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English 580 Final Project

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Art, Empathy, & Incarceration: Experiencing American Concentration Camps
through Graphic Narratives

Resurrections

In the wake of Miné Okubo's bravery in writing and publishing *Citizen 13660*, Kiku Hughes and George Takei seek to connect their stories of Japanese Incarceration with the ongoing struggle for equity and respect for all peoples, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or appearance in the United States. Okubo herself expressed her mix of fear and hope about this in the 1983 introduction to *Citizen 13660*, "I am not bitter. I hope that things can be learned from this tragic episode, for I believe it could happen again."¹ Okubo's awareness of this possibility, is taken up in the text and art of *Displacement* and *They Called Us Enemy*, as well as the statements made by their authors in their many online interviews. Takei, in particular, has been a vocal advocate for equality and equity both in minority and queer issues. Through their narratives and activism, Hughes and Takei insist on remembering the trauma of Japanese Incarceration, specifically in relation to contemporary racist exclusionary policies enacted by the U.S. Government. Their attitudes towards these policies are actively engaged through their personal lives as well as in the work they produce.

Additionally, as Hughes and Takei are writing from a contemporary space, they utilize their platforms as authors to push back against the racist propaganda of Donald Trump's candidacy and subsequent presidency, advocating for the alliance of minority and marginalized

¹ Okubo, Miné. "Preface to the 1983 Edition", *Citizen 13660*.

peoples in response to these statements and policies. This is emphasized in the close of each of their narratives, wherein the author-protagonists engage in civil disobedience, activism, and protest. The recurring theme presented by Hughes and Takei as author-protagonists in their respective narratives, can be summed up as “Never Again” – referring to Japanese Incarceration and present-day instances of similar events, such as the Muslim Ban and the separation of children from their parents at the Mexico/U.S. border. This idea, “that historical experience can speak to our collective present struggles suggests that our society must learn to respect objectified Others and cultivate critical empathy – or risk making the same mistakes all over again.”² Hughes and Takei utilize the form of graphic narrative to create space for this critical empathy and reflection. And, as comics and graphic novels have historically been marketed toward children and adolescents (though there has been an evolution of that marketplace with the advent of titles marketed to adults like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight*), the message of remembrance and insistence that the United States never again engages in something akin to Japanese Incarceration, seems aimed at both our contemporary moment and future generations.

Simply, because the graphic narrative encourages critical empathy, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the narrative, and promotes re-readings through the evolution of meaning and abstraction within the novels, it would seem that Takei and Hughes have chosen their mediums well. Additionally, as Takei notes, directing these narratives toward young adults, and presenting them in a manner that is accessible to a myriad of readers, allows stories of Japanese Incarceration to be passed on for generations to come, so that we, as a society, can enact change and ensure that the United States never “replaces one gravely wrong decision with another.”³

² Roxworthy, Emily. “Revitalizing Japanese American Internment: Critical Empathy and Role-Play in the Musical *Allegiance* and the Video Game *Drama in the Delta*”

³ Takei, George. *They Called Us Enemy*