

# PROMISES OF DEMOCRATIC CONSENT AND PRACTICES OF CITIZENSHIP: REENACTING JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS MEMORIES IN COMICS FORM

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout US history, the reaction to political crises, particularly foreign-based ones, has been the repression of individual rights; a cyclical resolution that seems to validate the old claim that ‘history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.’ Indeed, post-9/11 anxiety over immigrants as potential threats to national security, and the debates about the Patriot Act and Muslim Ban involuntarily revived the discussion about the legacy of Japanese Internment: was Executive Order 9066 a mistake not to be repeated or a legal antecedent to contemporary resolutions? Clearly, the subject of Japanese American Internment taps into an obscure and unreconciled (hi)story in American memory. Hence, it is no surprise to find contemporary comics (a liminal medium) revisiting the Internment experience to comment on the present, questioning America’s promises of democratic consent and practices of citizenship. To discuss contemporary comics about Japanese Internment, the paper debates how (1) the Muslim Ban revived the *Korematsu* case in public discourses and memory, (2) literature engaged with this historical event and where comics position themselves within that tradition, (3) contemporary graphic narratives use the past to address current issues, and (4) the choice of the medium is somehow problematic. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary neo-internment comics are a visual and textual rhetorical device demanding the expansion of the circle of ‘we’ to promote interethnic forms of solidarity.

**Keywords:** Comics; Internment Camps; Trauma; Allyship; Muslim Ban.

## IT’S *KOREMATSU* ALL OVER AGAIN! PROMISES OF DEMOCRATIC CONSENT AND PRACTICES OF CITIZENSHIP

**O**n December 7, 2015, six months before obtaining the nomination at the Republican Presidential Primaries, Donald J. Trump published a “Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration” on his campaign website. In this statement, he suggested, “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on” (Trump 2015). He argued that “until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims [sic] of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad.” When he became President, this anti-Muslim animus soon translated into a series of executive orders that suspended the insurance of immigrant

and non-immigrant visas to applicants from Muslim-majority countries. However, being aware “that the ban on Muslims likely violated the Constitution, Trump later attempted to re-characterize his ban as one on nationals from certain countries or territories” (Ramahi 2020, 561). Indeed, while judges on the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit were reviewing a district-court ruling declaring the ban unconstitutional, Trump’s campaign statement disappeared from the net<sup>1</sup> (Barbash 2017).

This quest to make this decision look constitutional and secular might explain why the ban was enforced through two consecutive executive orders and a related presidential proclamation. It is possible to speculate that the government feared the first two Orders (No. 13769 and No. 13780) to be declared unconstitutional as they likely violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by targeting members of a particular religion. Even though Trump justified both Executive Orders by recurring to national security, explicitly referring to 9/11, none of the nineteen hijackers came from the countries included in the ban.

On September 24, 2017, Trump issued the final version of the Muslim Ban, Presidential Proclamation 9645. This Executive Order banned nationals from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Chad, North Korea, and Venezuela. Some critics saw the inclusion of North Korea and Venezuela as a form of ‘window dressing’ to demonstrate that the ban was not targeting solely Muslim-majority countries (Anderson 2019). Yet, one could still observe the administration’s malicious intention as Trump and his staff explicitly acknowledged the resolution as a ‘Muslim Ban’ during the Presidential campaign (Ramahi 2020).

This resolution had the effect of reopening the wounds left by the post-9/11 era, as the Ban signaled another state-sanctioned attack on the Muslim community and their faith. The Patriot Act expanded the government’s right to surveil its citizens because of public security, but it also made clear that the civil rights of certain ethnic communities

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<sup>1</sup> Because nothing truly disappears from the web, it is still possible to find a reproduction of the statement on The American Presidency Project webpage of the UC Santa Barbara, as well as on the internet archive the “Way Back Machine”.

could be sacrificed to protect Americans' freedom at large. However, it is important to remark a substantial difference between Trump and his predecessors. Trump's rhetoric did not distinguish Islam from terrorism and it failed to recognize the multiethnic and multiracial dimension of Islam, reducing the Muslim identity into a homogeneous (inassimilable) 'race.'

The Muslim Ban was not an isolated episode at odds with US history. In contrast, it resurrected an old practice of determining one's right of entry into the country based on a collective criterion (e.g., nationality) rather than on individual grounds. The US history of migration/discrimination laws features the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Gentlemen Agreement (1908) which barred Japanese immigration, the Immigrant Act (1917) which restricted the immigration of 'undesirables' from other countries, and the Executive Order 9066 authorizing Japanese Internment (1942-1945).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the Ban somehow reiterated and revived the old historical "tension between America's universalist promise of democratic consent and its race-, gender-, and culture-specific practice of citizenship" (Li 1998, 5-6) as specific groups were barred from immigration (and naturalization as they kept on being marginalized). Hence, one may observe the convergence of old "Orientalist" (Said 1979 [1978]) prejudices with new forms of populism that feed on fear, bigotry, and hysteria.

Hawaii and several other States challenged the Presidential Proclamation (and the two predecessor Executive Orders) on statutory and constitutional grounds, arguing that the Proclamation and the Executive Orders were driven by anti-Muslim animus. The enactment of the Muslim Ban and the *Trump vs. Hawaii* case had the involuntary effect of revitalizing the (public) memory of an old court case, the well-known *Korematsu v. United States*, and the haunting ghost of the Japanese internment camps.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced relocation and incarceration in internment camps of people of Japanese descent. Consequently, 110,000 ethnic Japanese were displaced from the western United States into hastily erected centers, located in deserted areas of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming (Girst 2015). Many Americans, including Roosevelt himself, feared that the utmost menace to national security would come from "alien" sleeper agents who supposedly waited to attack on orders from the Axis powers (Branca-Santos 2001).

