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## From Sea to Waterless Sea: Archipelagic Thought and Reorientation in *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Summer Weaver  
*Brigham Young University*

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From Sea to Waterless Sea: Archipelagic Thought and  
Reorientation in *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Summer Weaver

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Brian Roberts, Chair  
Jamin Rowan  
Emron Esplin

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### From Sea to Waterless Sea: Archipelagic Thought and Reorientation in *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Summer Weaver  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) retells the trauma of the Japanese American imprisonment through the lens of fictional characters taken from their "white house on the wide street in Berkeley not far from the sea" to "the scorched white earth of the desert" (74, 23). The Topaz Internment Camp in Utah's Sevier Desert, where these characters were forcibly relocated, sits on the site of an ancient inland sea, Lake Bonneville, which submerged that barren desert ground some ten thousand years ago. The paleolake serves as a displaced but active character in Otsuka's novel that shapes the characters' understanding of their traumatic experience and their ability to work through it. Rather than serving as an actor in disorientation, the ancient sea actually enables *reorientation*, affording the characters a new understanding of self and place. In developing this sea-oriented analysis of the internment, I call upon theory from trauma scholars Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra and archipelagic thinkers like Epeli Hau'ofa and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, who have reoriented our understandings of islands, continents, and the concept of home. With these thinkers as interlocutors, my archipelagic reading of *When the Emperor Was Divine* advances a model for understanding the ocean as a mediator and a symbol through which traumatic experiences are acted out, worked through, refracted, and reoriented. This essay relies on the interaction of—or the potential for mutual illumination between—two emergent arenas of study: critical desert studies and critical ocean and island studies. It thus becomes a frame through which archipelagic thought can become a collaborator for the contingent working through of trauma and, ultimately, a reimagination of notions of home and reorientation.

Keywords: trauma, archipelagic thought, reorientation, Japanese American internment

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From Sea to Waterless Sea: Archipelagic Thought and  
Reorientation in *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Julie Otsuka's 2002 novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* tells the story of a Japanese American family's displacement during World War II. The novel traces the family's forced removal from the San Francisco Bay area of California to the Sevier Desert of Utah, where they are imprisoned in the Topaz Internment Camp. Describing an initial scene in which a central character known only as "the girl" steps off a crowded bus and into the "blinding white glare of the desert," the narrator explains, "everything she saw she saw through a cloud of fine white dust that had once been the bed of an ancient salt lake" (48). This line, in its attention to Topaz's geologic time, offers a crucial impetus for a water-oriented reading of *When the Emperor Was Divine*. Its universalization of the water—even if that water has long since evaporated—reminds us that during the traumatic experience of being imprisoned, each of Otsuka's characters has new perspectives laced with traces of the sea. These traces involve both memories of their home in Berkeley near San Francisco Bay and material remnants of the paleo "salt lake" that once submerged most of Utah, including the Sevier Desert where the Topaz internment camp was built in the early 1940s. Whereas previous approaches to Otsuka's novel have usefully discussed internment and displacement in terms of disorientation (Manzella), regionalism (Sohn), and memory (Liao), this sea-oriented reading draws not only on the trauma theory of Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra but also on the archipelagic thinking of Epeli Hau'ofa, Rebecca Hogue, and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, who, in complicating our understandings of the self in relation to islands and continents, also complicate our understandings of the self in terms of internment and displacement. By reading the sea in Otsuka's novel as a catalyst for reorientation, we can better understand the submerging influence of a traumatic experience and the fluidity of consciousness that such an experience requires of an individual in order for them to resurface.

