

“All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget”: On Remembrance and Forgetting in Julie Otsuka’s novels

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***Abstract:** This article considers Julie Otsuka’s representations of the World-War-II internment of Japanese Americans in *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) and *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) from the perspective of collective remembrance, thus highlighting the interconnectedness of remembrance, forgetting, silence and race. Remembering and forgetting are understood as contingent on one another, and on the ideological currents and countercurrents that affect the construction of collective remembrance. The article argues that the content and form of Otsuka’s novels mediate the cultural silence of the internment. In addition, they illustrate the changing nature of the narrativized remembrance of the internment as accounts of the lived experience of the Japanese Americans who went to camp are being replaced by trans-generationally transmitted, imaginatively recreated memories. The historical silence of the incarceration and its aftermath is sometimes explained in terms of “Japanese culture,” but such a description risks reducing the impact of the racialization of Japanese Americans, and obscuring its effect on resistance. Finally, the analysis demonstrates that in Otsuka’s texts, remembrance of the internment is characterized by a negotiation between repressive erasure and restorative forgetting.*

***Keywords:** Otsuka, remembrance, forgetting, silence, Japanese Americans, internment*

Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), which deals with a Japanese American family sent to an internment camp during World War II, is rapidly becoming a modern classic. It is widely taught in universities and colleges, has sold more than 300,000 copies and been translated into several languages (Freedman 2005; Otsuka, Homepage). Her second novel, *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) also addresses the internment, albeit more briefly. In this article, the concept of collective remembrance¹ is used to analyze Otsuka's texts and it is argued that her novels affect the construction of the collective remembrance of the wartime relocation, while offering productive ways of understanding the silence and forgetting that are part of this process of memorialization.

Some aspects of remembrance are particularly important to my analysis and in the following, collective remembrance is understood as "an activity of reconstruction in the present rather than the resurrection of the past" (Whitehead 126): a reconstruction that is concerned with "maintaining social cohesion and identity" rather than preserving the past (Whitehead 152). Furthermore, memories are considered as "relations of power through which we, as individuals and groups, actively negotiate and decide what can be recollected and what can be forgotten" (Galloway). In other words, collective remembrance is the result of a social struggle—a type of struggle that is played out in Otsuka's texts.²

These insights serve as a connection to the theme of currents and counter-currents as we can broadly define a first current of forgetting the incarceration in the postwar public debate, which is countered by a later—still developing—current of remembering, beginning with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent concern with identity politics. Andreas Huyssen notes that "one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark

1 In *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (1999), Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan propose the use of the term "collective remembrance," rather than "collective memory," to avoid generalization and put "emphasis on agency, on activity, on creativity" (9).

2 Another significant dimension is proposed by Winter and Sivan: "When people enter the public domain, and comment about the past—their own personal past, their family past, their national past, and so on—they bring with them images and gestures derived from their broader social experience. As Maurice Halbwachs put it, their memory is 'socially framed.' When people come together to remember, they enter a domain beyond that of individual memory" (6). What is important about this definition is the bringing together of the personal, family and national part, which applies to Julie Otsuka's narratives of the war.

contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity” (21). Relating Huysen’s observation to the contemporary American context, we may note that this turning toward the past is illustrated, for example, by an increased interest in historical fiction. More specifically, in the first decade of the 21st century there has been a proliferation of fiction dealing with the internment of the Japanese Americans.³ Otsuka’s novels are part of this trend.

In the following, remembering and forgetting are understood as contingent on one another, and on the ideological currents and countercurrents that affect the construction of collective remembrance. In other words, a discussion of Otsuka’s contribution to the collective remembrance of the internment includes addressing the historical and social factors that encourage or discourage remembering. The following analysis considers the construction of *race* as one of the most significant of these factors.

Historical and textual silences

The incarceration of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans, many of whom were American citizens and children, after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 is an episode of American history which has been surrounded by a curious silence. It is a pervasive silence, found both on the public and private levels. Reflecting on the writing of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Otsuka says, “There was so much silence in my family about what happened during World War II, and a lot of repressed anger and sadness, too, so writing the novel helped me to understand what that silence was all about” (Shea). The silence of the former internees is sometimes at least partly ex-

