

2021

The Role of Nature in Japanese American Internment Narratives: Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*.

Brandon McWilliams
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj>

Recommended Citation

McWilliams, Brandon (2021) "The Role of Nature in Japanese American Internment Narratives: Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*," *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 5, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol5/iss1/11>

This Short Communications is brought to you for free and open access by the Seattle University Journals at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.

The Role of Nature in Japanese American Internment Narratives: Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Brandon McWilliams, English and Environmental Studies

Faculty Mentor: Nalini Iyer, PhD, English

Faculty Content Editor: June Johnson Bube, PhD, English

Student Editor: Alia Fukumoto, English

Abstract

The relocation and internment of US residents of Japanese heritage during World War II has been well documented, both historically and in literature. The critical examination of internment narratives has, however, largely failed to consider the highly consequential role of the natural environment in the internment experience and subsequent internment literature. In this paper, I examine Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*, in conjunction with historical sources, through an ecocritical and environmental justice lens. In doing so, I reveal that the natural environment played a dual, and often contradictory, role in the internment experience. On the one hand, nature was as a source of hardship for interned people, as the harsh, alien environments of the camps were a source of physical and emotional pain, and thus acted as one of many tools of oppression. On the other hand, nature offered spaces of defiance and sanctuary, and thus provided a means to actualize and process the traumatic experience of internment. Through this analysis, I not only highlight the importance of the natural world in Otsuka's text, but also stress the importance of further ecocritical examinations of internment narratives.

Introduction

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The purpose of the act was to prevent espionage in the face of national panic following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This act disrupted the lives of over a hundred thousand people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast. Ten internment camps were quickly constructed, and those of Japanese ancestry were forcibly removed to those sites where they were imprisoned until 1945. This experience—the internment experience as I will refer to it—was a deeply traumatic event for all involved, but also generated a substantial body of literature, including firsthand accounts like *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* by Yoshiko Uchida, and *I Call to Remembrance* by poet Toyō Suyemoto.

In popular and critical analysis, these works are often read for themes of alienation, a search for identity, generational difference, and national betrayal. While these readings account for integral parts of the internment experience, they often leave out an important facet of the genre: the role of the environment. An understanding of the environmental effects on literature surrounding the internment experience is vital for a full understanding, but is certainly under-examined. Despite the lack of critical attention, the role of nature shines through internment literature and stories, both in a positive and negative capacity. Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor was Divine* provides an important case study of this trend. On its surface, the text revolves around the personal and interpersonal trials of a Japanese family from Berkeley, California as they are forced to relocate to the Topaz camp in the Utah desert. Under the surface of her novel, she unpacks the deep effect nature has on the characters' internment experience as it is shaped by their relationship to the natural world. Namely, Otsuka reveals the complex role nature played for internees, both as a source of hardship and heightened alienation, as well as a balm by which they actualized their experience by building subversive spaces of sanctuary.

In this essay, I will examine *When the Emperor was Divine* along with historical accounts and related scholarship through an ecocritical lens. This paper will be split into two parts: first, an investigation of nature as a source of hardship, in which I will examine its role as a tool of oppression and source of physical and emotional pain; second, as a study of nature as a boon, in which I will look at nature's role in assisting to process the traumatic experience of internment, as well as its ability to provide spaces of defiance, sanctuary, and home.

Alienation of Landscape and Loss of Home

Those who study the Japanese internment will almost certainly be familiar with the names and locations of various camps such as Topaz, Manzanar, and Tule Lake. These camps

became iconic for their gaunt rows of tarpaper houses surrounded by barbed wire fences. This imagery represented the violation of thousands of people's rights and dignities; yet the camp structures were by no means the only source of hardship for those within their walls. The very locations of the camps were carefully calculated to benefit the federal government, and increase the isolation and alienation felt by those imprisoned. Otsuka describes the journey her characters take from their home in the San Francisco Bay Area to the Topaz camp as if it were a bad dream: "[t]he girl had always lived in California—first in Berkeley, in a white stucco house on a wide street not far from the sea [...] but now she was going to Utah to live in the desert" (Otsuka 25). The girl's first real glimpse of this new, alien place is just beyond the last outpost of civilization. On her way to the camp, she passes by hedges and domestic tranquility that lie incongruously before the reality into which she, and the rest of the train full of Japanese Americans, are headed. This reality is powerfully rendered by Otsuka's description of the camp as "nothing but the scorched white earth of the desert stretching all the way to the edge of the horizon" (23). The girl's perception of her new desert home as a blasted wasteland was shared by many who arrived at the Topaz camp.

