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# **An American Dream torn to pieces**

An essay analysing Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*

A representative for the American publisher Random House claims that Julie Otsuka's novel, *When the Emperor was Divine*, is a "depiction of the failure of the American dream" (Kawano par. 2). A review in *The New York Times* seems to follow regarding the theme of dreams in the novel using the headline "War's Outcasts Dream of Small Pleasures" (Kakutani). Furthermore, the failure of dreams appears to be applicable to most of the Japanese-Americans who resided in the United States during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them eventually got their "[l]ost dream restored" (T. Watanabe), some never did.

This essay strives to define how the concept 'the American Dream' was relevant to Japanese-Americans in the United States during the Second World War. Moreover, the aim of the essay is to present reasons as to why the Japanese-American main characters in *When the Emperor was Divine* – further on abbreviated as *Emperor* – fail in retaining the hope of the American Dream. In order to accomplish the latter, examples from the novel which depict such events will be given. In addition I will apply historical material dealing with the experiences of Japanese-Americans and analyse the perception of the American dream. Throughout the essay different themes that significantly affect Otsuka's main characters, e.g. Americanisation, prosperity vs. failure, identity, loyalty, equal rights, ambiguity, and irony, will be discussed.

Typing the term "the American Dream" on the search engine Google, will provide about 3 130 000 hits.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, it is a concept with many perspectives and the numbers of subjects with connections to the term seem almost endless. The American Dream as a phenomenon is not something which arose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but can be traced back to the times of the Pilgrims looking for religious freedom in North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Cullen 16).

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<sup>1</sup> The search was made November 9th 2010 at <<http://www.google.com>>.

Predictably, the concept has been interpreted differently throughout its history from the day of its establishment.

The American Dream as a term is not cited anywhere in *Emperor*. However, the realisation (and failure) of the concept can be seen throughout the novel, and this statement will be supported by further examples as this essay progresses. A short account of how the family appears to define the American Dream – according to a modern approach to the term – summarizes the concept in three different aspects: striving for economical prosperity, attaining equal rights and the struggle to achieve an American identity. These categories permeate *Emperor* and will be evident through references from the novel as this essay continues.

In the beginning of *Emperor*, the main characters reside in the West Coast Area of the United States; a region where many Japanese-Americans were prosperous in their strivings for economical comfort in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Signs of wealth within the family can be seen throughout the novel: paying for going by streetcar and not walking (6); owning an Oriental rug (7), crystal (8), a piano (16), and fancy shoes (33); hiring a driver (40); visiting a luxury restaurant endowed with silver trays and immense chandeliers (40). However, the fictitious family in *Emperor* who initially succeeds in the American society is an exception according to Sandra C. Taylor. She argues that the flourishing among Japanese-Americans took place within their own communities, not in the “white America” (42).

Discrimination and racism were evidently factors which affected the possibilities of success in a broader sense, even prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. However, this unfair treatment escalated – apparent in *Emperor* as well – due to the events in Hawaii. The father is arrested on grounds of his Japanese origin and imprisoned without a trial. The United States considers him to be an enemy of the state, censoring the letters he sends his family. A

stamp on the letter saying “Detained Alien Enemy Mail” points out that the letters have been examined before they reach the family (Otsuka 10). The stamp indicates the alienation of Japanese-Americans, here obviously through the use of the term ‘Alien’. Furthermore, using the word ‘enemy’ suggests that they are regarded as being a threat to the United States and therefore also to each American. Considering Otsuka’s characters as examples of what kind of turns the situation could take, consequently, Japanese-Americans’ prosperity ceased – not only because of the war – but due to a general distrust in people with Japanese origin.

In spite of this discrimination, Japanese-American children tried to adapt to the present American teenage culture, and had typical American interests (Taylor 42-43). Such influences are also present in *Emperor*. When it is time for the boy to pack for the family’s departure to the internment camp, the most important item to pack appears to be his baseball glove; this is evident both through the mother’s and the boy’s actions. The mother puts the baseball glove on his pillow to ensure that the boy does not forget to bring it (Otsuka 7), and the glove is also the first thing he puts into his suitcase (18). Baseball has namely been a major sport in the United States during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, in *Emperor*, the boy’s interest in this popular activity becomes a symbol of living an authentic American life. Evidently, the way the American society treats the family in the novel did not cause them to denounce American culture.

Moreover, this bond to the American way of living is evident in a number of sections throughout the novel. One example concerns fathers returning from work, carrying shiny briefcases and arriving just in time for dinner with the rest of the family at six o’clock. The boy praises and appears to miss this common pattern of an American family and refers to six o’clock as “[d]innertime across America” (66). In addition the quotation indicates a wish for unity and affinity with Americans in general utilizing the phrase ‘across America’. This image

of a life which the boy, at this point in life, cannot attain seems to influence his thinking a great deal: “When he thought of the world outside it was always six o’clock” (66). In this context, ‘the world outside’ refers to a place on the other side of the fence of the internment camp, where the dream of happily and peacefully having dinner with your family at the same time as everybody else could become true. All his thoughts of the world outside the camp seem to concern this meal. However, the yearning for an American lifestyle remains a dream to the boy during the confinement.