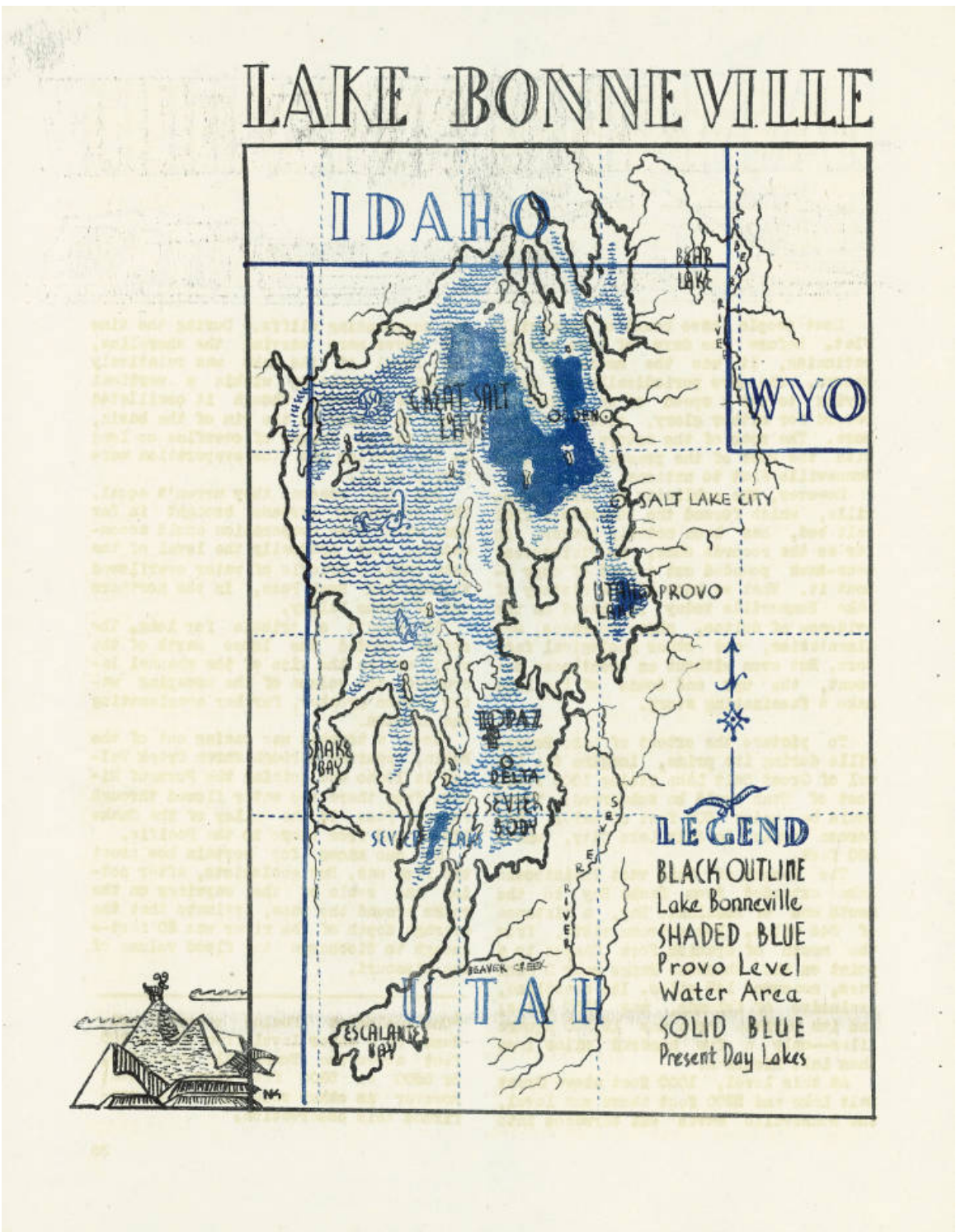


Figure 1. Map of ancient Lake Bonneville. This map appeared as an illustration for Jim Yamada’s article “Lake Bonneville,” published in the February 1943 issue of *Trek*, Topaz’s literature and arts journal. Miné Okubo, whose 1946 book *Citizen 13660* was one of Otsuka’s sources while writing *When the Emperor Was Divine*, was the art editor of *Trek* and would have overseen this map’s inclusion as an illustration for Yamada’s article.

The “fine white dust” that the girl sees is not only a reminder of the water from Lake Bonneville that once submerged that barren desert ground; it is an invitation to take seriously water’s role in the reorientation of the self that follows a traumatic experience. Otsuka’s novel centers on Topaz during the Japanese American internment. From 1942 to 1946, approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent, about two-thirds of whom were American citizens (“Issei” 8), were forcibly removed from their homes on the west coast to one of ten prison camps around the United States (Arrington 3). Previous scholarship on the internment, and particularly on Otsuka’s novel, has centered on the disorientation that follows this forced relocation.<sup>1</sup> Yet these disorienting effects of displacement, as outlined by internment narrative scholars, are complicated by the pluralistic model of trauma. This model, supported by Michelle Balaev, Greg Forter, and Ann Cvetkovich, embraces the variation in traumatic experience and invites the concept of reorientation into our understanding of dissociation (i.e., trauma’s disruption to memory, identity, or experience). The pluralistic model suggests that trauma’s disruptive effects can result in a reorientation of consciousness—in other words, a new perspective of one’s identity and relationship to the outside world (Mambrol). This pluralistic approach, when brought into dialogue with Otsuka’s novel, invites an archipelagic reading of internment narratives that pays particularly close attention to the sea’s role as a mediator and symbol for the traumatic experience. For the characters in Otsuka’s novel, the sea—along with its many layers of cultural meaning—does not serve as a facilitator of disorientation but unexpectedly enables the characters to reorient themselves in a way that allows for a new understanding of the self.

A sea-minded reading of dis- and reorientation in *When the Emperor Was Divine* builds on trends in American literary studies that have developed over the past few decades as the

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<sup>1</sup> For more scholarship on *When the Emperor Was Divine*, see Abigail Manzella and Pei-chen Liao.

transnational turn in American studies has given rise to several new critical geographies, including oceanic and archipelagic approaches.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars of US literature have shifted their attention away from a “sea to shining sea” approach that reifies the US continent and have turned toward a wider sense of the United States of America that includes its many archipelagoes and oceanic spaces.<sup>3</sup> Together with the heightened visibility of the ocean as featured in the works of Hester Blum and Mary Eyring, archipelagic Americanists like Brian Russell Roberts, Michelle Ann Stephens, and Craig Santos Perez have emphasized the significance of the ocean-island complex of the archipelago in the ways we understand American literature and even the term “America” itself. In the introduction to *Archipelagic American Studies*, Roberts and Stephens explain that the concept of the archipelago is “a push and pull between the metaphoric and the material. [...]he archipelago emerges as neither strictly natural nor as wholly cultural but always as at the intersection of the earth’s materiality and humans’ penchant for metaphoricity” (7). In this sense, archipelagic thinking provides us with the useful lens through which to view both the environment and human engagement with that environment. As a result, Roberts and Stephens push for an acknowledgement that “the geographical form of the archipelago is as culturally contingent as the geographical form of the continent,” which has previously been prioritized in American studies (6). Not only does archipelagic thinking invite us to look beyond the continental United States, but it also requires us to rethink the continent itself and any trauma experienced within that space.

I join in this archipelagic rethinking of the continent by approaching trauma in Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* through the lens of the “sea,” a term I use strategically throughout this article. The term “sea” functions as an umbrella designation for the novel’s two

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<sup>2</sup> On the transnational turn, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin.

<sup>3</sup> For early work that moved Americanist approaches beyond the continent, see Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease.



primary bodies of water: the Pacific Ocean, from which the family has been displaced spatially, and the inland sea of Lake Bonneville, from which the family is removed temporally, given that Bonneville evaporated about ten thousand years prior to the novel's setting. Looking at the setting and the traumatic experience as the girl does—through the sea—readers of Otsuka's novel can better understand the heretofore unexamined role that water plays in the novel as the characters struggle to work through the dissolution of the self that accompanies their imprisonment experience. The sea—whether it is the physically distant Pacific or temporally distant Bonneville—serves as a displaced but active character in Otsuka's work. This reading expands Otsuka's internment novel far beyond the years of the internment itself. Indeed, if Wai Chee Dimock is correct in her assertion that “American literature emerges with a much longer history than one might think” when viewed through the lens of deep time (4), then approaching Otsuka's novel through an archipelagic thinking that makes the water environment visible pushes the significance of Otsuka's novel—and the Japanese American internment—into timeframes much deeper than many human cultures.

