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English 580 Final Project

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

“Masking” in *Citizen 13660*, *Displacement*, and *They Called Us Enemy*

In the previous section, I argued that the form of the graphic narrative creates spaces of interplay and ambiguity that invite readers to immerse themselves in the world of the novel, forcing them to consider both the seen/unseen and the said/unsaid, which in turn encourages critical empathy in their audiences. However, when accounting for the space of critical empathy created by graphic novels, Scott McCloud’s theory of “Masking” must be considered.

McCloud’s theory argues that the form of comics allows for the consideration of interplay between the artistic style of the subject and that of the background. Within this interplay, the audience is invited to identify with the character due to the simplicity of the art, especially when the background is rendered in more vivid detail.<sup>1</sup> At work in McCloud’s theory is an idea of authority attributed to the character in the graphic narrative. In the case of graphic memoirs, this authority “becomes even more layered and complex and its claims to objective [autobiographical] “truth” even more qualified.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, iconic abstraction lends authority to the character in question – the reader is more apt to connect to the character because of their artistic rendering. However, in the case of graphic memoirs, that connection is deepened through the Masking of character and background image, lending a further authority to the author-

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<sup>1</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

<sup>2</sup> Peacock, James. “My thoughts shifted from the past to the future”: Time and (autobio)graphic representation in Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*”

protagonist in these works – we as readers are more willing to take the character’s, or in the case of *Citizen 13660*, *Displacement*, and *They Called Us Enemy*, the author-protagonist’s words as true. This air of credibility then, existing in many forms of the autobiographic narrative, is strengthened through the use of art in the graphic memoir.

Additionally, later scholars have expanded upon McCloud’s theory, suggesting that works with photorealistic characters can serve as guides within graphic worlds that seem foreign, strange, or upsetting.<sup>3</sup> Christiane Buuck and Cathy Ryan use Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* to illustrate this point, as the character drawings in the book are rendered in photorealistic detail, however the backgrounds are often abstract and, at times, troubling. Tan’s book is devoid of text, and rather than researching the abstraction of text and image in the work, Buuck and Ryan explore these ambiguities in the relationship of character art to background rendering in *The Arrival*.

Alternatively, Masking in a work such as *Citizen 13660*, can be seen as an interweaving of both McCloud’s and Buuck and Ryan’s theories. That is to say, while Okubo’s sketches for *Citizen 13660* never include characters rendered in photorealistic detail, her drawings often abstract the backgrounds, at times rendering them in detail and at others reducing them to much more simplified drawings (see fig. 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Buuck, Christiane and Cathy Ryan. “Looking beyond the Scenes: Spatial Storytelling and Masking in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*”



(Figure 1. Okubo [1946] 2014, 99 & 161)

In the first panel, Okubo renders the garden and lake created by the incarcerated at the camp in detail, capturing the shadows and primary light source, as well as ripples on the water, either connoting current or wind. However, in the second panel we see that the background has been simplified to show only the outlines of the buildings and people, leaving space and open-ended lines, and providing little definition of the figures. One way to theorize this artistic choice is Katherine Stanutz's idea of "Inscrutable Grief", Okubo leaves the reader with no solid interpretive direction, instead constructing "Japanese American subjectivity around an objectless gaze; that is the reader sees only the external understanding of his or her interiority."<sup>4</sup> This form of masking, departs somewhat from McCloud, Buuck and Ryan, and instead focuses on the disparities within Okubo's art choices from panel to panel. Rather than examining the overall novel, focusing in on these subtle shifts in style illustrates for the reader what can be and cannot be known to them. The inscrutability of the other people in camp is conveyed by abstracting their

<sup>4</sup> Stanutz, Katherine. "Inscrutable Greif: Memorializing Japanese American Internment in Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*"

figures along with the background in the image, however feelings of grief are carried throughout the book through the choices of what, or who, to abstract in each image. In this way, Okubo uses the authority inherent in McCloud's understanding of Masking to showcase that, although the reader can comprehend the author-protagonist's interiority by examining the interplay of text and images, the interior feelings of the other internees will always remain somewhat beyond the audience's grasp. Further, as we have established masking's creation of empathic space and authority for the author-protagonist, we must also consider how this authority is used.

In examining *Citizen 13660*, Okubo often uses her positionality as author-protagonist to interject her own feelings toward a situation by placing them within the ambiguities between image and text. James Peacock does a wonderful job analyzing this in his article on Time and (autobio)graphic representation. So, I will turn liberally to his work to showcase this interaction between authority and textual/graphic ambiguity:



ON January 29, 1943, President Roosevelt announced that volunteers would be accepted in a Japanese American combat unit. A recruiting team came to the center, and a printed form was submitted to all men of military age. It contained 28 questions to determine loyalty and willingness to fight. Question 28 read: "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign power or organization?"

At the same time, the War Relocation Authority, yielding to increasing pressure, decided to conduct a general registration of all persons in the camp seventeen years of age or older. To determine their loyalty, Question 28 was used. It brought about a dilemma. Aliens (Issei) would be in a difficult position if they renounced Japanese citizenship and thereby made themselves stateless persons.

(Figure 2. Okubo [1946] 2014, 175)

A member of the "recruiting team" stands upon a stage in the Topaz centre, clutching

a handkerchief and emotively proclaiming to an audience of internees his “loyalty and willingness to fight” (Okubo [1946] 2014, 175). To exaggerate the air of theatricality, many of the audience are shedding tears, visibly moved by this performance of patriotism [Figure 2]. Okubo, in contrast, does not reprise the tears she shed on departing her California home: she holds her nose in disgust and stares not at the performer, but at the reader. The alienating effect invites the reader to consider dispassionately the politics at work and not to be swayed by the emotive rhetoric.<sup>5</sup>

In this section of his article, Peacock is exploring the performativity at work in some of the panels of *Citizen 13660*. I bring this in, not to introduce performativity, but to illustrate how Okubo utilizes the authority of the graphic form by interjecting her attitudes toward the recruitment team and the notorious Questions 27 and 28 of the Loyalty Questionnaire, through her self-depiction, rather than through the accompanying text.

Masking’s effects then, are multifaceted in the form of the graphic memoir, having an impact on the relationship of the reader to the novel: through the abstraction of art and text, the rendering of character and background, the change in style choice from panel to panel, and finally in the establishment of the authority of the author-protagonist. These aspects combine to grant the reader and area of understanding through abstraction, and beyond this, the ability to access and process trauma through spaces for critical empathy. The audience can both see and read about the events happening in the camps, however in the ambiguity or abstraction between image and text, they are able to feel the affect of these events in relation to the author-protagonist.

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<sup>5</sup> Peacock, James. “My thoughts shifted from the past to the future”: Time and (autobio)graphic representation in Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*”