<sup>3</sup> In 1942, Fred Korematsu was arrested for going into hiding in Northern California and failing to report to a relocation center. While under arrest, Korematsu appealed his conviction through the legal system challenging the

The correspondences between these two experiences were first (shamelessly) evoked by a pro-Trump Great American PAC spokesperson, who cited Japanese internment camps as ‘precedents’ for Muslim registry (Hartmann 2016). Whereas all post-WWII presidents condemned the Internment, with five offering public apologies, Donald Trump and his administration did not only fail to condemn the incarceration, but they also attempted to use this event as a legal precedent to justify current (racist) government policies (Pistol 2021). During an interview on ‘Good Morning America,’ Trump stated that he was simply following Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s footsteps, as the ban was not different from his predecessor’s “solution for Germans, Italians, and Japanese” (William & Yaffe 2017). In contrast, the opposition evoked *Korematsu* as a notably bad antecedent, as one might question the constitutionality of means to separate neatly the ‘bad actors’ from the larger group.<sup>4</sup> In both situations, the Court “abandoned judicial review over alleged infringement of constitutional rights asserted by American citizens arising from screening procedures” (Dean 2018, 176).

During Trump’s campaign for office and throughout his presidency, (Japanese) American (contested) history was misused, showing how America has not learnt yet how to deal with both ethnic minorities and its controversial history of discrimination. This misguided public, and legal use of history makes evident the endurance of America’s racism and scapegoating. The presence of this debate around the meaning and legacy of Japanese Internment shows two important points. First, it testifies the presence/possibilities of a cross-cultural, cross-identification, and intergenerational

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constitutionality of the Government Executive Order. The Supreme Court agreed to hear his case in late 1944. The Court had already debated a similar case the year before, *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943). Here, the Supreme Court judged Gordon Hirabayashi, a college student, guilty of violating a curfew order. The *Korematsu vs. United States* decision referenced the *Hirabayashi* case, but it also went a step further ruling on the ability of the military, in times of war, to exclude and intern minority groups.

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, the lack of understanding of the Japanese American experience is not limited to Republicans. In 2015, David A. Bowers, the Democratic Mayor of Roanoke (Virginia) stated he did not want Syrian refugees resettling in his city, citing security concerns and Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 as an antecedent (Zurcher 2015). This statement raised numerous criticisms because of Bower’s lack of legal authority, his use of a fear-based rhetoric, and his unfortunate comparison of Syrian refugees to these same terrorists they were fleeing. One of the most vocal critics was the actor and activist George Takei, who on a November 18, 2015 Facebook post replied, “There never was any proven incident of espionage or sabotage from the suspected ‘enemies’ then, just as there has been no act of terrorism from any of the 1,854 Syrian refugees the US already has accepted. We were judged based on who we looked like, and that is about as un-American as it gets.” (Takei 2015)

coalition around traumatic experiences. Second, there is still a group of Americans contending that “the imprisonment of Japanese American citizens and legal residents without due process has some legal, rational or moral standing” (Maki 2019). Indeed, as Michelle Malkin’s book *In Defense of Internment: The Case for ‘Racial Profiling’ in World War II* (2004) testifies, there is still a minority that rationalizes/justifies the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Yet, it is worth reminding that this sentiment of a vocal minority has no juridical basis, especially after the redress movement, Ronald Reagan’s signing of the Civil Liberty Act in 1988, and the payment of 20,000 USD to every surviving detainee that began under George H.W. Bush in 1990.

The comic strip artist Tak Toyoshima sardonically addressed this lack of empathy towards Japanese (Americans) suffering in a 2003 strip titled “Why It’s Hard for Asian Americans to Get any Sympathy.” The comic strip shows different ethnic groups complaining about the injustices and mistreatments they historically had to endure and indicts white supremacy. Yet, the Asian character provocatively states, “**My people** were taken from their homes and places in **internment camps** where they had **no choice** but to organize **dances** and **play football** to pass their time” (Toyoshima 2003, original emphasis). The strip reflects on how Asian American issues and history do not get the traction that other minority race issues get, but also how America overlooks the traumatic (and long-lasting) effects of the internment on the Japanese American community.

Toyoshima’s observation proved somehow prophetic considering Trump’s use and understanding of the internment history. In his vision, threats (never historically proved) to national security justify deviations from core constitutional protections, thus posing the basis for what Giorgio Agamben (2017 [2003]) described as a prolonged “state of exception.” Indeed, the suspension of Japanese Americans’ rights was justified by a critical condition (war) calling for the direct action of the sovereign, beyond the limits of the rule of law (i.e., the Fifth Amendment), in the name of public security. However, this resolution was not simply an exception to the rule of law dictated by war contingencies, as it has been evoked in time as a legal antecedent to justify restrictive policies. In this regard, it is worth remarking that the Supreme Court overturned

*Korematsu* only during its decision in *Trump vs. Hawaii*, which is well after the end of World War II and the closing of the camps.

