

Alien or American?: The Boy's Search for Nationality in *When the Emperor Was Divine*

In 1932, Yoshiko Uchida and her cousins attended the Los Angeles Olympic Games (Uchida 37; Somerby 127). Uchida, a second-generation Japanese American (Nisei) born in California in 1921, boldly demonstrated her American patriotism by wearing “red, white, and blue” and “cheering enthusiastically for the American team” (Seaman 168; Uchida 37). However, as Uchida recalls in her book *Desert Exile*, her Nisei cousins supported Japan, choosing to “identify with the men who resembled them in appearance” (37–38). It was here that Uchida recalls first becoming “acutely aware of the duality of [her] person and the fact that a choice in loyalties might be made” between her Japanese heritage and her American nationality (37).

Eleven years later in Topaz, Utah, Japanese American third graders in Ms. Yamauchi's class were faced with a similar yet more hostile “choice in loyalties” between Japan and the United States (Hori et al. 9; Uchida 37). After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which ordered the “evacuation” of 127,000 Japanese immigrants (Issei) and Japanese American citizens into ten concentration camps located throughout the western United States (Arrington 3, 5, 9). Ms. Yamauchi and her third-grade class, stripped of their constitutional rights of citizenship, were imprisoned in the Topaz internment camp. Beginning in March 1943, the class began keeping a diary (Hori et al. 4). It contains drawings of American flags, tanks, and planes and documents the class's attempts to help “Uncle Sam,” which suggest that, despite their imprisonment, the children had “chosen” America (Hori et al. 5–6). However, the children's last names and the diary's references to the camp's celebration of Japanese Boy's Day and Buddhist

parades demonstrate the continued presence of their Japanese heritage, which the United States shunned (Hori et al. 3, 30–32).

Considering Uchida's and the third graders' experiences as Japanese American children before and during the Japanese American internment has interesting implications for analyzing Nisei characters in internment literature because Uchida's experience illuminates the Nisei's unique ability to "choose" a nation-based identity: American or Japanese. Yet their experiences also demonstrate that even if the Nisei pledged loyalty to their American nationality, like Ms. Yamauchi's class, the American public would not accept their decision because of the lingering traces of their Japanese heritage—their names, their race, and the traditions of their parents—which the United States government used to justify imprisoning them.

The Nisei's struggle to obtain a socially recognized American identity can shed light on Julie Otsuka's representation of Nisei children in her novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*. Published in 2002, the novel reimagines the internment of a Japanese American family and is loosely based on the internment of Otsuka's mother, uncle, and grandparents (Lao 505–7). The characters do not have names and are referred to as the woman or Mother, the girl, the boy, and Father. Father, arrested shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, is imprisoned in various camps, while the woman, the girl, and the boy are interned in Tanforan and Topaz. Otsuka, utilizing historical research, her family's experience, and her historically distant yet personal perspective as a third-generation Japanese American (Sansei), recreates the traumatic experience of internment through purposefully generic characters (i.e. the boy, the girl) (509). Therefore, the novel is a valuable resource for contemplating the Nisei's personal struggle to "choose" and claim an American identity.

Literary scholars of Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* have discussed the characters' powerlessness against the United States government. Some scholars argue that the internees (specifically the boy) perceive themselves through the racial stereotypes of contemporary American culture, transform into the "enemy" race throughout the novel, or remain silent against government oppression because their distinct racial features obviously identify them with the racialized enemy (Manzella 144–45; Park 136; Ahlin 89–90). However, Yoshiko Uchida's and the third graders' experiences clearly demonstrate that, though the Nisei were physically powerless against the government's internment order, some still acted out their chosen American identities (consciously or unconsciously) by wearing "red, white, and blue" and helping "Uncle Sam" with the war effort (Uchida 37; Hori et al. 5–6). Therefore, Otsuka's Nisei characters may mirror their historical counterparts' determination to act out their Americanness.

