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UNIVERSITY OF IOWA CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ONE COMMUNITY, ONE BOOK – ALL JOHNSON COUNTY READS
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WHEN THE EMPEROR WAS DIVINE
By Julie Otsuka

RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In December 1941, immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the US declaration of war on Japan, the US Treasury seized all Japanese-owned banks and businesses. More than 2,000 first-generation (*Issei)* Japanese-American leaders in Hawaii and the mainland US were arrested and imprisoned. Japanese-Americans were considered suspected "enemy aliens" and barred from owning cameras, shortwave radios, or guns. In January 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered re-registration of all suspected "enemy aliens" in the Western states. The first orders, establishing "strategic military areas" on the Pacific Coast, made all suspected "enemy aliens" living in these areas subject to removal. In February, the US Attorney General imposed curfews on both Japanese citizens and Americans of Japanese descent living in California, and President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the Secretary of War to establish "military areas" from which they could evacuate "any or all persons" they chose. (NOTE: Two-thirds of the "evacuees" were US-born American citizens, although few of the public documents regarding incarceration used the term "citizen" to refer to Americans of Japanese descent. Indeed, some went so far as to use the term "non-alien.") On March 21, President Roosevelt signed Public Law 503, making it a federal offense to violate any order by a military commander under the authority of Executive Order 9066. On March 22, a first large group of evacuees from Los Angeles arrived at the Manzanar Reception Center (later renamed Manzanar Relocation Center) in eastern California. On September 11, the Central Utah Relocation Center (Topaz) opened with evacuees from the Tanforan Assembly Center featured in *When the Emperor Was Divine*. Overall, two-thirds were American citizens. Over half were children.

1. *When the Emperor Was Divine* is at its core a story about the suffering and struggle of an American family who, because of their Japanese origin, were forcibly evacuated from their home and placed in "internment" (concentration) camps by the American government during World War II when the United States was at war with Japan. More broadly, it is a story about the politics of fear and a consequent failure of the "American Dream." How is this so?

2. Read the American Bill of Rights amending the US Constitution (available at http://www.constitution.org/billofr_.htm). Were American civil rights and freedoms denied by the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII? If so, which ones? Were they justifiably denied? Unjustifiably? How? How not? Revisit this question after considering question 5, below.

3. Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly (including the US) in 1948 (available at http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html). What if it had existed at the time of the World War II Japanese-American

internments? Would any of the rights proclaimed in the UDHR have been denied by the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans in WWII? If so, which ones? Would they have been justifiably denied? Unjustifiably? How? How not? What would the consequences have been for the US?

4. In the camps, the Japanese-American "internees" (prisoners) were told they were brought there for their "own protection," and that "it was all in the interest of national security" and an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty (Otsuka, p.70). Were these justifications credible? Do they reveal anything about the attitude of the United States government toward Japanese-Americans?

5. The same executive order that authorized the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II applied also to German and Italian citizens living in the United States who evidenced sympathy with the fascist movements of their home countries, and in accordance with that, they were subject to arrest and imprisonment, sometimes for long periods. Among other things, Italian-American fishermen were barred from their fishing grounds. Unlike Japanese-Americans, however, these other so-called "enemy aliens" were not evacuated and imprisoned in concentration camps nor did they suffer systematic expropriation of their property. Furthermore, their treatment was neither as systematic nor as widespread as that sustained by the Japanese-Americans. How do you explain this more favorable treatment of foreign nationals who expressed sympathy with the enemy and versus American citizens who, generally, did not?[*]

6. Is the different treatment of others because of different ethnic, racial, or other inherent characteristic ever justified? If so, when? If not, why not? Does different treatment necessarily spell disregard or mistreatment? When is discrimination based on ethnic, racial, or other inherent characteristic permissible? Is it ever?