#### FROM WWII TESTIMONY TO “NEO-INTERMENT NARRATIVES”

Given this context, it is no surprise to see the reenactment of Japanese internment camps in contemporary narratives. This haunting presence of the past is mainly due to the divisive narratives that this experience generated. Indeed, as hitherto discussed, the political debate about the Ban showed how opposing American parties attributed different meaning to the Internment experience. So, as Rigney (2010) discussed, “one of the paradoxes of collective remembrance may be that consensus (‘we all recollect the same way’) is ultimately the road to amnesia and that it is ironically a lack of unanimity that keeps some memory sites alive” (346). Yet, this continuous revision of the past is an instrument to redefine the present, especially in moments of crisis, since “memory is valorized where identity is problematized” (Kansteiner 2002, 184). The Japanese Internment is a particularly interesting case study as it shows “how history and memory are negotiated when the need to remember an event challenges the ideals of democratic nationalism and the narrative unity of nation that historical discourses ostensibly provide” (Simpson 2001, 4). Indeed, this event tested limits of America’s democracy as people of Japanese ancestry (two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth) were forcibly removed and imprisoned under nothing more than a ‘disloyalty’ suspicion by the US government.

It is worth remarking that the contemporary debate surrounding the Japanese American Internment is just the latest phase of the long and contested afterlife of the camp legacy. After World War II, its memory has been kept alive by public debates, commemorations, and political movements. The complex and lively legacy of the internment experience is made evident by the abundance of creative literature about this event, which Gayle K. Sato (2009) and Greg Robinson (2015) divide into four periods. The first phase coincides with the wartime years, when Japanese American wrote within the camps themselves describing their experience. Nisei artist Miné

Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (2014 [1946]) is arguably the most famous example of the literary production of this time.<sup>5</sup>

The second phase goes roughly from 1945 to the 1960s, a period characterized by what the scholar Carolyn Chung Simpson (2001) defines as the “absent presence” in national consciousness. Right after the war, many Nisei attempted to leave their experience in the past and “It was only after the redress campaign began in the early 1970s that former internees broke their silence to start talking about their experience” (Takezawa 1991, 40). This willingness to forget is well captured by the editorial history of *No-No Boy*, “a forgotten, neglected, and rejected novel about Japanese America that every Japanese American knew about but never read during Okada's lifetime” (Chan *et al.* 1991, 478).<sup>6</sup>

In the 1970s, inspired by the Civil Right movement and African Americans' examination of the effect of slavery, Japanese Americans promoted campaigns aimed at obtaining formal reparations. This new consciousness led to a formal redress. Understandably, this historical period coincides with a new literary phase that capitalized on the “movement ethos of breaking the silence that surrounded the camps” (Robinson 2015, 46). Finally, the fourth phase comprises the literary production that emerged after 9/11. According to Sato (2009), “all of these post-redress narratives are marked by efforts to explore the inherent but previously under-examined transnational and multicultural dimensions of internment history” (455). Pei-Chen Liao (2020) proposes the term “neo-internment narratives” in order to highlight the elements of continuity and discontinuity with the representation of earlier periods, rejecting to overemphasize 9/11 as the moment when everything changed. Yet, the scholar observes how this revival and rewriting often implicitly or explicitly comments on the

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, it is worth mentioning how graphic narratives managed to comment on the subject well before conventional forms of literature.

<sup>6</sup> Okada's case is somehow emblematic as *No-No Boy* entered the (Asian) American literary canon only after Jeffrey Paul Chan rediscovered it in 1970, and republished it in 1976. Other important works produced in this period are Hisaye Yamamoto's classic story “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) and Monica Sone's autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (1953).

discrimination suffered by Muslims in America, highlighting the presence of a cross-cultural alliance.

Despite their different historical context of publication and agendas, all these narratives about the internment can be seen as “counter-memories” (Lipsitz 1990), as they promote a progressive renegotiation of national history and identity. Indeed, these alternative narratives of nation and history question the “use of the past” in a way that does not only address past injustices, but it also “speaks to present day intellectual concerns with time, history, subjectivity, and fragmentation” (215). Interestingly enough, some of the contemporary comics seem willing to push these political claims further by trying to ‘get out in the world,’ encouraging militancy and activism. They no longer merely describe a state of crisis, but they attempt to offer solutions (providing in some cases positive role models to follow).

For these reasons, this article strives to overcome the literate/literary canons discussing how graphic narratives (an often-neglected literary medium<sup>7</sup>) have presented the internment camp experience to a larger public. In order to provide a more complete account of the evolution of comics literature on the internment, I also discuss the contribution of (white) non-Japanese American artists to demonstrate the presence of different treatments and understandings of the event. As previously discussed, literary scholars divided the internment narratives into four periods. Similarly, one can observe a chronological progression also in the way that comics have approached this theme.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Whereas in some historical moments (including the contemporary) some comics creators (have) experienced fame, riches, and even literary recognition; there have also been periods when the medium was met with hysterical responses (Gardner 2012). This lack of recognition allowed the medium to develop its own language and relationship with the readers without necessarily complying with the taste of an educated audience. It is worth noticing that the contemporary literary turn may obfuscate the fact that comics is not a genre, but a medium capable of conveying different messages. The urge to prove the academic respectability of the medium has also prompted scholars to focus on a narrow selection of works/genres. The newly acquired respectability, often limited to certain genres and not the medium *per se*, did not erase comic artists’ perception of inhabiting a liminal space. As Gilbert Hernandez remarked, comic artists want their work to be taken as “seriously as any novel”, however they are also aware that comic books must inhabit “their own neat, kitschy, junky world” in order to be subversive (Gardner 2012, ix). Indeed, a complete institutionalization of the medium may kill off their subversive nature. To give a more complete depiction of the medium potentiality, I also included works that may not qualify as ‘highbrow’.