My reading brings focus to pervasive sea-oriented symbolism within Otsuka's novel. On one level, the spatially displaced presence of the Pacific ranges from the boy's “lucky blue stone from the sea” (68), to the woman's loss of a pearl earring, with the Pacific signifying a lost cultural and spatial sense of belonging. Equally important is the sea that has a temporally displaced presence in the novel: Lake Bonneville. Being taken from a watery sea to a waterless sea has traumatic implications for the characters' internment experience, especially when one considers the temporal displacement that accompanies their spatial displacement. However, rather than intensify the trauma of displacement as one might suspect, the presence of paleo Lake Bonneville enables the characters to begin working through their traumatic experience and

allows for a reorientation of self. The boy and the girl in Otsuka's novel, though spatially displaced by the US government, create a new understanding of home by allowing themselves to be temporally displaced by the sea and by experiencing variations on the "oceanic feeling" as Freud and LaCapra describe it. The girl and the boy's ability to provisionally work through their forced displacement reframes the stances of oceanic thinkers who emphasize the sea's role in creating a sense of home and complicates the theories of trauma scholars who assert that trauma leads to disorientation. In this context, the temporal displacement is not one of disorientation in the negative sense, as Manzella might suggest; instead, this temporal displacement is a method of reorientation, of finding precarious refuge in a time when Japanese Americans were outcasts imprisoned by their own country. By embracing the ancient sea in order to survive and endure their traumatic experience, the boy and the girl find a provisional home in a place (and time) far from home. Furthermore, the woman's interactions with her waterless environment differ from those of her children, allowing for us to view the watery symbolism in Otsuka's novel as a magnification of the woman's traumatic symptoms, not just a means of coping with trauma. Together the experiences of the woman and children demonstrate how reading trauma through an archipelagic lens illuminates a complex narrative of survival and sometimes deferred healing that is as multifaceted as the traumatic experience itself. Thus, this essay emerges not just as an archipelagic rereading of an important novel of the internment but also as a frame through which archipelagic thought can become a collaborator for the contingent working through of trauma and, ultimately, a reimagination of notions of home and reorientation of the self.

### **Disorientation Across Borderlands and Borderwaters**

The setting of *When the Emperor Was Divine* contributes to its status as a novel that evokes archipelagic and traumatic understanding as interdependent and mutually constitutive.

Otsuka has alluded in interviews to the importance of the novel's setting as a place of trauma. She spent more than six years working on the manuscript for her novel, during which time she combed through 1940s newspapers, interviewed past internees, and read history books about the camps (Shea; Otsuka, "Secrecy"). In a 2012 article about her own family's experience being interned in Topaz, Otsuka wrote the following about the research process:

I kept countless notebooks filled with details about camp life: the food, the showers, the schools, the dust storms, how you got there (in a train with blacked-out windows), how you left (with a \$25 check in your pocket). I learned about the flora (sagebrush, not cactus) and fauna (coyotes, prairie dogs, rattlesnakes) of the Sevier Desert, and the ancient salt lake under which Utah had once been submerged (somewhere in my parents' house is a pin from camp made out of tiny seashells). ("Julie Otsuka on")

Each item on Otsuka's list points toward the trauma of the internment experience, and each would have been present in the camp during the 1940s except for "the ancient salt lake," making Lake Bonneville feel out of place to us in the sense that it is out of *time*, or anachronistic. Indeed, Bonneville's state of anachronistic exception within Otsuka's commentary may point toward the distinct impression this ancient lake made on her during her research into the trauma surrounding Topaz. Her own mother, who was imprisoned in Topaz as a child, kept a brooch—made up of an assemblage of ancient seashells found in the sand after Bonneville had evaporated—and carried it with her back to California. Because her mother did not speak much about the internment experience, Otsuka herself felt somewhat disoriented about the events of the war, not even knowing where the pin with the seashells was located in her parents' house. Hence, Otsuka's time spent reading and interviewing about the camp was perhaps her way of orienting herself around the war experience with knowledge of Topaz and the temporally distant Lake Bonneville.

Much of Otsuka's research would have focused her attention on Topaz's archipelagic-traumatic setting. In an acknowledgment that appears on the final page of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Otsuka expresses her gratitude to several works for their help in shaping her story, including *Citizen 13660* by Miné Okubo, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* by Yoshiko Uchida, and *A Fence Away From Freedom: Japanese Americans and World War II* by Ellen Levine. Each of these sources mentions the presence of the ancient lake in Topaz—if not directly, then at least by the dust it left behind. In her proto-graphic novel, Okubo frequently describes the dust in Topaz and the “non-absorbent alkaline soil” (189). In one such passage, Okubo writes, “The snow melted quickly and, as the alkaline soil did not absorb water, the ground became a sticky mass of mud” (148). Similarly, Uchida mentions the dust and the ancient lake in *Desert Exile* and in her 1980 article “Topaz, City of Dust,” in which she writes, “what had once been a peaceful lake bed was now churned up into one great mass of loose flour-like sand” (236). While the dust and sand make frequent appearances in the accounts Otsuka read about Topaz, shells from Lake Bonneville are also mentioned in Levine's interview with Amy Akiyama, who was imprisoned as a child in Topaz. Levine reports Akiyama's words: “Topaz was a lake bed, so there were seashells. People collected the shells and made pins and things” (56). In each of these passages, the representation of the disappeared sea mediates the trauma of displacement. Whether through dust or shells, the prisoners' interactions with Lake Bonneville become interlaced with their traumatic memories. These mentions, along with several others from her research, aided Otsuka in her depictions of Lake Bonneville's ancient presence in Topaz as the place of trauma.