3 Some early examples of fiction dealing with the experiences at the internment camps are Miné Okubo’s memoir *Citizen 13660* (1946), Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (first published in 1957; re-published in 1976). During the 1960s, several texts examined the internment from a historical perspective, such as Girdner and Loftis’ *The Great Betrayal: the Evacuation of Japanese Americans during World War 2* (1969) and Roger Daniels’ many books on the plight of the Japanese Americans, starting with *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (1962). It would take a little longer for fiction writers to address the topic in earnest. The steady trickle of publications in the latter part of the 20th century, exemplified by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Mitsuye Yamada’s *Camp Notes* (1976), and Yoshiko Uchida’s many books on the internment, would grow into a veritable flood of fictional texts on the topic in the early 21st century. Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) is one of the first to reach a large audience, but is followed by a number of works by, for example, Cynthia Kadohata, Kimi Cunningham Grant and Mariko Nagai. The examples provided here do not make up an exhaustive list, but serve to identify a general trend.

plained by reference to Japanese culture, in which endurance and docility are central values. In her study of Japanese-American racial performativity in the camps, Emily Roxworthy remarks that “It was this silence and stoicism that contributed in large part to their designation, along with other Asian Americans, as ‘the model minority’” (1), and notes that the silence of the Japanese Americans was sometimes understood as a tacit agreement with the evacuation policy.

However, Japanese cultural retention only partially explains the silence surrounding the internment; it needs to be considered as a specific response to a political culture in which the Japanese Americans were conceived as “disloyal, perfidious, and potentially traitorous” (Gordon 38). Theirs is a silence negotiated in the social struggle for meaning that characterizes the construction of collective remembrance. To conceive of the internment and its aftermath in terms of “Japanese culture” risks reducing the impact of the racialization of Japanese Americans that began in the late 19th century and reached a tragic climax during the war. In this article, the possibilities for resistance are seen as contained by the discourse of race, and it is suggested that the reactions of the Japanese Americans are more fruitfully understood in terms of resilience; a point to which I will return further on.

How, then, does the historical silence surrounding the internment of the Japanese Americans inform Otsuka’s depictions of the mechanisms of remembrance and forgetting? To begin with, an article published in *Newsweek* on Oct 15, 2012, can be used to elaborate on the issue of public and intergenerational family silence. In the article, Julie Otsuka discusses a picture of her family: her grandmother, her mother (who is 10 years old at the time), and her uncle (8 years old). They have just arrived at the assembly center outside San Bruno (California), Tanforan race track, where they will have to spend some time before they are relocated to the internment camp Topaz, Utah.⁴ In the picture we see Otsuka’s grandmother talking to a man, who is probably another evacuee who has arrived a little earlier. She is listening intently to what the man is saying as he points them to the barracks where they will spend the night. They are both well-dressed: he is sporting a three-piece suit and a hat, while she is wearing her best coat and a hat. They both look composed and there is no sign of protest or disorder as everything

4 Tanforan was a temporary detention center for thousands of Bay Area “evacuees” on their way to Topaz, Utah, one of ten internment camps in which more than 100,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were imprisoned during World War II.

seems to proceed in a well-organized manner. Then there is the eight-year-old boy, who has been told he is going to “camp” and has therefore decided to bring a water bottle. Otsuka says,

Clearly, my uncle had a different kind of camp in mind—the kind of camp where you pitch tents and take hikes and get thirsty—and clearly, his mother has allowed him to think this. But he is only just now realizing his mistake, and the expression on his face is anxious and concerned. (Otsuka, “My Family’s”)

The boy’s misunderstanding of his mother’s reference to the internment as going to “camp” reveals her attitude to the event. After the war, Otsuka’s mother would from time to time mention “camp” and tell stories, such as the one about the mess hall cook who used Ajax instead of baking soda in the cookies and the boy who fell through the roof of the women’s bath house while spying on the bathers below. Camp was, Otsuka’s mother told her, “an adventure.” She did not mention that camp was surrounded by barbed wire fences and armed guards, or that the reason her father was not in the photograph was because he had been arrested four months earlier, within days after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 1941, by the FBI as a *dangerous enemy alien* and sent to Fort Missoula, Montana. Otsuka learned of all this many years later, while doing research for *When the Emperor Was Divine*; her novel about “camp” (Otsuka 2012). Otsuka’s mother’s attitude to camp—that is, to make light of it and to talk about it mainly in humorous terms, if at all—is representative of that of many other Japanese Americans after the war.

The *Newsweek* article evidences Otsuka’s personal investment in the story in *When the Emperor Was Divine* even though she, unlike many other internment writers, has not chosen to write in the genre of memoir or autobiography. She has said in interviews that she absorbed knowledge about camp “osmotically” and that there was “a subterranean line of anger” (Oishi) running in her family that finally found an outlet in *When the Emperor Was Divine*. These descriptions call to mind Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, which she uses to analyze the “transgenerational transmission of trauma.” Hirsch uses the term to analyze the effects of the Holocaust, but emphasizes that it is relevant to “numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer” as well. Hirsch says,

Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation. (106-107)

In the case of the Japanese American incarceration and Julie Otsuka, this transgenerational transmission of trauma was, to a great extent, wordless and surrounded by silence.