The many ways in which the family in *Emperor* has adopted the American way of living – e.g. by interests, religion, music and feelings of affinity – serve as evidence of the Americanization they all have undergone. Their connections to Japanese culture gradually decrease, even though the shifting from Japanese to American identity is not a smooth transformation, yet attractive. The American identity namely involves possibilities to strive for the American Dream, something which clearly is appealing to many people. The significance of the concept becomes more evident when Jim Cullen – holder of a Ph. D. in American Civilization and former lecturer at Harvard University – claims that the American Dream is seen as a “birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like ‘democracy,’ ‘Constitution,’ or even ‘the United States’” (5). Taking these terms into consideration, the impact of the American Dream on the American people appears immense. Alan Brinkley and Ellen Fitzpatrick also use the term ‘birthright’ when referring to the American Dream of the 1950s (406). Consequently, the right to the American Dream is something innate according to these definitions. Nevertheless, despite being born in the United States, the Japanese-Americans – including the fictitious main characters in *Emperor* – have had unjust conditions in their struggle to attain their American Dreams.

The American Dream does not only concern the native-born Americans. Immigrants coming to America also get access to the concept, at least in theory. The American Dream was thus also a concept during the Second World War. However – as stated earlier – the content of the term is, and was, a product of its particular time. Although there was a war going on, it did not prevent people’s quests for the American Dream. Moreover, even though the dream obviously concerned *Americans* – as the term reveals – the concept was not meant to be bound to any ethnicity within the borders of the United States. Cullen argues that the reason to why it is called the *American* Dream is that the United States is founded on the very idea of every person’s right to pursue her dreams (182). Therefore, the notion of reaching for ones’ dreams is deeply rooted in the American people, being a crucial factor in the establishment of their country. In brief, the American Dream has its identity in the very founding of the United States, but is supposed to be attainable for people of any ethnicity who are pursuing their dreams in the country.

Taking the *modern* American Dream into consideration, it did not just suddenly become a part of every American’s life recently. In reality, the concept of the modern American Dream rose from Southern California in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cullen 167). At the time, many Japanese-American immigrants inhabited California prior to other states: 93 717 (73,8 %) out of 126 948 Japanese in the United States altogether (Daniels 8). Consequently, a majority of the Japanese-Americans in the country were residents where this modern American Dream derived from, and therefore, predictably, most affected by its presence.

It was not only the geographical closeness of Japan that induced quite a number of Japanese immigrants to arrive in the area. Also attractive to newcomers was the image of ‘the California Dream’. The state of California was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered as “the Golden State” due to a gold rush in the area (Cullen 170), and called “the nation’s

breadbasket” (171) by reason of its farming possibilities. In time, both San Francisco and Los Angeles received beneficial reputations which attracted immigrants from Japan into those areas. Yet, their presence in the country did not please all Californians:

Not even earthquakes, frontier violence, or racism stopped newcomers, who often found themselves facing daunting odds. For few were the odds more daunting than for the Japanese, whose triumph over such obstacles in accumulating land so infuriated Anglo-Californians that state legislators made it illegal for them to do so.

(Cullen 172)

The Japanese immigrants did experience some rather tough times as newcomers in America, not only through natural disasters. Their continuous success angered the Americans which eventually resulted in restrictions against their rights to own land. But changes to the law later made it possible for Japanese-Americans – such as the family in *Emperor* – to own a house in California. Nevertheless, although the house is still legally theirs once the war is over and they return to Berkeley (106), the mother never receives any checks from the lawyer who is supposed to rent out the house during the family’s absence (Otsuka 110). Consequently, the fact that Japanese-Americans owned houses did not prevent – as exemplified in *Emperor* – others from taking advantage of their misery, being forced away from their houses.

Some of the dream-seeking Japanese-American immigrants back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had settled in the United States a long time ago. The mother in *Emperor* has lived in the country for almost 20 years when she is obliged to fill out a “loyalty questionnaire” in the internment camp (99). The multiple years that the mother has lived in the United States *prior to* Pearl Harbour appears irrelevant after the attack, her loyalty being questioned. Regardless of their history, the family members’ dreams are shattered, not due to idleness, but because of their former nationality and their connections to it. In addition the boy has difficulties in grasping the reasons to why he is confined in the camp. Initially, he blames himself for having done something which caused his incarceration, but eventually “when he tried to remember what that horrible, terrible thing might be, it would not come to him” (57). Evidently, he

figures that the underlying causes to their internment must be – whatever it is – something ‘horrible’ and ‘terrible’. These words indicate an awareness of the gravity of the Japanese-Americans’ committed “faults” even among young children. However, the fact that the boy in connection with this lists some minor executed mischief of his as possible crimes, suggests lack of knowledge of the real grounds for their situation. In addition he gives evidence of a child’s limitations in reasoning when he assumes that his actions have led to such a disaster. The costs of having Japanese origin in America at this point in time are evidently not apparent to him.