The lived experience of the girl is corroborated in Yoshiko Uchida's memoir *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*. In her memoir, she describes Topaz as "bleak as a bleached bone" (Uchida 130). "Everywhere I looked," says Uchida, "there was only the hard white glare of bleached sand and no sign of the renewal of life so abundant in California" (140). This bleak, uprooted sentiment is echoed in another first-hand internment memoir by poet Toyo Suyemoto. In her narrative *I Call to Remembrance*, Suyemoto mentions the stark difference between the desert of Topaz compared to her home in California: "[s]truck by the barrenness of the place, we spoke wishfully about California; we experienced natsukashi-mi, the Japanese term for this emotional state of yearning, of longing" (Suyemoto 79). The concept of natsukashi-mi captures the first, and in some ways most profound emotional blow with which the internees were hit. The entire experience of internment was a series of alienations: from country, community, and identity as an American. When Otsuka's unnamed boy and girl step off the final bus into the desert, they realize like so many other Japanese Americans that their final loss is that of home. Any pretense of familiarity that might have persisted in the intermediary Tanforan Assembly Center, or their long train ride to Utah were wiped away by "the blinding white glare of the desert" (Otsuka 48).

The sense of longing and loss for those places where the internees had space, privacy, acceptance, and belonging is ingrained into virtually all internment narratives. The boy in Otsuka's novel feels the pull of home from all manner of sources. He feels it when he remembers his friend Elizabeth, the only one who writes him letters in the camp, and in the loss of the familiar schedule when dinner started precisely at 6:00 pm. He also remembers the feeling his home environment evoked through the nature which defined it: "in his mind he

could see it: the tree lined streets at sundown, the dark green lawns” (Otsuka 66). Otsuka’s description of the boy’s neighborhood makes it clear that many internees felt that home was where trees shade the streets, where their gardens grew exactly as they were planted, and where the cool ocean breeze washed over them at night. To live amidst the unrelenting sunlight and pitiless barren earth of the Utah badlands was just another reminder of all they had lost and what many feared they would never regain.

Wasteland and Waste People

Psychological alienation produced one level of trauma; physical isolation produced an entirely different layer of violation. The requirements set by the United States government for the camp’s location virtually guaranteed that they would be placed in harsh, inhospitable locations. The decision made by the War Relocation Authority stated that camps must be situated on tracts of undeveloped land large enough to house thousands of people, so as to minimize the ratio of guards needed. As a result, the camps were placed on federal land so that no private individual would benefit from the improvement labor required of internees; consequently, they had to be set in a location where their work would be useful in turning wasteland into productive land (Chiang 240-241). These criteria directly applied to the federal government’s stance towards its Japanese population.

In the government’s view, people of Japanese heritage on the West Coast had to be moved, but not into a location where they would disturb any of the ‘upstanding’ (e.g., white) citizens whose loyalty was not questioned. Instead, they ought to “assist in the war effort to prove, by constructive deeds, that they are loyal Americans” (United States WRA 76). Thus, those who the government chose to treat as suspect were placed on land that had no commercial use. A report by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians states “[t]hat these areas were still vacant land in 1942, land that the ever-voracious pioneers and developers had either passed by or abandoned, speaks volumes about their attractiveness” (156-157). The insult of being forced into these unwanted spaces was compounded once again by the clear double standard being applied to white versus Japanese Americans.

Otsuka masterfully highlights this outrageous hypocrisy in this passage: “[t]hey passed block after block of white houses with wooden porches and neatly manicured lawns [...] For several miles they passed nothing but farms and alfalfa fields and the scenery was very pleasant, then the bus turned onto a newly tarred road and drove in a straight line past the occasional clump of greasewood and sage until it arrived at Topaz” (47-48). Otsuka once again encapsulates the feeling of being absolutely unwanted, of being shunted to the edge of one’s own society. After all the family has been through in Tanforan and on the train, they must

suffer one last insult before arriving at the camp. In driving through a quintessential American town (e.g., white picket fences and bucolic charm), they are reminded once more that they are barred from that space which is so central to American identity. They are not even welcome in the farmland, where the land and its produce are still valued. Instead, they must drive through these places into wasteland where nothing is built or grown, and thereby has little value to the United States other than as a prison. As Otsuka puts us in the perspective of those on the bus, what does that say about their identity?