Otsuka’s work on *When the Emperor Was Divine* hence began as an attempt to counter this silence. One day she found a box of letters sent by her grandfather to his wife and children from various detention camps (Shea), and these letters became the starting point of Otsuka’s narrative reconstruction of her family’s wartime experiences. Her family’s story is fused with that of other Japanese Americans as the narrative is pieced together from various other written accounts of the event.⁵ At about the same time that she started working on her novel, her mother began developing frontotemporal dementia (Shea). Writing the novel thus became a piece of active memory work undertaken to counter the processes of both historical and individual forgetting. As Josephine Park notes, Otsuka “imbues her characters with the fury of a later generation that can fit a family experience into a known historical outrage” (136). This observation links Otsuka’s family past with the national past, and brings out the transgenerational element of the trauma of internment.

At the same time, Otsuka’s texts are not autobiographical as many other internment narratives. Autobiographers like, for example, Monica Sone (*Nisei Daughter*, 1953) and Jean Wakatsuki Houston (*Farewell to Manzanar*, 1973) are generally more concerned with giving authentic accounts of camp life, as well as emphasizing the protagonists’ resourcefulness at camp, and their subsequent search for identity and what it means to be a Japanese American during World War II and its aftermath. There is also a good deal of internment fiction written specifically for children or young

5 See the note on sources where Otsuka acknowledges her debt to the works of Girdner and Loftis, Ellen Levine, Miné Okubo, Sandra C. Taylor and Yoshiko Uchida.

adults, which often stresses strategies of survival or creativity, such as baseball (Ken Mochizuki's *Baseball Saved Us*, 1993), and art (Amy Lee-Tai's *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*, 1996); or emphasizes hope and friendship (Yoshiko Uchida's *The Bracelet*, 1993; or more recently Cynthia Kadohata's *Weedflower*, 2006). In *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Otsuka draws on the tradition of focusing on the experiences of the many children who, despite their young age and American citizenship, were sent to camp, but her narrative is neither directed particularly at younger readers, nor an account of her own family's experiences at camp. Instead, her text brings to light the changing nature of the represented memory of the internment: the late 20th and early 21st century camp narratives no longer embody the lived memories of the generation that went to camp, but the mediated, imagined memories transmitted to the next generation.

While Otsuka's narratives dramatize crucial elements of the historical internment experience, such as the general lack of protest at the incarceration; the racialization of the Japanese Americans; and the sense of guilt that the treatment gives rise to, her characters are no heroes in the face of adversity. Instead, she depicts them as bewildered and depressed by life in camp. One of the most striking aspects of *When the Emperor Was Divine* is Otsuka's minimalist style of writing. Reviewers often use words like "spare" (*Oprah Magazine*, September 1, 2002), "understated" (Kakutani), or "lean" (Amazon.com) to describe Otsuka's prose. She clearly works with understatement and ellipsis, creating a linguistic vacuum in the text. These textual gaps indicate that her topic partly defies narrative reconstruction and create a silence, which allows us to read *When the Emperor Was Divine* as a metaphor for the broken, incomplete, unheard, "forgotten" stories and memories of the former evacuees. Thus, both content and form in Otsuka's text mediate the cultural silence about the Japanese American internment.

An obvious example of narrative silence is the omission of her characters' names: throughout *When the Emperor Was Divine* the main characters are referred to simply as Mother, Father, the Girl and the Boy. As a result, the family's likeness to any of the thousands of Japanese American families sent to camp is emphasized. At the same time, the omission is a disturbing reminder of the dehumanization that was part of their treatment: bearing identification tags with numbers, their individual identities are nullified. The Japanese are seen merely as a group of 'enemy aliens' that had to be contained.

Furthermore, form serves to give emphasis to the content, as the structure of the texts rests on an absence: the father is largely absent from the story, figuring mainly as the object of the other characters' dreams and speculations. The many information gaps surrounding the reasons for and circumstances of his absence are crucial elements of the plotline. At the beginning of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the narrator tells us that the family is already divided as the woman "has not seen her husband since his arrest last December" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 10). He is now at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and can only communicate with his family via weekly, censored letters that bear the stamp "Detained Alien Enemy Mail" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 10). The Father's voice is stunted as the letters only permit him to comment on the weather, or encourage the children to be good to their mother. It is not until the final chapter that we get to know more about the father's situation: we are never told exactly what it was he went through during the war, but it is clear that he returns as a spiritually and physically broken man. The final chapter of the novel will be further discussed in connection to race and resistance below.

