University of Florida

# AML 2070 Survey of American Literature Final Portfolio:

# Race, Inequality, Religion, and LGBTQ Rights in Modern America Through *Citizen 13660* and *Angels in America*

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# Stories Untold: *Citizen 13660* and the Average Japanese American Experience During and After WWII

## Introduction

*Citizen 13660* by Miné Okubo (1946) is often regarded as a representative portrayal of Japanese American life during and after World War II. In reality, it does not reflect the average experience of internment camps and its aftermath due to the author's social position and relative privilege. Okubo had the talent to receive a higher quality of education with exceptional opportunities for her career, which differentiates her from the average Japanese American. Additionally, Okubo's graphic novel does not mention the sexual violence that other sources described as prevalent in the camps. Lastly, Okubo was able to return to work as a professional artist, whereas most people of Japanese ancestry were unable to simply return home and pick up where they left off.

## Education and Job Opportunities

Reading *Citizen 13660*, the focus on the cold reality of WWII makes it easy to overlook the author's talent and how she differed from the average Japanese Americans long before the internment period. Okubo was awarded a fellowship by UC Berkeley, where she completed her undergraduate and master's degrees in fine arts (Spring). After her graduation, she won a fellowship which allowed her to spend 18

months traveling in Europe studying art under the direction of artist Fernand Léger. Okubo's educational records are highly exceptional considering the racism towards the Japanese American students at the time. Numerous legislative discriminations against Japanese Americans led to significant disadvantages in students' education, including being placed in segregated "Chinese" schools or "certain sections" of the classroom (Roy).

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, anti-Japanese sentiments were heightened and many of Japanese ancestry faced intensified racism that affected their careers and daily lives. The book mentions that people volunteered for relocation due to "unforeseen difficulties" while the government took charge of the properties of the evacuees to protect them from "social and economic vultures (Okubo 14)." However, for Okubo, she was uninterrupted from her work position and was provided with necessary permits for her commute to Oakland. Okubo's opportunities as an artist even amidst a global crisis proves her exceptionality. Even before the war, despite many Japanese Americans attaining college-level education, they rarely secured white collar positions outside the Japanese community (Roy).

It is also notable how Okubo has supportive friends and colleagues at this time. In the book, she mentions that fellow workers were feeling sorry for her (Okubo 11). Later on, her friends even visited her at the camp multiple times. The following is a direct passage from *Citizen 13660*.

Friends often brought me food. One day a friend brought a Chinese meal, including my favorite egg-flower soup. After three hours of waiting in line he was finally admitted at the gate. He greeted me with a dripping carton. "Here is your egg flower-the

soup is on my pants." After this I discouraged friends from bringing food. In fact I discouraged them from trying to visit me (Okubo 79).

While Okubo was ultimately forced into internment camps alongside others, the experience of those who were subjected to layoffs, suspicion, and hostility differs drastically from that of Okubo, who had a supportive workplace and sympathetic friends.

**Sexual Violence in Internment Camps**

In Citizen 13660, the small daily details of life within the walls along with Okubo's witty illustrations almost makes it hard to believe the pervasive sexual violence women and children faced inside the camps. Public areas such as the latrines or spaces between barracks easily became a place where women were watched, followed, harassed, threatened, and assaulted. Within one month of the opening of Tanforan, where Okubo initially stayed for five months in Citizen 13660, three rapes and at least two attempted assaults were confirmed (Wallace). There were even specific incidents that everyone in the camp knew and heard about after the fact, such as when a group of men turned off the electricity to a women's latrine and raped the women inside (Densho). Afterwards, women were told to never go to the latrines alone and always be accompanied by a husband or a father.

Many survivors from the camps were forced to marry their abusers or stay silent due to the social perceptions and by their own families. In an incident where a 16-year-old became pregnant after nearly two years of sexual abuse by a "family friend," she was pressured by her father to marry her rapist in order to "legitimize" the child and protect the family's reputation (Densho). The norm was to forgive rapists and disbelieve or blame the victims. When a group of young women attending a dance at Camp Shelby

were raped by 442 recruits, one enlistee wrote to the Denson Tribune (newspaper published inside the Jerome Relocation Center) excusing his friend: “After all, what do you think would happen if a mere 100 girls were pitted against some 400 soldiers?” (Wallace)

Meanwhile, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) treated any sexual activity that took place outside the heteronormative confines of marriage as criminal behavior, which led to victims opening up to punishment for “offenses against chastity” (Wallace). Assault cases were also ignored or severely mishandled. Two rapes in Tule Lake, though apparently widely known among the inmates and referenced in a subsequent FBI report, were never reported because “the Japanese no longer respect[ed] the police.”

It is hard to believe that Okubo herself had never heard of any sexual violence within the camps. However, it is easy to reason why these facts were not included in the memoir. The first assumption is that since the memoir was published in 1946, only two years after she left the camp in Topaz, certain contents were cut out to be acceptable for public reading. The second assumption is that because many of the victims chose to remain silent, there were limited sources for documentation. Most cases of sexual violence were covered up by the victims’ families, while many of the incidents happened within the family from the start. This is also true for the reason behind why there are barely any records of sexual violence in internment camps in general.