Simultaneously, in Japan any American influence on Japanese culture was condemned. It was regarded as “poisonous output” (Gordon 219). *The Yomiuri Shimbun* – the largest newspaper in Japan – published a poem revealing something about the view of America shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbour: “We are standing for justice and life/While they are standing for profits/We are defending justice/While they are attacking for profits” (ibid). The link between the concept of profit and the United States is evidently emphasized through the use of ‘profit’ in the two lines to do with the Americans (‘they’). The poet accuses the Americans of participating in the war just for the reasons of greed. In contrast to the portrayal of an American identity, the Japanese claim to be protectors of great human values such as ‘justice’ and ‘life’. Reasonably, the poem is part of Japan’s war propaganda; however, the idea of fighting for preservation of material and economical wealth has points of contacts with the efforts to attain the American Dream. The prosperity among Japanese-Americans was hindered due to their ability to drive Americans out of competition. Consequently, the strivings for the *American* Dream could not result in *Japanese-Americans* making more profit than the Americans themselves.

In addition Brinkley and Fitzpatrick tightly link the terms ‘post-war prosperity’ and ‘the

American Dream', even if there were many Americans who could not reach this standard of living (406). For instance, the times in the internment camps during the war stifled the dreams of economical prosperity among many Japanese-Americans. There are several characters in *Emperor* who are examples of this decline from previous occupations (Otsuka 55-56). In the past, they all had more respected employments and equivalent salaries. The tasks they carry out in the camp therefore suggest loss of status and dignity, not to mention that they are unpaid. According to Burton et al Japanese Americans lost 4 to 5 billion dollars (in 1999 values) because of the incarceration (par. 1). To put it briefly, respected occupations as well as money were lost to them due to the war.

The family's financial losses in *Emperor* are severe: a trashed house and a number of items stolen. Additionally, the father never returns to work after the war. Otsuka identifies three reasons for his unemployment: his great age, his delicate health and that he recently had arrived from a prison for "dangerous enemy aliens" (Otsuka 135). Noticeably, all three words in the phrase have negative connotations, and two of them ('Alien' and 'Enemy') have already been introduced on p.2 of this essay in the discussion about the censored letters. 'Aliens' indicates unfamiliarity and difference. It hints that another power is intruding on your territory and that their presence results in people not feeling safe. 'Enemy' signifies resistance and threat. An enemy normally does not agree with your thoughts and ideas; instead, his aim is to prevent his rivals from succeeding in their efforts. The enemy will also try to accomplish damage against the opponent. 'Dangerous' displays untrustworthiness and unsafe conditions. This word reinforces an already sceptical opinion about the 'enemy aliens'. Labelling the other part as dangerous decides the level of readiness towards people of that kind. Consequently, these circumstances disqualify the father from being considered by the employers. As a result, the mother alone has to fend for the family's income. This change

influences their profit which now is significantly lower than prior to the war.

Additionally the boy considers his father's absent-mindedness after being released as a result of the latter's disappointment in himself, not fulfilling the previous promise to his wife, "You'll never have to work" (136). The father suffers from the incarceration, hearing noises in his head, having bad dreams and displaying an apathetic attitude towards the days passing by (137). His wounds from the prison do not increase his possibilities of working again and contributing to the family's quest for the American Dream.

The hostile attitudes towards Japanese-Americans were not something which occurred overnight; it had been a developing process going on for decades. In 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt – the wife of the then American president Franklin D. Roosevelt – wrote an article about the history leading up to the situation for Japanese-Americans in USA during the Second World War. Initially, the immigrants were welcome and needed for work, but eventually they became a threat to the Americans in terms of competing for work. Consequently, the Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act in the 1920s led to the fact that people from the Orient were not granted citizenship if they were not "government officials and returning nationals" (Girdner and Loftis 67). Eleanor Roosevelt argues that the reasons for this were that,

in one part of our country [California], they [the Japanese Americans] were feared as competitors, and the rest of our country knew them so little and cared so little about them that they did not even think about the principle that we in this country believe in: that of equal rights for all human beings.

(Roosevelt par. 10)

Roosevelt claims that the hostility against Japanese Americans derived from both their ability to compete for the same jobs, and their seclusion from most Americans. However, due to shared misery during the Depression, Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis argue that the Japanese-Americans were more acknowledged by most Americans just before the Second World War than they had been in the 1920s (93). Nevertheless, in the early 1940s the attack on Pearl Harbour resulted in a significant change for them, and since *Emperor* is set in these years, the

novel focuses more on being a Japanese-American in the United States during war between the two countries than the previous relationships between the two ethnic groups. Still, the issue of equal rights Roosevelt is referring to is – in a distorted shape – constantly evident in the novel. Consequently, if the Americans had considered the Japanese-Americans as being equal with them, then rocks and bricks would *not* have been thrown at their cars (Otsuka 29,43), Japanese-American men would *not* have been imprisoned (84), the remaining Japanese-Americans would *not* have been sent to internment camps (49). To put it briefly, the strivings for equal rights were during this period in American history, at the very least, partly put on hold, if not entirely.

A more ironic example of equality in *Emperor* becomes evident when the mother encounters her previous housekeeper in the camp. The latter attempts to fulfil her former responsibilities towards the mother, but does not receive any affirmative response from her former employer. The mother argues that in the camp “we’re all equals” (56), and this remark indicates that even among the Japanese-Americans there was a hierarchy which affected the equality. The irony lies in the fact that even the Japanese-Americans had to be confined in order to attain equality. But even more ironic is that the equality among them is only valid *inside* the camp, not on the other side of the fence in the American society. In brief, the issue of doubtful equality between people comprises the Japanese-Americans as well, not only the Americans.

