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English 580 Final Project

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

Art as Chronicle

The graphic novel (also referred to as the graphic narrative and graphic memoir in this project) exists in a liminal space between the traditional form of the novel and that of the comic book. In the preceding video I presented Michael Chaney's argument that graphic narratives offer us the unique position to see the social, or the ability to view the individual in "proximate relationships to depictions of community."<sup>1</sup> This positionality is especially useful when examining graphic narratives of Japanese Incarceration, as the prevalence of community is fundamental when considering both the immediate and lasting impacts Order 9066 had and continues to have on Japanese Americans. In examining Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, this proximate relationship to community allows for the representation of shared grief and trauma through the interplay of words and text. It is this interplay, or more specifically the ambiguity created by the relationship of Okubo's art and captions, that invites readers and scholars to consider the seen/unseen and said/unsaid in the novel, as well as the implications of those dichotomies, more deeply. In framing a story of Japanese Internment in the guise of a graphic narrative (or perhaps graphic memoir, though neither of these terms existed when *Citizen 13660* was published), the novel is able to represent not only the spoken, but the body language of the speaker, bringing in a further layer to the interpretive dynamic of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Chaney

This marriage of art and text in *Citizen 13660*, for instance, allows for the depiction of gestures of resistance by Japanese American internees described by Vivian Fumiko Chin in her research on the Okubo's work.<sup>2</sup> Without the art of *Citizen 13660*, Okubo's comment that she is "not bitter" could be accepted as genuine. However, when paired with the sketches of Okubo glaring or sticking her tongue out at guards, the meaning of her 'non-bitter' attitude is altered. By using the *graphic* space of the graphic narrative, Okubo augments her captions with gestures that illustrate "a spirit of endurance that served to help internees withstand the experience of internment camp[s]... [while also] expos[ing] language as utilitarian, not necessarily as a medium for conveying truth".<sup>3</sup> In this way, graphic novels, and *Citizen 13660* in particular, are able to showcase honest depictions of community and personal resistance through art, while in the same instance, connecting that art to text that is both seemingly passive and subtly defiant.

These, at times, ironic relationships between art and text in graphic narratives are integral to Chaney's argument, as they trouble the construction of identities, positioning the protagonist as both inside and separated from their community, both as an observer/documenter and an unwilling recipient of the trauma being detailing in the novel.<sup>4</sup> The liminal space occupied by the author-protagonist in works like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* and other later works depicting Japanese Incarceration (such as *Displacement* and *They Called Us Enemy*), allow their readers to connect emotionally with the protagonist's position, while still maintaining some distance from the trauma being depicted. This connection is deepened by what Scott McCloud calls "Iconic Abstraction" (see video for definition).<sup>5</sup> In choosing the graphic

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<sup>2</sup> Chin, Vivian Fumiko. "Gestures of Noncompliance: Resisting, Inventing, and Enduring in *Citizen 13660*"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Peacock, James. "My thoughts shifted from the past to the future: Time and (auto)graphic representation in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*"

<sup>5</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

form, the audience is more easily able to accept the authority of the author-protagonist, and further, readily see themselves in the narrative being told.

Through this use of art, or more specifically the abstraction of the human form through art, the graphic novel opens up a space for critical empathy. That is in part due to the positioning of the author-protagonist in relation to the reader. However, in creating an inroad for the audience to see themselves in the narrative, the graphic novel straddles the temporalities of identity, time and space, stymieing total immersion in any of them; the audience is constantly aware of the past and present, while the abstraction of the author-protagonist forms a bridge for their performative spectatorship.<sup>6</sup> This is especially true for *Citizen 13660*, where in so much of Okubo's commentary is at odds with her visual depictions.

Okubo's interplay of text and image is often ironic in *Citizen 13660*, forcing the reader to examine each page as a dialogue between the drawings and the captions. This means that one cannot accept either the image or the text at face value, and instead must question how the two complicate each other. It is this dialogue between visual and textual that makes the depictions of emotion: grief, pain, loss, bitter-irony, even humor, so affecting.<sup>7</sup> Existing independently, Okubo's words and images could be taken at face value, but when sharing the page, the reader must consider how the two coexist, and what meaning they make separately and as a whole. That said, in choosing the graphic narrative form, Okubo and later authors, are choosing to complicate their messages, augmenting the meaning of their words and images through the interplay of the two. And, as the iconic abstraction of comics invites the reader to fully immerse themselves in the world of the narrative, they must also reckon with this ambiguity, forcing the reader to

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<sup>6</sup> Roxworthy, Emily. "Revitalizing Japanese American Internment: Critical Empathy and Role-Play in the Musical *Allegiance* and the Video Game *Drama in the Delta*"

<sup>7</sup> Stanutz, Katherine. "Inscrutable Greif: Memorializing Japanese American Internment in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*"

consider the seen and said alongside the unseen and unstated. By positioning the author-protagonist as the bridge for this immersion, the reader is able to examine these ambiguities from arm's length, as the author-protagonist creates a temporal distance of time and space – the reader is aware that the graphic novel they are reading is a retrospect, being told from a space beyond the events in the book – however, as they are also being pulled into the narrative through the iconic abstraction of the image, this distance is muddied, forcing the audience to both feel the pain of the novel empathically and consider the disparities of their own feelings with those of the textual/graphic interplay.