Race and resistance

In order to understand the complex reactions of Otsuka's characters, it is relevant to probe the historical context of the vexed role of *resistance*. As Erica Harth notes, for many Japanese Americans who experienced the war, "resistance and dissent still raise the specter of disloyalty" (10). In my discussion of resistance, the question of loyalty is set aside in favor of a focus on race. It is only through an understanding of the racialization of the Japanese Americans that we can fully appreciate the limits and possibilities of resistance and its narrativization.⁶

In the study of Dorothea Lange's photographs of the internment, *Impounded* (2006), Linda Gordon offers the following explanation for the general lack of protest against the evacuation:

Getting Japanese Americans to report and register without the army having to apprehend them in their homes depended on their similarity to widely circulated images; it reflected in part their understanding

6 My discussion in the following deals only with resistance in relation to the internment. For a broader study of resistance and identity in Asian American literature, see Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance in Asian America*, Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002.

that they could not hide, that they could be identified and turned in by the ‘American citizens’, i.e. the ‘white’ citizens. Thus in World War II American nationalism became explicitly racialized. (38)

In other words, Gordon suggests it was useless for the Japanese Americans to object to this treatment because their faces and bodies so clearly bore the marks of difference from the white Americans. In this context, it is also worth remembering that the anti-Japanese propaganda of the press at this time was very offensive and reinforced the image of the Japanese as sly, treacherous, and violent behind their calm appearance.

In addition to the heavily stereotyped pictures of contemporary anti-Japanese propaganda, there were also images that sought to elevate the position of the Japanese Americans. Photographer Ansel Adams’ book about the camps, published in 1944, focused on the positive attitudes and spiritual strength of the Nisei, but as Gordon notes, there were also more rebellious inmates who disagreed with this attitude. Although Adams’ decision to focus on the complaisance and strength of the internees at first glance may seem to contribute to a favorable image of the Japanese Americans, it also, accidentally or not, helped limit the circulation of alternative narratives of the internment experience. Gordon explains the effect of Adams’ representation of the Japanese Americans in the following way:

It directed the eye away from conflicts and resistance in the camps, such as an open rebellion that broke out at Manzanar in December 1942, leading guards to kill two internees. It directed the eye away from the conditions under which the internees managed and away from the injustice of the whole enterprise ... Not least, it extended and promoted a construction of people of Japanese ancestry as passive and compliant. (35)

This construction of the Japanese Americans was, of course, timely for the American authorities as the docility of the internees appeared to minimize the cruelty of the incarceration. *When the Emperor Was Divine* reproduces the wartime logic of the incarceration policy and the rationale behind the camps: “You’ve been brought here for your own protection, they were told. It was all in the interest of national security. It was a matter of military necessity. It was an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty” (Otsuka, *Emperor* 70). This was what the government would like the inmates to believe

in order to promote the idea that the camps were justified and that it was part of the Japanese-American war effort to willingly give up one's home and belongings together with one's civil rights. However, rather than interpreting the lack of protest as agreement with the evacuation, it is necessary to understand it in the light of the forceful racialization that was part of the treatment of the Japanese Americans.

The lack of resistance was not, in general, caused by agreement with the incarceration policy, but a result of desperate circumstances. According to Roger Daniels, "[t]he probable consequences of mass disobedience by persons identified with the hated Japanese enemy in wartime are dreadful to contemplate" (58). The possible retribution that would be the result of resistance would, in other words, be even worse than the brutality of being incarcerated in a camp. Daniels goes on to explain that "life behind barbed wire in America's concentration camps was not, in the main, a story of resistance or of heroism, but essentially one of survival. Most inmates did not actively resist" (65). Resistance could, in fact, lead to death. The following representation of resistance, most likely built on an actual event at Topaz,⁷ is included in *When the Emperor Was Divine*:

On a warm evening in April a man was shot dead by the barbed-wire fence. The guard who was on duty said the man had been trying to escape. He'd called out to him four times, the guard said, but the man had ignored him. Friends of the dead man said he had simply been taking his dog for a walk. He might not have heard the guard, they said, because he was hard of hearing. Or because of the wind. One man who had gone to the scene of the accident right after the shooting had noticed a rare and unusual flower on the other side of the fence. It was his belief that his friend had been reaching out to pick the flower when the shot had been fired. (Otsuka, *Emperor* 101)

It is emblematic of the situation in camp that it is the guard who first puts the incident into words, while the motive of the inmate remains a matter of

7 A similar incident is related by Daniels, who also mentions "fatal riots at both California camps, Manzanar and Tule Lake, in which armed soldiers guarding the camps shot unarmed protesters to death" (Daniels 63-64). Some fictional examples of resistance are the uprising at Manzanar described by Wakatsuki Houston in *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), or the refusal to swear allegiance to a country that incarcerated its own citizens, as in Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957).