Another example of deviation from equal rights is discrimination due to skin colour and facial features. The Japanese-Americans’ physical appearances isolated them from other Americans, and the fact that their former fellow-countrymen attacked Pearl Harbour made them targets for people’s rage (Daniels 21). Americans who knew the family in *Emperor* were requested *not* to write letters to them due to the fact that “[t]hose people bombed Pearl

Harbour! They deserved what they got.” (Otsuka 121). The passage indicates an “other”-perspective, where the words ‘those’ and ‘they’ suggest a distancing from the Japanese-Americans<sup>2</sup>, even though many of them did hold American citizenship. Nevertheless, this circumstance did not change the fact that there were Americans who blamed them for being co-responsible for the attack on the grounds of their Japanese origin. The rage identified in the quotation above from *Emperor* implies that the actions taken against the Japanese-Americans were justified due to the Pearl Harbour bombings, signalled through the word ‘deserved’. Furthermore the occurrence of such an utterance suggests that their situation was well-known among Americans who earlier had been friends with them.

On the train from California to the Utah desert in Otsuka’s novel the passengers’ Japanese appearance makes people throw bricks at the cars. The Japanese-Americans become a symbol of the enemy and the previously mentioned idea of “equal rights for all human beings” (Roosevelt par. 10) does not seem to have any significant influence on people’s actions. The problematic reality of having Japanese features was dealt with by a civil-right organization at the time, the JACL – the Japanese American Citizens League. Their aim was to prove their loyalty to the United States, and to address the dilemma of “how to avoid identification with Japan when one has a Japanese face” (Daniels 20). Still, the Japanese-Americans’ loyalty towards the United States was brought into question and an American citizenship was not enough to reassure the Americans of their reliability. The senior military commander on the West Coast, General Dewitt, claimed that the descent always would separate Japanese immigrants from American citizens: “A Jap is a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not” (Brinkley and Fitzpatrick 360). This belief is

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading on the subject of ‘the other’: Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1978.

confirmed in Roger Daniel's *Prisoners Without Trial* where he quotes an article from *Los Angeles Times* the day after the attack on Pearl Harbour:

We have thousands of Japanese here...Some, perhaps many...are good Americans. What the rest may be we do not know, nor can we take a chance in the light of yesterday's demonstration that treachery and double-dealing are major Japanese weapons.

(Daniels 28)

Thus, the citizenship did not seem to affect how the Japanese-Americans were treated by neither a rather highly placed American commander, nor the most important newspaper in Southern California at the time. Consequently, the possibilities of success and prosperity in the American society significantly decreased among the Japanese-Americans.

The family in *Emperor* also shares this condition. Just prior to the evacuation, people have been staring at the girl, hence the question to her mother: "Is there anything wrong with my face?" (Otsuka 15). The girl's observation suggests a change in how the Japanese-Americans were considered in the American society due to the bombings of Pearl Harbour. Since the mother additionally has removed all mirrors from the walls, the girl believes that her looks in general must be dissatisfying to others. However, it may not have been easy for a child to understand why a Japanese appearance alone should be offensive to Americans. Taking a child's perspective, Otsuka creates a sincere and straightforward questioning of the destructive ability to belittle fellow human beings. Additionally, the girl pleads to her mother to be honest regarding her looks, and this indicates an unawareness of the fatal consequences of having a Japanese face. The girl has not – at this moment in the novel – understood that her Japanese heritage likely has given her a less thriving future.

Feelings of suspicion are continuously present in *Emperor*. Americans and Japanese-Americans are separated from each other due to their appearances, and this state is especially clear during the train journey to the Utah desert. The window shades make visual contact impossible, and the girl reflects upon it: "there were the people inside the train and the people

outside the train and in between them were the shades” (Otsuka 28). The shades function as a symbol of distinction and diversity, and as a tool preventing conflicts between Japanese-Americans and Americans. In addition the shades hinder to some extent the American people from observing what their government is doing. Logically fewer witnesses result in fewer protests and deprecations. Still, many Americans must have seen the Evacuation Order signs that was posted in public places, and noticed that the Japanese-Americans disappeared. However, whether the treatment of the Japanese-Americans would have been more humane if the whole incarceration had been carried out in broad daylight is a hypothetical question and nothing to take for granted. Bottom line, they are disqualified to attain the American Dream due to their origin.

Returning to the question of equality among Americans, Eleanor Roosevelt rounds off her previously mentioned article about the Japanese-Americans’ situation with an appeal to all citizens regarding the rights of every American:

We have no common race in this country, but we have an ideal to which all of us are loyal. It is our ideal which we want to have live. It is an ideal which can grow with our people, but we cannot progress if we look down upon any group of people among us because of race or religion. Every citizen in this country has a right to our basic freedoms, to justice and to equality of opportunity, and we retain the right to lead our individual lives as we please, but we can only do so if we grant to others the freedoms that we wish for ourselves.

