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Spring 2017 First Prize Essay

THE PURPOSE OF “OTHERING” IN JULIE OTSUKA’S *WHEN THE EMPEROR WAS DIVINE*

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Everyone knew that kid in elementary school who never really fit in, was kind of nerdy, always sat alone at lunch, and any time they were made fun of the teacher always stepped in to stop the teasing. But what if instead of stopping the teasing, the teacher joined in? This rather basic scenario of an elementary school kid can be an analogy for the Japanese American experience during World War II. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, anyone in America of Japanese descent became the kid who never really fit in. The government ordered all Japanese Americans to be placed into internment camps because they were considered dangerous and potential threats to the safety of the nation. There was an anti-Japanese sentiment of xenophobia that spread across the American population thus alienating them from society. There is a plethora of written work about how the American government justified the internment. However, Julie Otsuka’s novel *When the Emperor was Divine* offers a different perspective of the internment from the traditional textbook description. Otsuka argues that the American government created the Japanese American as the “Other” through the description of the internment camp setting, the interaction between a soldier and an internee child during relocation, geographical symbolism, and the namelessness of the characters in order to demonstrate how the American government’s forced relocation, mass incarceration, and relocation of Japanese Americans during WWII hinges on the tendency of authority figures to erect social constructs to control marginalized minority groups.

In order to understand why the Japanese Americans are portrayed as the “Other”, one must first understand how these social constructs are created. In modern day, it is common for people to refer to social constructs as societal norms and traditions alone, such as a high school prom or getting a driver’s license at sixteen. However, this is a misconception because social constructs, while they are generally accepted by society and can be driven by societal norms, also begin with mental and cultural discourse. Thus, social constructs are a result of an interplay between mental and cultural discourse as well as societal norms. According to Schwarz, Norbert and Bless mental constructs “require a representation of the target (i.e the object of judgment), as well as a representation of some standard against which the target is evaluated” (120). In other words, they are formed through a comparison between a person, trait, or custom that is familiar and one that is foreign or un-relatable to the traditional regularities of a society. This recognition of a something that is unfamiliar is the initial spark that ignites quick judgements that show the target as “different.” Schwarz, Norbert and Bless go on to say that “people rarely retrieve all information that may be relevant to a judgement but truncate the search process as soon as ‘enough’ information has come to mind forming a judgement...” (120). Ultimately, when people realize that they are interacting with someone or something that possesses different qualities than themselves, snap judgements are made before properly getting to know the person and gaining a well-rounded understanding. This pattern, when repeated over and over among many people, eventually causes mental constructs to evolve into social constructs that are believed and followed by the majority of a population.

Through the process of truncated judgement, there is an impulse of the majority to construct the dehumanized “Other”. This phenomenon of the “Other” can be traced in many cultures throughout

history. In my argument I will draw on concepts from Edward Said's Orientalism to show that the American government constructed the Japanese American as the "Other". Said refers to the "Orient" as the "Other" and states "the Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental'... but also because it could be- that is, submitted to being- made Oriental" (6). In other words, Said is saying that the Orientalist "Other" of the East, is constructed and made foreign through social constructs that are erected from the judgments of the presumably superior West. In the case of *When the Emperor was Divine* the WWII Japanese American is constructed as the "Other" by the supposed superior majority- the American Government. The Japanese American is the minority in WWII America that possesses many foreign qualities from the majority (i.e. skin color, heritage, language, traditions, values). According to Said Westerners consider people from Asia to be "ripe for reform and re-education" (291). In an American context, the white majority as well as the government seeks to remove these foreign qualities from the minority to satisfy their social constructs, and encourage or even compel assimilation into contemporary society to ensure that life remains familiar and similar to current culture so the majority do not feel threatened. This forced assimilation in turn causes diverse minorities to often be dehumanized and lumped into a similar category of being different, which allows the majority thinker to create the construct of the "Other" and do harm to them without necessarily feeling much emotion. This can then become the basis for racial slurs, or hate crimes and is further exemplified through literature.

This phenomenon of the "Other" or "Othering" someone can lead to systematic institutional discrimination as seen through the forced internment of Japanese Americans in *When the Emperor was Divine*. Literature often reflects the views, values, and traditions of a culture. Thus, a societies racial views are often reflected in written expression leading literary critics to identify the "Other" within literary texts. Ethnic literary studies seeks to explore the concept of the "Other" and what that means for the time and society that the piece is written in. Ethnic studies involve "the view that racism is not an aberration but inherent to the guiding narratives of national progress" (Mays 1990). Further, ethnics studies examine the role of the "Other" in literature to determine how the role functions as a means to comment on society in that time period. Critics now "emphasize the hybridity of all cultures... and intermixture of cultures... may be read as enriching literature and art..." (Mays 1991). The "Other" is now read not only as a method of understanding how society is run during that time period, but also what the authors commentary about society is. Ethnic studies and the role of the "Other" is important in *When the Emperor was Divine* because it scrutinizes White America's role in alienating Japanese Americans during WWII and offers extensive commentary about societal constructs and boundaries that are erected for the sake of protection for the majority.