In this essay, I examine how Japanese American children in Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* internalize race and nationality as a consequence of the Japanese American WWII internment in the 1940s. I analyze how the boy's conception of "Americanness" influences his perception of race and personal identity by examining scenes from the novel—specifically scenes where he engages in patriotic acts, verbalizes and enacts racial stereotypes against Asians, struggles with memories of his father's arrest, and dreams of the Emperor. I contextualize my analysis of the boy's experience by referencing primary and secondary accounts, which include oral histories, autobiographies, and articles, that describe the Nisei's childhood experiences before, during, and after their internment at Topaz and other concentration camps. In light of these sources, I argue that, within Otsuka's representation, the boy consciously strives to prove his "Americanness" by performing "American" acts, such as

supporting the war effort or utilizing racial slurs, and by struggling against his image as the Japanese enemy alien. However, despite the boy's choice to claim his American identity, he subconsciously recognizes the United States' betrayal and seeks citizenship and belonging in the irresistible pull towards his Japanese heritage, as indicated by his dreams of the Emperor. Otsuka's representation of the boy reflects Asian Americans' ongoing struggle to validate their American identity by bearing the physical, mental, and emotional scars of patriotism.

As I examine the boy's conscious efforts to prove his "Americanness" and his subconscious search for citizenship and nationality, I draw on Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke's discussion of identity theory and social identity theory, Tina Chen's theory of Asian American impersonation and double agency, and Ju Yon Kim's theory of Asian American performance. I combine these theories in my essay to examine how the boy identifies with the "in-group" of white America and differentiates himself from the "out-group" of the Japanese and the Issei by acting out, impersonating, or performing his conception of white American culture (Stets and Burke 225). In this essay, I first utilize primary and secondary historical accounts to establish how Japanese American children reacted to their internment, and I interpret those reactions using the conceptual theories cited above. I then analyze the boy's efforts to impersonate white American society, his struggle against being classified as a Japanese enemy alien, and his disconnection from any nationality.

### **Nisei Children's Identity Crises and Their Performance of the American Mundane**

According to primary and secondary historical accounts, Japanese American children and adolescents experienced identity crises as a result of their internment. According to Benson Tong, Japanese American children often failed to connect their imprisonment with "racism, war hysteria, or governmental control" because of their sheltered existences (Tong 3, 6). However,

after the attack on Pearl Harbor, children did feel “self-conscious” as they faced “overt hostility” from white Americans (11). George Nakagawa, a Nisei interned when he was ten years old, remembers that, though he “had little knowledge of world affairs,” he “was very much conscious . . . of the fact that [he] was Japanese American, because there was a noticeable discrimination that was obvious even to a nine-year-old” (*Japanese* xv, 54, 56). As children became more racially self-conscious, they often experienced a sense of “undefined guilt” and “disbelief” that the American public could “[associate them] with the enemy” because of their race (Tong 11–12). Adolescent Japanese Americans also “experienced heightened racial consciousness” (23). Although many recognized government-sanctioned racism as the cause of their internment, some hesitated to do so (26, 24). Instead, they “blamed” their internment on “the demands of the war,” “wartime hysteria,” or “themselves” (24, 26). Some Nisei also “identif[ied] with the aggressor” (American society) by adopting racist ideologies against the Japanese “to [distinguish] themselves from the Japanese in Japan, and from the Issei, so as to assert their American identity” (27).

The responses of Nisei children and adolescents to the trauma of internment exemplifies Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke’s discussion of identity and social identity theory. Stets and Burke explain that both social and personal identities are formed through “self-categorization” (225). In social identity theory, individuals self-categorize by “accentuat[ing] . . . the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members . . . [and] the perceived differences between the self and out-group members,” which may include “attitudes, beliefs and values” (225). As individuals attempt to unify themselves with the in-group, they often apply social stereotypes to out-groups (226). On the other hand, identity theory suggests that individuals self-categorize by

“nam[ing] and classif[y]ing” themselves and others into “roles,” which ultimately “guide” their “behavior” (225).

Tina Chen’s theory of Asian American impersonation or double agency and Ju Yon Kim’s theory of Asian American performance add to these theories. Tina Chen argues that Asian Americans adopt identities “assigned to” them by society in order to be understood and recognized (xviii). Though Asian Americans are American, white Americans do not consider them to be “‘American’ enough” (xviii). This societal rejection forces Asian Americans “to impersonate . . . [themselves]” or follow “constructed” “American identities” to legitimize their citizenship (xviii–xix). Ju Yon Kim mirrors Chen’s argument as he explains that Asian Americans’ performances of “everyday,” “mundane” actions, like “eating, working, shopping, and studying,” were used to classify Asian Americans as the “‘model minority’” or “‘yellow peril’” “from the nineteenth century to the present” (3). Even though Asian Americans may perform the “mundane” as well as other Americans, oftentimes the American public (or their audience) does not “believe” in their bodily performance of Americanness because of their racial appearance (3, 7, 13).