his friends' speculation. The scene suggests the extreme vulnerability of the incarcerated man: walking close to the fence, but unarmed and unable to hear the guard, he may not even have been aware that he was breaking the rules. The flower on the other side of the fence is a striking symbol of the life that still goes on outside and that still is unattainable for the Japanese Americans. The event indicates the price that would have to be paid for even a faint attempt at resistance.⁸

Otsuka's representation of the family in *When the Emperor was Divine* clearly reproduces this repressive historical context. As the story begins, the mother of the fictional family is quick to comply with the instructions on "[t]he sign [that] had appeared overnight" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 3). She goes straight home to pack and keeps going for ten days, until it is time to go to the Civil Control Station and "pin their identification numbers to their collars and grab their suitcases and climb onto the bus and go to wherever it was they had to go" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 22). She kills their dog and sets their macaw free as the sign said pets are not allowed in the place they are going to, in addition to hiding anything that could be linked to their Japanese ancestry, such as a set of ivory chopsticks sent to them from her mother in Kagoshima (Otsuka, *Emperor* 9-10). There is no indication that she considers refusing or challenging the evacuation order that would put an end to her life as she knew it. Instead, we are told that "the woman, who did not always follow the rules, followed the rules" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 9). These matter-of-fact descriptions of the character's preparations for going to camp illustrate that the Mother is well aware of the precariousness of their situation.

Furthermore, the following exchange takes place between the girl and the mother one evening shortly before they leave for camp: "'Is there anything wrong with my face?' she asked. 'Why?'" said the woman. 'People were staring'" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 15). The girl's question suggests that she has suddenly been made intensely aware of her difference. These examples

8 Emily Roxworthy examines resistance in relation to the theatrical performances of inmates at camp, in which the connections between race and nationality were questioned. She discusses "the resistant potential for internees' own camp performances to call attention to the two-faced promise of American citizenship constantly dangled in front of Japanese Americans during World War II," arguing that "the emphasis of camp performance on U. S. principles of assimilation and accommodation does not translate into acceptance of these terms; rather, in foregrounding these issues, Japanese American performers revealed the contradictions inherent in American national belonging by putting both faces of racial performativity on stage" (Roxworthy 15).

show how the family become conscious of their vulnerability and status as enemy “aliens” and racial “others” as a result of the Pearl Harbor attack. The racialization of the Japanese Americans is most overtly addressed in the final chapter of *When the Emperor was Divine*.

This final chapter, entitled “Confession,” reads like an amalgamation of contemporary stereotypes and prejudices against Japanese Americans, and reiterates the common racist terminology of the time. The first-person narrative voice appears to belong to the father of the family: “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” (Otsuka, *Emperor* 142–43). In this passage, the narrator replicates racial slurs that were commonly used about people of Japanese descent, for example in several of the West Coast newspapers that reported on developments after Pearl Harbor (Daniels 29). The chapter also includes “confessions” to common contemporary suspicions and allegations of wartime crimes: “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 you” (Otsuka, *Emperor* 140). Here, the repetition of the first-person pronoun makes it clear that this is not the confession of one single character: with every response articulated by this voice, there is an added sense of insincerity. The repetitions serve to indicate that this is a mock confession, whose force lies in hyperbole: the exaggerated articulation of false allegations draw attention to the absurdity of the charges and to the victimization of the Japanese American man.

In her review of *When the Emperor was Divine* in the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani finds this final chapter “a shrill diatribe” and claims that the book is “flawed by [this] bluntly didactic conclusion.” While agreeing with her observation that the “elliptical method” of the preceding chapters is abandoned here, I would instead argue that the exaggeration of the final chapter is very efficient. The narrative voice may be “shrill”, but we need to recognize how it echoes the near-hysterical tenor of contemporary prejudice against Japanese Americans, uncovering the fact that *race* was the most forceful component in the policy of incarceration. The Japanese Americans were considered guilty on the basis of their lineage and the allegations against them were mainly based on prejudice and fear. The “confession” can thus be read as a dramatization of a situation where none of the detained Japanese-American men ever received a proper trial in which they could defend themselves against clearly formulated accusations. Historian Roger

Daniels explains, “Thousands of German and Italian aliens whose names appeared on the government’s lists were interned, and in many instances, citizen wives and minor children accompanied them. But no white citizens of German and Italian birth or ancestry were deprived of their liberty by the government except by individual warrant and according to due process of law” (51). The statement reveals that race was a determining factor in the treatment of the Japanese Americans during World War II. Daniels concludes that “the mass incarceration that took place was based simply on ethnic origin and geography” (27), and not on proper legal proceedings. These insights inform Otsuka’s texts, which represent the vulnerability of her racialized characters, and the futility of resistance. Instead, the question of resistance is transferred to the surrounding community, and intimately bound up with the processes of remembrance and forgetting.