**Reality of “Going Back Home”**

Okubo was able to immediately go to work in New York immediately after internment, but she was an exceptional case of a talented artist with a Master’s from UC

Berkeley. The former internees continued to be constrained by systemic racism, evident in discriminatory housing and employment. When the camps closed, Japanese Americans were given $25 and a one-way train ticket to go and reestablish their lives (Maki). However, many of Japanese ancestry who once held white-collar jobs or owned businesses could only get post-war jobs doing menial labor or domestic service (Blakemore). Moreover, by the time the evacuees returned, their homes had been sold, leased, or vandalized, and businesses taken over by others. The Japanese American Citizens League estimated property losses exceeded 400 million in 1940s dollars, which is over 5 billion dollars today (Varner). The WRA encouraged people to move out of the West Coast and to the inner states to avoid heightened anti-Japanese sentiments. Certain universities voted to bar American citizens of Japanese ancestry, while others agreed to accept Japanese American students and helped them relocate outside of the coastal area and into the Midwest (Anderson).

The internment only lasted a few years, but the actual damage done was in the aftermath. Families and individuals were stripped of their livelihoods, with its impact affecting generations of Japanese Americans without compensation or recognition. The Tomihiro family, who had owned a half-block of houses and stores and a hotel, were unable to return to their home in Oregon when they left the Minidoka War Relocation Center in Idaho (Blakemore). Tomihiro's mother got a new job as a seamstress, while her father, once a powerful businessman, was never able to find steady employment again. Okubo’s brother, Toku, who was alongside her in the camps, was just two weeks away from completing his Bachelor’s at UC Berkeley. However, after the internment, he

worked briefly in a wax-paper factory in Chicago and was inducted to the army shortly afterwards.

**Conclusion**

Citizen 13660 highlights some of the details of lived experience within the camps. Okubo's graphic memoir serves as a variable memorial for the limited documentation of the lives of Japanese Americans during WWII. However, as most historical records are, it can only be considered as one point of view, never a full picture. This is especially true regarding Okubo's social position and relative privilege as an aspiring artist. Okubo's talent provided her with an opportunity of work and even a publication of her experience after the camps. However, most Japanese Americans suffered economic, social, and psychological damage that went on for decades after the internment. Therefore, while we should take notes from Citizen 13660, we should not make the mistake of regarding the memorial as the whole story of Japanese Americans during and after WWII.

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Angels and Religions in America

**Introduction**

*Angels in America* (1991) touches on the broad horizon of modern issues America faces, from racism to LGBTQ rights, women's rights, unethical conduct, political corruption, and toxic masculinity. However, given that the title is Angels in America, it is arguable that its strongest message is how religious beliefs and values in America clash with modern changes and new values. Religious values are often not adapted to contemporary changes, leading to confusion and an inability to be applied functionally in real life. This leads to certain parts of those beliefs to be misinterpreted for repression against change, while in other cases, religion is reinterpreted to align with modern values and remain relevant today.

**Religion, Confusion, and Denial**

In *Angels in America*, the main characters struggle with their religious beliefs not aligning with their real life and identity. Joe, a deeply closeted gay man, denies his sexuality due to his faith in Mormonism. His denial leads his wife, Harper, to be severely depressed with her loveless married life. Being a Mormon, she is unable to leave the marriage and finds freedom in valium instead. Joe eventually comes out to his mother, Hannah, who is willing to help her son and daughter-in-law. However, due to her beliefs in heterosexual marriage, she makes the mistake of ignoring Joe's confession, which

leads to his spiral. Many religions promote lifelong commitment in heterosexual marriage and consider anything outside of it as sinister. While divorce and sexual relationships outside of marriage are generally accepted by most religious communities nowadays, many are still against homosexuality. These traditional values clash with the modern society's trend of taking steps to accept homosexuality and support LGBTQ rights.

Another main character, Louis, connects his Jewish identity to a moral burden. As a result, he is constantly preoccupied with "big ideas" while being miserable with his inability to be present with his dying partner, Prior. As the Rabbi from the funeral tells Louis, "Catholics believe in forgiveness, Jews believe in guilt" (Millennium Approaches 00:27:35-00:27:39). Louis embodies the religious lifestyle of internal moral reflection, responsibility, guilt, and self-examination. However, Louis's moral burden plays little part in his actions, as he quickly leaves Prior to protect himself and moves on to Joe instead. Like for Joe, Harper, and Hannah, his religious beliefs clash with his real life and identity, only resulting in confusion in what is supposedly the right choice to make.