With an understanding that the ancient sea was wrapped up in the trauma that both Otsuka and the prisoners were grappling with, we can better appreciate the oceanic metaphors

that structure how Otsuka has spoken about the task of representing trauma in her novel. In 2002, when asked about her writing process, Otsuka remained conscious of her temporal displacement from the traumatic event of internment, saying, “When you’re writing about something like the uprooting and incarceration of an entire generation of people—your people—well, that can feel like a tremendous and terrible responsibility. Am I the right person to be telling this story? Am I even entitled to tell this story?” (*Book*). Hence, Otsuka’s feelings of inadequacy stemmed from her own sense of anachronism in relation to the camp experience. Like Lake Bonneville, Otsuka was from a different time, separate from the WWII present of the novel she was striving to write. Despite the fact that her family lived in Topaz, her own temporal distance left her feeling insecure in her role as the trauma’s storyteller. Years later, she explained her motivation to continue in a 2013 interview with author Gene Oishi: “The only way I could enter into that experience of internment was by writing about it. It was a way of knowing what it felt like, which I didn’t know, to have been interned, and it was also a way of trying to understand my mother” (“Secrecy”). Otsuka’s desire to understand her mother’s experience overpowered her discomfort with trauma narration, so she proceeded to tell a story from which she was temporally displaced. Interestingly, she told it by means of another anachronistic element—the ancient sea. The novel’s use of watery metaphors in a time and place without water can perhaps be attributed to her insecurities about her own time and place in relation to the traumatic event. Just as Lake Bonneville seemingly reaches Topaz prisoners across time, the trauma of the internment reaches across time and space, in ways resembling the transgenerational “ripple effect” of trauma described by Linda O’Neill and her colleagues (174), to impact Otsuka.

Otsuka explained this concept of transgenerational trauma through a watery lens in her interview with Oishi. When asked about the possibility of the incarceration creating a “lasting

trauma through subsequent generations,” she used oceanic language to describe a “subterranean current of anger” that has been passed down in her family (Otsuka, “Secrecy”). Just as Otsuka’s anger flows underground in this metaphor, some of the ancient waters of Lake Bonneville also have taken up subterranean space. In fact, the lake’s waters not only evaporated but also soaked into the ground and became part of a vast system of aquifers (Hunt et al. 81). In this sense, the Otsuka family’s subterranean currents of trauma make up an aquifer, like Lake Bonneville, but rather than flowing between layers of sediment, they flow and ripple between generations. In speaking about her family’s story and the internment experience more generally, Otsuka has demonstrated an understanding of trauma and the implications it might have for future generations. Otsuka has posited her mother’s early-onset Alzheimer’s disease as possibly a trauma symptom, explaining, “When you don’t process the grief and anger, it’s got to affect you physiologically also on some level, as well as your children and the next generation” (“Secrecy”). According to Otsuka, by not processing their trauma, her family members, and perhaps Otsuka herself, have kept their grief and anger hidden, thus allowing for the “subterranean current” to flow through them. Therefore, even though Otsuka is temporally displaced from the traumatic event, her anachronistic relation to the incarceration of the 1940s has a certain logic because her family’s trauma is so closely intertwined with a paleo sea. Because of the seeping nature of her family’s trauma, Otsuka has explained that “clearly, at some deep unconscious level, [she] needed to write about the war” (Shea). This experience with transgenerational trauma, thoroughly intertwined with her extensive research on Topaz and Lake Bonneville, has allowed Otsuka to write a novel teeming with oceanic and traumatic significance. Otsuka employs the ancient sea not as a mere backdrop for her traumatic narrative, but as an active and influential presence in the camp and in the characters’ traumatic experience.

The ancient sea impacts each of Otsuka's characters just as it seems to have impacted her during her detailed research process. With substantial knowledge of Lake Bonneville as her frame of reference, Otsuka crafted a place of trauma so rich with metaphor that it invites both archipelagic thinkers and trauma theorists to rethink the Japanese American displacement.

Whereas critics have previously approached displacement in *When the Emperor Was Divine* as a crossing of borderlands, an archipelagic reading frames it as a traumatic experience that deals with the crossing of what a few scholars have recently discussed as borderwaters.<sup>4</sup> While it makes sense to think of Utah in terms of the borderlands of the US Southwest, such a framing—which does not see the waters of Bonneville and their implication for trauma—corresponds to Roberts and Stephens' claim that American studies often rests on “geographical assumptions that have made the borderwaters illegible” among scholars and that “the United States' and the Americas' mythic continentalism has obscured the materiality of the Americas' archipelagic status” (9). Also writing on the notion of borderwaters, Kyrstin Mallon Andrews's 2019 photo-essay has aimed to redefine our understanding of borders, often held as “central sites for understanding the production of difference” (3). She captures the water's role in shaping and changing identities and behaviors around these fluid borders.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, in writing about queerness and blackness in the middle passage, places borderwaters in the context of trauma by analyzing the Atlantic as a space for sexual fluidity between black enslaved bodies. She examines “the challenges that the Atlantic offers the border waters of African diaspora, queer, and queer African diaspora studies,” arguing that “metaphors provide conceptual bridges between the lived and the possible . . . we should

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<sup>4</sup> For more on borderlands in general, see Gloria Anzaldúa. For more on borderlands in *When the Emperor Was Divine*, see Stephen Sohn and Abigail Manzella.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the ocean as the ideal space for rethinking borders, see Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters.

return to the materiality of water to make its metaphors mean more complexly, shaking off settling into frozen figures” (212). For Otsuka’s characters, the ancient sea becomes this bridge between the lived and the possible as they embrace the sea’s materiality. When one acknowledges the ancient-sea-status of the Utah desert, *When the Emperor Was Divine* becomes a crucial touchstone in this emergent discussion of borderwaters. By being displaced across borderwaters, and by living in the presence of the remains of an ancient sea, Otsuka’s characters are forced to reorient themselves in this new setting of geologic and oceanic significance.

