**The unrepresentability of the Japanese American wartime internment to Miné Okubo’s graphic memoir, *Citizen 13660***

In an interview, Miné Okubo states that “life and art are one and the same” (Kuramitsu, 1995, 626). *Citizen 13660* attempts to represent the inherent tragedy and trauma of Japanese Americans’ lives during World War II. Intended both as a memoir and an exhibition depicting the truths of internment, Okubo’s work “reflects needs paramount during internment: to endure and negotiate the crisis” (Sokolowski, 2009, 69). While impossible to entirely capture the deep psychological trauma of internment, *Citizen 13660* seeks to be a crucial artistic representation of Japanese American experience as the first published documentation of the camps by an internee. Published in 1946, the drawings provide a “smooth integration of the large themes of history with the small details of daily life” (Zhou, 2007, 51-73). Okubo offers an eye witness testimony of trauma that is heavily in contrast with the War Relocation’s propaganda photography of internment camps which portrayed the collective Japanese American experience to the American public as assimilative and positive. *Citizen 13660* offers visibility and a voice that can testify both factually and artistically to the horrors of World War II internment.

Miné Okubo establishes a complex relationship between words and images in *Citizen 13660* in order to create a dialogue between the factual details of internment and the psychological consequences it provoked. The combination of both techniques of story-telling provide a narrative that speaks both objectively and emotively to the collective pain of Japanese Americans during World War II. Zhou writes that “Okubo employs that strange magic of comics – the interaction between words and images that don’t neatly fit. New meaning arises from the discord” (ibid). Okubo intends for the ‘discord’ to create discourse about the traumas of internment which were previously hidden from the American public and world. Pairing short sections of apolitical or neutral writing with poignant drawings, we are guided to feel the injustice. For example, in one image Okubo draws herself staring in horror at a newspaper which is perpetuating and sensationalising racist stereotypes about Japanese Americans (Okubo, 1983, 10). Words like ‘alien’ and ‘sabotage’ float menacingly above her head, illustrating her precarious position in the wartime political climate and the entrenched racialization of Japanese Americans. Somewhat contrastingly, the text below states factually that “on December 11th the United States declared War on Germany and Italy”. By documenting events with a relatively neutral tone, Okubo allows her drawings to speak powerfully with the emotion of her experiences. Her words provide clear and objective documentation of life in internment camps which makes ‘hidden history’ visible to many audiences. Where her words inform, her drawings protest. Choosing to depict the horrors of her internment experience in traditional Japanese art forms such as line art and pen-and-ink drawing, her illustrations appear tactile and convert the traditional into activism. Through the discourse both image and words create, Okubo conjures a profound narrative that details the trauma of wartime incarceration in a way that brings us intimately into the experience.

Okubo portrays herself as both observer and participant in *Citizen 13660* in order to narrate the camp experience from “multiple, gendered, subject positions” (Zhou, 2007, 51-73) as well as from her own personal understanding of camp life. Placing herself on the periphery of and in the centre of the narrative, Okubo provides a commentary that speaks of both the individual and communal trauma of internment. A sketch of her “one-room home” at Topaz Relocation Center shows her in the foreground of the drawing looking anxious, with her familiar hair and patterned shirt (Okubo, 1983, 139). Her room, a personal space, is filled with ten people conversing restlessly, reading, and sipping tea. Okubo writes that “a feeling of uncertainty hung over the camp […] some were ready to risk anything to get away”. In this scene, as in much of the memoir, Miné is both observing the communal uncertainty and feeling it herself, emphasizing the collective *we* in “*we* were tired of the shiftless existence”. There is urgency and discomfort layered in her words and drawings. By portraying herself as both inside and outside of moments, Okubo “evokes psychological distress about belonging within the community and the nation” (Sokolowski, 2009, 82). She is able to place herself in and around shifting positions that represent the unique trauma in a way that encompasses the many narratives and diversity of the Japanese American community. Karamitsu writes that Okubo’s self-portraits help to “emphasize the humanity of the internees, something which those on the outside overlooked in the context of the war” (Karamitsu, 1995, 625). By creating a point of recognition, she becomes our guide, and in turn we become invested in her story. In this sense, Okubo offers both a personal and factual testimony of Japanese American internment that attempts to objectively depict trauma.