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[*] It is important to remember that the evacuation, relocation, and internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII did not arise out of a vacuum. Along with other immigrants from Asia, the Japanese had been targets of discriminatory policies since they first arrived in Hawaii in 1869. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibiting immigration from China, resulted in increased demand for Japanese laborers, Japanese-Americans continued to be were victims of social exclusion, including school segregation. In 1907, Congress passed an immigration law banning Japanese laborers from entering the US through Hawaii, Mexico, or Canada. In 1908, the Japanese and US government negotiate the so-called "Gentlemen's Agreement" in which Japan agreed not to issue visas to laborers wishing to emigrate. In 1913, California passed the Alien Land Law denying "all aliens ineligible for citizenship" the right to own land in the state. Similar laws were passed in Arizona, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. In 1920, a second alien land law adopted in California forbade the leasing of lands to ethnic Japanese. In 1922, the US Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Takeo Ozawa v. U.S.,* 260 U.S. 178, that American citizenship is limited to "free white persons and aliens of African ancestry," thus prohibiting people of Japanese descent from becoming naturalized citizens on the basis of race. Also in 1922, Congress passed the Cable Act, providing that "any woman marrying an alien ineligible for citizenship shall cease to be an American citizen." In practice, this meant that anyone marrying an *Issei* (first generation Japanese) would automatically lose citizenship. In marriages terminated by death or divorce, a Caucasian woman could regain citizenship, whereas a *Nisei* woman could not. The 1924 Immigration Act officially barred all immigration from countries whose people were "aliens ineligible for citizenship," i.e., any Asian. Chinese, Filipinos, and other non-Japanese Asians were not allowed gto become naturalized citizens until the 1940s, Japanese not until 1952.

7. During WWII, three US citizens of Japanese descent—Minoru Yasui, Gordon Kiyoshi Hirabayashi, and Fred Toyasaburo Korematsu—challenged the US government's curfew and evacuation orders in court. Another US citizen (and public employee), Mitsuye Endo, questioned the legality of detention without a criminal conviction. These cases were adjudicated by the US Supreme Court, which, according to Wendy Ng [*Japanese American Internment During World War II: A History and Reference Guide* (2002)], gave to the military the power to suspend the rights of citizens and non-citizens during wartime without the need to declare martial law and reinforced the war powers of the executive and legislative branches of government (*see* Ng, pp. 77, 86). At the time, neither the courts nor the press questioned the government's claim that Japanese-Americans were a danger to national security. Indeed, though vacated in the 1980s and 1990s, these rulings were never overturned. Do you agree that Japanese-Americans posed a danger to national security during World War II?

8. The relocation and incarceration of Japanese-Americans received little scrutiny or criticism until the 1980s when newly-released documents under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that there was no national security threat ("military necessity") to justify the Japanese-American internments as the US government had claimed. According to author Peter Irons [*Justice Delayed: The Record of Japanese American Internment Cases* (1989)], formerly classified documents showed that the government had suppressed evidence and presented false information regarding the necessity to conduct a military evacuation of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast. Irons also found evidence that the War Department (since renamed the Department of Defense) had destroyed and altered important information pertaining to the Yasui, Hirabayashi, and Korematsu cases. In 1982, according to Wendy Ng (cited in Question 7, above), the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, established by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, concluded that the internment was not justified by military necessity but, rather, was motivated by "race prejudice, war hysteria, and failure of political leadership." Can you identify similar cases of suspension of civil, political, and other human rights under similarly questionable conditions in the post-9/11 era? What specific similarities and/or differences do you see between the post-9/11 treatment of persons of Middle-Eastern descent and the treatment of Japanese-Americans during WWII?

9. What parallels, if any, does Otsuka's novel reveal between the American treatment of citizens of Japanese descent and the Nazi German treatment of German Jews in the 1930s-40s?

10. A report commissioned by the US Congress just after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor [Curtis B. Munson, *Report on Japanese on the West Coast of the United States*, Hearings, 79th Cong., 1st sess., Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack (1946)] concluded that second-generation Japanese-American citizens (*Nisei*) were "90 to 98 percent loyal to the United States." According to the Munson Report,

> [t]he Nisei are pathetically eager to show this loyalty. They are not Japanese in culture. They are foreigners to Japan. Though American citizens, they are not accepted by Americans, largely because they look differently and can be easily recognized. . . . The

> loyal Nisei hardly knows where to turn. Some gesture of protection or wholehearted acceptance of this group would go a long way to swinging them away from any last romantic hankering after old Japan. They are not oriental or mysterious; they are very American and are of a proud, self-respecting race suffering from a little inferiority complex and a lack of contact with the white boys they went to school with. They are eager for this contact and to work alongside them.

