

“Now Can I Go?": Internment and the Legacy of Silence in Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*

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This article is part of my larger project which examines Japanese American internment, specifically how the camps were experienced and how this historical period has been represented in American literature and culture since the 1940's. I also explore the narratives of this history in memorials and facilities at the former internment camp sites in order to compare representational methods between the spaces of fiction and physical space. I discuss how contemporary literature provides a solid opportunity for critical inquiry into these sites as a collective social memory and an articulation of its contemporary cultural presence. In this article I focus on Deborah Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* as an important critique of the processes of censorship and social denial.

Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. military command initiated a program of swift action against all people of Japanese descent residing in the Pacific Coast states including those with American citizenship. With a total dismissal of legal and national status in favor of a blanket “enemy” designation based on ethnicity, the U.S. government coordinated the forced relocation and incarceration of West Coast Japanese Americans. The imprisonment of Japanese Americans without trial in early 1942 marks the inception of Japanese American internment, which continued until March 1946. Between those years over 110,000 West Coast Japanese, two-thirds of whom had attained citizenship through naturalization or had gained it as birthright, were stripped of their civil rights and forced into army-monitored camps. During the internment period and in the aftermath of World War II, no formal charges of sabotage were brought against the thousands who were interned. The 1982 report by the U.S. Presidential Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians declares that the process and events were “not justified by military necessity, and the decisions which followed from it [...] were not driven by analysis of military conditions” (18). Further, the report concluded that the historical causes were the result of “race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership” (18). Japanese American internment is characterized, at a bare minimum, by the government's abject denial of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. While this deployment of State control most forcefully expressed goals for wartime nationalist preservation, it demonstrably undermined (even literally alienated) the principles of democratic inclusion and national identity. That is, while solidifying the concept of the nation it sought to protect, the State was overtly, perhaps unconsciously, sacrificing its doctrinal base. This disregard for the legal rights, not to mention the humanity, of those unjustly incarcerated certainly problematizes positions which disavow the abuse of power as evidence of systemic racism.

The outright focus on ethnicity and race became actualized through the severe knee-jerk reactions to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This insuperable delineation of difference and separation materialized as the incrimination of all Japanese in a generalized enemy status, which signaled a shift from the national to the ethnic in defining what comprised individual identity. As one *Nisei* (second generation) recalls, “I felt very conscious of the fact that I had a Japanese face. I

wondered how we would be treated by our non-Japanese friends and neighbors. I felt very much alone, silently hoping for some words of comfort but fearing that my features would cause me to be the target of hatred and suspicion for what the Japanese Navy had done" (Hosokawa 233). This fear that one's physical characteristics and genealogy would serve as evidence of complicit guilt for Japan's act of war was not unfounded. The vindictive desire for retribution galvanized actions against the innocent who merely shared common Japanese ancestry.

The residual effects of divisive social systems and state-sanctioned exclusion in the camps persists for the Japanese American community decades after its conclusion. However, there is relative silence about the events within U.S. society at large. There is a silence about internment itself coupled with the collective social inability to confront this history. Singling out an entire people for evacuation to prisons in deserts and marshes far removed from densely populated areas certainly is the action of a government attempting to make a "problem" invisible. For the War Department to silence and control the West Coast Japanese population meant making it literally vanish into punishing environments. Thus, the unwanted population was wedded to a forsaken landscape and became a spatial analogue of rejection: the outsiders, the undesirable, the silenced and exiled. As an unwanted historical legacy, the camps in large part have been forgotten, marginalized or rendered insignificant as a footnote to an extremely complex period of twentieth century history.

Despite the collective silence about internment, a number of literary texts have been published in the past few decades as American society seems to be coming to terms with this often undisclosed history. Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* is grounded in the historical realities of internment and explores the subjective experience of a Berkeley family entangled in the racially focalized anger which incited the federal process of exclusion, confinement, and resettlement. Rather than creating an emotionally charged drama exposing the deep psychological consequences on this family, Otsuka's style presents a muted, sophisticated portrait in short, simple, declarative sentences without grand, descriptive flourishes. The language is largely stripped of expressive quality and deliberately devoid of emotional proclamations. A sense of narrative distance withholds direct access to the character's thoughts and feelings. Although difficult to register immediately, the underlying force of this stylistic design and narrative structure becomes clear as the domestic scenes of internment begin to gain clarity. The narrative style provides its own subtle criticism of the social consequences and callousness with which the Japanese community was treated in the internment era. Otsuka's detached style of pared down, objective separation is echoed in the delineation of family members indicated not by name but, rather, their gender or domestic position. Literalizing the loss of identity for internees, the main characters of the novel are referenced with the most reductive descriptive signifiers as merely the woman, the man, the girl, and the boy or, alternatively, as the mother, the father, the daughter, and the son. However, other Americans (that is, non-Japanese) are supplied with specific identities and their own names: Joe Lundy, Elizabeth, Greg Meyer, et cetera.