In other words, Japanese Americans—specifically the interned Nisei—had to reenact the “mundane,” mainstream American “attitudes, beliefs and values” to be accepted and recognized by other American citizens (Kim 3; Stets and Burke 225; Chen xviii–xix). However, the American public did not believe in their American performance, which caused the Nisei to feel disconnected from their own country even as they struggled to distance themselves from their Japanese heritage (Tong 27).

### **The Boy’s Impersonation of White American Society**

While interned at Topaz, the boy attempts to engage in acts of American patriotism to prove his chosen American identity. “Every morning,” the boy “recite[s] the pledge of allegiance,” sings patriotic songs, and “shout[s] out ‘Here!’ at the sound of his name” (Otsuka 71). Josephine Park argues that Japanese Americans were forced to recite the pledge of allegiance every day “to prove their Americanness” and to “[turn] the [Japanese] enemy” within them (139). However, the boy eagerly announces his presence in the school’s patriotic setting by shouting “here,” which suggests that he is attempting to “accentuat[e] . . . the perceived similarities between” himself and the “in-group” of recognized American citizens (Stets and Burke 225). The boy connects himself with other Americans by participating in the same patriotic acts and therefore daily reiterates his Americanness to himself and his peers. In a letter to his father, the boy also establishes his role in the war effort. He says, “*In the mess hall we are collecting nails for Uncle Sam*” (Otsuka 61). Miss Yamauchi’s third-grade class also collected “nails for Uncle Sam” to fulfill their patriotic duty (Hori et al. 38). According to Michael O. Tunnell and George W. Chilcoat, “nails were scarce and valuable to the Japanese Americans” because resources for making furniture were limited to “boxes and crates that came into camp” (39). Therefore, the boy, like other interned Japanese American children, sacrificed personal comforts to perform the everyday tasks of a wartime American despite his imprisonment.

The boy also acts out his patriotism by adopting and utilizing racial slurs or stereotypes against the Japanese enemy and other internees. As the boy and his friends play “war,” they imitate American soldiers, shouting, “*Kill the Nazis! Kill the Japs!*” (Otsuka 53–54). The boy’s use of the racial term “Japs” suggests, as Abigail Manzella argues, that the boy has “internal[ized]” Japan “as the enemy” to the United States (Otsuka 54; Manzella 144). However, it more importantly demonstrates that the boy uses names or classifications to actively

differentiate himself, the soldier, from the enemy, the “Japs” (Otsuka 54). Before his internment, the boy shouts, “Jap! Jap! I’m a Jap!” after saying he was a “Chink” to a man in the street, demonstrating that the boy initially identified as a member of the enemy out-group prior to his incarceration (76). However, upon arriving in the camp, he separates himself from the other internees and Asian Americans by using racial slurs, which suggests that the boy’s sense of identity has shifted from the alienated out-group to the in-group of American citizens. When the boy first enters the camp, he mistakes the male internees for his father. “They all looked alike,” he thinks. “Black hair. Slanted Eyes. . . . Thin lips. Bad teeth. Unknowable. Inscrutable. That was him, over there. The little yellow man” (49). By stating “*they* all looked alike,” the boy categorizes the Issei (including his father) into a generalized out-group who are marked by racialized features (“slanted eyes”) that American society associates with deceptive character traits, such as being “unknowable,” “inscrutable,” and ultimately untrustworthy (emphasis added, Otsuka 49; Ahlin 89). The boy distinguishes himself from this untrustworthy group using the pronoun “they” rather than “we” (Otsuka 49). In addition, the word “they” is often used by white Americans to refer to non-whites or people of color, which suggests that the boy mentally and racially identifies with the in-group of white American citizenry (49).