As may be intimated from Tinsley’s commentary on borderwaters and the middle passage, the terms and ideas applied to borderwaters correlate significantly with trauma, and more specifically, I would argue, with trauma theory’s discussion of dissociation, which Laurence Kirmayer defines as “a gap in the normal integration of memory, identity and experience” (179). Dissociation following a traumatic experience is what enables Otsuka’s characters to be so attentive to the metaphor of the ancient sea as it shapes their internment experience. Analogous to Otsuka’s own watery discussions of transgenerational trauma, the language which scholars use to refer to dissociative experiences is often rich with watery images. Kirmayer writes of patients with dissociative disorders experiencing “shifts in metaphors for the self,” saying, “This sensitivity of memory to the metaphoric implications of language is a crucial difference between accounts of repression and dissociation, as the former is portrayed as a *rigid barrier* to overcome at a critical moment of de-repression while the latter involves *fluid movements* back and forth across an ‘amnesic barrier’ that responds to shifts in metaphor with more or less permeability” (180, my emphasis). With the fluidity Kirmayer suggests, dissociation can be seen as the crossing of borderwaters between one’s understanding of a traumatic experience and the actual lived experience. As I trace in the subsequent sections, Otsuka’s



characters seem to be able to cross this borderwater of the “amnesic barrier” by bringing their internment experience into convergence with images and dreams of the ancient sea. While consequences of trauma, including dissociation, involve a degree of disorientation, this ability to embrace fluidity is what enables Otsuka’s characters to reorient themselves and find their sense of place following their displacement.

### **Trauma and Healing in a (Temporally Distant) Watery Sea**

With an understanding of the ways in which Otsuka, during the writing process, relied on interweaving archipelagic and traumatic metaphors, it becomes easier to see how the novel engages a set of traumatic and contingently healing borderwaters, specifically through the girl’s and the boy’s interactions with ancient Lake Bonneville. Trauma and archipelagic thought help us not only to see signs of dis- and reorientation in these characters’ actions and words, but, reciprocally, their actions and words help us to reevaluate the role of the watery metaphor in both the acts of experiencing trauma and healing from trauma. By subconsciously soaking up the watery history of the ancient sea, both the boy and the girl begin the process of reorienting themselves even as the traumatic experience continues.

The girl’s process of reorientation begins on her train ride from the Tanforan Racetrack near San Francisco to Delta, Utah, a town whose name reflects its history as an ancient river delta flowing into Lake Bonneville. As the train crosses the causeway that cuts through the Great Salt Lake (which the narrator frames as a remnant of Bonneville by describing it as “an ancient body of water where nothing ever sank”), the girl sleeps, though “even in her sleep the sound of the rippling water came to her” (46).<sup>6</sup> As the girl is crossing the borderwater of the Great Salt Lake, she is transitioning from the watery Pacific to the waterless remains of Lake Bonneville.

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<sup>6</sup> The Great Salt Lake, located in Northern Utah, is a remnant of the water that made up the paleo Lake Bonneville.

When she wakes up in Delta, the narrator explains, “she did not remember the sound of the rippling water but it was with her, without her knowing. The sound of the lake was inside of her” (46-47). Here she has crossed the “amnesic barrier” by failing to recall the event and by embracing a new fluid, watery movement. The girl’s experience while sleeping echoes Cathy Caruth’s description of the traumatic nightmare, which builds on a model advanced by Sigmund Freud. Caruth explains that flashbacks and nightmares are often “accompanied by an *amnesia* for the past,” which “suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness” (152). Consequently, the girl’s sleeping state becomes crucial for the water’s integration into her subconscious. While she is not currently having a traumatic nightmare, she is living through a traumatic experience, leaving her subconscious vulnerable to both selective amnesia and embedded meaning.<sup>7</sup> The girl’s inability to remember the sound of the rippling water results in the water’s continued presence in her permeable subconscious as it seemingly trickles across the amnesic barrier. This puzzling occurrence may best be explained by referring back to dissociation, a situation in which “material out of conscious awareness can nonetheless exert a tangible effect” (Spiegel and Cardeña 367). The rippling water is certainly beyond the girl’s “conscious awareness,” yet it impacts her thoughts toward her displacement and imprisonment. Her relationship to the paleo sea in Topaz is affected by the fluidity of the rippling waters she has heard while sleeping on the train. The water becomes a subconscious symbol for her displacement, something she can use to reorient herself throughout her internment experience.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on trauma victims’ “enhanced perception of imagery,” see Judith Herman.

The girl comforts the boy in Topaz and initiates his reorientation process by sharing her newfound knowledge of borderwaters and the unimportance of land-based borders. The girl educates the boy, her brother, about “the ancient salt lake that had once covered all of Utah and parts of Nevada. This was thousands of years ago, she said, during the Ice Age. There were no fences then. And no names. No Utah. No Nevada. Just lots and lots of water” (58–9). Here the girl is conveying the incapability of rigid, human-made borders to define a person’s sense of place in time and space. For her, the knowledge of an ancient sea erases the importance of traditional borders and borderlands. While the geopolitical borders between the states of Utah and Nevada are explicitly referenced here, a more implicit erasure of borders can also be inferred in the girl’s commentary. When one considers the ancient presence of Lake Bonneville, the WWII border between Japanese American freedom and incarceration becomes more permeable. In a sense, the “fences” surrounding them in Topaz, the human-made barriers, are submerged by imagining the ancient sea. The girl implies this death of rigid borders as she continues: “‘And where we are now? . . . ‘Six hundred feet under’” (59). The girl is now verbally and visually reorienting the boy to be underneath the surface of the ancient sea. While this term “six hundred feet under” resonates with “six feet under,” the common phrase for a body buried in a grave, the boy does not seem bothered by the girl’s hinting at death. In fact, he seems comforted by the thought of being in a watery grave, as this conversation is what leads the boy to his reorienting dream that finally enables him to find his own sense of place. Perhaps the thought of finding one’s place in a watery grave is less frightening than finding oneself disoriented in a dry desert, imprisoned by one’s own government. In this sense, the price of reorientation seems to be the burial of one’s trauma, which results in personal and generational amnesia. It is possible that Otsuka needed to research her own family’s history because her ancestors chose to reorient

rather than remember—surviving trauma always comes at a cost. For Otsuka’s characters and their World War II counterparts, the price was likely the burial of ancestral narratives through a personal amnesia for the past, even as that past would ripple forward toward Otsuka.