(Roosevelt par. 27)

Written in 1943 – during the ongoing war – Roosevelt reminds the reader of focusing on the rights of *all* Americans instead of emphasizing differences in religion or race. Noticeably, in *Emperor* Otsuka uses a character called *Elizabeth Roosevelt*, who is the boy’s “only friend from before [the evacuation] who had remembered to write” (Otsuka 69). But back in Berkeley, Elizabeth is no longer seen or heard from: “Elizabeth, Elizabeth, where had she gone?” (121). Connecting the character of Elizabeth Roosevelt with *Eleanor* Roosevelt, the first quotation suggests a supportive stand, while the latter indicates abandonment. Due to her

position as First Lady, she was – at least in theory – influential and repeatedly shared her opinions in the media.<sup>3</sup> However, it was her husband and the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who allowed the “violation of civil and human rights” (Daniels 3), sending the Japanese-Americans to internment camps due to their country of birth. In fact, most of the Japanese-Americans sent to the internment camps were actually American citizens (Robinson vii). Consequently, the conflict among Americans regarding the justifications of the evacuation was evident even up to the Roosevelt spouses.

This ambiguity is also present in *Emperor*, first through Joe Lundy and later through two soldiers who come in contact with the family during the journey to the internment camp. Beginning with the Joe Lundy example, in his store, he offers the mother that she could pay for her purchases another time. Given that there were only days before the family’s departure, his proposal appears to be nothing more than an attempt to partly compensate for the actions taken by his home-country against the Japanese-Americans. Leaving for the internment camps, she will not have the opportunity to pay another day. Additionally, Joe Lundy avoids looking at the mother when he makes an effort to return the coins to her. His actions indicate feelings of guilt and shame in view of the fact that he tries to give her supplies for free and simultaneously evades eye-contact.

Quite contradictory, during the same visit, Joe Lundy gives the mother several compliments. He acts strangely, immediately commenting on her glasses as she enters and confirming the accuracy of her reasoning a number of times (Otsuka 5-6). Joe Lundy has nothing to gain in terms of a positive customer relationship flattering the mother since she is shortly forced to leave Berkeley. However, his behaviour indicates an ambivalent attitude towards the evacuation, and his directness suggests a bad conscience, appearing on

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<sup>3</sup> Find some of Eleanor Roosevelt’s published articles on the homepage of the George Washington University: <<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouteleanor/erarticles.cfm>>

tenterhooks when she enters his store. Nevertheless, his behaviour must be seen in the light of an impending evacuation of all Japanese-Americans. Consequently, whether his attitude towards the mother is true to previous meetings between them – or fake – is rather unclear. Something which however *is* evident is the fact that the mother has never pronounced Joe Lundy's name before, in spite of all the years they have encountered each other in the store (6). The two characters appear to have had a distance between them earlier which has prevented them from using each other's first names. Joe Lundy's efforts to compliment and be generous towards the mother, and her impulse of addressing Joe by his name, suggest a change and steps towards decreasing that distance, in spite of the special conditions.

Considering the second example, the soldiers' missions are to escort the Japanese-Americans to the internment camps and they must follow their orders, regardless of their personal opinions about the evacuation. Whether the soldiers have mixed feelings about whether it is righteous to perform a mass departure of Japanese-Americans or not, is irrelevant with reference to their duty as soldiers. For instance, during the train journey, the girl meets a young soldier and he makes the following impression on her: "His voice was soft and low and he did not smile but she knew that he would if he could" (27). She notices the characteristics of his voice and describes those in positive terms, although the absence of a smile is preventing, at least the reader, from perceiving more of his attitude. However, the girl's opinion is that the soldier's professionalism hinders him from demonstrating his true feelings. Her conclusion signifies trust – and in addition – a one-sided conviction of the soldier's mixed feelings.

A similar attitude among American soldiers emerges when the family departs the train and moves towards the buses to the internment camp. Although the present soldier orders them to "keep walking", he, nevertheless, adds the appeal, "please" to soften his directive

(47). Reasonably, such a polite remark would not have been uttered if the soldier had not been having conflicting emotions about the deportation. Taking all three examples into consideration, Otsuka depicts a reality where different acts give evidence of this ambiguity among Americans about the evacuation and the righteous in deporting (Japanese-) Americans to desert camps due to their ethnic background. On the hand they elude contestants in their own quest for the American Dream; on the other hand they must consider whether this is something fair or not.

The internment did not only generate mixed feelings among the Americans. Many Japanese-Americans suffered from an identity crisis, not knowing whether they were Americans or Japanese. Julie Otsuka addresses this question of identity in *Emperor*. In an interview, she claimed that the times in the internment camps made some Japanese-Americans “feel ashamed of being Japanese, ashamed of not being ‘American’ enough” (Duncan par. 10). The racial identity of Japanese-Americans was severely affected by their confinement, and in the post-war era their situation resulted in attempts to harmonize with white Americans. The second generation of Japanese-Americans, the Nisei, appears to have succeeded in their assimilation, being regarded as a “model minority” in the 1960s by William Petersen, a demographer-sociologist at the University of California (Y. Watanabe 46). But to be successful the Japanese-Americans needed to conform, stay silent and work hard, according to Kitano. Children were also taught how to handle white people in order to avoid awakening hostility and hatred among the whites (50). Similar strategies are used in *Emperor*. A lecture in the internment camp close to the liberation is held on the topic of “How to Behave in the Outside World” (Otsuka 122). The listeners are recommended to “not draw attention to [themselves] in any way” (ibid). Accomplishing such ideas demands silence and conformity. On their way to possibly attain the American Dream, the Japanese-Americans

have to adjust to the surroundings. Without a severe assimilation their partly Japanese identity hinders their chances to succeed in the American society.