Soon after the Pearl Harbor bombing, the father of the family had been taken in for FBI questioning, but without just cause. The father, then, is one of the 2,192 FBI arrests of primarily *Issei* (first generation) leaders in the Japanese American communities both in the continental U.S. and Hawaii (Hosokawa 237).¹ The news of

¹ Roger Daniels explains that due to the fact that "the government acted largely on the theory of guilt by association, it arrested most of the leaders of the Japanese community:

the father's arrest is dropped in the narrative amid a catalogue of events that compose the desolate scenery of a broken family, the abandoned dreams of a former livelihood:

Weeds were everywhere. The woman had not mowed the grass for months. Her husband usually did that. She had not seen her husband since his arrest last December. First he had been sent to Fort Missoula, Montana, on a train and then he had been transferred to Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Every few days he was allowed to write her a letter. Usually he told her about the weather. The weather at Fort Sam Houston was fine. On the back of every envelope was stamped "Censored, War Department," or "Detained Alien Enemy Mail." (10)

Throughout the novel the father supplies only sparse information in his correspondence. Subject to censorship by the War Department, these letters from the father are delivered with entire lines and passages deleted: "Every few days the letters arrived, tattered and torn, from Lordsburg, New Mexico. Sometimes entire sentences had been cut out with a razor blade by the censors and the letters did not make any sense. Sometimes they arrived in one piece, but with half of the words blacked out. Always, they were signed, 'From Papa, With Love'" (59). The trope of the absent father underscores the metaphorical loss of leadership both for the son in the family and the community in general.

The father's arrest leaves the mother as the sole parent who must bear the responsibility for the family and their house. Otsuka's novel opens with a public declaration that permanently effects this family: "The sign had appeared overnight. On billboards and trees and the backs of the bus-stop benches. It hung in the window of Woolworth's. It hung by the entrance to the YMCA. It was stapled to the door of the municipal court and nailed, at eye level, to every telephone pole along University Avenue" (3). The sign is Civilian Evacuation Order No. 19 posted throughout the streets of Berkeley, California, in April 1942. Like the hundreds of other such orders posted in the Pacific Coast states of Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona, this notice directed all residents with Japanese ancestry to report for removal and relocation. The opening scene portrays this family ensnared in a coordinated effort for social control which reduced Japanese to a single collective identity regardless of citizenship and personal history. They, like all others in the Pacific Coast states, were designated with an "enemy" Japanese identity eclipsing their status as Americans.

The evacuation order drives a wedge between the terms "Japanese" and "American" and forces the family out of society. The woman must resolutely comply with the evacuation order and she deliberately boxes up everything in the house, hides valuables in a hole in the backyard, and stores cherished furniture in a locked room. The narrative does not reveal any emotional or intellectual response to these impositions. As abruptly as the notice for forced evacuation appeared, so too must she respond: "the woman, who did not always follow the rules, followed the rules. She gave the cat to the Greers next door. She caught the chicken that had been running wild in the yard since the fall and snapped its neck beneath the handle of a broomstick" (9). Showing emotional detachment, the woman continues to complete her tasks with the swift movements of necessity:

Somewhere in the distance a telephone rang. White Dog barked. 'Hush,' she said. White Dog grew quiet. 'Now roll over,' she said. White Dog rolled over and looked up at her with his good eye. 'Play dead,' she said. White Dog turned his head to the side and closed his eyes.

officials of organizations, and those persons who had observable contacts with the Japanese embassy and consulates" (26).