The boy’s racial stereotypes extend beyond Japanese Americans to the Chinese as he remarks that he knows that “in China the men wore their hair in long black pigtailed and the ladies hobbled around on tiny broken feet” (75). The boy’s descriptions of the Chinese and Japanese reflect the adolescent Nisei’s “identification with” and impersonation of “the aggressor” or American society (Tong 27). Some Nisei attempted to remain within the in-group of American citizenry by adopting racist ideology about Asian cultures to prevent themselves from being categorized as the racialized enemy out-group (27). Lena Ahlin argues that Japanese Americans



did not resist their “incarceration” (as can be seen in the novel) because their racialized features clearly distinguished them from “white Americans” and therefore introduced “desperate circumstances” in the case of rebellion, such as worsened camp conditions and even “death” (89–90). Though the characters in the novel do not engage in physical resistance, the boy does mentally resist the United States government’s efforts to classify him as the enemy by adopting and applying their racial ideology to ultimately integrate himself into the in-group of American citizenry.

A particularly poignant example of the boy’s attempts to identify with and impersonate the in-group of white American society is when the boy puts on a “size 44 navy pea [coat]” and looks at himself in the mirror (Otsuka 87). “His hair [is] long and uncombed and his face [is] dark brown from the sun. The coat [hangs] down past his knees. He narrow[s] his eyes and [sticks] out his two front teeth. *I predge arregiance to the frag . . . Whatsamalla, Shorty? Solly, So so solly*” (87). This unsettling reenactment of the pledge of allegiance contrasts sharply with the boy’s previous recitations at school with “his hand over his heart” (71). Abigail Manzella argues that the change in the boy’s mannerisms from patriotic eagerness to mocking racial slurs can be attributed to the boy’s internal struggle as he “both wants to kill the enemy and sees himself as the enemy wearing a bullet-ridden, military peacoat” (144). However, rather than recognizing himself as the enemy, the boy recognizes and mocks the Issei internees as the enemy. According to Yoshiko Uchida, she and other Nisei children (a decade before the internment) were “sometimes ashamed of the Issei in their shabby clothes, their run-down trucks and cars, their skin darkened from years of laboring in sun-parched fields, [and] their inability to speak English” (42). Therefore, the boy’s overly large, “shabby” coat, his unkempt appearance, and his dark skin likely remind him of the Issei, from whom, according to Tong, Nisei

adolescents strove to differentiate themselves (Uchida 42; Tong 27). As Tina Chen suggests, the boy adopts the identity “assigned to” the Issei by the American public as he exaggerates the Issei’s accented English and racialized features (xviii). <fig. 1> When I visited the Topaz internment camp, I found a rusted coat hook lying in the sand (see appendix A). Its presence in the camp highlights how the boy (and other Japanese American children) metaphorically “hangs up” one racialized identity as a white American, like a coat on a hook, and slips temporarily into another as the stereotyped Issei enemy when he puts on the oversized coat. Similar coats may have hung on coat hooks in almost every barrack in Topaz, reflecting the dualistic identity of interned Japanese American children.

### **The Boy’s Struggle against His Japanese Heritage**

As the boy impersonates white American values to establish his American identity, he tries to reconcile his father’s imprisonment because of his race with the boy’s American identity by projecting his idealized perception of American culture on his father. When the boy imagines his father as a prisoner “in the camp for dangerous enemy aliens,” he says, “My daddy’s an outlaw,” and then “picture[s] his father in cowboy boots . . . , riding a big beautiful horse,” “rustl[ing] some cattle, or robb[ing] a bank” (Otsuka 83). In Stephen Sohn’s analysis of the novel’s second chapter, Sohn argues that the girl projects American “narratives of romance,” including the mythic figures of the cowboy and wild mustangs, onto the desert landscape to “[assimilate]” herself into the American West as she looks out of the train window (171, 175, 180). While the girl romanticizes the landscape, the boy projects his fantasy of the American “outlaw” cowboy onto his father to move his father from the out-group of racialized “enemy aliens” to the in-group of white, masculine Americans (Otsuka 83; Stets and Burke 225). The cowboy’s mobile banditry on his horse in the romanticized American frontier contrasts sharply

with the father's confinement within a fenced-in camp. By imagining his father as a cowboy, the boy restores his father's freedom and provides an alternative reason for his father's imprisonment besides his race. Therefore, the boy attempts to avoid his own origins as the "enemy alien" by rewriting his father's incarceration.