Remembrance and forgetting

When they are released from camp, the family in *When the Emperor Was Divine* return to their hometown only to find themselves ignored and forgotten. For them, the homecoming is almost as painful as being in camp. Having been singled out and labeled as “the enemy” confirms the characters’ sense of exclusion from society. The family’s return to their former home clearly shows that their dislocation was not temporary and will not end just because the war has ended. There is no going back to the life they knew before the war.⁹ Towards the end of the novel, the children reflect on the reactions of the surrounding community, noting that

not a single one of our old friends from before...came up to say “Welcome back” or “Good to see you,” or even seemed to remember who we were. Perhaps they were embarrassed ... Or maybe they were afraid ... Perhaps they had never expected us to come back and had put us out of their minds once and for all long ago. One day we were there and the next day, poof, our names had been crossed off the roll books, our desks and lockers, reassigned, we were gone. And so we mostly kept to ourselves. (Otsuka, *Emperor* 120-21)

⁹ These observations about the difficulties of adapting to life after the war are borne out by other works depicting the effects of incarceration, such as those of John Okada, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and Yoshiko Uchida.

This passage shows how the characters are met with silence by their former friends and neighbors. Otsuka's depiction of how the family's friends "had put them out of their minds" suggests that they actively choose to deny the existence and experiences of the Japanese Americans. Furthermore, she speculates on the reasons for their behavior: that they were afraid or embarrassed, or thought it was too difficult to imagine that the Japanese Americans would ever return and therefore decided to forget about them entirely. Finally, when they find that nobody comes up to them and asks them where or how they have been, the Japanese Americans take their cue and accept that they are not allowed to articulate their wartime experiences.

These examples resonate with the definition of collective remembrance—and forgetting—as the result of a negotiation between social actors. First, we clearly see that forgetting has an active side; under certain circumstances individuals can decide to keep silent or "forget" the past. Second, the negotiation between the Japanese American family and their neighbors illustrate that power relations play a significant role in the construction of collective remembrance. On the collective level, remembrance is the result of a social struggle, in which some agents are deprived of the right to tell their story.

Crucially, there are two types of forgetting that are at work here manifested by the Japanese Americans and their white neighbors respectively. In a discussion of "manipulated memory" sometimes found in the aftermath of war, particularly in totalitarian regimes, Paul Ricœur describes a forgetting characterized by "avoidance, the expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizens' environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know" (448-49). This type of forgetting is connected to official histories of war and can be seen as the result of the emplotment of narrative being taken over by "higher powers [who] impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery" (Ricœur 448). In World-War-II America, this canonical narrative rested on the racialization and otherness of the Japanese and was pitched, in the circulation of derogatory images in press and popular culture, as a battle between righteous, democratic, white Americans and sly, back-stabbing, yellow Japanese. It is against this background we must understand the "wanting-not-to-know" that the neighbors of the former inmates demonstrate. The behavior of the white Americans is the product of a highly racialized environment and perhaps also of a belated sense of guilt, as the description of them as "embarrassed" in the previous quotation indicates.

The situation of the Japanese Americans, for whom collective remembrance is mediated through a strong sense of inferiority and brought home through decades of discrimination and segregation, is depicted particularly clearly in *The Buddha in the Attic*, where we see how the young Japanese women that come to the US in the early decades of the twentieth century quickly learn about their position at the bottom of society. In this novel, the internment is not so much a single instance of repressive behavior caused by the extreme circumstances of war, as the appalling culmination of decades of racism and marginalization.

In the final chapter of *The Buddha in the Attic*, there is a switch of narrative perspective from the plural voice of the Japanese women to that of the townspeople they and their families left behind when evacuated. It is significant that the narrative ends by depicting the people in whose midst the evacuees lived, thereby forcing the readers to consider the role of the surrounding community. To begin with, the town seems empty and a few people maintain that they miss their former neighbors. There is much speculation about what happened to the evacuees and many rumors of their whereabouts are circulating:

People begin to demand answers. Did the Japanese go to the reception centers voluntarily, or under duress? What is their ultimate destination? ... Are they innocent? Are they guilty? Are they even really gone? Because isn't it odd that no one we know actually saw them leave? ... Perhaps, says a local air-raid warden, the Japanese are still with us, and watching us from the shadows, scrutinizing our faces for signs of grief and remorse. Or maybe they've gone into hiding beneath the streets of our town and are plotting our eventual demise. Their letters, he points out, could easily have been faked. Their disappearance is a ruse. Our day of reckoning, he warns, is yet to come. (Otsuka, *Buddha* 123)

As we can see in the quotation, the initial concern for their fellow citizens soon turns into apprehensive questions that echo the common stereotypes of the Japanese as treacherous, sly and violent. They are not seen as victims of injustice, but instead their disappearance is construed as suspicious. Furthermore, these reactions demonstrate a disinclination to find out what really happened to the Japanese Americans.