Watanabe's article, "The Nisei as Model Minority: Self-Concept and Definition of the American Dream", argues that there is a clash between this external success – in terms of profits, earnings and efforts paying out – and an internal conflict concerning whether the Japanese-Americans really have succeeded in their quest for the American Dream in the post-war era, as a number of writers consider (53). Letting go of their culture and assimilating to a great extent appears to have resulted in insecurity about their identity and issues of their self-concept. The forced assimilation in *Emperor* affects the family immensely, evident in their actions, such as conducting extremely politely and taking the blame no matter what happens (122-123). The reader of *Emperor* will not learn how far the family members reach in their quests for success, but will have to settle with the fact that they try to assimilate and start all over again in their attempts to realize the American Dream.

However, in the previously mentioned interview by Andrew Duncan, Otsuka added that the Japanese-Americans' imprisonment nevertheless, to some extent, had led to a closer bond between those who experienced the camps (Duncan par. 11). For the family in *Emperor* this closeness leads to a determination of being there for each other. During the train journey the girl feels sick and wishes her mother to leave her alone. In her consoling response the mother claims that it is impossible to be alone in one's sickness (26). Her reaction suggests that one person's issues concern everyone else, and to endure the impending rough times they will have to support one another and not rely on their own personal strength.

Additionally, the family shares conditions such as troublesome feelings of not being American enough. Otsuka describes how the mother has been living in America for nearly 20 years (99). Not only has she adopted the religion, seen through praying The Lord's Prayer

(82) and having a picture of Jesus on the wall (8), but she also adheres to some cultural traditions presented by the possession of a Christmas tree (74), and the choice of not encouraging her children to learn how to speak Japanese (28). In other words she seems to be trying hard to adapt to the American society herself and on behalf of her children as well. Furthermore, there were other Japanese-Americans who supported most assimilation to the American culture. Similarly, in the books *Desert Exile* by Yoshiko Uchida and *Prisoners without trial* by Roger Daniel, thoughts and experiences of adaptation as such at the time of the Second World War are shared. Uchida is a Japanese-American writer who narrates the story of her parents and their attitudes towards the United States and Japan during the war:

But their first loyalty was always to their Christian God, not to the Emperor of Japan. And their loyalty and devotion to their adopted country was vigorous and strong. My father cherished copies of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of the United States, and on national holiday he hung with great pride an enormous American flag on our front porch, even though at the time, this country declared the first generation Japanese Immigrants to be “aliens ineligible for citizenship”.

(Uchida 36)

Uchida depicts Japanese-Americans who were considered to be disqualified for citizenship, but still showed great devotion to the American nation, the predominant religion and American culture as such. The quotation has several shared points with the situation in *Emperor*. The family has the picture of Jesus in the foyer, evident for every visitor to see. It is also one of the items the mother carefully packs while another picture is thrown away (Otsuka 8). Additionally, the mother is questioned about her loyalty to the Emperor of Japan during army recruitment in the camp, but pledges allegiance to the United States in her response (99). She chooses a pragmatic way, picking the answer that improves the family’s chances of staying in the country. To her, words such as allegiance, obedience, disloyalty and loyalty are “just words” (ibid). Obviously, they do not mean that much to her, and since she does not want to return to Japan, she swears loyalty to the United States on those premises. In addition the expression ‘just words’ indicates a bit of bitterness. Despite the family’s loyalty and

obedience to America, it has not hindered the imprisonment of the father and their own incarceration.

A “real-life” aspect of loyalty was evident in the United States in 1940 when the previously mentioned JACL, through their creed, tried to prove loyalty to the United States:

I am proud that I am an American citizen of Japanese ancestry, for my very background makes me appreciate more fully the wonderful advantages of this nation. I believe in her institutions, ideals and traditions; I glory in her heritage; I boost of her history; I trust in her future; She has granted me liberties and opportunities such as no individual enjoys in the world today.

(Daniels 20)

The JACL appears determined to emphasize its members’ appreciation and gratitude towards the United States. Nevertheless, the fact that such a creed was required at the time indicates an uncertain situation for all Japanese-Americans. Reasonably, the question of loyalty became even further relevant after the attack on Pearl Harbour the following year.

A fictitious example of loyalty is when the mother in *Emperor* forbids the boy to utter the Emperor’s name for the sake of his own safety (Otsuka 52). Nevertheless, the boy’s understanding of loyalty appears to be quite limited, playing war with his Japanese-American friends, shouting “*Kill the Japs!*” (54). Firstly, his outburst suggests a brutal treatment of his fellow-Japanese, considering the ‘Japs’ to be the enemies, and therefore indicating him being the opponent – an American. Secondly, the choice of using ‘Japs’ as a byname for the Japanese suggests that the boy imitates the disparaging nickname which he must have heard in his surroundings. A pamphlet titled *The Japs Must Not Come Back* and a leaflet called *Slap the Jap: No Jap is Fit to Associate with Human Beings* give evidence of how the name was used by some rancorous movements in the United States in the early 1940s (Girdner and Loftis 357). Summarizing, the boy’s exclamation reveals some of his unawareness concerning loyalty to certain sides in the war and also demonstrates a lack of ability to understand

connotations to certain words. More importantly, he proves, perhaps unconsciously, his loyalty to the United States.