Miné Okubo frequently represents erasure of identity and individuality in her graphic memoir to emphasize the psychological trauma of internment. Her narration on identity is most keenly observed in the title of her memoir: *Citizen 13660*. She and other Japanese Americans have been reduced by their government to a number: hers being 13660. The contrast of her legal status as an American civilian with the cold numerical label she is given provide insight into the troubling relationship between state power and democracy during this historical period. In one drawing, Okubo depicts herself and her brother Benji standing surrounded by bags of their belongings (Okubo, 1983, 22). Labels with “the family number” hang around their necks and their faces reveal their fear and disorientation. One number has been assigned to the Okubo family, a number that overlooks individuality and renders all Japanese American people the same: ‘alien’ or threat. Though there are significant differences, she draws parallels between Nazi concentration camps that incarcerated Jews during World War II and her own community’s incarceration. Both are deeply traumatic incidences of removal of identity and agency: affronts to citizenship and humanity. Okubo also emphasizes the erasure of the identity of internees as a uniquely traumatic element of internment. Her drawings frequently reflect the aesthetic ambiguity of camp life. For example, one sketch depicts an internee dressed in a large hat and coat surveying the many identical-looking barracks in Topaz Relocation Center (Okubo, 1983, 136). Okubo writes “the residential blocks look alike; people were lost all the time”. The place of incarceration itself is barren and stripped of any distinctiveness, and the internee’s clothes are ambivalent of gender or culture. The drawings skilfully expose the disturbing contradiction of the U.S. government removing basic rights and personal expression from its citizens. The details of the memoir fundamentally protest that this social injustice was kept concealed and falsely reported as beneficial for Japanese Americans. Okubo artistically depicts the homogeny of incarceration and the psychological distress this evoked, constructing a narrative that serves to detail the trauma of internment camps.

By framing the narrative chronologically, Okubo is able to guide her audience through events as they unfold and conjure a pace that reflects the intensity of Japanese Americans’ experience during World War II. Fu-jen Chen and Yu Su-lin suggest in their essay that the structure of *Citizen 13660* is “so enfolded in narrative time, it is as if the trauma never occurs” (Chen & Yu, 2005, 551-570), becoming too focused on merely the beginning and closing of the historical period which reduces the sense of trauma. However, one could argue that in both the opening and closing of the memoir, Okubo represents the trauma as being uncontainable or unescapable, unfolding at such a pace that reflects both historic discrimination against Japanese Americans and testifies to horrors of internment. For example, Okubo chooses to begin the memoir in Europe. Her journey on a “crowded” boat back to America finds her speaking with “refugees who told [her] vivid stories of their experiences” (Okubo, 1983, 5). Every space she is confined to projects a narrative of trauma and incarceration. Her conversations with those fleeing Europe prefigure her own internment, which reinforces her representation of the inescapable trauma of the war in Japanese American experience. The end of the graphic memoir similarly reflects the lack of closure of the internment narrative. Instead of a resolution, Okubo is pictured tearfully leaving the camp and she wonders what will become of those who remain. The self-portrait depicts her looking uncertainly back at a crowd of internees waving her goodbye behind a barbed wire fence (Okubo, 1983, 209). The bleak barracks are positioned in the background and the bus that will return her in the foreground, as she clutches her few belongings. Okubo emphasizes here that the collective trauma of Japanese American interment cannot have a resolution, the distress is irreversible. There can be no definitive close as her “thoughts shifted from the past to the future”; the trauma will reside within her for the rest of her life and the future she imagines is unclear. Okubo leaves behind a place where her individuality and identity were stripped only to return to a ‘free’ America that has historically discriminated against Japanese Americans. Historian George Okihiro notes that after a formal apology during the passing of the 1988 Civil Liberties Act through Congress, the American Congress passed the U.S.A. Patriot Act of 2001 “under which racial and religious profiling enables a secret and arbitrary government-sponsored program of registration, expulsion, and indefinite detention” (Zhou, 2007, 51-73). The past was given the potential to repeat itself, an insult to the living distress of generations of Japanese Americans. Okubo conveys the trauma of internment as being seared into the memories and minds of internees, without resolution nor sufficient apology. By framing the narrative in this way, *Citizen 13660* is able to represent the collective trauma as unresolved and lasting.

Okubo writes “I hope that things can be learned from this tragic episode, for I believe it could happen again” (ibid). Her graphic memoir serves as a testament to the traumatic experiences of Japanese Americans during World War II. Though it would be impossible to conjure the complete intensity of the collective tragedy, Miné Okubo offers herself as a guide through the internment experience. By providing a detailed visualisation of every day life in confinement and a positive depiction of the diversity of Japanese Americans, Okubo is able to produce a reflection of World War II internment that reveals the trauma and social injustice of the experience to be vast.

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