<sup>8</sup> This parallel, even though asynchronous, progression should not be taken for granted especially if we consider the history of the medium (Barbieri 2009; Baetens and Frey 2015) and the medium’s relationship with historical representations (Witek 1989).

Whereas early depiction of the event in graphic form aimed to make the public aware of present injustices (Okubo 2014 [1946]), denounce America's long history of Asians' exclusion policy (Yang et al. 2012) and counter the invisibility of Asians' sufferings (Toyoshima 2003), the more recent comics do not just aim to address these old questions, but to also bring these debates within a "global civil sphere" (Alexander 2012). Indeed, the transnational and multicultural dimension that characterize post-9/11 internment narratives is also present in many contemporary comics around the subject, as this experience is connected and compared to the discriminations suffered by the Muslim community in post-9/11 America. Hence, whereas the attack on the Twin Towers revived WWII rhetoric, it also activated new types of cross-ethnic solidarity.

#### REMEMBERING AND REENACTING THE CAMPS IN POST-9/11 GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

While dealing with these pop cultural representations of historical events, it is important to take their forms into consideration. Indeed, new forms and formats open up new ways of representations, knowledge, and investigation (in terms of construction and deconstruction) of the past. This is particularly true for a hybrid medium like comics, as a competent comic reader must develop what Marianne Hirsch (2010) defines as "biocular literacy," since "visual images both create narrative and impede it, both compete with the words and illustrate them" (217). Comics invites reflections on the existing differences between visual and textual literacy, but also about the new possibilities created by their combinations. Whereas words can narrate, describe and represent through plot progression, images work on a deeper/subliminal level "through a process of affect contagion" (Bennet 2005, 36)

The hybrid nature of comics forces the reader to assume an active interpretative role, which can be used to produce new knowledge and/or critical/political consciousness. Being a "cool medium" (McLuhan 2017 [1964]), comics forces the reader to make "inferences" (Cohn 2019) about the syntagmatic relationships that links the panels, recomposing the fractures created by the "gutter" through the use of "closures"

(McCloud 1993), and thus creating a cognitive engagement through the stimulation of the senses.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, by taking advantage of the potentiality offered by the visual, comics can function as a form of “visual activism” (Mirzoeff 2015) as they allow the transmission across society of empathy for the traumatic experience of others. Hence, the public reconstruction of past memories (the Japanese Internment) aims to promote the understanding of historical (and present) injustices, in turn generating solidarity, and encouraging the alliances among different (marginalized) groups. This process can be clearly observed in George Takei’s autobiographical graphic testimony *They Called Us Enemy* (2020), Kiku Hughes’s “postmemorial” (Hirsch 2012) graphic novel *Displacement* (2020), Anupam Chander’s and Madhavi Sunder’s graphic biography *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011), and Frank Abe’s and Tamiko Nimura’s graphic biography *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021).<sup>10</sup> In these works, the recollection of the internment experience is used as a catalyst for a redefinition of the notion of (US) citizenship and (international) human rights.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of preserving and transmitting the memory of past traumatic events is well captured by the ending of Kiku Hughes’s graphic novel, as the author reflects on the symbolic power of (post)memory. Hughes is well aware of memory’s ability to generate innovative political thought, occasions for political resistance, and new forms of solidarity among historically oppressed groups:

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<sup>9</sup> Will Eisner (2005 [1985]), one of the masters of the art of comics, noticed how “[t]he relationship or the identification evoked by the acting out or dramatization in a sequence of pictures is in itself instructional. People learn by imitation and the reader in this instance can easily supply the intermediate or connecting action from his or her own experience” (154-55). Even though Eisner’s primary examples were his ‘attitudinal’ comics, aimed at promoting vocational schools, this approach can be expanded to different genres and texts. Similarly, George Takei (2020) is conscious about the educational function of comics as he states in the afterward of his graphic novel, “ I frequently meet people — even people who seem well-educated and informed — who are shocked when I tell them about my childhood [...] So I became convinced that we needed to tell this story in a new way, to make it accessible to audiences of all ages using the format that readers are irresistibly drawn to: comics” (207).

<sup>10</sup> The artwork for *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) was created by Ross Ishikawa and Matt Sasaki. *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* was illustrated by Angela Loi.

<sup>11</sup> Even though these works are very different in terms of creativity, originality, structure, writing, characterization, plot, complexity, quality, target audience (kids, young adults, adults), and aims (didactic vs. artistic), they nonetheless all share similar rhetorics, connecting past experiences of discrimination to present ones.

Our connection to the past is not lost, even if we don't have all the documents, even if we never learn the details. The memories of community experiences stay with us and continue to affect our lives. The persecution of a marginalized group of people is never just one act of violence—it's a condemnation of generations to come who lived with the ongoing consequences. We may suffer from these traumas, but we can also use them to help others and fight for justice in our own time. Memories are powerful things. (Hughes 2020, 276-277)

In *Displacement*, the interconnectedness of past and present is visible in the juxtaposition of images evoking the debate surrounding the Muslim Ban and the portraits of Japanese Americans activists who opposed their incarceration and stood up against bigotry (like Miné Okubo, Gordon Hirabayashi, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, Ina Sugihara, Fred Korematsu, Yuri Kochiyama, Mitsuye Endo, Norman Mineta, and Aki Kurose).