To further separate himself from his Japanese heritage, the boy infuses his father's language with contemporary American slang and sayings when he remembers and daydreams of his father. For example, the boy recalls his father saying, "*I guess you could say that's my forte*," referring to his ability to doodle (Otsuka 62). In the boy's tenderer memories, he remembers his father's nicknames for him, like "Little Guy," "Gum Drop," "Peanut," and his "absolute numero uno" (64). As the boy daydreams of being reunited with his father, his father says, "Son of a gun. . . . Would you look at that," when the boy points out that he is still wearing slippers (105). Phrases like "that's my forte" and "son of a gun" are distinctly American, and "Gum Drop" and "Peanut" are typical nicknames American parents bestow on their children (64, 105). Nisei teenage boys in the short story "The Brothers Murata," by Toshio Mori (a Topaz internee), also emphasize their status as "representative Americans" through their language. (139). They repeatedly weave sayings like "What's eating you?" and "hard knocks," name-calling like "dope" and "GI wolves," and American swear words into their casual conversations (139–41). The Nisei teenagers' overuse of American slang and the boy's remembrance of it may reflect their desire to "distinguish themselves from the Japanese in Japan" and from the Issei in the camp (Tong 27).

However, the boy's use of these phrases and nicknames seems almost unnatural because of how frequently the boy recalls his Issei father (whose second language is English) using them. This suggests that the boy is attempting to recategorize his father's English from "enemy-alien"

status to American in-group status. In Toyo Suyemoto's memoir, *I Call to Remembrance*, Suyemoto recalls that her parents frequently used Japanese words like *giri* (moral obligation) and *on* (duty) as they taught Suyemoto and her siblings (31). Although the boy's parents are much more fluent in English than Suyemoto's, it seems strange that the boy does not remember his father's Japanese culture surfacing in his language, causing readers to question the reliability of the boy's memories (Suyemoto 32). In essence, the boy molds his father's character to impersonate the "behavioral norms" and "styles of speech" of the in-group of white American society in order to erase the boy's own relationship with the Japanese enemy (Stets and Burke 225).

However, the boy's efforts to secure his father's and his own American identity are continually interrupted by flashbacks of his father's clothing when he was arrested. Refusing to allow the boy's father to change his clothes, FBI agents arrested him in "his bathrobe and slippers" (Otsuka 74). The boy recalls feeling "troubled" about his father's appearance (74). "If only they had let him put on his shoes," the boy thinks, "then it all might have turned out differently" (74). The boy strangely connects his father's footwear with his father's imprisonment, and the image of his father's slippers haunts him. As the boy daydreams about his father being a cowboy, "the image . . . suddenly float[s] up before him: his father, in his bathrobe and slippers, being led away across the lawn" (83). As the boy fantasizes about being reunited with his father, he "notice[s] his father's big toe sticking out through a hole in his slipper. 'Papa,' he'd say. . . . 'You forgot to put on your shoes'" (105). Pei-chen Liao argues that the boy's fixation on his father's clothing operates as a "literary technique of repetition [which] enables Otsuka to explore the internees' psychological trauma" (514). While this may be true, the boy's perspective of the Chinese provides more insight. One night in Topaz, the boy "wonder[s] if you

could see the same moon in Lordsburg . . . or even in China, where all the men wore little black slippers” (Otsuka 67–68). In other words, the boy associates “Asian foreignness” with slippers and robes and therefore correlates his father’s slippers with his arrest as a Japanese enemy alien. As a child, Yoshiko Uchida evidently made the same connection as the boy between Japanese clothing and “alien” status, recalling that she felt “like a foreigner when [she] wore [a] kimono for a special school program” (39). The scene of the boy’s father’s arrest—highlighted by his father’s “Asian” apparel—interrupts the boy’s impersonation of American whiteness and reveals his performance as a farce, exposing his Japanese heritage to his peers.

After his father’s arrest, the boy recalls “seeing lights on in the house next door” and seeing “faces pressed to the window,” including Elizabeth Roosevelt’s (Otsuka 74). She “had seen his father taken away in his slippers” (74). The boy’s consciousness of being watched by his neighbors some time after his father’s arrest demonstrates the boy’s heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the white American gaze while he is imprisoned and under military surveillance at Topaz. Elizabeth’s last name, Roosevelt, also demonstrates the boy’s uncertainty about his neighbors’ reception of his Japanese roots, exposed by his father’s apparel. As stated before, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 to imprison Japanese Americans in internment camps (Arrington 5). However, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, opposed the internment and publicly advocated for racial tolerance (Black 9). Therefore, the “Roosevelt” faces watching his father’s arrest could be unsympathetic and condemning or sympathetic and tolerant of the boy’s racial difference from the in-group of white American society. The boy’s fear of his father being seen “in his slippers” reveals the boy’s fear that the American public will reject him (Otsuka 74).