Physical Harshness

The emotional toll the camps exacted was intense, but the physical harshness of the land was equally if not more trying for imprisoned Japanese Americans. Dust, heat, and bitter cold were the defining characteristics of Topaz. Of these, dust was the first to greet the travel-weary internees when they stepped off the buses and into the camp. In almost every piece of writing about Topaz, the dust is prominently featured. In their first-hand memoirs, Uchida and Suyemoto describe their entrance into the camp in almost word-perfect synchronicity. Uchida remembers that “[w]ith each step we sank two to three inches deep, sending up swirls of dust that crept into our eyes and mouths, noses and lungs” (132). In Suyemoto’s memoir she recounts, “[h]ere was unspeakable dreariness and gray, stifling dust everywhere [...] We stepped down from the bus and sank ankle-deep into the powder silt” (75). Otsuka also expresses the reality of the dust as she describes “everything she saw through a cloud of fine white dust that had once been the bed of an ancient salt lake. The boy began to cough” (Otsuka 48).

The depth of dust was not a natural occurrence; rather, it was the result of the camp’s hasty construction. When all vegetation holding down the soil was cleared away for construction, it stirred up the fine silty soil that created the suffocating dust. In a tragically ironic twist, the very existence of the dry lakebed was a result of colonial meddling. Before settlers arrived, the area was known by the native Paiute people as “‘Pahvant’ meaning ‘abundance of water’” (Arrington 23). Diversion of the Sevier River which fed the area began in 1859. This continued until the area became the desert which Otsuka’s characters experienced (Heymond). Regardless of its creation or cause, the dust represented the first worrying sign that this place was not fit for life. The dust clogged noses, irritated eyes, and choked lungs. The implication of the internees’ dusty entrance is plain to see; if the first steps into the camp cause this much discomfort and pain, Otsuka implies, the rest of the experience can only bring more hardship.

The internees’ sense of foreboding was certainly warranted. The heat of the camp in the summer was staggering. As Otsuka recounts, “[t]he air above the barracks shimmered. It

was ninety-five degrees out. One hundred. One hundred and ten" (53). For those used to the temperate Mediterranean climate of the San Francisco Bay, such temperatures were unknown, absurd. Just as troubling was the cold, for at night "[t]he temperature dropped to ten degrees. Five. More than once, to twenty below" (Otsuka 87). Once again, memoirs confirm these harsh conditions: "the days grew sharp and brittle with cold. Morning temperatures hovered close to zero" (Uchida 153). Ultimately, the extreme climate, the dust, and the harshness of the Topaz environment culminated to symbolize one central idea; that Topaz was a place where nothing could flourish. Plants, animals, and people alike all struggled and died under the desert's weight. Tellingly, the plants and trees brought in by the camp administration to bring life to the bleak environment expired wholesale: "75 large trees and 7,500 small trees, principally Siberian Elms, Utah Junipers, Russian olives, and black locusts, were obtained to beautify the center. There were also 10,000 cuttings of tamarisk shrubs, willows, and black currants. Nearly all the trees and shrubbery died; the alkali soil, heat, and wind foiled efforts to get grass and flowers to grow" (Arrington 21).

The boy in Otsuka's novel seems to take this pervasive sense of death to heart. Frequently, he blames himself for the deaths of beings he had no control over, including the tortoise he found in the camp: "[i]ts head and legs were tucked up inside its shell and it was not moving. Had not moved for several days. Was dead. My fault, the boy thought" (Otsuka 82). Despite the boy's concern for the lives around him, he cannot process all the death which surrounded the internees: "[s]mall birds lost their way and dropped out of the sky [...] A man disappeared and was found frozen to death three days later" (Otsuka 88). While some endings are given importance by the boy as he attaches his own actions to them, others are narrated neutrally, as if they were just another piece of the Topaz landscape. Loss, it is implied through this persistent notation of death, is the very essence of the camp. In Otsuka's novel, as in other internment narratives, the camps take much and give back little.