Otsuka dedicates the third section of *When the Emperor was Divine* to the family's experience in the internment camp to highlight its function as a means of alienation and "Othering" by the American government. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the government issued an order for all Japanese Americans to leave their homes and travel to internment camps where they would live because they appeared to be untrustworthy, being of Japanese descent. Despite being Americans and living peacefully for many years within American society they "found themselves at this cusp between domestic and wartime policy... friend or foe" (Park 139). Because they looked different from the white majority, and descended from a Japanese heritage, they too were labeled as enemies who attacked Pearl Harbor and imprisoned.

In the novel, Otsuka sets the scene at the internment camp by showing a high level of government control and surveillance. The internment camp demonstrates that the people inside do not belong in society, they are not "American" enough to function in society without supervision. This ideology of the "Other" is fueled by the internment camp because the camp only supports the fear of the Japanese

Americans. The camp is a physical construct that was erected by the American government to show other Americans that people of Japanese descent are not loyal and therefore should be placed under heavy watch. Otsuka states that “there was a guard in each tower, and he carried a machine gun and binoculars and at night he manned the searchlight” (51). The heavy scrutiny by government officials shows that they are being treated as if they are prisoners of war or have committed a capital crime, they are essentially being reduced to the enemy. The heavy surveillance is further exemplified by all the rules they must follow while in the camps. Otsuka describes the “rules about food: No second helpings...And books: No books in Japanese... about religion: No Emperor worshipping Shintos allowed” (61). These rules are surveillance which ensures a stripping of their identity. Because they cannot live freely and are corralled by a strict set of rules, Otsuka is showing how the Japanese American is reduced to the enemy. The American government, by purposefully removing them from their homes and the rest of society solely because of their heritage are blatantly “Othering” them without a concrete cause. Thus, the internment camp functions as a direct vessel for contributing to the “Othering” of the Japanese Americans because it isolates them from the outside world and society.

Not only are Japanese Americans placed under heavy surveillance in the camps by the government, but also are subjected to despicable living conditions on their journey to the camp and also while living in the camp. Before going to the internment camp Otsuka states that “all summer long they had lived in the old horse stalls in the stables behind the racetrack” (30). By being forced to live in the stables, they are essentially being reduced to animals. The government is dehumanizing them completely by requiring them to live as a barn animal would. Thus, stripping them of their dignity and their humanity. In the camp the family is forced to live in a dehumanized state as well, with “three iron cots and a potbellied stove... a single bare bulb that hung down from the ceiling... a table made out of crate wood... there was no running water and the toilets were half a block away” (Otsuka 51). This scene epitomizes the dehumanization of the Japanese Americans during WWII. Because Otsuka describes their living conditions in such detail, she is demonstrating the extent to which they were stripped of their identity. They were stripped not only of their Japanese identity, but also of their American identity and given the label of simply the enemy. The primitive and dehumanizing conditions of the camp also demonstrate that if the Japanese Americans do not cooperate with the government by completely stripping themselves of their heritage and completely assimilating into modern American ways, then they will be severely punished. Ultimately, the “Othering” of the Japanese American is what led them to be imprisoned in the camps, but the camp is what solidified their identity as the “Other” because it removed them from society altogether and forced them to live in poor conditions under constant surveillance.

Furthermore, the interaction between the soldier and the girl during the forced relocation to the camp, demonstrates society’s collective view that the Japanese American “Other” is not only the enemy but also inferior to other Americans. While on the train to the internment camp, a soldier is walking around instructing everyone to pull down the shades over the windows. When he tells the girl to pull hers down she does so and thinks “he did not smile but she knew that he would if he could” (Otsuka 27). This interaction is skewed by the unreliable narration of the little girl. She sees him simply as an instructor telling her to pull the shade down and believes his lack of a smile to be something that he simply was not allowed to do. However, knowing that the Japanese Americans are intentionally being “Othered” by the government it becomes clear that his character was not as the little girl described it. The soldier walks around repeatedly telling everyone to pull the shade down so that they will not be seen at the next train station, because they are the enemy. Should they be seen, other Americans may feel threatened and act in violence. The soldier embodies the government’s military authority by giving direct orders to lower the shades while on the train. Because the Japanese Americans have been alienated by the government,

the soldier does not have any emotion or connection to the passengers on the train, thus accounting for his lack of a smile when talking to the little girl. The alienation has made them inferior and incapable of being treated like regular people. Otsuka shows readers that the alienation has reduced them to inferior beings that are not worth connecting with because they are the enemy. This ideology that has been manifested by the government is reflective of Otsuka's commentary that these social constructs are manifested simply to encourage conformity and rejection of things that are different. The scene on the train specifically highlights interaction between the accused "Other" and one who is accepted in society. This interaction shows just how influential institutions of authority can be because they completely dehumanize and deem inferior those who do not perfectly fit in and thus provide positions of power and authority to those who are assimilated into society.