How does this description of Japanese-Americans compare to Otsuka's portrayal of the unnamed Japanese-American family in her novel? What stereotypes against Asian-Americans does this report try to dispel? Why do you think it was ignored by the US government?

11. The Preamble and Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers to dignity as something fundamentally linked to the pursuit and safeguard of human rights. Does the behavior of Otsuka's unnamed Japanese-American family illustrate or suggest a loss of human dignity because of the deprivation of their human rights? Does their experience illustrate or suggest a loss of human dignity because of the deprivation of their human rights? Explore the theme of dignity in relation to the themes of shame, embarrassment, and dehumanization in the novel.

12. In 1942, under the authority of Executive Order 9066, the US government could have questioned your patriotism and ordered you to go to a local train station for transportation to a relocation camp. Would you obey and show up at the station? Why? Why not? Beginning in 2002, in its "war on terrorism," the US government could question your patriotism and order you to go to a local police station to report your address and be questioned on your activities. Would you obey and show up? Why? Why not?

13. Are there advantages or disadvantages in looking at historical events through a fictional lens? What is lost and what is gained by this approach? What does the novel tell us about the personal, psychological, and other consequences endured by victims of human rights abuses that historical accounts may not convey? How do the characters in Otsuka's novel cope with their situation?

14. Each of the four family members indirectly narrates, or is the focus of, the main sections of Otsuka's novel. Through their eyes the reader gets different views of the internment experience, and the way in which these views differ is critical to understanding what is being described. Can you identify each of the views expressed in the novel and their significance in defining the Japanese-American internment experience?

15. Julie Otsuka is a skilled writer. What kind of literary skills/ techniques does she deploy to narrate these characters' experiences? Why does she choose these techniques? Note in particular the narratological restraint exercised throughout the novel. Otsuka always suggests, rarely tells. Why?

16. The image of the divine emperor has a unique place and significance in the novel. What is that place and what is its significance? How does it mark the young boy's psychological and

mental trajectory through the evacuation and internment experience? And how does it symbolize the condition of Japanese-American identity during WWII?

Websites with helpful background information

Japanese American National Museum: http://www.janm.org/nrc and http://www.janm.org/events/digital.htm

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA): http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/military/japanese-internment.html

“War Relocation Authority Camps in Arizona, 1942–1946": http://www.library.arizona.edu/wracamps/ (including the full text of Executive Order 9066)

Santa Clara University’s homepage on diversity: http://www.scu.edu/SCU/ Programs/Diversity/scvasian.html

“Japanese-American Internment Camps During World War II” from the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, and Private Collections: http://www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo/9066/9066.htm

The Japanese American Exhibit and Access Project, a permanent Web site providing access to the University of Washington Libraries holdings: http://www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/harmony/

Helpful films/videos

Jeremy Cooper and R.A. Maidment, *From a Different Shore: An American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Open University, Films for the Humanities, 1996)

Bonnie Dry and Dolores Danska, *Japan Bashing* (New York: Carousel Film and Video, 1992)

Eric Paul Fournier, *Of Civil Wrongs & Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story* (San Francisco, CA: NAATA, 2000)

Gordon Hirabayashi, John de Graaf, and Scott Simon, *A Personal Matter: Gordon Hirabayashi v. the United States* (San Francisco, CA: Cross Current Media, 1992)

Steven Okazaki, *Unfinished Business* (Oscar-nominated PBS documentary, National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), 1985)

Steven Okazaki, *Days of Waiting* (Peabody Award and 1991 Academy Award-winning documentary about artist Estelle Ishigo's concentration camp experiences. NAATA, 1990)