His paws went limp. The woman picked up the large shovel that was leaning against the trunk of the tree. She lifted it high in the air with both hands and brought the blade down swiftly on his head. White Dog's body shuddered twice and his hind legs kicked out into the air, as though he were trying to run. Then he grew still. A trickle of blood seeped out from the corner of his mouth. She untied him from the tree and let out a deep breath. The shovel had been the right choice. Better, she thought, than a hammer. (11)

The woman's distressing indifference about her dog's death indicated by her concluding thought is the first moment of any character's internal reflection in the narrative. The stark objectivity of this brutal scene confronts the reader and begs a visceral response, yet the narration halts any such emotional release. Otsuka sustains this effect throughout the novel. When we, as readers, want to react in shock, anger or sorrow to the racially charged events of this historical period, typically we are not afforded a moment to embrace subjective reflection from these characters. Yet, the dread of inevitable internment proceeds as an inescapable certainty and the reader also becomes conditioned to withdraw in resignation to the hopelessness of incarceration.

The shocking violence in the passage describing the death of White Dog serves as a sharp correlative to the destruction visited upon this family in its arrest and internment. They are constructed as beings deprived of personal identity, as a political category, as data within a massive government program. The family is herded with the Berkeley Japanese American community and transported to the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California. Like many of the Temporary Assembly Centers in the Pacific Coast states, Tanforan was hastily arranged as temporary housing for thousands of families until the completion of preparations for "permanent" confinement in the ten internment camps.² Having previous experience specific only to army barrack life of young adult men, the State was woefully unprepared to deal with the full-scale care of such a large and diverse population. The primitive nature of Tanforan is clear when the girl reminisces about how all

summer long they had lived in the old horse stalls in the stables behind the racetrack. In the morning they had washed their faces in the long tin troughs and at night they had slept on mattresses stuffed with straw. Twice a day when the siren blew they had returned to the stalls for the head count and three times a day they had lined up to eat in the mess hall on the ground floor of the grandstands. On their first night there her brother had plucked the stiff horse hairs out of the freshly white-washed walls and run his fingers along the toothmarks on top of the double Dutch door where the wood was soft and worn. On warm days he had smelled the smell of the horses rising up through the damp linoleum floors. (30-1)

The implication of housing West Coast Japanese in horse stables is less than subtle. The treatment of Japanese internees during this period of war hysteria was no greater nor dignified than for the animals who formerly held residence in these quarters.

Five months later the family is sent by train to the Topaz internment camp outside of Delta, Utah.³ Arrival at the Topaz camp immediately generates a feeling of austere permanence and inescapability. The girl "looked out the window and saw

² In fact, most of the camps still remained incomplete after internees began arriving starting in the summer of 1942.

³ The train ride between the Tanforan Assembly Center and the Topaz internment camp held its own challenges: passengers became ill, the train was struck by a brick thrown from outside, the duration of the trip seemed interminable and their destination was ultimately unpleasant.

hundreds of tar-paper barracks sitting beneath the hot sun. She saw telephone poles and barbed-wire fences. She saw soldiers. And everything she saw through a cloud of fine white dust that had once been the bed of an ancient salt lake” (48). The ever-present dust has an irrepressible effect as the boy “began to cough and the girl untied her scarf and shoved it into his hand and told him to hold it over his nose and mouth. He pressed the scarf to his face and took the girl’s hand and together they stepped out of the bus and into the blinding white glare of the desert” (48). This environmental shock serves as their jarring introduction to this “city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert” (49) which becomes their enclosed, militarily guarded world. This bland, unwelcoming scene of impersonal army barracks arranged methodically across the desert floor dominates the experiences of this family during confinement.

The spartan housing structures in the camps were erected with a primary interest in their rapid completion at the lowest expense. Bill Hosokawa details the basic military functionality of these barracks with their “exterior walls [of] wood sheathing applied on 2 by 4 studs and covered with black tarpaper. [...] Each room was furnished with a stove, one droplight and steel Army cots and mattresses – nothing more. The space allotment was one room per family; it was up to the family’s ingenuity to build furniture and shelves from scrap lumber, arrange for the privacy of its members and make these bleak little boxes livable” (343). While adequate at the most basic level, these barracks provided little comfort, especially set in the high desert environment of Western Utah. Roger Daniels provides further description of the typical living quarters at Topaz:

the uninsulated barracks were twenty feet wide. Thus, all “apartments” were twenty feet in one dimension: and as little as eight feet or as much as twenty-four feet in the other. The largest “apartment” was an unpartitioned area of twenty by twenty-four feet; that 480 square-foot space would be “home” for a family of six. Partitions between “apartments” did not reach the roof, so that privacy within or between family living spaces was impossible. As the camp populations declined, conditions improved somewhat. By April 1943 the average Topaz inmate had 114 square feet of living space; that is, an area six by nineteen feet. (67)