New people start to move into the houses left by the Japanese Americans and the narrator notes that gradually “their faces begin to blend and blur in

our minds. Their names start to elude us. . . . Our children, who once missed them so fervently, no longer ask us where they are. . . . Some days we forget they were ever with us” (Otsuka, *Buddha* 128). As the passage begins, we see how the townspeople forget their presence and progressively, as they no longer note it, they forget their absence. A year later, the process is completed and “almost all traces of the Japanese were gone” (Otsuka, *Buddha* 129). They sink into oblivion, thus ceasing to remind the townspeople of their own lack of action in defense of the Japanese Americans.

In addition to opening up the question of the surrounding community’s responsibility, Otsuka’s narratives illustrate quite clearly how being labeled as the “enemy” gives rise to a sense of guilt. The choral narrator that represents the community of Japanese women describes how their husbands lie awake at night assessing the possible implications of their past actions: “Surely there must be something they had said, or done, surely there must be some mistake they had made, surely they must be guilty of *something*, some obscure crime, perhaps, of which they were not even aware” (Otsuka, *Buddha* 91).¹⁰ Here we see that it is because they have been singled out and treated like criminals that the men feel like lawbreakers. They continue their enquiry:

Should they have been friendlier, our husbands asked us. Were their fields too unkempt? Had they kept too much to themselves? Or was their guilt written plainly, and for all the world to see, across their face? Was it their face, in fact, for which they were guilty? Did it fail to please in some way? Worse yet, did it offend? (Otsuka, *Buddha* 91)

The passage suggests that their sense of guilt is not so much the result of anything the men might have done or not done, as of their appearance. The use of the singular form –“their face”–in the process of self-questioning quoted here indicates that they are denied individuality and makes it clear that their guilt is their heritage, their race.

Similarly, as the children of the fictional family in *When the Emperor Was Divine* return to their home they find their guilt inscribed on their faces: “We looked at ourselves in the mirror and did not like what we saw: black hair, yellow skin, slanted eyes. The cruel face of the enemy. We were guilty.

¹⁰ The term “choral narrator” is used in Renée Shea’s interview with Julie Otsuka. Linking the narrator to a chorus emphasizes the communal and musical aspects of this voice.

Just put it behind you. No good. Let it go. A dangerous people. You're free now. Who could never be trusted again" (Otsuka, *Emperor* 120). The quotation clearly points to the internalization of guilt, which leads to self-hatred. For these characters, the experience of incarceration has far-reaching psychological consequences in terms of wounded self-esteem. All they want to do is to forget their experiences at camp and be accepted by their peers, but the quotation suggests that the freedom they now have is illusory. Their racialized bodies bear the markers of difference and alleged guilt and the shame that this gives rise to will continue to circumscribe their postwar existence.

The family's homecoming stands in stark contrast to the ceremony and celebration that meet the American soldiers returning home from war:

There were victory parades in their honor, with horses and trumpets and great showers of confetti. Mayors on windy platforms stood up and gave speeches, and children in red, white and blue waved the flag. Squadrons of returning B-29s swooped down out of the sky and flew overhead in perfect formation as down below, on the streets, the crowds roared and wept and welcomed the good men home. (Otsuka, *Emperor* 119)

Here we see the official commemoration of the war effort in which the Japanese American family's only place is that of the "enemy." There are no parades or speeches for them, and instead of "roaring crowds" they are met with silence. The absence of the Japanese Americans from the kind of ceremony that is representative of official memory contrasts with and emphasizes the significance of the personal and collective remembrance of Otsuka's narrative.