Another example of loyalty towards the United States and the Americans can be seen when the family returns to Berkeley after the confinement. The girl and the boy immediately try to adapt to the American identity, but now their behaviour derives from the fear of being mixed-up with the enemy (Otsuka 114), not from their pleasure of being back in Berkeley. The loyalty does no longer originate from an infinite reliance in the American way, but from a presumption that any disloyalty would cause further pain and misery.

In all, loyalty has not supplied any advantages regarding the family's pursuit of the American Dream. Even if they prove their allegiance to the United States, they are, nevertheless, a symbol of the enemy and therefore untrustworthy. Consequently, back in Berkeley, the loyalty eventually derives from fear and not from an honest desire of wanting to become more "American".

The clash of dream and reality regarding a true American identity is manifested in Mr. Ito's shout to the boy at the race track: "Eat lots, grow up to be big *American* boy!" (my emphasis 31). The quotation conveys a few points which need further analysis. Firstly, they are all in a situation in which they have been forced from their homes due to their ethnic origin. To use the term "American" when addressing the boy's plans for the future suggests either an ironic tone or an actual belief in that there are promising prospects for the boy, *if* he will be considered as an American in the future, despite the American treatment of the Japanese at the moment. However, they are in the beginning of the evacuation and have not reached the internment camp when this event takes place. Secondly, the utterance has grammatical errors – lacking the required indefinite article and perhaps also a conjunction such as 'and' after "Eat lots" – which may emphasize one of the things that could distinguish

Japanese-Americans from Americans: the language. If the language is considered to be something which might delay or prevent the fulfilment of dreams, then the language is a factor that determines whether or not a Japanese-American will be able to attain the American Dream.

An ironic aspect concerning American identity could be found in the work that the Japanese-Americans carry out at the internment camp. The boy writes a letter to his father, who is regarded as an enemy of USA, saying “we are collecting nails for Uncle Sam” (61). The boy is not only assisting the government that restrained his father, but also uses a symbol strongly associated with the United States, i.e. ‘Uncle Sam’, in his letter. U.S. Military recruiters adopted Uncle Sam and put him on posters in both the First and the Second World War, being a nationalistic symbol of “great fairness, reliability, and honesty, [deriving from a man] who was devoted to his country” (Library of Congress par. 4). This symbol of unity and patriotism was used to attract soldiers to the army (Encyclopædia Britannica). Therefore, it is more than just a strong American reference; it is also a reference to the war which led to the family’s incarceration.

Additionally, it is interesting that the boy is familiar with such a symbol, considering his age (7-8 year old) when he is writing the letter. His knowledge of the nickname of the United States indicates either some awareness of American culture, or, just a life spent in an environment where the expression has been frequently used. However, an ironic use of the term cannot be identified in the boy’s utterance – his age and cognitive development do not yet allow it – but the situation as such, narrating to a prisoner of war, his own father, about his work for the enemy, is something truly ironic.

Somewhat more tragic perspectives are found in the recurrent clashes between hope and reality in *Emperor*. Unfulfilled expectations are depicted in the reunion of family members

and the returning to a place they call home. For example, the boy has innumerable ideas of how his father would return to the family: coming by train, bike or horse, reminding the boy of Jesus in his gestures (104). According to the boy's thoughts, they would not approach each other in the Japanese manner, bowing, but in an American way, by shaking hands "or maybe they'd even hug" (105). His dreams and ideas of encountering his father again indicates a connection to a lifestyle and culture which is more American than Japanese, which seems strange due to the circumstances behind his father's absence. However, the boy is most likely too young to realise this contradiction. He is part of a generation with Japanese ancestry, which is born in the United States and naturally has acquired the American culture and language. Nevertheless, the Americans do not accept him as their fellow-American. In addition, the practice of Japanese culture is not predominant in the family, which consequently makes the children's connections to their origin less and less strong. This predicament results in a status of being in-between, neither American, nor Japanese. Since the struggle to achieve an American identity is partly how the family appears to define the American Dream, they do fail in this matter as well.

Other disappointments for the family concern the return to their house and their former neighbours in Berkeley. Dreams dreamt in the internment camp contain a warm welcome, invitations and freedom to do whatever they would like, but again the dream collides with changes in reality. The mother is only offered work which takes place out of American people's sight in order to not offend any customer. She is offered a "small dark room in the back where no one could see her" (128). Consequently, the isolation of the Japanese-Americans continues in spite of their return after being confined for 3,5 years. Even though they have not been present for several years, but incarcerated due to their origin and not their actions, they still offend the Americans.

The post-camp period also brings problems to the family from an economical point of view. All members of the family have to use the same bathwater to not waste any water, and the supper often consists of the same meal in order to save money (128). In addition their accounts were frozen by the Treasury Department a few days after the father's arrest (90), a fate which troubled many Japanese-Americans simultaneously the week after Pearl Harbour according to Daniels (26). The simple fact that the mother has to apply for work suggests a lack of money. In all, the dream of returning to a preserved and unaffected place as it was *before* the family's departure from Berkeley appears to have been unrealistic. The continuing pursuit of the American Dream *slowly* recovers.