Such is the cramped living space the family must inhabit in Otsuka’s story. At night the boy mentally locates himself within “the endless rows of black barracks all lined up in the sand. In the distance, a wide empty field where nothing but sagebrush grew, then the fence and the high wooden towers. There was a guard in each tower, and he carried a machine gun and binoculars and at night he manned the searchlight. He had brown hair and green eyes, or maybe they were blue, and he had just come back from a tour of the Pacific” (51-2). This relationship between the barracks and the armed guards never weakens. Confined to their featureless quarters, the family is perpetually aware that armed military guards enforce their restriction.

Trapped within the camp, the outside world and former identities begin to vanish. Each section of the novel charts in stages how this family was forced to destroy its cherished heirlooms and other items which would differentiate them ethnically. The woman mulls over the memories of the days prior to the evacuation when she necessarily incinerated anything connected to Japan: a bonfire in the backyard consumed all letters from Kagoshima, family photographs, kimonos, phonograph records of Japanese opera, their abacus, et cetera. She ripped the flag of the rising sun, smashed the tea set and Imari dishes, and the “framed portrait of the boy’s uncle, who had once been a general in the emperor’s army. No more rice balls in lunch pails – peanut butter and jelly sandwiches instead. If asked, they are instructed to say that they are Chinese” (75). This deleterious process of winnowing down cultural markers culminates in retaining not much other than the nameless,

common identity of Japanese prisoners. The family becomes defined solely on a racial basis, signifying nothing more than their inclusion in the War Department's tally of "enemy" Japanese.

The inescapably uninspiring aspects of this barrack city begin to erode visual distinctions. The indistinct external world of the camp personifies the reductive condition of the Japanese American community as a general ethnic type. In time, the Topaz population begins to resemble the bland, monotony of the identical, blank army barracks: the same cots, same potbellied stove, same single bare lightbulb hanging from the roof. Exemplifying the erasure of specific identity, the boy regards all internees as a mass without quality, as "an endless sea of bobbing black heads" (50). Lost within this undifferentiated crowd, the boy believes that he recognizes his absent father everywhere, mistaking nearly every older man for him. His painful search elucidates the depth of his desperation.

Institutionalization sets in as the days bleed into one another without significance. Daily activities are divested of meaning and many internees merely subsist through the prolonged period of confinement by waiting for it to end. The mother in particular grows increasingly listless and despondent. Time itself begins to lose definition and she occasionally experiences confusion about her situation, intimating how sometimes in dreamlike disorientation she will "look up at the clock and it's half past five and I'm sure that he's on his way home from the office. And then I'll start to panic. 'It's *late*,' I'll think to myself. 'I should have started the rice by now'" (84-85 – italics in original). Time seems to be on hold and the ghosts of a past life reinforce the deprivation of internment. The girl literalizes this sensation of frozen time by no longer winding her watch after their arrival at Topaz. Whenever she is asked for the time, she states that it is 6 o'clock. The boy also becomes adrift in the indistinguishable years of imprisonment: "he lay awake on top of the sheets longing for ice, a section of orange, a stone, something, anything, to suck on, to quench his thirst. It was June now. Or maybe it was July. It was August. The calendar had fallen from the wall. The tin clock had stopped ticking. Its gears were clotted with dust and would not turn" (103). Clearly, time has become divided by the moment when this family entered confinement. The slow decay of time mirrors the slow erosion of their cultural identity as they are transformed into another family subsumed within the category of Japanese prisoners. Like many, this family has no option but to wait for the war to end and hopefully reunite with their father.