Finally, we may note that as *When the Emperor was Divine* draws to a close the matter of legal guilt is abandoned and again, the trope of silence appears at the narrative center. Near the end of the book, the plural narrator that represents the children's point of view muses on the father's imprisonment and their own situation now that they are back from camp:

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.
(Otsuka, *Emperor* 133)

The passage points to the uncertainties and information gaps that surround the father's absence—even the family members do not know what it is he has been charged with. It also suggests a wish to forget the incarceration without a trial that the father had to suffer, as well as the horrors of camp life. The younger generation wants to move on and is willing to leave painful questions of innocence and guilt unanswered: “we didn't *want to* know.” This declaration takes us back to the silence and unwillingness to put these experiences into words which were evidenced by the story of Otsuka's mother and her refusal to talk about camp in other than euphemistic and humorous terms. What we see is *a desire to forget* manifested in silence, which is connected to the goal of moving on and forging a new identity (Connerton 62-64). Returning to Ricoeur once more, it is important to note that he approaches the question of forgetting in terms of capacity rather than deficiency and sees forgetting as a necessary part of remembering. On the basis of Freud, he claims that we forget less than we think and fear. Freud has shown that memories can be suppressed, but that they can also be recovered: the traces of a memory are not erased, but rather made unavailable. This process of making memories unavailable, as in the case of the willful suppression of the internment, reveals the active side of forgetting and indicates its dual nature: “Forgetting as a personal and/or collective response can be, at times, a necessary and adaptive reaction to the alternative of painful or destructive memory. It can also be the explicit or tacit ally of oppression and silence” (Singer and Conway 279). In Otsuka's texts, we have on the one hand the repressive type of forgetting that is illustrated by the reactions of the former friends and neighbors (Ricoeur 545). For the Japanese Americans, on the other hand, forgetting appears as a necessary and adaptive reaction to the alternative of painful or destructive memory.

Forgetting and resilience

The fictional family's response to the internment is thus complex. Even though Otsuka's text suggests that the characters' forgetting of their war experiences was to a great extent forced upon them by a hostile society, it is possible to suggest that forgetting could have certain constructive consequences as well, and that it may function as a strategy of resilience.

According to the American Psychological Association, resilience includes maintaining flexibility and balance in life and they suggest that one way to achieve this is “Letting yourself experience strong emotions, and also realizing when you may need to avoid experiencing them at times in order to continue functioning” (“Road to Resilience”). Read in this light, the forgetting of the internment can be seen as a necessary and rational way to deal with this trauma. Similarly, Ricoeur uses a positive figure of forgetting, which he calls the “reserve” of forgetting (414). Relegating certain experiences to this “reserve” of forgetting helps us keep the painful past at bay in order to move on. Rather than seeing forgetting as a shortcoming, Ricoeur urges us to recognize its transformative potential and its connection to survival and healing. Ultimately, forgetting has the power to interrupt time, thus giving us a chance to imagine new identities and new futures for ourselves. Forgetting might thus permit hope and, if used “at times,” facilitate resilience.

However, forgetting is not a viable long-term strategy and the current surge of interest in historical and fictional narratives about the internment suggests that remembrance is taking the place of forgetting. Finally, the silence has been broken. For the former internees and their descendants, narrativizing this trauma is a far more productive strategy of resilience.¹¹ Writing is a significant act that often fills “a ‘void’ in their personal history” created by the silence around the incarceration of their parents and grandparents (Nagata 62). In the memory work that takes place through narrative, both individual and national identities are rearticulated. In this process of rearticulation, literature serves as “a medium of collective memory-making” (Rigney 6). This claim is based on the assumption that, as Ann Rigney has shown, literature has an important role to play in “creating shared narratives and hence in collectivizing memory” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, novels can be considered “quasi-monuments”, as they “enjoy longevity, stability, and normativity, and, either in their original version or in some derivative form, they link people to the past” (Rigney 222). Literary works can be thought of as textual monuments, which can be reprinted time and again in new editions even as the environment around them changes. Like the stone memorial, the novel provides a fixed point of reference, mediating certain narratives of the past.

11 The American Psychological Association includes writing under the heading of “10 ways to build resistance”, *Road to Resilience*.

To consider the text as a portable monument inviting readers to engage with certain narratives of the past begs the question, “What do memorials and monuments ask us to remember? What part history and what part myth?” (Harth 11). Finding an answer to this question begins with recognizing that a text requires the active engagement of its reader: by overtly inviting multiple readings it is more fluid than the stone memorial. In addition, the question draws attention to the narrativity of history. A text has the capacity to challenge the reader’s knowledge of history as well as revealing the process of myth-making that is particularly relevant to the discourse of race. Otsuka’s novels serve both these purposes, embodying the negotiation between repressive erasure and restorative forgetting that characterizes the remembrance of the internment. They indicate that the forgetting of the incarceration should not be seen as shameful, but as a pragmatic response to a suppressive situation. Similarly, “compliance” on the part of the inmates was necessary in a highly racialized, segregated and hostile wartime environment. Reading her stories through the lens of collective remembrance helps us see how works at the intersection of private, family and national memory shape the collective remembrance of the incarceration of the Japanese Americans during World War II. At the beginning of the 21st century, the increasing number of publications on the topic suggests that the narrativization of this trauma is alive and well.

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