Perhaps the most disturbing example of the boy's struggle against his Japanese heritage is his revulsion of his father's appearance when they are reunited after their internment. When their father gets off the train, the children do not recognize the bald, "small stooped man" with a "face . . . lined with wrinkles," a cane, and no teeth as their father (Otsuka 131–33). "*That's not him,*" they whisper to their mother (132). Josephine Park argues that the novel demonstrates the family's literal transformation into the Japanese enemy, especially the father, whose transition from "the jaunty American father" to the "'little yellow man'" is evident in this scene (142). However, Park does not consider that most of the novel is told from the perspective of Nisei children (particularly the boy) who struggle against the label of "enemy alien" by distancing themselves from their Japanese heritage. In this scene, the children are initially repulsed by their father's seemingly altered appearance because he closely resembles the unkempt, "shabby" appearance of the Issei—the enemy—rather than the American cowboy identity the boy has imagined for him (Uchida 42). Therefore, the children conclude that he cannot be *their* father because *they* are Americans, and this "little yellow man" cannot be (Otsuka 49).

### **The Boy's Recognition of the United States' Betrayal**

Despite the boy's efforts to prove his Americanness and differentiate himself from the Japanese enemy, he struggles against an unconscious loyalty to his Japanese heritage. "On their first day" in Topaz, the boy's mother warns him to "never say the Emperor's name out loud" because worshipping the Emperor or even saying his name is forbidden in the camp (Otsuka 52, 61). Every time the boy walks past a guard tower, he "trie[s] not to say the word. But it sometimes slip[s] out anyway. *Hirohito, Hirohito, Hirohito.* He sa[ys] it quietly. Quickly. He whisper[s] it" (52). Josephine Park argues that the boy's repetition of Hirohito, "the name of the enemy," "expresses a cause for [the boy's] incarceration" and demonstrates that he "behaves like

the enemy because he is imprisoned” (144). However, the scene demonstrates the boy’s inability to perfectly impersonate white Americans because he cannot suppress his loyalty to his Japanese heritage. Though he “trie[s] not to say” the Emperor’s name, it “slip[s] out” before he can prevent it (Otsuka 52). He then “whisper[s] it” “quickly” with “his cap down low over his head,” attempting to conceal his participation in the un-American and treasonous act of saying the Emperor’s name (52).

Alice Sakata Hayashi’s son Bob, a child internee at Tule Lake, also struggled to conceal his Japanese heritage as Alice and her children waited to board a train to leave Tule Lake (Hayashi 110, 131–32). Alice recalls, “When Bob saw the train . . . he wave[d] his arms and [said], ‘*Banzai*.’ I was so embarrassed. I said, ‘They’ll keep you here if you say things like that” (qtd. in Hayashi 132). While *banzai* means “cheers” or “hooray,” it “is also part of the exultation for the Emperor of Japan,” which “Americans often misinterpret as a Japanese battle cry for victory” (Hayashi 133). Though Alice may have warned Bob repeatedly about his language, he could not consciously alter his language in moments of excitement. More importantly, however, Bob was too young to understand that expressing loyalty for Japan, even in the innocent situation of shouting “cheers” or “*Banzai*” for an incoming train, undermined Japanese Americans’ attempts to perform their Americanness into being and immediately reclassified them as the enemy (133). In the boy’s situation, however, he is aware of the Emperor’s threat to Americanness (evident by his mother’s warnings and his shouts of “*Kill the Japs!*” in games of war), yet he cannot completely suppress the pull of his Japanese heritage—much to the boy’s shame (Otsuka 54).