The geographical symbolism throughout the novel reflects the "Other's" inability to achieve ultimate freedom. On page 58, the girl is describing what it's like beyond the fence that captivates her and her brother. She describes a dry riverbed that was once a salt-lake during the ice age. She says that during the ice age "there were no fences...no names... no Utah... no Nevada... just lots and lots of water" (Otsuka). This description of the land where they are currently living is in its purest state. Humans had not touched that land, it was boundless. But now the lake is dried up, it has become desert and there are now fences all around. It's as if all opportunity that the land once offered is now gone with the water. The water offered abundant life and freedom to those who encountered it. The boundary of the fence was created by humans to encage others and prevent them from having freedom. But it was not the land that chose these boundaries, the American government erected these physical constructs to demonstrate ownership of an area. Thus, the conversation between the girl and her brother highlight Otsuka's negative commentary that constructs are created to control and encourage conformity. Much like the water that disappeared years and years ago, so has the freedom of Japanese Americans as they are now imprisoned in an internment camp as the "Other", because they supposedly cannot be trusted. This conversation between the girl and the boy leads to the boy having a dream about water. In his dream, he "saw the ancient salt-lake floating above the floor of the desert... drifting down through the reeds and fish were swimming through his fingers..." (Otsuka 59). The boy dreams of swimming and essentially being free. The water offers an image of freedom for him amidst the internment that they are experiencing because it is natural and pure, contrary to the fences and boundaries that surround them. Thus, Otsuka shows through the focus on water and landscape in these two instances that the boundaries and lines the American government created are artificial and contrary to the natural freedom and purity of nature itself. These social constructs manifest ideologies that pit people against each other because of race, class, etc. Ultimately, conveying that people tend to generalize and stereotype against things they don't understand further erecting artificial boundaries thus preventing the purity and freedom of people to live.

The novel's main characters remain nameless throughout the story, making their experience a universal human experience rather than a strictly Japanese experience so that readers can connect to the situation. By choosing to not provide readers with names of the main characters, Otsuka is essentially critiquing the concept of "Othering". In an analysis of the novel, Tina Chen argues that the purpose of the namelessness is to "encourage... readers to concentrate on the universal dimension of the family's experience" (167). In other words, by referring to the main characters as simply "the girl", "the boy", "the woman", the ability to easily "Other" them is greatly reduced because they are identified by merely their gender and age. These terms pertain to all people, in all cultures making it much easier to relate the struggle this family endures. By universalizing their identification, Otsuka removes the ability of the reader to say "Well that's not me, they're Japanese and I'm not so this has nothing to do with me". It becomes clear that readers "are supposed to align [themselves] with the outcast family, experiencing

discrimination and marginalization from a subject position as close as possible to that of a Japanese American..." (Dunbar 32). Ultimately, the namelessness of the characters provides an interesting commentary by Otsuka about the effects of "Othering". It becomes clear that Otsuka is defying the social constructs of cultural bias by universalizing the struggle of the family. If she had given them traditional Japanese names, it would be easy for readers to disconnect themselves from the story and discredit the struggle Japanese Americans faced through the internment. However, by universalizing the characters the struggle and pain in the story becomes more personal to all readers. This ultimately highlights the negative effects of social constructs because if the characters were not universalized it would be easy to immediately write them off and argue they should just assimilate fully into American culture to avoid problems. But when read from an unbiased perspective, the ability to "Other" the story is removed and thus can be understood from a personal standpoint with regards to internal morals and values.

Otsuka's novel explores the concept of the "Other" through a perspective that highlights the negativity and wrongdoings of the American governments internment and forced assimilation of Japanese Americans during WWII. Otsuka does not explicitly state that social constructs have negative effects, nor does she explicitly blame the American government for the internment. However, she exposes the negative effects of social constructs because she demonstrates how they create division between groups of people by casting the marginalized group out of society and alienating them as the enemy. By pitting people against each other through alienation, it becomes easier to manipulate groups of people into forced assimilation. During WWII, the American government created the Japanese American as the "Other" to be feared, thus allowing for the rest of the nation to view them as the enemy. This then led to their forced assimilation or complete alienation from American society altogether.

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