The temporal divide between imprisonment and the memories of a prior life has its parallel in the spatial separation that distinguishes the camp from the outside world. The armed guards patrolling the barbed-wire borders and stationed atop watchtowers form a persistent external threat. This clear delineation of space cannot be questioned. The boy muses with childhood innocence about "the rules" of the fence: "You could not go over it, you could not go under it, you could not go around it, you could not go through it. / And if your kite got stuck on it? / That was an easy one. You let the kite go" (61). While these observations are bittersweet in their subtle, boyish evocation, they highlight the undeniable realism of coercion and the unwavering potential for violence. Otsuka describes the boy's fantasies of a happier, flawless domestic life outside of the camp:

in his mind he could see it: the tree-lined streets at sundown, the dark green lawns, the sidewalks, boys throwing balls in backyards, girls playing hopscotch, mothers with pink quilted mitts sliding hot casseroles out of ovens, fathers with shiny black briefcases bursting through front doors, shouting, "Honey, I'm home! Honey, I'm home!" / When he thought of the world outside it was always six o'clock. A Wednesday or a Thursday. Dinnertime across America. (66)

Once again, that 6 o'clock marker registers the gulf between memories of the outside world and existence in the camp. In the end, there was not much to desire from the outside world anyhow. The experience of internees who were allowed outside of Topaz contrasts decidedly with his childish dream of escapism. Persecution of Japanese continues beyond the guarded barbed-wire fences. The War Relocation Authority permits agricultural workers to travel to distant farms and some "swore they would never go out there again. They said they'd been shot at. Spat on. Refused entrance to the local diner. The movie theater. The dry goods store. They said the signs in the windows were the same wherever they went: NO JAPS ALLOWED. Life was easier, they said, on this side of the fence" (66-67). Hearing these stories diminishes the boy's hope for freedom outside of the patrolled perimeter.

In what is likely September 1945, the family finally gains release from Topaz after three and a half years of internment. However, there are further complications and continued racist encounters after they resettle in their former home. While fortunate to have a home to which they may return, the family soon discovers that it has been ransacked and had been inhabited by squatters while they were away. It was vandalized with "words scrawled in red ink that made [them] turn away" (111). The room in which the mother had locked their most valued possessions is now almost empty. Nevertheless, the children ebulliently embrace their return home and run from room to room "shouting 'Fire! Help! Wolf!' simply because [they] could" (109). As the children begin to resettle into their old neighborhood, they notice that neighbors now own furniture and appliances suspiciously similar to items that were stolen while they were away. However, initiating a dispute over true ownership would only draw increased negative attention.

Readjustment to American society is extremely difficult after years of racist hysteria, especially in the Pacific Coast states; for example, the vast majority of Californians at the end of WWII still supported the decision for internment as a necessary action (Fugita and Fernandez 107). Most resettlers feared that publicly critiquing their treatment would garner rejection from an unsympathetic society and would only serve to extend the unwanted memory of internment. Likewise, drawing attention to internment would accentuate one's Japanese ethnicity and invite further hostility; as such, many internees wanted to forget these tormenting years and maintain silence. For example, the father returns to the family residence in December 1945 and remains absolutely silent regarding the details of his imprisonment:

He never said a word to us about the years he'd been away. Not one word. He never talked about politics, or his arrest, or how he had lost all his teeth. He never mentioned his loyalty hearing before the Alien Enemy Control Unit. He never told us what it was, exactly, he'd been accused of. Sabotage? Selling secrets to the enemy? Conspiring to overthrow the government? Was he guilty as charged? Was he innocent? (Was he even there at all?) We didn't know. We didn't want to know. We never asked. All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget. (133)

By extension, the reader remains ignorant of his situation during incarceration. Those punishing years slowly became an unarticulated understanding in the family. Narrated from the children's point-of-view, this section of the novel establishes a feeling of distance from the father. The children's relationship with their father is ostensibly close, but the unconquerable silence about their recent past creates a lack of intimacy. Though he is outwardly enthusiastic to talk with his children, they note their father's pronounced sense of vacancy: "no matter what we said [...] his response was the same. 'Is that so?'" (135). After his isolation, the father is a paranoid, frazzled, ruined man. He spends his days "sitting on the edge of his bed

with his hands in his lap, staring out through the window as though he were waiting for something to happen. Sometimes he'd get dressed and put on his coat but he could not make himself walk out the front door" (137).

