their group identity depends on silence. Somehow, putting these stories into a 'we' voice feels necessary—is it the only way to be told?

Trauma and nostalgia are necessarily linked, here. How can we avoid nostalgia when thinking about the past? In novels dealing with trauma, it is far too easy to think "everything was well and good until—" Thinking more particularly about the interaction between trauma and nostalgia, I wonder if the 'we' then becomes a place of resistance against this erasure. It resists embodiment, it resists the individual "I," which in turn resists a dominating relationship over nature, over woman, over Native. Hogan and Pursell explain nostalgic imagery regarding Alaska, but let's move into all or at least many shared traumas, and consider how nostalgia helps flatten or blur the nuance of the past, especially through shared collective memory and narrative. If nostalgic imagery shapes our stories in terms of positivity and 'overcoming' the odds or the hard times, it also seems to "downplay or even erase unresolved traumas," especially regarding current and future social problems (70). In both Otsuka and Chase's texts, the moments the 'we' voice fractures or slips are the moments we must look most closely at: what is being made visible? Which moments are held taut across bodies, and where do we get closer, farther away, and why? Might it be that this distance increases our awareness, that instead of downplaying or erasing unresolved traumas, it heightens them for us as readers? When these intense shifts happen, do they affect our own bodies in a way we hadn't accounted for? If we've grown used to the nostalgic, blurry 'we' and then, suddenly, we're pulled away

from it—what is the effect on the body of the reader? Do we suddenly feel the violence that much more poignantly, personally?

If we truly are to believe that "the history of Western literature so far has been a journey from the first-person plural to the first-person singular" (Miller), then it seems an act of resistance to co-opt the original plural perspective as an opportunity for coalition. Morris claims that the first-person singular pronoun is "a seizure of the existentialist 'I,' the pronoun we must use to say 'I am,' 'I want,' and 'I can,' the pronoun through which we claim the freedom, authority, and conviction of choice…" (15), but she quickly explains the consequences of such a move. She says "the shifts we must continue to seek necessitate the development of new tropes and the construction of alternate subject positions" (15). The potential of the collective 'we' lies in its fracturing, shifting, and indeterminacy. It isn't just fluid, she says, but allows for the space of a multitude of selves to exist. Rather than a first-person plural that "conceals an 'I' that has sponged up and all but obliterated the others it claims to include" she says that "the 'we' of coalitions is lighter, subtler, and more shifting… it shimmers between identity and difference… it is a place where 'we/they/I connect and disconnect'… it is a site where disparate subjectivities collide, converge, and continue to coexist" (17).

The fracturing of the 'we' voice must not only show how the self is subsumed under group ideologies, but it must fight erasure or silence surrounding shared traumas. It must make the silences suddenly loud and persistent, must pull erasure into visibility. In Chase's novel, the bodies of the girls of the 'we' voice blends, but they isolate during violence against an individual body. To make sense of these acute traumas, the girls adopt the language (not of the narrator but namely, the mothers and grandmother who already experienced similar trauma) of other characters in order to create distance between themselves and the event, which also distances the audience. In turn, that distance dramatizes the moment and makes it more emotional. Otsuka departs from both of these close moves in a more distant plural first-person, but instead evokes a schism between racial bodies, shifting the 'we' and 'they' not only between the Japanese and the white people, men and women,

but generations of immigrant families: parents and their children. There are moments, though, when the language of the 'we' narrator adopts language of the state—revealing that institutional power allows these violences to happen through passive voice, without an actor to blame. Through that distance, and through repetition, Otsuka actually enacts the history of erasure and whitewashing of a place which is bound up in its racial history.

However, as I've found in these close readings of perspective shifts as language rather than point-of-view, there are some bodies who cannot blend through lines of difference. Perhaps we can blur between generations, perhaps we can find ourselves in the bodies of both mothers and daughters, and yet we cannot be in more than one race at a time. Race, as an imaginary signifier, is too closely controlled by the white gaze and fear of the other, is coded in a visible way that gender-violence is not. In Otsuka and Rankine's work, a 'blending' in perspective will always be difficult, in the same ways that bodies are read as different. Perhaps this is exactly the coalition that Morris pleads for: acknowledging difference as intersectional. Otsuka enacts this feeling of self/other through form. Survival *looks differently* for embodied perspectives encoded as 'other.' Some bridges cannot be crossed, and they shouldn't be.

Ultimately, the first-person plural is used out of a necessity: survival. But survival is multifaceted and complicated, cultural survival being historically oriented and tied to place. Survival is embodied, and bodies are how we 'cue' perspective in narrative distance, by telling what is lived *in* and what is lived *through*. Perhaps gender can be a close link in perspective, and might become a blurred border, but we can never blur the lines among racially-othered bodies. To be in a racial body can be signified by gaze/gazed upon, which is also about perspective: who can see, and who is seen? Who can name, and who is named? The goal of using the first-person plural isn't to transcend racial boundaries, or to subsume the 'other,' or even to speak for an entire group as a representation of ideologies and cultural beliefs. In moments of acute violence, we use shared language to distance

ourselves from the stories we must tell, masks of others to contemplate our own pain. Language is shared across these boundaries, but perspective cannot be.