This interconnectedness is also evident in the plot progression, a coming of age story where the protagonist has to recuperate the history of her family (her grandma was an internee) in order to become an aware and engaged citizen. While searching for the traces of her late grandmother (Ernestina Teranishi) in San Francisco, the protagonist (Kiku's fictional persona) finds herself displaced to the 1940s in the same camps (Tanforan and Topaz) where a young Ernestina was relocated.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, at the end of the comics the reader finds out that Kiku's mother also experienced a similar displacement in the 1970s, as she confesses to her daughter,

I don't think we are travelling through time or space, really. I think we're travelling through memory. I think sometimes communities experience is so traumatic that it stays rooted in us even generations later. And the later generations continue to rediscover that experience, since it's still shaping us in ways we might not realize. (Kiku 2020, 234)

In both cases, the 'displacement' is triggered by public debates about the camps' legacy, as political leaders use Order 9066 as a precedent to justify restrictions to civil liberties.

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<sup>12</sup> This narrative solution is clearly an intertextual reference to Octavia Butlers' *Kindred* (1979), adapted into a graphic novel in 2017 by Damian Duffy (adapter) and John Jennings (illustrator).

In the 1970s “there was talk of reopening the camp for political dissidents, communists, black panthers” (Kiku 2020, 232), and in the present the comics portrays Trumps’ and Carl Higbie’s rhetorical use of the camps experience to justify the Ban.

Even though the displacement only occurs in memory, this experience is powerful enough to leave physical marks (bruises) on Kiku’s body. This travel is nonetheless unavoidable and necessary as it allows her to fill in the gaps of the history of a branch of her family.<sup>13</sup> Despite being only “half” and living in the present she must become aware of the legacy of the camps, as the consequences of this traumatic experience are passed on to different generations affecting their relationships. The camp experience convinced many Nisei to stop transmitting their parents’ language (and many Japanese traditions) to their children to prove their loyalty to America.<sup>14</sup> Yet in the camps, Kiku also observes how Japanese Americans managed to create a community and resist oppression despite being denied their civil liberties. There, she also learns that, in contrast to a commonly held belief, not all Nisei collaborated quietly; many expressed their disagreement with their unjust and unlawful detention. Dissent manifested itself in different forms: a person speaking up for the community, but also a family putting its name in front of its stall (the government substituted surnames with numbers); a member of the community sketching what was happening (cameras were forbidden); protecting one’s privacy (where there was none). The comic also addresses the contradictions and hypocrisies of the camps’ school system, which demanded young pupils to learn America’s promises of democracy, freedom, and free speech when they were denied those same rights. The government also tore the community apart using questionnaires aimed at establishing the internees’ loyalty to America. Yet the community managed to reunite during celebrations and the funeral for James Hatsuaki Wakasa, arbitrarily killed by Topaz’ guards, after the community succeeded in having a public obsequy, despite the camp administration’s initial resistance.

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<sup>13</sup> The comics reminds the reader that anyone with one-sixteenth Japanese ancestry or more was incarcerated.

<sup>14</sup> One of the cultural traditions that seem to survive is food. In the comics, tempura, sukiyaki, gyoza, mochi, and other Japanese foods have the capacity to bring together a community whose unity was tested by the camp experience.

Whereas the narrative revolves around Kiku's learning about the Internment camp experience and her grandmother's history, she never has the occasion to speak to her late relative. This narrative choice signals a void that symbolizes the readers' and Kiku's inability to fully recover that experience. The comic shows a tension between the encounter with the testimony of former internees and the awareness of the illusion of knowing perfectly what it was like. However, this impossibility to retrieve all the memories does not trigger a passive stance toward history, but a renewed commitment not to let those ever events occur again.

Indeed, the comic ends with Japanese Americans demonstrating against Trump's racist policies that specifically targets Latinx and Muslims. The depiction of a dialectical interrelation between Japanese and Muslim experiences does not aim to claim that these experiences operate under the same assumptions, but rather it brings out the historical specificity of each historical moment. It reveals a dialectic between the universal and the particular aspects of each traumatic event. These two events differ in dimension, scope, and historical context, yet one can see some parallelisms. In both cases, claims to national security were used to justify and mask ethnic, racial (and religious) animus. Indeed, the lack of respect for individuals' access to justice, in spite of their citizenship, the racist undertones present in both misinformed propaganda rhetoric, and the malicious detention of individuals are clear assonances between these two cases (Wietelman 2019). So, the comic do not only recognize the existence of human suffering, but it asks the readers to take responsibility for it. It does so by expanding the circle of 'we', recognizing how the Muslim Ban and the Internment are/were motivated by fear, and how in both cases the majority deprived an unpopular minority of its rights. Neo-internment comics do not impose new master narratives, but personal and subjective counter histories that address the relationship between the individual and his community/ies of reference. They make the individual accountable for his/her actions, and thus they dare to be moralistic. These comics give voice to neglected personal (hi)stories in order to juxtapose them in contrast or alongside national mythos. For example, George Takei (2020) compares and contrasts his *Star Trek* role to America's (broken) promises of citizenship and justice,

I am a veteran of the starship enterprise. I soared through the galaxy with ... a crew made up of people from all over the world. Our mission was to explore strange new worlds... to seek out new life and civilizations...to boldly go where no one has gone before. I am the grandson of immigrants from Japan to America. Boldly going to a strange new world, seeking new opportunities. (11)