After the girl conveys the importance of the ancient sea’s presence to the boy, he dreams of Lake Bonneville, finally enabling him to reorient himself after the trauma of his displacement. Subsequent to his conversation with the girl about the ancient lake, the narrator writes, “All night long [the boy] dreamed of water. . . . He saw the ancient salt lake floating above the floor of the desert. Its surface was calm and blue. Smooth as glass. He was drifting down through the reeds and fish were swimming through his fingers and when he looked up through the water the sun was nothing but a pale wobbly speck a hundred million miles above his head” (59). The boy seems comforted by the water, which he visualizes as “calm and blue” and “smooth,” just like his “lucky blue stone from the sea” which he carries with him in Topaz (68). In his dream, the boy is seemingly exercising his ability to feel the “oceanic feeling,” which Freud refers to as a “feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (Freud 11). Because the boy is a child, his “ego” has yet to “separate off an external world from itself,” so the boy still feels an “inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which [corresponds] to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it” (Freud 13). Thus, his age has enabled him to embrace the proximity of Lake Bonneville across space and time. In this sense, by dreaming about and subconsciously *feeling* Lake Bonneville, the boy is experiencing the “oceanic feeling” through a “more intimate bond” with his natural environment. The boy’s ability to feel the oceanic feeling and to draw comfort from an underwater dream seems to contradict what is frequently recounted in other traumatic experiences relating to water. In fact, many terms used to describe manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder, like “numbed” and

“distorted” (Herman 43), hold watery significance but with more negative connotations. For instance, Abram Kardiner describes a patient for whom mere thoughts of the sea were physically painful reminders of his traumatic experience of being submerged in cold water (Kardiner and Spiegel 128). Water, when viewed through a traumatic lens, is often associated with numbness or drowning, yet for the boy in Otsuka’s novel it brings a sense of peace and belonging. In this instance, it will be useful to examine water and the sea from an archipelagic perspective, as many archipelagic thinkers share the boy’s interpretation of the sea as a place of belonging.

Oceanic and archipelagic thinkers have worked to reorient our understanding of the sea on a planetary scale, thus providing us with a framework for interpreting the boy’s dream as a reorienting experience rather than a traumatic nightmare. The Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner eloquently explains the tie that native Pacific Islanders feel to their lands and waters. In a blog post published to *Ke Kaupu Hehi Ale*, she writes about Lidepdepju, the “pile of rocks” that, according to Marshallese elders, tells the story of “how [the people] came from stone, from earth,” and emphasizes the connection the people have had to the land from the time of creation (“Luerkoklik”). It is Jetñil-Kijiner’s belief that origin stories play an important role in connecting a people to their land, and this origin story in particular relies upon the sea to shape the stones, which “live in the waves.” Hence, the sea is just as important as the land in creating a sense of home for the people of the Marshall Islands. Similarly, Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa emphasizes the role the sea plays in defining an island in “Our Sea of Islands.” He argues for a shift in perspective through a shift in language—rather than referring to the Pacific as “islands in a far sea,” he believes a term that better acknowledges the importance of water is “a sea of islands” (7). For both authors, and many of their contemporaries, the ocean is an essential part of their definition of home and of self. By redefining the sea, these oceanic thinkers have invited a

reinterpretation of the sea's role in Otsuka's novel. The sea, in this light, becomes a catalyst for both displacement and reorientation of the self.

With this oceanic scholarship and philosophy in mind, the boy's relationship with the ancient sea as established by his dream becomes one of comfort and belonging rather than traumatic disorientation. Prior to his reorienting dream, the boy feels insecure in his sense of place, particularly when he thinks of his father's arrest. At the beginning of the boy's chapter, a scene in the mess hall is like Hau'ofa's discussion of "islands in a far sea." Here the boy witnesses "[a]n endless sea of bobbing black heads. Hundreds of mouths chewing. Slurping. Sucking. Swallowing" (Otsuka, *When* 50). By describing the men in the mess hall as "an endless sea," the narrator creates an image of the boy himself adrift at sea, searching for something familiar to cling to. He has yet to embrace his sister's notion that land is less important in this ancient desert sea and that Lake Bonneville itself is something around which to reorient oneself. It is only after the boy's watery dream that he begins to be comforted by oceanic imagery around him in Topaz. As might be expected, a result of his dissociation following his displacement is a new susceptibility to metaphor. Because of his sister's own reorienting guidance and because of Lake Bonneville's ancient presence in the camp, the boy seems to adopt oceanic metaphors as his method of understanding and working through his trauma. He sees "*frozen white sails*" in sheets on laundry lines, and he notes the blood from his loose molar to be "salty...like the sea" (88, 104). He feels comforted by the motion of rocking his loose tooth back and forth in its socket. Though the thought of being alone at sea once overwhelmed him, like when he seeks his father among "an endless sea of bobbing black heads" (50), the boy's reorienting experience has shifted the sea's meaning from a place of trauma to a space of belonging.

Both the boy and the girl's ability to *feel* Lake Bonneville, despite its temporal and spatial distance, is understandable when one considers other ways in which children have dealt with trauma. Writing about children's capacities for dissociation and creating new understandings of self, Roberta Culbertson observes that children "are suggestible, and as anyone who has watched a child playing can attest, their ability to enter into a world that is separate from the one in which they reside . . . is significant" (181). For the boy and the girl in Otsuka's novel, the desert becomes a sea, which we know to be a place of comfort yet also a place of potential danger. The sea as a symbol of their displacement highlights the fluidity of the children's trauma—in one moment they feel at peace; in another they fear the unknown. The unknowability of their situation is highlighted by ocean-themed rumors in camp, which the children hear often, such as, "They would be taken out onto the high seas and then shot. They would be sent to a desert island and left there to die" (Otsuka, *When* 70). While the children frequently draw comfort from the thought of the ancient sea, the adults around them display fear of seas and islands, and this fear undoubtedly impacts the children's traumatic experience. In these and other scenes, we see a permeability between resolved and unresolved trauma for the children, for whom "ordinary and nonordinary reality or states of consciousness, and the inner and outer dimensions of existence are all more fluid than they become in later life" (Culbertson 181). Because of their age and their susceptibility to oceanic metaphor, they can displace themselves to the ancient sea and become actors, rather than victims, in their own displacement. However, dissociation from reality can come at the cost of remembering, which is perhaps why the woman (the girl and boy's mother) holds on to her past and thus remains grounded in the desert sand of Topaz.