Both nature and othered bodies are subsumed in literature by a gaze which removes their power. Yet it is within nature and wild spaces where we might "shimmer between identity and difference," where we might find a place "where 'we/they/I connect and disconnect'" a site where "disparate subjectivities collide, converge, and continue to coexist" (17). Dominator culture doesn't exist in landscapes untainted and untamed, and that is where freedom within difference can lie. Nature offers a site for survival unexplored in an Alaskan aesthetic.

THE ALASKAN PARADOX

I must ask the same questions of my own project. In my own experience, Alaskans themselves ricochet between dependence upon tight-knit communities and their fierce individualism, independence, and stubbornness. At once we are both the individual and the protectors of community with which we belong. At once we destroy "virgin territory" and exhibit "intolerable anxiety" of our own mortality, in comparison to the backdrop with which we live, actually, quite intimately with. The land is an active agent to Alaskans—determining where we go and what we do, and when, and we learn to yield.

But this in itself might be a "perpetual imperialist narrative," that I might believe "Alaska is somehow more natural, wild, and authentic than other places" (Hogan 70). We are, at any given time, ready to battle our own vision of ourselves. Hogan and Pursell explain, "Alaskans ourselves are in many ways complicit with these dominant narratives… That is, the nature state narratives are intimately and intrinsically interpenetrated with our own identity constructions as real Alaskans" (71). In many ways, we have to continually perform the frontier narrative for outsiders in order to sell ourselves, as tourism has become the second-largest employer in Alaska (ironically, second to gov-

ernment work). "Americans need Alaska in their back pocket, even if they never come here. They need to know that there is a place in the United States where it is impossible to be alienated from nature…Alaska remains a proving ground for masculinity" (78) which is why these narratives continue to persist, regroup, and hold power over particular bodies. "The stories we tell ourselves locally about living in and experiencing Alaska as home exist in tension with and are constructed in discursive relation to mass media capitalism and by extension, a national identity" (71), Hogan and Pursell insist. The central paradox, they explain, is that most Alaskans feel themselves "to be special and unique…but at the same time do not want to give up their ties to national identity," (71), namely: freedom, land, domination over nature, and domination over the 'other'—the 'wild,' the feminine, the Native. Finally, "in our ideas about landscape and nostalgia, Alaska represents to the outside a place where one can go back in time prior to capitalism, pollution, and the stresses of a consumer society" (78).

The individual, rugged frontier narrative of Alaska, inherently dominant-masculine, inherently imperialist, inherently hegemonic in its dominance over land and Native, may never die. The economic selfhood of the state depends on it in the same way it depends on extract-driven, capitalist destruction of oil fields and melting Arctic villages. But that doesn't mean that the individualist narrative persists in all aspects of life in Alaska, especially in the winter, when the "true" Alaskans persist through dark months (sans tourists, sans performance). We all negotiate with this particular narrative, acknowledging that "we all do not fit into this archetype…many of us…(have) a deep commitment to and dependence on our community" (Hogan 71). In each narrative I found in my research, a repeating trend bears mentioning: that for each successful Alaskan, "for all their individuality, rely on the transmission of knowledge from strangers," that many of us have been "saved by someone else when survival became tricky." Our communities, as large as the state, and as small as a fishing co-op, depend largely in part on "advice from more experienced people" (Hogan 79).

The paradox: we are unique, special—yet we do not want to give up our communities or our ties to a national ideal and value system. In fact, the communities keep us alive. When we fish in a co-op, we are committing to the kind of protection, safety, and competition that allows us survival over individual, solitary fishermen. When winter light dips below the mountains, it is small community-sourced potlucks and events that keep even the most-misbehaving of us close. In our isolation from 'civilization' we also find a civilization with one another, a commitment that isn't required necessarily by more urban environments, by cities full of anonymous and autonomous individuals. How do we write this? How do we create a tension between the 'we' and the individualistic 'I'?