Land as Catharsis

While the landscape and placement of the camps took a heavy toll on the internees, nature was nevertheless a positive force as well; for example, in the Topaz camp even amidst the harsh desert environment, small moments of non-human life and beauty became sources of solace and hope. Many of these signs were subtle, as life in the desert often is. When the children in Otsuka's novel walk along the camp fence, they point out small things of interest and wonder, such as "[a] dog chasing a porcupine, a tiny pink seashell, the husk of a beetle, a column of fire ants marching across the sand" (Otsuka 65). In the grand scheme of things, each of these moments are tiny and would have likely been ignored in the course of their pre-internment life; however, in the context of camp life, they take on an outsized sense of

importance in the children's eyes. Despite the insignificance of each, they offer the children a chance to break from the unhappiness and discomfort brought about by the confines of the camp, and instead focus on something outside of their experience. In a time and context where racial, cultural, and political appearances and opinions dictated the direction of their lives, the neutrality of the natural world offers a respite from the weight of prejudice. A seashell, Otsuka insinuates, cannot hate and the ants have no opinion; they are simply unique and fascinating. This search for pleasure and escape is a common theme in internment memoirs as well. Uchida, for example, fondly remembers the peace and calm of evening walks: "[w]e often took walks along the edge of camp, watching sunsets made spectacular by the dusty haze and waiting for the moon to rise in the darkening sky" (Uchida 132). It is striking that even while imprisoned, Uchida and many others still managed to appreciate the beauty of their surroundings. Whether this attention on the non-human was a form of distraction or simply a reframing of their experience, the result seems to be the same. The first gift nature gave back to the internees was the gift of distraction and joy, no matter how fleeting.

Meaning and Solace Through Gardening

Another boon the Japanese internees extracted from their natural surroundings was a sense of purpose brought about by cultivating their bleak surroundings. In almost all ten camps, gardens and farms sprang up, ranging from a single bulb in a coffee can to extensive agricultural operations. These cultivated spaces served three beneficial purposes for the internees: first, they provided meaning in the stagnant and largely isolated world of the camps; second, gardening was a subtle and acceptable way to subvert their treatment as worthless; finally, they proved that life could flourish in the camps despite harsh conditions. Estelle Ishigo's first-hand memoir *Lone Heart Mountain*, detailing her experience at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center sums up the essential joy of gardening for internees through the experience of her grandmother: "[s]he wanted to nurse little growing things [...] Just once again to see the beauty of young, living plants" (19). Otsuka's boy, too, experiences the joy and companionship brought about by cultivating a plant. In this case, he takes solace in the bloom of his bulb, Gloria, after he thought it had died: "[i]nside the rusted peach tin, a sudden burst of yellow. The boy touched the petals with his finger again and again" (100). The life of one flower or the flourishing of one tree might seem inadequate to counteract the injustices of the camps. Nevertheless, as landscape architect Kenneth Helphand's book *Defiant Gardens* highlights, "[f]or people who had just been dispossessed of their homes, belongings, careers, and daily lives, this [gardening] was particularly important. The tangible physical result was a form of communication—we did this, and this is who we are" (190).

Emotional Catharsis through Nature

The hardest to define, yet most emotionally vital role nature played in the internees' lives was as a medium for authentically processing their experience. Internment was perhaps the most emotionally fraught and distressing period in the internee's lives, and the desire to express their accompanying emotions was understandably strong; however, there were ample reasons to be cautious of expressing raw and authentic emotions while in the camps. The desire of the American government to portray internment experience as an essentially benign, possibly even positive, was clear. Parroting the government PR line about the benefits of the camps, the *Los Angeles Times* in 1942 stated that those sent to the Manzanar War Relocation Center in the arid Owen's Valley, "couldn't wish for better scenery or a cleaner, more healthful atmosphere" (Cameron Ai). The Office of War Information went one step further by producing a short propaganda film calling internment a "mass migration" (1:17) enacted with "real consideration for the people involved" (1:32) to locations that were "untamed, but full of opportunity" (6:30). The perceived loyalty of the internees was under constant scrutiny due to the hanging threat of longer imprisonment, loss of employment, separation from family, or relocation to Tule Lake High Security Segregation Center—where those deemed most dangerous or disloyal were sent (Takei and Tachibana). Given the power the government obviously held over internees to dictate their lives and the lives of their families, it seemed only prudent to most internees to not speak the full extent of their experience. Instead, many turned to the natural world around them. Through images like that of the open sky, sunset, flora, and fauna, and other pieces of landscape they had been forced into, internees found ways to artistically express their experience without the threat inherent in more open mediums of expression or protest. A poem titled "Clouds" by Ben Mura found in Charlotte B. DeForest's collection of poems *Cactus Blossoms 1945, Poems by Students of Butte High School, Gila Relocation Center, Rivers, Arizona*, showcases this veiled expression of internee experience:

I stand and watch the clouds sail by
Across the land of sage and sand.
Up near the roof of spacious sky
The clouds float over mesas grand.