Crushed dreams due to the events at Pearl Harbour were nothing exceptional or rare, it happened to a lot of Japanese-Americans. This reality is also depicted in many ways in *Emperor*. A man on the train has signs of wealth, a gold watch and a designed handkerchief, but he has to admit his present lack of wealth (33). Furthermore, the incarcerated father writes a letter to his son stating, "it's better to bend than to break" (78). This utterance is an English proverb according to Ridout and Witting, who have not detected any evidence that it should be of Japanese origin. Their interpretation of the proverb suggests that it is "sometimes better to give way to the wishes of those in authority than to stand up to them and be ruined. This is cowardly advice, unless it is assumed that by such action one lives to fight another day" (31). The father in *Emperor* applies this proverb to a situation where he has been deprived of his rights and his family. Considering him a coward is reasonable since he evidently survives the years in incarceration, even if that it is impossible to say whether he would have outlived his stay in prison, not "bending" to those in charge. Additionally, although the father bends to the will of the American authorities, he still becomes wrecked, mentally and psychically. Considering his children's reaction when they meet him again not recognizing him, neither by

looks or personality (132), it is reasonable to question if the father actually is broken, rather than just bent. A person or a dream which is being bent is something to prefer, at least compared to a broken person or a broken dream.

However, the other family members do not lose faith in the future, despite their confinement. But the dream of becoming someone or accomplishing a goal appears to be on hold during their stay at the camp. For the family in the novel, especially the mother, the incarceration seems to be just a state where their pursuit of dreams is postponed, not destroyed. The constant waiting for freedom in the interment camp is simultaneously the yearning for a better future in the United States. For the mother, the girl and the boy, the future equals hope, since their time in the internment camp mainly involves static positions where nothing happens. These conditions may be the reason for the mother's manic obsession with assuring herself that their house key is kept in safe custody (107). There is namely a time before the camp and another one after, and the mother does not want to spend that time without access to their house, or even worse, outside of the United States. During the army recruiters' interrogation in the camp, she declares in regard to going back to Japan: "There is no future for us there. We're here" (99). The confinement does not hinder the mother from considering the United States as being the better place to live in compared to her native country. The failure of attaining the American Dream does not hinder the mother from dreaming of a prosperous future.

In contrast to the dreams of a thriving tomorrow stands the fact that the Japanese-Americans had to go through a lot of suffering *after* the confinement as well. They were labelled as "untrustworthy" by Americans far into the post-war era (Gordon 210). Even stronger adjectives were used about Japanese people among different American organizations during the war, e.g. "inhumane, depraved [and] ungodly" (Girdner and Loftis 357). In

*Emperor*, coming back to Berkeley, the family members' desire of returning to 'normal life' is concluded in a depressing reunion with their distorted father. His ironic reply in the final chapter to those who held him in custody gives evidence of both bitterness and wrath (Otsuka 140-144). In contrast to many Nisei in the post-war era, not being on "good terms with themselves and in the mood to speak frankly of their past" (Y. Watanabe 47-48), the father, an Issei, chooses to speak his mind about the hard experiences of the imprisonment. He has evidently not succeeded in attaining the American Dream, counter to what a great number of Nisei in the post-war era accomplished, according to several distinguished Americans in the 1960s and 1970s (46). However, the Nisei's achievement is due to how the American Dream was defined and cannot be compared with the Issei's situation. A great deal of the wounds which the father chooses to bring into the light in the final chapter is not fully shared by the Nisei generation, being too young to entirely grasp what happened at that time. The Nisei in *Emperor* are the girl and the boy and whether they will eventually succeed in the American society or not, is not spoken of in the novel.

Most of the Japanese-Americans had their American Dream shattered during and after the Second World War. The family in *Emperor* is evidently not an exception, but one fictitious example among many factual ones. Nevertheless, the Japanese-Americans were eventually redressed through the Civil Liberties Act, signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1988. Two years later, the Japanese Americans received a formal apology together with a check of \$20 000 from the U.S. government conveyed by President George H.W. Bush, where he confesses that "[a] monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories" (Berthold et al 1-2). Money is traditionally a persistent component of the American Dream (Warshauer par. 2), and rather ironically, it became, as mentioned, the

predominant tool by which the American government tried to console and heal the Japanese-Americans' wounds of the past.

In order to summarize, some aspects to why the main characters' in *Emperor* fail in retaining the hope of the American Dream have been more evident than others as this essay has progressed. First and foremost, the parents are not native-born Americans but immigrants, and this appears to exclude them from sharing the equal rights with the rest of the Americans. Secondly, their Japanese origin and appearances disqualify them in advance in the quest for prosperity and wealth. This reality becomes immensely more evident after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941.

Some Americans in the novel appear to have mixed feelings concerning the evacuation of all Japanese-Americans, while others display their contempt openly. However, an interesting remark is the fact that a country founded on the idea of dreams bars American citizens, due to their Japanese ancestry, from the concept of the American Dream. This scenario is not only evident in the fictitious *Emperor* by Julie Otsuka, but also through research and examples from reality. The American Dream is therefore never really attainable for the family members, at least not in its broadest sense. Even though they try to assimilate to the American culture, prove their loyalty and adopt its religion, interests and traditions, their Japanese roots still force them to adjust to the surroundings in order to not offend any Americans. Consequently, being true to themselves and not adjusting to what others require from them, they can never realize the American Dream.

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