### **Traumatic Symptoms and Oceanic Traces in a Waterless Sea**

While the girl's and the boy's interactions with Lake Bonneville reveal the reorienting (and in some instances healing) potential of conceptualizing trauma theory and archipelagic thought as intertwined, the woman's status and imaginations while in the camp help us to consider another way in which these dynamics may unfold—namely, as a magnification of traumatic symptoms or as a symbol for the traumatic event itself. The woman does not have a reorienting experience like the ones her children share, which seems to indicate that she is unable (or unwilling) to dissociate her consciousness to a time when Lake Bonneville was watery. In fact, rather than seeking out symbolism of the ancient sea, as her children do, the woman is apparently desperate to rid herself of oceanic imagery, primarily in her interactions with the dust left behind by the ancient sea. She initially appears to confirm Judith Herman's assertion that the "ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness" (1). Yet, as Herman aptly points out, "[a]trocities . . . refuse to be buried." The woman's desire to control her environment by clearing it of dust results in an obsession with dust and an obsession with both the wateriness and waterlessness it simultaneously represents. Like her children, she too interacts with Lake Bonneville and other watery forms, and the contradictory nature of these interactions highlights the complexity of her traumatic experience. Her compulsive sweeping of the dust symbolizes her rejection of her displacement and her obsession with the ancient sea, while, ultimately, her mourning for a lost pearl earring reveals the deeply embedded trauma of her loss of home.

The woman first engages with Lake Bonneville by confronting the alkaline dust that once made up the lake's bed. The narrator writes of the dust in their barrack, saying, "It was soft and white and chalky, like talcum powder. Only the alkaline made your skin burn. It made your nose bleed. It made your eyes sting. It took your voice away. . . . And all day long, it seemed, his mother was always sweeping" (64). The woman's repetitive action of sweeping fits with



Dominick LaCapra's term "acting out" to characterize victims of trauma who often engage in "compulsive repetition" (*History* 119). His term "working through," on the other hand, defines a healthy form of countering post-traumatic symptoms in order to "mitigate the effects of trauma," which for these characters is their displacement and family separation. For the girl and the boy, this journey of working-through, and ultimately reorientation, begins when they individually experience, even subconsciously, the watery history of the desert land. By reorienting themselves around the ancient sea in Topaz, the boy and the girl begin to work through their trauma. The woman seems to still be in the "acting out" stage by choosing not to pay the price of burying her traumatic memories in order to reorient and rebuild her sense of self. Knowing, as she certainly does, that the dust is a remnant of Lake Bonneville, the woman sweeps constantly, perhaps as an effort to avoid such traces of the ancient sea, as the ancient sea becomes a symbol for the watery sea she was forced to leave behind. This behavior coincides with some of the dissociative symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as described in *DSM-5*, where patients are characterized by "[p]ersistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by . . . [a]voidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders" (American). By tirelessly working to rid their barrack of the fine white dust, the woman is, in a sense, refusing to accept her displacement to a waterless desert. Rather than water leaking through her roof, as it did in Berkeley (21), she now has dust.

However, the woman's traumatic experience is complex, thus resulting in a complicated traumatic response—while on the surface she seems to be sweeping away any reminders of Lake Bonneville, she is, in the process, fetishizing it, while simultaneously experiencing the loss of the "oceanic feeling" her son is still able to feel. Dominick LaCapra expands on Freud's commentary on the oceanic feeling by describing it as an "imaginary unity (or community) with

the mother” (*Writing* 52). LaCapra’s use of mother can refer to a literal mother or a symbolic mother. He details the loss of the oceanic feeling as “separation from the (m)other with the intervention of (the name of) the father and the institution of the symbolic” (52). In Otsuka’s novel, the woman’s loss of the Pacific Ocean signifies her loss of the oceanic feeling. We can read the woman’s “mother” as the Pacific because Otsuka frequently references the woman’s longing for the ocean (*When* 94) as well as her family in Japan, an archipelago in the Pacific (95). The woman seems to conflate the Pacific with her sense of home, family, and belonging. She loses this unity with her “mother” when the “father,” whom I would read as the US government, forcibly moves her away from the Pacific. The US is her new home, or her new parent, yet it does not accept her with the loving embrace of a mother—rather, she finds the stern hand of a symbolic father, accompanied by barbed wire and barren barracks. After the government’s intervention, the woman experiences her loss of the oceanic feeling as “a similar conflation of absence and loss [that] occurs with respect to the passage from nature to culture, the entry into language, the traumatic encounter with the ‘real,’ the alienation from species-being . . . or the constitutive nature of melancholic loss” (LaCapra, *Writing* 52). We see her alienation, her traumatic encounter with the “real,” and her melancholic loss, all through the eyes of her children, whose youth allows them to maintain some sense of their own oceanic feeling.

As part of her loss of oceanic feeling, the woman begins to display an inability to engage with her surroundings, further solidifying the possibility that while her children are working through their trauma, she remains in the acting-out stage. The narrator’s descriptions of the woman’s behavior in *Topaz* echo Kate Schick’s descriptions of individuals acting out their trauma. Schick writes, “Individuals who act out have difficulty distinguishing between the past and the present and struggle with notions of the future . . . to re-engage with life in the here and

now, they must begin to work through their traumatic experience” (1842). The woman’s struggle to distinguish between past and present is especially evident in her obsessive sweeping. She seems to view the dust—in both its past and present function—as a reminder of a past abundance of water, and as a symbol for the present lack of water. Additionally, the woman’s inability to “re-engage with life” is evident in that “she no longer had any appetite. Food bored her,” and she tells her son that “[s]he didn’t want anything anymore. Not a thing” (Otsuka, *When* 94). The woman has also lost her motivation to complete tasks. The narrator writes, “Most days she did not leave the room at all. She sat by the stove for hours, not talking. In her lap lay a half-finished letter. An unopened book” (93). The only task she seems to truly care about is sweeping dust, which represents her complex feelings toward her imprisonment. In relation to LaCapra’s understanding of the oceanic feeling, she feels imprisoned by one symbolic parent and separated from another. She sweeps the dust to rid herself of this reminder of her trauma, yet in doing so, she is continually interacting with the ancient sea, thus obsessing over her loss of the watery Pacific. She is distancing herself from her reality but not in the same way her children are. While her children begin reorienting themselves vis-à-vis the sea’s ancient presence, the woman remains in a disoriented limbo state. She is disengaged with her reality and is unable to form a new reality or coping mechanism for understanding her displacement.