*They Called Us Enemy* reminds the nation that many American citizens descend from immigrants who sought to find better opportunities. However, race cast him and his family as unassimilable and enemy aliens. So, the comic resists the co-optation of Takei's success as an actor into the "Model Minority Myth" (Lee 1999) as the reader observes how war hysteria and racism conditioned his life, and that of many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. In contrast, his success makes evident the irony of history: as a well-established actor, he would be called to give a speech at the FDR museum. Like Hughes's post-memorial narrative, Takei's memoir indulges in trivial moments that have the function of humanizing the internees and are offered as a form of resistance. They both show the resilience of Japanese (Americans), as they try to build a sense of normalcy. Yet, in Takei's first-person narrative bitter experiences alternate with sweet childhood memories and even comedic moments. For example, a humorous moment involves George learning a swearing from older kids and asking for his parents' explanation about its meaning. The comic reminds that even though there was no mass torture or starvation, Japanese Americans suffered pain and hardship as the federal government violated their civil rights: the camps were dirty and inhospitable spaces that tested the unity of a community, which started to fall apart when the WRA distributed mandatory questionnaires to all adults to determine their loyalty. The comic also shows how Japanese Americans answered in various ways, and it homages them all. Each answer was as heroic as the other. There were Nissei who answered "yes-yes." They found those questions outrageous, but swallowed their pride and served the military, fighting in Europe. Others refused and became principled objectors. They did not want to wear the uniforms of their captors. There were those that had no other option than to answer "no-no" because of their family ties: the first generation did not want to become stateless, and some second-generation Japanese Americans did not want to leave their parents behind in the camps. Ironically, a few internees even radicalized

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because of how they were treated. The comics also resists the portrayal of Japanese internees as passive and compliant as it shows instances when they protested and exercised their right to assemble. It would be through organized people engaged with the democratic system that Japanese Americans would gradually reacquire their civil rights. This experience triggers Takei's awareness about the functioning and limits of America's democracy, which need to be monitored through active participation so that history does not repeat itself. Indeed, in the final pages, the memoir remarks how "In a cruel irony, the court struck down *Korematsu* as a mere side note in *Trump v Hawaii*" (Takei 2020, 200) noticing that the Supreme Court merely replaced one bad decision with another.

Similarly, *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011) draws parallelisms between Korematsu's experience and the discriminations suffered by a young Muslim girl in post-9/11 America. This short educational comics shows a young Muslim being bullied and discriminated at school because of her ethnicity/religion. She later meets a Japanese woman who comforts and introduces her to the story/judiciary case of *Korematsu*. Of course, this parallelism is at times simplistic and sentimental, but it is rhetorically capable of delivering important anti-racist messages and offering models of resistance that aim to stimulate mutual form of understanding, paving the way to new forms of justice, able to answer the challenges of a globalizing world.

By exploring the biographies of Jim Akutsu, Hiroshi Kashiwagi, and Mitsuye Endo, *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) demonstrates how individual court cases can overthrow unjust laws. In particular, Mitsuye Endo's story is quite revealing, as her case became a cause. Indeed, her landmark lawsuit ultimately led to the closing of the internment camps and granted Japanese Americans the right to return to their West Coast home in 1945. Interestingly, the comic also addresses the role played by attorney James C. Purcell, showing how Japanese Americans needed help and guidance in solving their problems. The comic does not seek to reiterate a white savior trope, but it endorses the notion of (interethnic)

allyship.<sup>15</sup> Despite Purcell not being the protagonist, the reader sees the character's determination and pivotal role in bringing a *habeas corpus* lawsuit to demand the release of the imprisoned Japanese Americans. To achieve this aim he needed to find a sympathetic plaintiff, and Mitsuye Endo matched all the criteria he was seeking. She was a Nisei who had worked for the California Department of Motor Vehicles, she neither spoke nor read Japanese, and had never been to Japan. She was raised a Methodist, and had a brother in the US Army. The government could not discredit or cast doubt on her figure, and it had to recognize her unlawful detention. The comic stresses the moral integrity and strength of Mitsuye Endo, as she rejected the War Relocation Authority's offer to leave the camps, "Mr. Glick, I'm sorry, but I must refuse. This is about more than me and my freedom. This has a bearing on all Japanese Americans who are eager to go back to their homes. I am willing to go as far as I can on this case" (Abe & Nimura 2021, 75). Like the previous comics, *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* links the past to the present by stating, "[i]t happened to us. We refuse to let it happen again" (147).

The exemplar models provided by *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011), and *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) invites the reader to take on the torch of justice from those who came before. Hence, the recognition of civil rights is seen as part of an ongoing long march for a more just, equal, and caring America. These comics attempt to provide the reader three different types of learning experience: cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral. They ask the reader to know, recognize, and critically judge past experiences of oppression. They request the reader to develop empathy and solidarity feelings, and finally take action in order to prevent history from repeating. Indeed, personal stories are more compelling than factual accounts because they facilitate the development of identification and

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<sup>15</sup> Similarly, George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy* discusses the role that San Francisco lawyer Wayne Collins and his Japanese American associate Theodor 'Ted' Tamba had in soliciting a mitigation hearing for the internees who refused to pledge their lives for America. Their renunciation was not an act of free will, but it was forced upon them by their detention condition. How could they serve a country that upended their families and put them behind the barbed wire?

empathy. This affective response is important because people are more likely to take action when they feel a personal stake.

