

Capturing Students with Comics: Teaching Race and Identity in *American Born Chinese*

Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* is a critically acclaimed graphic novel that has often been a centerpiece of the discussion surrounding comics in the classroom. Due to its depiction of race and identity, with a focus on exploring the formative years of a Chinese American boy, Jin Wang, the novel lends itself as a teaching tool that has an accessibility advantage due to its manner of conveying content. The arrangement and movement of visual and written narrative through comic panels supplements students' experience of reading, making it the medium ideal to introduce and convey its subjects of stereotype and racism, both on a micro- and macro-aggressive scale. Despite the novel being published in 2006, these themes still resonate into the modern-day, as the fallout from COVID-19 has given rise to new anti-Asian rhetoric that requires acknowledgement and examination, especially students who may be experiencing this propagation for the first time. The medium of graphic novels lends itself to a classroom setting due to its ability to communicate story in a more approachable and multifaceted manner while subtly introducing complicated issues to students; *American Born Chinese* uses the combination of visual and written storytelling unique to comics to educate students through intertextuality steeped in Chinese culture and a history of brutal stereotypes while placing these difficult topics in the school setting.

American Born Chinese combines three distinct vignettes: a tale of the Monkey King, a biographical story about Jin, and a sitcom-style story about Cousin Chin-Kee; these narratives all carry the overarching theme of identity, especially in a racial and cultural context. When used in classrooms, the novel serves as a powerful teaching tool due to its heavy symbolism and theming, as well as its medium's accessibility to students. In the minds of students, comics are associated with leisurely reading, with the reduced text making them more manageable for students of all reading levels (Combs). Comics can often be consumed faster and in one sitting, since the added use of images creates instant content absorption. As Derek Parker Royal points out, "(. . .) comics rely on a visual language that encourages a more immediate processing time within the reader and, on the level of interpretation, a more 'efficient' exchange between author(s) and audience (. . .)" (7), creating a direct transfer of interpretation, where the author can be more overt with their intentions to emphasize their subjects and themes. The exploration of identity through *American Born Chinese* through the transformation and interplay between the three stories lends itself ideally to this medium, as the directness of images and less reliance on text allows these stories to forego extraneous explanation and fixate on the necessary elements needed to convey the larger narrative.

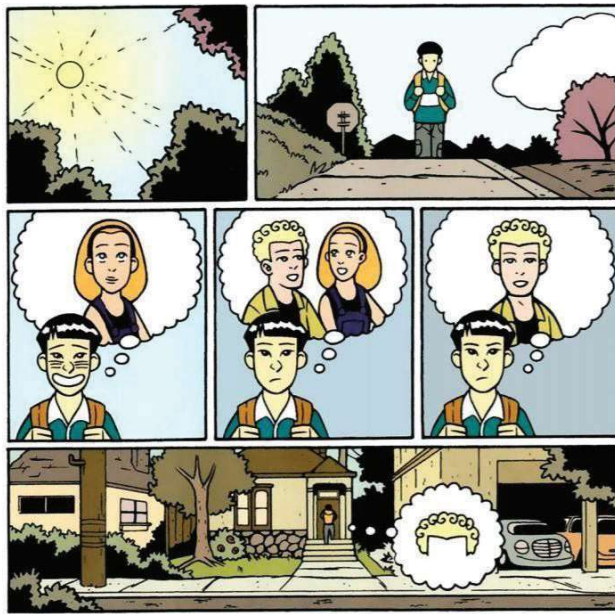


Figure 1 *From American Born Chinese ©2006 by Gene Luen Yang*

Using the graphic novel as a medium to tell stories adds a transformative aspect to literature by creating movement alongside its narrative. As comics theorist Scott McCloud expresses, “Comics [are] a mono-sensory medium. It relies on only one of the senses to convey a world of experience (. . .) Since cartoons already exist as concepts for the reader, they tend to flow easily through the conceptual territory between panels. Ideas [flow] into one another seamlessly” (89-90). Comics create a modern-day Kuleshov effect—a film technique in which viewers derive meaning from two (or more) sequential shots, as opposed to a singular shot—generating natural movement between panels akin to isolated shots in film. These panels create narrative in relation to one another, allowing the story to flow and be

expressed easily to the viewer. Graphic novels are especially accessible to students that have been primed with cartoons at a young age to immediately see motion within a comic. Figure 1 (Yang 97) shows that movement exists not just physically, but narratively through Jin’s thoughts as well. As he walks home, the reader can see his train of thought jumping from his love interest, Amelia, to jealousy over her friend, to associating their closeness with a characteristic of the friend—his hair. This narrative motion occurs within the reader’s mind without a second thought, yet easily expresses meaning without the need for words. Jin’s fixation on the hair and the novel’s context allows students to extrapolate further connections to inferiority and internalized oppression, as well as the theme of transformation that pervades the novel.