The intensity of the woman’s trauma is further characterized by her feelings toward an oceanic object, a pearl earring, which she loses on the train ride to Topaz. A pearl is formed as the result of a traumatic experience when a foreign element enters a mollusk’s shell and, as a defense mechanism, the living sea-creature then coats the irritant in layer after layer of nacre (Bryner). The pearl, then, is not only a remnant of the traumatic event itself but also an archive of the animal’s response. The woman has undergone a similar traumatic experience for which

her lost pearl serves as an archive of her trauma and of her attempts to grapple with her internment as she symbolically creates her own metaphorical layers of nacre.<sup>8</sup> She explains her loss of the pearl to the boy, saying, “It fell off somewhere between Provo and Nephi. I haven’t felt right ever since” (Otsuka, *When* 86). By losing one of her pearls, the woman has lost an archive of her trauma as well as an archive of her attempts to work through that trauma. The uncertainty of the pearl’s present location magnifies the disorienting effects of this archival loss. The woman cannot place exactly where her pearl was lost on her journey from a watery sea to a waterless one. To use the map of Lake Bonneville that appears in figure 1 as a means of visualizing the woman’s dilemma, Provo city’s location was once submerged by the ancient sea, while the city of Nephi (which though unmarked on *Trek*’s map would have appeared at the base of the peninsula between the Provo and Sevier Desert arms of the lake) was dry land even when Bonneville was at its high-water line (36). The woman cannot know if her archive was lost on land or if, in a way, her archival pearl was returned to a sea, even a now waterless one. The woman’s loss echoes that of Perla Ubitch in the 1998 documentary *Liebe Perla*, which follows Perla’s search for a video of her and her siblings made by Josef Mengele during their time in Auschwitz (Rozen). Unfortunately, like the woman in Otsuka’s novel, Perla (whose name translates to “Pearl”) is unable to find the archive of her traumatic experience. These women lose the archives of their trauma and face uncertainty about their archives’ whereabouts, thus magnifying the trauma of the loss itself. For the woman in Otsuka’s novel, the loss of her archival pearl signifies her loss of home and her traumatic disorientation.

### **Merging the Oceans of Archipelagic Thought and Trauma Theory**

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<sup>8</sup> For more on archiving trauma, see Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings*.

Just as archipelagic thought and trauma theory merge to create a new understanding of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, my reading of Otsuka’s novel invites us to view archipelagic thinking and trauma theory as mutually enlightening. The intertwining of these fields results in a new understanding of time as it relates to oceanic displacement. Trauma may be thought of as anachronistic, just as Lake Bonneville was anachronistic in the Topaz prisoners’ internment experience. This anachronistic nature allows repressed and/or dissociated trauma to “resurface” years later (McNally 183). Thus, the joining of archipelagic thought with trauma theory invites us to rethink time itself in the traumatic and archipelagic sense. Rebecca Hogue writes that “archipelagic time is both in front and behind; the future is past and the past is future, all part of the archipelago” (332).<sup>9</sup> This oceanic way of understanding time requires of us a reorientation—we must rethink displacement as affecting the here and now as well as the past, future, and distant.

The insight into a traumatic experience that comes through an archipelagic reading can not only be found by rereading other literature of the Japanese American internment, like Heidi Kim’s edited account *Taken from the Paradise Isle: The Hoshida Family Story* (2015), through an archipelagic lens, but also trauma narratives of Indigenous peoples who embrace noncontinental and watery geographies. Other scholars are already examining trauma and reorientation in terms of water. Caroline Wigginton’s 2020 article explores the ways “by which Native peoples oriented and reoriented themselves to the upper Mississippi River valley and its network of relationships” (5). Her work with Indigenous cartographies reveals a connectedness with water—an observation which holds significance for recent affronts to Indigenous existence

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<sup>9</sup> For the “tā-vā theory of reality,” a look at “oceanic relationships between time and space” (Hogue 327), see Tēvita Ka’ili. For “*etak*” as “a way of conceptualizing time/space” (Diaz 97), see Vicente Diaz.

like the Dakota Access Pipeline. Similarly concerned with watery ecologies, Hogue brings an environmental understanding of displacement trauma in the Pacific to her recent reading of Albert Wendt's *Black Rainbow* (1992). Here, she examines the storytelling of oceanic histories as it endures "despite physical and rhetorical dislocation" (327). Viewing these oceanic narratives of displacement as archipelagic trauma could be illuminating for the fields of trauma theory and the environmental humanities. Indeed, what Hogue calls "Indigenous Oceanic dislocation and forced migration from nuclearism" (327) is a modern-day example of traumatic displacement with oceanic importance. Just as Otsuka's characters and their WWII counterparts were taken from the Pacific, Indigenous peoples have been and continue to be forced from their island homes due to nuclear imperialism and the climate crisis. Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner speaks for these climate change refugees in her poetry, including "Dear Matafele Peinem" which she performed at the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit. Jetñil-Kijiner captures the complexity of the ocean's role in the trauma of climate change, saying, "Men say that one day / that lagoon will devour you / they say it will gnaw at the shoreline . . . and crunch your island's shattered bones / they say you, your daughter / and your granddaughter, too / will wander rootless / with only a passport to call home" ("Statement"). Here, the lagoon represents the sea itself, which simultaneously shapes islanders' homes while threatening to destroy them. Climate change is creating archipelagic trauma for Indigenous peoples within the continental and archipelagic US and wider archipelagos. My reading of Otsuka's Japanese American imprisonment novel—in which trauma theory and archipelagic thought arrive at convergent conceptual grammars—has relevance to other such narratives of displacement in ways that reveal the sea's role as a mediator through which traumatic experiences are acted out, worked through, and reoriented. The sea shapes our land just as trauma shapes our thoughts and behaviors. By merging archipelagic

thinking with trauma theory, we can better visualize the ocean and its islands as places for the reorientation of multiple versions of the self as they surface across time and space.

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