Though the boy consciously suppresses his Japanese heritage, his subconscious dreams portray his Japanese ancestry in an almost alluring position of power and grace, which suggests

that the boy is not entirely satisfied with his chosen American identity. As the boy rides the train from the Tanforan racetrack to Topaz, he “dream[s] he [is] riding an enormous white horse by the sea. When he look[s] out toward the horizon he c[an] see three black ships out on the water. . . . The Emperor himself ha[s] sent them. Their sail[s] [are] white and square and filled with wind and their masts [are] straight and tall. He . . . watche[s] as they slowly [turn] toward the shore” (Otsuka 53). The boy’s placement on the “white horse,” symbolizing American masculinity through its reference to the cowboy, represents the white American identity the boy has chosen, and the black ships represent his Japanese heritage (Sohn 175). Though the boy does gallop along the beach, demonstrating some type of mobility or freedom within his white American identity, the shoreline separates the boy from the ocean, mirroring the boy’s separation and rejection from American society by the barbed wire fences around Tanforan. Though the boy may imitate white Americanness within the camp, America will not accept his performance—he cannot ride his white horse into the sea (Kim 3). On the other hand, the ships—far larger, sturdier, and more well-traveled than the horse—have “sails . . . filled with wind,” signifying a promise for mobility, stability, and freedom if he embraces his Japanese heritage (Otsuka 53). The ships “[turn] toward the shore,” likely to drop anchor in the harbor (53). This leaves the boy in a tantalizing position. He can choose to ride the “white horse” (white America) and remain confined to the land, or he can choose to board the ships (Japanese heritage) and be confined to the ocean (53). Neither position can entirely satisfy the boy, leaving him stranded between his American nationality and Japanese heritage.

As the boy struggles to choose between his American and Japanese identities in his dreams, he subconsciously recognizes that American society has betrayed him and turns to his Japanese heritage for belonging or citizenship. The boy’s mother keeps a postcard of Jesus



“above [her] cot” in their family’s barrack at Topaz (Otsuka 82). In the picture, “Jesus [has] bright blue eyes and a kind but mysterious smile . . . Jesus’ eyes [are] filled with a secret and flickering joy. With rapture” (82). His white skin and blue eyes place him within the phenotype of the in-group of American society. Though “Jesus’ eyes [are] filled with . . . joy,” the boy does not share Jesus’s joy despite his conscious attempts to impersonate or identify with American society. Instead, he worries that he has “done something horribly, terribly wrong” to be imprisoned in the camp, blaming himself for his situation like many Nisei adolescents (Otsuka 57; Tong 24). Because the in-group has rejected the boy’s American performance (as is evident by his continued imprisonment), the boy feels a disconnection between his chosen identity and the in-group (Kim 7, 13).

In this state of mental turmoil, the boy does not turn to the white, blue-eyed image of Jesus in his dreams for salvation even though his mother assures him that Jesus “died for [him]” (Otsuka 82) Instead, the boy subconsciously recognizes that the in-group of white American society has no wish to save him or “die for [him],” so he turns to the Emperor to find belonging (82). The boy dreams about a “beautiful wooden door” behind which is “a second door” followed by “a picture of the Emperor, which no one [is] allowed to see. For the Emperor [is] holy and divine. A god” (73). As the boy touches the doorknob, he is sure that “he [is] going to see God” (73). The boy’s reverential, excited acknowledgment that the Emperor is divine and is “God” contrasts sharply with his comparison of Jesus to his teacher, “Mrs. Delaney” (73, 82). This contrast demonstrates that the boy’s reverence of white American culture, represented by Jesus, has fallen apart and that the boy has subconsciously turned to the Emperor to fill the need for belonging. However, despite the boy’s surety that “he [is] going to see God,” or the Emperor, “something always [goes] wrong,” like the “doorknob [falling] off,” to prevent him from seeing

him (73). Josephine Park argues that the boy's "inability to see his god curiously ensures the emperor's divinity, who has gone from 'god' to 'God,'" and the boy's ability to look at Jesus's eyes "demotes [Jesus] to a mere mortal" (144–45). However, the boy's inability to see the Emperor and his rejection of Jesus as his Savior demonstrates that the boy is without nationality and belonging because he recognizes the betrayal of the United States and fails to connect with the Emperor—the enemy from whom he consciously attempts to differentiate himself.