While some suffer from their religiousness, another character chose to ignore his religious roots instead. Roy Cohn, both a historical figure and a character in the play, is a successfully corrupt lawyer deeply involved in illegal practices. His Jewish identity was one of the things that he concealed to rebrand himself as an aggressive, "all-American" man. His fabricated identity contributed a great part to the strong image he presented to his audience, which enabled him to be one of the most influential in his industry. The only moment where he mentions himself as a Jew is when he was on his deathbed,

trying to be friendly to Belize: “Jews and coloreds, historical liberal coalition, right?” (Perestroika 00:23:53-00:23:58)

Another encounter between characters — Prior and Hannah — shows misunderstandings and prejudice between religious and non-religious individuals. Prior assumes that Hannah condemns him due to him being a gay man and that she is only trying to make him convert. When Prior tells Hannah how she must judge him due to his identity, she replies quite bluntly. “No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you” (Perestroika 02:22:03-02:22:16). Her delivery highlights how religion is never a united single identity, especially in modern America where individuals constantly find themselves in a turn of the tide.

**Religion as Repression**

With most religions’ nature of emphasizing traditional values, they are often misinterpreted to repress movement and change. The most direct embodiment of this phenomenon is the Angel, who comes to Prior to tell humanity to “stop moving.” She claims that humanity should stop intermarrying, mixing, migrating, or progressing so that God will return to them. The Angel represents the act of prioritizing the past history and traditional values, along with the desire to refrain from certain changes in society.

In the play, the religious effort to anchor oneself to the past is not solely from the Angel. The characters, whether religious or not, find themselves questioning whether migrating from traditions is the right choice. As Prior is visited by the Angel, he becomes convinced that humanity may succumb to the divine force and retreat to its history. “Maybe I am a prophet. Not just me, all of us who are dying now. … Maybe the world

has driven God from Heaven, incurred the angels' wrath." (Perestroika 00:55:35-00:56:30)

Although fiction, Prior's fear was true for a lot of Americans during the AIDS crisis. Many religious groups interpreted the AIDS epidemic in the light of their beliefs and teachings. (National Research Council) Religious leaders often described AIDS as a punishment from God meant to halt the sexual revolution. Such actions, along with the fact that many patients were infected through unsterilized needle use and same-sex contact, contributed to a powerful stigma that framed the disease as evidence of moral failure rather than a public-health emergency.

As Prior tries to figure things out, he meets Harper in the Mormon Visitor Center Diorama Room. She had been staying in the center with Hannah after Joe left her for Louis. She puts herself in the place of the Mormon mother dummy, imagining herself and Joe in a pioneer Mormon family. "Look at us. So perfect in place. The desert, the mountains, the previous century. ... Maybe we should never have moved east" (Perestroika 01:22:16-01:22:43).

Harper's desperation is more understandable with religious context. In Mormon beliefs, family through heterosexual marriage becomes the essential unit not only in earthly life but also in the eternal realm after death (Chen 32-34). There is also a strong emphasis on distinct gender roles and motherhood. Many church leaders describe motherhood as a duty and destiny, even discussing whether a woman should be saved without child-bearing.

**To Stop “Stop Moving”**

In the play, Hannah serves as a religious individual who accepts the changes around her. She leaves Salt Lake City, protects her daughter-in-law, accepts her son’s identity, helps Prior, tells him to “wrestle” the Angel, and befriends Belize and Louis. Her drastic progress shows how individuals can be open to change at any point in their lives. She did not renounce her faith and still honors Mormon history and beliefs. However, she has moved beyond strict obedience to religious doctrine and is now open to discussing, rethinking, and reshaping it through her own choices.

After listening to Hannah, Prior faces the Angel in defiance. He eventually makes the Angel surrender and earns his chance to go to heaven. Prior’s disobedience to his role as a prophet symbolizes humanity’s power to choose its own destiny. For a long period of human history most of society’s foremost goal was to act and decide what was religiously correct. Now as humanity evolved out of certain religious standards, society is making new standards for what is the morally right decision, without the context of religion.

The Angels ultimately succumb to Prior and bless him for him to go back to Earth and live. They try to persuade Prior that his urge for life is only due to the habit of living. However, when Prior still chooses life, they let him go without further asking. The Angels’ silent agreement with Prior deciding his own future shows the religions’ adjustment to the changes in the human society. Once prior makes up his mind, the Angels do not and cannot force him to further fulfill the role of the prophet. When humanity decides to progress, religion cannot halt its track midway. It will ultimately have to adjust to what humanity decides for itself.

At the end of the play, Harper leaves Joe and goes to Washington to find her own life. After Louis rejects him, Joe comes back to Harper to retreat to his starting point of denial. However, Harper now accepts the truth around her and leaves for change on her own. Like Hannah, she is not necessarily unreligious now. However, now she does not let her beliefs refrain her from necessary movement. “In this world, there is a kind of painful progress … Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead” (Perestroika 03:28:35-03:30:55).

**Conclusion**

It is unnecessary for religious beliefs to clash directly against societal changes. Religion is not a conservative force to compel individuals with traditional values that are hard to apply in modern America. As the main characters in *Angels in America* show us, the willingness to admit changes and to be true to oneself is often enough to balance the past, present and future in harmony. Religious beliefs may sometimes make it seem like humanity is subjugated in the hands of an almighty force. However, in the end, the decision is always our own.

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