The past is here used to illuminate both the present and the future; court cases are portrayed as democracy-perfecting practices. Indeed, in these comics, democracy is not presented as a given, but rather as an ideal to pursue. Therefore, in ‘neo-internment’ comics, the role played by Japanese Americans activists somehow echoes the figure of the ‘errand into the wilderness’, as they guide the American juridical system into the ‘sunlit path’ inscribed by ‘destiny’ in the national narrative. By recurring to national lore, these comics rehabilitate the figures of the dissenters, as they simply performed their civic duty, opposing unjust laws and abiding to their consciousness. The loyalty to one’s country is no longer restricted to the service in the military, but it also includes the courage to oppose unjust laws and speak up for the powerless, as democracy needs to be protected and perfected.<sup>16</sup> This reading seems confirmed by the fact that in ‘neo-internment’ graphic narratives, the protagonists’ dissent and antagonistic opposition never turn into violence. They do not seek a divisive confrontation, but a reconciliation, capable of putting America back on the democracy track. These comics reflect on how America’s participatory democracy requires each citizen to be active and involved in the shaping of the country, guiding it to match its ideals and moral aspirations. They invite citizens/readers to ‘speak up,’ breaking the silence caused by fear, indifference, and shame, and act against injustices.

Invoking one’s ability to speak is noticeably an attempt to counter the pernicious “model minority” myth that casts Japanese (and Asian Americans in general) as passive and compliant. This reading seemed to be fostered by the fact that in the camps many Japanese Americans adhered “to the situation forced upon them in the spirit of *shikatanagai* (‘it cannot be helped’) and *gaman* (‘enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity’)” (Girst 2011, 33). Yet, these sayings, used to describe experience in the camps, do not necessarily imply complicit resignation. In contrast, as

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<sup>16</sup> During World War II, many Nisei felt compelled to serve in the Army to prove their loyalty to the country that was unrightfully detaining them and their families (Robinson 2009).

Miné Okubo memoir illustrates, they testified the internees' resolve to convert inhospitable spaces into habitable homes. Though noble, in contemporary comics, these principles are discarded in favor of examples of more vocal forms of dissent. These comics argue that something can always be done to address and prevent injustice.

Finally, I want to remark how white American authors have also created neo-internment narratives in graphic form. As an example, one can name Kevin C. Pyle's *Take What You Can Carry* (2012) and Matt Faulkner's *Gaijin: American Prisoner of War* (2014). However, these reenactments often lack any political commentary on the present, and have a tendency to adopt a kitsch aesthetic by recurring to a maudlin sentimentalizing notion of suffering, or limit their analysis of the reasons behind the internment to the most evident forms of bigotry, thus failing to see the sociocultural and juridical implications. Pyle's comic draws a problematic parallelism between a Japanese American boy being relocated to an Internment camp in the 1940s and a white boy living in contemporary America being landed in jail for stealing. Whereas the comics attempts to elicit sympathy towards both experiences, creating unlikely ties across generations, one cannot ignore how racism shaped the Japanese American experience in the camps and the fact that Japanese people did not commit any crime. Similarly, Matt Faulkner's graphic novel captures the hybrid identity of the fictional character of Koji Miyamoto. Being the offspring of a Japanese father and a white mother, Koji is bullied by his white classmates who accuse him of being a spy. Similarly, when he is relocated in a camp because of his Japanese ancestry, young Japanese internees torment him for being half-white, foreign ('Gaijin') to the community. Whereas the comics successfully portrays how racism relies on predefined borders and gatekeepers crushing any liminal identity that challenges the status quo, it fails to see how racism is not just the result of bigotry, but also law enforcements and is ingrained within American society and institutions.

## “WHY COMICS?”: THE MEDIUM’S HISTORICAL COMPLICITY & RESISTANCE TO THE INTERNMENT

I want to conclude the reflections about comics’ representation of the internment camps by looking at the history of the medium. Narrating Japanese incarceration in comic form is not a neutral choice, as it might even be seen as an homage to one of the earliest vivid testimonies of the Japanese incarceration, Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* (1946). Indeed, despite the hardships of camp life, the creation of art was possible, often by using materials readily available. Miné Okubo (2014 [1946]) combined words and pictures to record her experience in Tanforan and Topaz internment camps, since “Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps” (xxvi).

These drawings were originally conceived to be gifts to friends living behind the barbed wire, a way to recognize their kindness in that time of hardship. However, these drawings would be noticed by *Fortune* magazine, becoming an instrument of denunciation. *Fortune* denounced that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were severely stretched if not breached when US citizens (with enemy faces) were put in prison. Then, a counter-narrative of World War II started to appear, as the morality of US actions started to be questioned. *Fortune* confronted injustice while it happened, and Okubo’s drawings of camp life helped to visualize such events. A selection of her drawings would later be recollected in a book titled *Citizen 13660*, first published in 1946, a time when anything Japanese was still unpopular.

This graphic narrative has an important civil and didactic function: it questions America’s past policies, and it asks the readers how to prevent these events from repeating themselves. As Okubo (2008) stated in an interview, “Textbooks and history studies on this subject should be taught to children when young in grade and high schools. Many generations do not know that this ever happened in the United States” (47-48). Hence, this quote confirms points of continuity between Okubo’s work and the new neo-interment narratives in graphic form. *Citizen 13660* may not be considered a comic book or a graphic novel (the drawings were originally conceived to be part of an art exhibition); each page has a single panel, and the text is captioned at the bottom of the page (there is no speech balloon). Yet this graphic narrative can be rightfully considered an important precursor to some contemporary documentary comics.

Moreover, it dared to mock the guardians, submitting them to the gaze of an internee, and thus symbolically subverting the power dynamics of the camps.