The boy's recognition of his disconnected, nationless identity shifts from his subconscious to his conscious after he and his family are released from Topaz. While in the camp, the boy imagines his return to American life as a joyful event, with "warm days, blue skies," "angel food cakes" from relieved neighbors, and endless invitations to parties (Otsuka 126). However, instead of enjoying himself, the boy feels "ashamed" as other children's fathers return from war as wounded veterans, while his father was arrested in "his bathrobe and slippers" (127). Instead of being welcomed by his neighbors, the boy faces threats of arson, vandalism, shootings, and "unannounced visitors knocking on doors in the middle of the night" to tell his family to "mov[e] on" (112). Instead of "go[ing] everywhere" and "do[ing] everything," the boy "look[s] . . . in the mirror," sees "the cruel face of the enemy," and apologizes for even "coming back" at all (127, 119–20, 122). The contrast between the boy's imagined homecoming and his community's hostile reception demonstrates America's rejection of his performance as a loyal, patriotic American. Yet the boy's final recognition of himself as "the enemy" represents his own tragic realization that he cannot be an "American" if America will not accept his chosen identity or recognize his efforts to perform his American duties (120).

## **Conclusion**

In *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka joins many Asian American literary voices, like Yoshiko Uchida, to demonstrate how the American public, driven by the racialized “they” or enemy mentality, has continually forced Asian Americans into situations where they must choose between their Asian and American heritages and prove their Americanness in order to be accepted or merely “tolerated” by American society. Even though they were imprisoned in a square-mile camp in one of the most desolate places in the United States, Ms. Yamauchi’s third-grade class and their families proved their Americanness as they sacrificed the little they had, including nails and “10% of their pay,” to buy “war bonds and stamps” in order to help Uncle Sam win the war against Japan (Arrington 12–13; Hori et al. 5, 38). Though the United States government has since issued a formal apology for the internment and has paid reparations to the descendants of interned Japanese Americans, the American public continues to discriminate against Asian Americans by perpetrating violent acts and demanding extra proof of their patriotism (Howard-Hassmann 827). Lee Wong, a sixty-nine-year-old immigrant of Chinese descent, a veteran of the US Army, and a current member of the West Chester Township board in Ohio, recently voiced his discontent at a board meeting in March 2021 a few weeks after a gunman shot and killed “six women of Asian descent” in Atlanta, Georgia (“US Asian Veteran”; Vigdor; Williams and Jennings). In a recording of the town meeting, Wong testifies, “People question my patriotism—that I don’t look American enough. They could not get over this face.” He gestures to his face in exasperation before proceeding to unbutton and lift his shirt to show the scars he sustained during his military service. “Does this look patriot enough?” he asks the council (“US Asian Veteran”).

As indicated by the experiences of WWII Japanese American internees and Lee Wong, America has demanded for many decades that Asian Americans bear the scars of patriotism

(physically or in the form of mental and emotional sacrifice) to be “American enough” (Chen xviii). In *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the boy’s efforts to perform his American “duties,” like saying the pledge of allegiance, reenacting killing the “Japs” as a soldier, and adopting racial stereotypes against the Japanese, seem to cry out, “Does this look patriot enough?” (Otsuka 71, 54; “US Asian Veteran”). Yet white American society does not believe in his American performance because “they [cannot] get over [his] face”—his appearance as the racialized enemy (“US Asian veteran”). Even as the boy struggles to suppress his Japanese heritage and embrace his American identity, sacrificing more than most white citizens have to sacrifice by facing his indefinite imprisonment and the violation of his constitutional rights, America turns away from him, leaving the boy without a nation.

As scholars continue to study literature of the Japanese American internment, further research will be needed to capture the diverse experiences of Japanese American children and adolescents within the camps. Though some children, like the boy, experienced identity crises as the United States demanded that they prove their patriotism and reject their Japanese identities to validate their American citizenship, others may have had different reactions to the internment. Studying other literary accounts or reimaginings will give scholars a more holistic understanding of Japanese American children’s responses to the internment and the trauma of racial discrimination.

Though Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* reimagines the Japanese American experience of WWII internees, her commentary on Asian American experience is still relevant and important today, especially as anti-Asian sentiments and violence have risen significantly. By inviting readers into the mind of a Japanese American child, Otsuka not only illuminates the raw emotional and psychological process of Asian American disillusionment and marginalization

but also encourages modern audiences to reconsider and redact racial generalizations that led the United States to imprison classrooms of third graders and ten-year-old boys as the enemy.

Appendix A



**Figure 1.** I took this photograph of a coat hook in the Topaz, Utah, internment camp near the site of one of the barracks on Saturday, March 13, 2021.

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