The silence emerging from the desire to forget these painful memories provides fortitude for many resettlers in the Pacific Coast states attempting to recapture their identities and reconstruct their previous lives. However, this daunting prospect is not universally achieved nor often possible. As former prisoners reestablishing "normal" life in Berkeley, they encounter American war veterans who relate P.O.W. stories of torture by the Japanese military. The somewhat similar experiences of incarceration only serve to deepen race-based separation and lingering hatred. Rather than potentially generating an incipient form of national solidarity, this situation amplifies a common West Coast judgment of all Japanese as alien, a people who "could never be trusted again" (120). The racially focalized overtones of guilt ensnare this family, strengthening a presumed affiliation with the enemy Japanese. Rationalizations abound for internment by those who stubbornly refuse to recognize the distinction between Japanese who are Americans and those in a separate nation thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean: "Those people bombed Pearl Harbor! They deserved what they got" (121). Many veterans conclude that the end of the war, even including its nuclear terror, is cause for celebration: "*Best day of my life? The day Harry dropped that beautiful bomb*" (119 – italics in the original). After being granted freedom from the camps, the dominant justifications for the burdens of exclusion and unjust confinement must be endured without redress in what still remains a hostile social climate.

Careers necessary for economic survival as well as establishing domestic stability are especially scarce for West Coast ethnic Japanese. The father lacks employment upon his return because the company where he had worked prior to the war was liquidated. The text lists the numerous explanations for why he is incapable of securing a job: "he was an old man, his health was not good, he had just come back from a camp for dangerous enemy aliens" (135). As undoubtedly the most significant factor, the latter reason indicates further carving of the racial divide during the resettlement period. After her own prolonged quest for employment full of rejections overtly due to her race, the mother finally secures work as a housekeeper, which is not comparable to her skill level. While the family may be lucky enough to have retained ownership of their home (unlike many) and are able to "begin again," their financial success in Berkeley must be accomplished through tight-lipped endurance.

Discriminatory practices were not necessarily the most powerful causes for silence. The self-monitoring will to assimilate and not "appear" Japanese (or even appear publically at all) displays an internalization of societal pressures. These panoptic measures were self-administered during the curfew period shortly before incarceration and intensify after resettlement. The mother outlines the goals for remaining invisible and socially harmless: "Keep your mouth shut and don't say a thing. / Stay inside. / Don't leave the house. / Travel only in the daytime. / Do not converse on the telephone in Japanese. / Do not congregate in one place. / When in town if you meet another Japanese do not greet him in the Japanese manner by bowing. / Remember, you're in America. / Greet him in the American way by shaking his hand" (83-4). This set of normalizing behaviors becomes a post-internment inheritance to be complaisant, burying emotions and thoughts which might distinguish oneself as disharmonious or unique:

When our teachers asked us if everything was all right we nodded our heads and said, yes, of course, everything was fine. / If we did something wrong we made sure to say excuse me

(excuse me for looking at you, excuse me for sitting here, excuse me for coming back). If we did something terribly wrong we immediately said we were sorry (I'm sorry I touched your arm, I didn't mean to, it was an accident, I didn't see it resting there so quietly, so beautifully, so perfectly, so irresistibly, on the edge of the desk, I lost my balance and brushed against it by mistake, I was standing too close, I wasn't watching where I was going, somebody pushed me from behind, I never wanted to touch you, I have always wanted to touch you, I will never touch you again, I promise, I swear...). (122-123)

These painful efforts at extreme self-abnegation display their commitment to be as innocuous as possible. In a similar fashion, the stultifying command over permissible language was one of the lessons learned early in the internment experience. The threat of granting any negative valence to internment and its practices lead to prescribed rules about language describing the camps: "Here we say Dining Hall and not Mess Hall; Safety Council, not Internal Police; Residents, not Evacuees; and last but not least, Mental Climate, not Morale" (61). Such rhetorical substitution disallows direct, genuine portrayal of prison conditions and the treatment of its "residents."