I breathe a sigh that it were I
That drift beyond the western steep,
Where poppies bloom with blossoms high,
Where sea gulls play with waves so deep.

I wish I were a cloud now floating by,
Where cacti stand and shadows lie. (Chiang 1)

Mura discusses the desire to escape, to be anywhere but the stifling confines of the camp. This was a common sentiment in much of the art produced in and around the internment experience. Another common emotion was the loneliness and pain of separation from family, friends, and community. The boy in Otsuka's novel draws a less direct, but no less poignant, parallel as he thinks of his father. As he wonders where his father is and what he is doing, he notices "a lone coyote in the hills to the south, howling up at the moon" (Otsuka 67). No matter the emotion expressed, the desire is the same. Everyone, on some level, wants to feel heard and validated. When the US government removed the reasonable possibility for the internees' direct expression of their experience, lest they be deemed disloyal or dangerous, they were forced to turn to the natural world for validation. In the harsh, alien environments into which they were thrust, the residents of the camp found one of their greatest outlets to creatively express their joy, pain, anger, confusion, and sadness. When the boy hears the coyote howl its lonely cry to the moon, he howls along and is left a little less alone.

Conclusion

When Executive Order 9066 was signed, it marked a expression of profound American xenophobia that set into motion years of trauma, indignity, and loss for thousands of people of Japanese heritage. It is no surprise, then, that the vast majority of literary discourse surrounding internment stories has centered on more anthropocentric themes of racism, alienation, and identity. These readings are by no means untrue. Rather, they simply fail to incorporate an additional, vital component of the experience that is nature. Nothing exists in a vacuum: Japanese internment was planned, executed, and sustained within the sphere of the natural world; thus, it is incomplete to examine the internment experience without fully considering the role nature played. I have highlighted a number of ways in which the natural world acted both as a boon and source of pain to Japanese Americans. The imprint of the natural world inevitably entwines itself into these narratives, as has been shown through the examination of *When the Emperor was Divine*.

While I chose to focus this essay through Otsuka's moving text, the ecocritical lens is by no means tied to that specific text. I would encourage others to take this critical lens and apply it elsewhere so that a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the environment and internment may emerge. Ultimately, by revealing this understudied facet of

internment, I hope that scholars and the public alike can come to understand how internment changed, and continues to change, the art, stories, experiences, and lives of those affected down the generations.

Works Cited

Arrington, Leonard J. *Price of Prejudice: the Japanese-American Relocation Center in Utah during World War II*. Topaz Museum, 1997.

Cameron, Tom. "Japanese Get 'Break' in Owens Valley Move," *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1942, p. Ai.

Chiang, Connie Y. "Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration." *Environmental History*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2010, pp. 236-267. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20749671.

Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. *Personal Justice Denied*. University of Washington Press, 1997, pp. 156-157. *National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>.

Haymond, Jay M. "Sevier River." *Utah History Encyclopedia*, edited by Allen Kent Powell, University of Utah Press, 1994. www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/s/SEVIER_RIVER.shtml.

Helphand, Kenneth I. *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*. Trinity UP, 2006.

Ishigo, Estelle. *Lone Heart Mountain*. Heart Mountain High School Class of 1947, 1989.

Krug, J.A., and D.S. Myer. *WRA: A Story of Human Conservation*. United States Department of Interior, War Relocation Authority, 1946. *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000807368>.

Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures. "1943 U.S. Government Produced Film 'Japanese Relocation' Addresses Relocation Camps." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Oregonian, 16 Feb. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVyIa11ZtAE&ab_channel=TheOregonian.

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor was Divine*. Anchor Publishing, 2003.

Suyemoto, Toyo. *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto's Years of Internment*, edited by

Susan B. Richardson, Rutgers University Press, 2007.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seattleu/detail.action?docID=332706>.

Takei, Barbara and Judy M. Tachibana. *Tule Lake Revisited: a Brief History and Guide to the Tule Lake Concentration Camp Site*. Second ed., Tule Lake Committee, Inc., 2012.

Uchida, Yoshiko. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*. University of Washington Press, 2015.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seattleu/detail.action?docID=4305983>.