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English 580 Final Project

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

Exploring Trauma in Graphic Novels

In telling the story of Japanese Incarceration and American Concentration Camps, trust between author and reader is paramount. Through the graphic narrative form: masking, iconic abstraction, textual/graphic interplay, and the ability to see the social, Miné Okubo, Kiku Hughes, and George Takei invite their readers into their personal lives (and those of their families) to experience these traumatic events alongside them. Due to the inherent authority, and space created for critical empathy, in graphic memoirs, readers gain the ability to immerse themselves in a narrative world where they are guided by author-protagonists through their processing of trauma and grief. Rather than a benign remembrance, these narratives consistently provide their narrators with a self-determined and critical perspective that is truthfully shared with their audiences.<sup>1</sup> In choosing the form of the graphic novel, Okubo, Hughes, and Takei, make stories of Japanese Incarceration accessible to a vast swath of readers from disparate age groups and social backgrounds.

This is especially true as comics are often connected to childhood and adolescents, a fact that Hughes and Takei are well aware of and note in their interviews. However, beyond the connection between comics and youth, graphic narratives offer a surrogation process, where in the author-protagonist “serves as a bridge for recognizing not only the humanity of the (Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> Chin, Vivian Fumiko. “Gestures of Noncompliance: Resisting, Inventing, and Enduring in Citizen 13660”

American) Other, but also for recognizing that the traumas of the past and those of the unfolding present might be coterminous race-based policies.”<sup>2</sup> It is here that the exploration of trauma in *Citizen 13660*, *Displacement*, and *They Called Us Enemy* takes on a deeper and farther reaching significance.

Graphic novels have long served a place as a way to process trauma and grief, or in some way memorialize a traumatic event. With the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Citizen 13660* a year in the past (as of the completion of this project) and the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* reaching over one million copies sold, the genre of graphic memoir, or graphic trauma narrative, is one that reaches and impacts people across the globe. This is perhaps because as long as racism exists, so too will the ideas of racialized citizenship. Throughout *Citizen 13660*, *Displacement*, and *They Called Us Enemy*, the disparities on who is, or what makes, a ‘citizen’ are called into question. Chief among these, is the idea that citizenship should not be racialized or in any way denied based on race, religion, sexual preference, or appearance. By presenting these ideals, and the historical failings of the United States to live up to them, Okubo, Hughes, and Takei are opening up their personal and generational traumas to the world at large. Specifically, by using the form of the graphic narrative, these authors are contextualizing their trauma by offering not only their interiority through words and images, but also the outward perceptions of that interiority. While it may seem like a small detail, the ability to both view the outward appearance of these author-protagonists as well as discern the abstractions between their interior thoughts and feelings, and their outward facing actions, words, and masks, provides a space for the reader to recognize trauma’s effects not only in the moment but for generations to come.

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

The ability to see both the outward face and disparate inward reality of Japanese Incarceration in these graphic novels takes on an even greater aspect when considering the absence of much of this history from the core cannon of classroom texts in the United States. Further,

If there is no outlet through which Japanese Americans can process or even speak the injuries and losses brought upon them, grief is eliminated as a mode of interpreting and conceptualizing Japanese American experience in the 1940s. As such, this forbidden emotion becomes unreadable in the dominant modes of the time... [these] texts thus disrupt representational paradigms of Japanese American subjectivity, experience, and emotion, creating different affective modes that alter the terms of perception.<sup>3</sup>

In point, these narratives exist as an answer to the long absent ability for Japanese Americans to process the generational trauma of American Concentration camps. And while *Citizen 13660* has been in print for more than seventy-five years, it remains a work often overlooked in classrooms across the United States. To combat this, Hughes' novel, *Displacement* seeks to acknowledge the great contribution Miné Okubo and *Citizen 13660* made not only in documenting Japanese Incarceration, but also to the processing of trauma and grief for Japanese Americans. As Hughes, as well as many other Japanese American authors and artists will attest, Okubo's work was well ahead of its time, and the echoes of *Citizen 13660* can still be seen and heard throughout narratives of Japanese Incarceration, as well as the entire form of the graphic memoir.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanutz, Katherine. "Inscrutable Greif: Memorializing Japanese American Internment in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*"