When the Emperor Was Divine illustrates the multiple levels of silence permeating all aspects of internment. In addition to the coordinated federal program to render West Coast Japanese invisible, there are the individual struggles to silence one's cultural identity through the internalization of social codes discouraging ethnic distinctions and the process of censorship, both self-administered and within bureaucratic channels. The final section of the novel, however, presents a vitriolic explosion in response to the injustices levied against this family. Although not specified, it is quite clear that this short section voices the father's fury, who issues a vertiginous list addressing every unwarranted accusation against West Coast Japanese: "I admit it. I lied. You were right. You were always right. It was me. I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. I sent my peas and potatoes to market full of arsenic. I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads. I set your oil wells on fire. I scattered mines across the entrance to your harbors. I spied on your airfields. I spied on your naval yards" (140).⁴ The "confession" becomes an absurd catalogue of nearly every socially undesirable element and paranoid threat attributed to the "enemy"; for example, "I crept into your house while you were away and sullied your wife. [...] I pulled out the nails from your white picket fence and sold them to the enemy to melt down and make into bullets. I gave that same enemy your defense maps for free. [...] I revealed to him your worst secrets. *Short attention span. Doesn't always remember to take out the garbage. Sometimes talks with his mouth full*" (141 – italics in original). The text continues to detail the malevolent stereotypes and invectives issued against the Japanese in America:

You know who I am. Or you think you do. I'm your florist. I'm your grocer. I'm your porter. I'm your waiter. I'm the owner of the dry-goods store on the corner of Elm. I'm the shoeshine boy. I'm the judo teacher. I'm the Buddhist priest. I'm the Shinto priest. [...] I'm the one you call Jap. I'm the one you call Nip. I'm the one you call Slits. I'm the one you call Slopes. I'm the one you call Yellowbelly. I'm the one you call Gook. I'm the one you don't see at all – we all look alike. I'm the one you see everywhere – we're taking over the neighborhood. [...] I'm your worst fear – you saw what we did in Manchuria, you remember Nanking, you can't get Pearl Harbor out of your mind. [...] So go ahead and lock me up. Take my children. Take my wife. Freeze my assets. Seize my crops. Search my office. Ransack my house. Cancel my

⁴ The limits of space prevent printing the full text of this "confession" section with all of its crisp condemnation of the wartime mistreatment of Japanese in the U.S.

insurance. Auction off my business. Hand over my lease. Assign me a number. Inform me of my crime. (142-143)

That is to say, the father, along with all others in the Pacific Coast states, stands trial for being Japanese and for "crimes" assessed from sweeping racist prejudices. The section concludes with extreme frustration and acquiescence in voicing a forced apology to his phantom interrogators: "And if they ask you someday what it was I most wanted to say, please tell them, if you would [...] I'm sorry. / There. That's it. I've said it. Now can I go?" (144). In other words, how much self-abasement is sufficient to end these tireless punishments?

Otsuka cleverly sustains the narrative tension of silent endurance throughout the novel in preparation for the critical impact of this final concluding passage. The sharpest indictment of the racism underlying incarceration manifests in this list of ostensible crimes, which delineate an offensive catalogue of stereotypes and irrational fears. But the father must swallow his legitimate reproach and the "confession" remains unvoiced. Of course, none of his admissions of guilt are true; what is interesting is how their intensity and extensiveness emerges in contradistinction to the tortured silence portrayed since the beginning of the novel. The concluding forced confession emerges as a requisite response to the unwanted and uncompromising pressure to legitimize the unjust incrimination of innocent Japanese. *When the Emperor Was Divine* itself (albeit as a fictional representation) is the result of an imposition, both in the repressive nature of the historical subject matter and in its production as a cultural, testimonial document decades later. In fact, the entire history of internment is a lamentable cultural inheritance for generations of Japanese Americans.

As a work of historical fiction, *When the Emperor Was Divine* must negotiate its separate roles as a text exhibiting American history, personal reminiscence (or memoir), and a collective cultural memory. The novel maintains a troubling tension between its exploration of the subjective experience of internment which humanizes the event and the simultaneous inclination to remain silent and to forget the internment era. At the same time, the novel articulates a social history largely erased from U.S. collective memory about the wholesale scapegoating of a racial and ethnic presence during wartime. In one fashion, then, literary representation of this history promotes discourse on that which otherwise cannot be articulated. But much more than supplying factual representation and encapsulating historical significance, a fictional account of internment like Otsuka's testifies to the personal realities and cultural impact of internment. Hence, *When the Emperor Was Divine* fulfills an important social task of breaking the silence. It articulates, humanizes, and "embodies" this historical reality and enables contemporary audiences to confront internment and its human consequences.

Reference

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