It seems that narrative distance has been the key all along. In my project, I'm especially interested in the tension of insider/outsider relationships with my home state: partly why I'm trying both to move close and far away, while the 'we' switches to close third when in female bodies. I'm especially careful to stay close to women, or at least spend the most time there, but I'm also interested in the way the women bear witness to what Hogan and Pursell call a "multiplicity of masculinities" within such a rural hegemonic community. They explain that "in reality, a more negotiated urban masculinity or a hybrid rural-urban masculinity or any other multiplicity of masculinities (e.g. Alaskan Native, queer, and female) surely exists," though these explorations are still missing, still being pulled into visibility from erasure, from our narrative body of literature. I'm interested in developing queer relationships, particularly those carried out in secret, unacknowledged potentially even by the individuals exploring as the greater community refuses to acknowledge them. There's a particular privilege to the women in this community, because they are so coded as anti-masculine, that they are afforded particular secrets. The performance of such rural masculinities requires the emotionality to never be shown to other men; in this way, women are both the secret-keepers and the emotional-laborers. They know most about the people they work with. They are the intimacy shepherds or gatekeepers, the vulnerability key-holders. In many ways, the women are where the individual experiences come through. It is through their eyes that with might see those coalitions of differ-

ence, which is why it has been so important for me to focus more critically on individual perspectives through using narrative distance. I still think of the 'we' as being present in the close-third movements, though this is potentially their imagination.

While I'll acknowledge this will have to be more carefully controlled in future revisions, I'm especially interested in playing with the tension of land-anxiety or urban-anxiety. I think especially of that scene with Jacob and Colt, one a college-educated outsider, and one a true "man's man" legacy, and how the community simply can't understand why Luce might choose the least rurally-masculine of the two—and how that can be confusing, and acknowledged by the community, while intensifying urban anxieties about outsiders. I'm also interested in the tensions between national identity and that of rugged frontiersman or Alaskan. How can the 'we' shift and murmur, in varying degrees, to be reflective of the ironic and conflicted subjectivity of being an "Alaskan" in the "wilderness," of being "wild" and "raw" but not so wild and raw as the "savage," to, in every way, destroy the natural world as "wild" as soon as one is enacting their subjectivity and more especially, their violence, upon it—the conflict between the self, the other, and the communal 'we.' As always with my work, I'll need to focus more critically and carefully on the geographical space surrounding them. I imagine that in the second part of this novel, I will be more particularly looking at the history of the land they fish on, as well as the formed communities, and the erasure of Native Alaskan histories.

Of course the frontier is a social construct, in the same way that race and gender are. But the frontier might also be a site for potential, a site for greater acknowledgment of difference, a place where difference and intersectionality may become active interrogators. bell hooks explains: "In the natural environment, everything has its place including humans. In that environment everything was likely to be shaped by the reality of mystery. There, dominator culture (the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) could not wield absolute power. For in that world nature was more powerful. Nothing and no one could completely control nature" (8). If power relationships

invented by dominator culture don't exist in "wild" spaces, what is the potential for an Alaskan aesthetic to move beyond relationships between we/they, them/I, us, we, and ours?

Perhaps I'm stating the obvious here, but Native Alaskans have a fundamentally different relationship to land than that of colonizer. "Although Alaskan Native culture had more traditional links with landscape and nature, an emphasis on domination of nature at the center of the rural paradigms of masculinity in Alaska codes authenticity and masculinity in clearly Western, capitalist terms" (Hogan 69), but I am particularly interested in the various and intricate ways we can use craft to resist these hegemonic structures in our narrative choices.

In my research, many initial descriptions from Native communities take on a similar language structure: "they" (the outsiders, the Western colonists, whether Russian or American) are often enacting violence across the land, the traditional sites of knowledge, and the people that lived there; while "we" (Native Alaskans, although told through a singular account or voice but stated as "we") is used to portray how the communities watched, resisted, traded, or survived.

It is also true that translations between English and the various languages of indigenous people are imprecise. For example, the Deg Xinaq language uses a prefix meaning "with each other." As explains Beth Ginondidoy Leonard in translating a story about "The Man and Wife," she realized the way a prefix was "used to mark vital, reciprocal social relationships," and that the word "wife" actually meant "multiple persons" or "village." In translation, not only is a strict gender role de-coded from this story, but it suddenly becomes a story about community relationships. Other reflexive forms, possessive prefixes, uncover not only the translation trouble, but the ancestral, communal, and de-centering of the self in Native Alaskan narrative stories. While this is just one example of the many languages still being spoken, written and recovered today, and while I have no desire to appropriate a communal "we" from Native Alaskan peoples, what I'm most interested is understanding the fundamental different relationship to land.

That collective amnesia, through nostalgia, can be combatted in various craft conversations feels fraught as we write towards and into an understanding of Alaskan mythologies as white and rural and masculine mythologies. How and why can craft decisions reflect our own positioning, our coalitions of difference? I'd like to invite others to consider how narrative distances and points-of-view might change the way humans interact with, gaze upon, and collide with bodies, land, and animals. How can our craft conversations be encompassing of these coalitions of difference? More work needs to be done, not only in understanding the "multiplicities of masculinities" that exist in a contemporary Alaskan setting, but in constructing narrative tools that don't just re-enact specific violences and colonial-settler mythologies. I invite others to imagine the ways coalitions of difference can glitter, shimmer, and shine—not unlike salmon scales in sunlight, acknowledging shadows, light, and the ways we all survive.

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