However, it is important to remark that in the 1940s the medium was also involved in the dissemination of anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiments, as comics functioned as propaganda tools. They depicted the Japanese as brute hordes and sinister villains with small and slanted eyes, and effeminate traits (Murray 2011). Moreover, on June 28, 1943, a *Superman* comic strip even justified the interments. During a conversation, Major Munsey states to Clark Kent and Lois Lane that “Our main difficulty is that loyal Americans of Jap ancestry are indiscriminately mingled with enemy sympathizers who would be glad to sabotage our national welfare at the first opportunity [...] Our government has done all but lean over backwards in its desire to be humane and fair.” To which Lois Lane comments, “You’ve done a marvelous piece of work here. The Jap government should have absolutely no excuse for not showing their prisoners of war as much consideration.” This depiction is of course problematic, as it presents Japanese Americans internees as prisoners, while, in fact, they were simply American citizens whose only crime was being of Japanese descent. Hence, it is not surprising that a July 1, 1943 article appeared on *The Daily Tulean Dispatch* (the newspaper of the Tule Lake camp) vehemently criticized such depiction,

The creators, Siegel and Shuster, swerving from their mad scientists and queer monsters, are using real live people to victimize for their incredibly fantastic plots. Anyone who has been inside a [relocation] center would know that evacuees are too busy with their personal and family problems to even dream about ‘escaping’ with ‘concealed guns.’ Guns? We are not even allowed to own a camera. (2)

Thus, the use of comics might be a way to make the medium accountable for its representation of minorities. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that recent mainstream comics seem aware and willing to address the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. For example, in *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man #9* (Taylor and Cabal 2019) the mutant Marnie confesses that she immigrated to the US from Japan in the late 1930s, and that she was interned along with other citizens and immigrants of Japanese descent from 1943–1945. Marnie recalls that in 1939 she was

among the test subjects of a Japanese project that aimed to create a counterpart to Captain America. She was one of the very few on whom the experiment was successful, granting her super strength and X-ray vision. However, she soon escapes Japan and turns against her nation, joining the US and fighting the Axis. In 1943, despite serving as an ally of Captain America, she was deported. This episode is reminiscent of how many Japanese American soldiers who were already in the military by the time of Pearl Harbor were required to surrender their weapons (Robinson 2009).<sup>17</sup> Even though her power granted her the ability to escape, Marnie preferred to be interned to help other internees the best she could. In a brief verbal exchange with Captain America, she notices how the camps are against America's ideals of freedom. Yet, even though Captain America agrees with her observations, he assumes the role of the bystander, symbolizing the indifferent compliance of many Americans.

This portrayal seem to rework the main ideas of two stories ("9066" and "Heroes without a Country") featured in *Shattered: The Asian American Comics Anthology: a Secret Identities Book* (Yang et al. 2012) as the values embodied by the superhero are inevitably complicated by the historical context and race.<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Tsuei's and Jerry Ma's (2012) "9066" captures how the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed the perception of Japanese Americans. Even though, prior to the "date which will live in infamy" (Roosevelt 1941), the protagonist performed heroic actions, executive order 9066 (which gives the title to the story) ruled that he must have been imprisoned because of his ethnic origins. Despite superhero stories arguing that the hero's mantle can be passed on to different people by their adherence to universal values of truth and justice, the comic reflects on how these 'universal' notions are ethnically connoted in US society. When imprisoned, "9066"'s nameless protagonist comments, "I thought that it didn't matter who we were when our masks were off [...]. The truth is it's not what

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<sup>17</sup> In the summer of 1942, General DeWitt opposed the formation of a Japanese American unit because of the universal distrust in which they were held. However, some month later, Elmer Davis of the Office of War Information wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for a Nisei fighting unit as a propaganda weapon to counter Japanese claims of American racism. In February of 1943, Army recruiters toured the camps to create a (segregated) all-Nisei unit.

<sup>18</sup> This anthology aimed at giving visibility to Asian American artists and stories. The inclusion of Internment narratives testifies the centrality of this event in the shaping of the Asian American identity.

you do that matters, but what you look like. I was a hero once. Now I'm just another Jap" (Tsuei and Ma 2012, 27-28). Lee's and Sunico's (2012) "Heroes without a Country" dramatizes this contradiction by having its Japanese American protagonist saving a Jew from the tortures of Nazi generals. This short comic does not attempt to establish an easy parallelism between the Holocaust and Japanese internment; in contrast, it questions the myth of racial unity during World War II and the good war narrative. Therefore, these comics show how the medium can function as both an instrument of propaganda and/or counter history. So, one can appreciate how comics have gradually moved away from being enforcers of hegemonic discourses to become promoters of human rights. The use of the superhero frame reminds the reader that civil rights are both a source of power, but also responsibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

By connecting apparently different (interethnic and intergenerational) experiences, neo-internment comics do not draw their politics from static and essentialist notions of identity, but rather dynamically mold new identities through politics. They demonstrate that interethnic and (antiracist) struggles for social justice can unveil previously unknown aspects of social relations. Indeed, the comparison of these events show how the constitutionalization of fear has made possible the reduction of civil rights in the name of national security. A close attention to historical and personal stories demonstrates how there never was a justification to support these repressive measures other than racial prejudice. These comics do not just point out how different historical moments tend to 'rhyme,' but they also offer examples of civic engagement and protest. Here, the notion of citizenship (that was once denied to Japanese people) is not understood as a mere possession of (passive) rights, conceded by the majority, but as a responsibility. They ask US citizens to act as a democracy-perfecting and counterhegemonic force able to intervene on the behalf of the powerless whenever the latter feel threatened by the majority.

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