Wei-Chen’s introduction exemplifies the medium as a teaching tool that can subtly convey information without bogging students down with words; the novel connects themes with visual representation and uses the spatial parameters of the panels to implicitly reveal dynamics between characters. As shown in Figure 2 (Yang 36), Wei-Chen is introduced with an overt example of casual ignorance—the teacher does not bother with learning Wei-Chen’s name or home country, belying the faults of simply diversifying classrooms without putting in practices to make them antiracist. From a visual perspective, Wei-Chen is displayed at the center of the panel, yet is portrayed small in comparison to his teacher and classmates, despite having his whole body in frame. This panel is done as a full horizontal spread, taking up the combined length of the bottom two panels to establish itself as a setting shot and to diminish Wei-Chen’s presence while centering him. When the focus is back on Jin, he is level with his classmates in an attempt at assimilation. The thought square, “Something made me want to beat him up,” clues the reader into Jin’s emotions—he feels threatened by Wei-Chen’s presence because Wei-Chen represents another general Asian body and, even though he is from Taiwan, Jin’s internalized oppression has led him

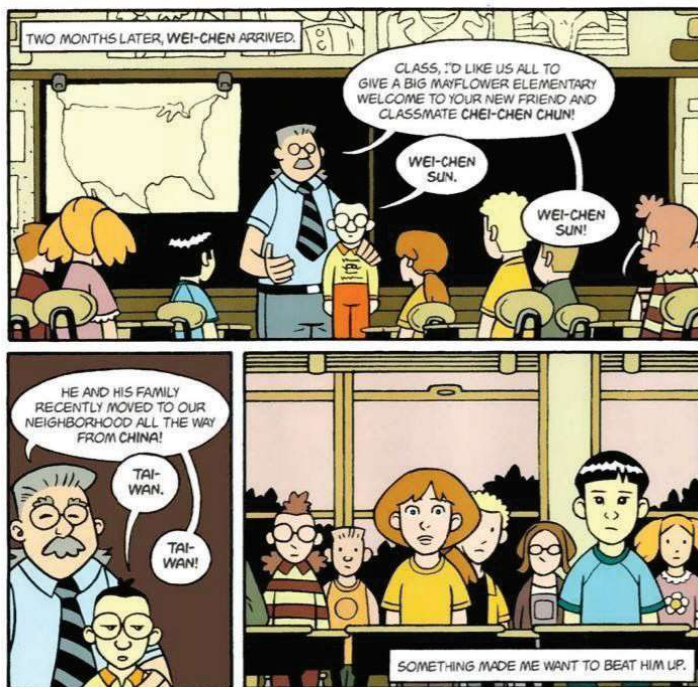


Figure 2 From *American Born Chinese* ©2006 by Gene Luen Yang

to adopt the point of view of his classmates and view Wei-Chen as another reason to feel shamed by his identity. The relationship between Wei-Chen, the class, and Jin is conveyed through the nuances of graphic novels; the visual elements provide implicit context to students that can then use the text to recognize themes of ignorance within both the class setting and Jin.

The obligatory images in graphic novels force narrative iconography, as images need to be simple and recognizable to be effectively reproduced throughout the novel; this requirement plays in favor to *American Born Chinese*, which provides students with ample opportunity to examine how caricature is often used to designate ethnicity and race. Historically,

cartoons attempting to denote ethnicity often fall back on racist stereotypes, drawing big noses or buck teeth as shorthand for a racial other. The nature of the “(. . .) graphic narrative, with its relatively limited temporal space, must condense identity along commonly accepted paradigms” (Royal 7-8) and often falls into the trap of coding to economize narrative effectiveness. *American Born Chinese* uses this history to its advantage, simultaneously rebelling against this by creating distinct Asian characters without falling back on racially coded features, and bringing those caricatures to the forefront with Cousin Chin-Kee—drenching him with ugly racist imagery like buck teeth and yellow skin—to emphasize the grotesque nature of these identifiers and how recognizable they are due to their prevalence.

While the visual medium of *American Born Chinese* is, on its own, an essential facet of the novel’s accessibility, the utilization of intertextuality brings in cultural and sociopolitical aspects that shape the text to a more contemporary classroom. Intertextuality involves the relationship and formation of meaning in one text through the use of other texts, which the visual aspect of comics employs to draw direct references between texts. This intertext can be both explicit and implicit; the Transformers and their slogan, “More Than Meets the Eye” is directly shown and referenced, while the overt retelling of the 17th century novel, *Journey to the West*, is only clear to readers familiar with the material. The explicit forms of referenced text are prominent in their appearance and make their thematic significance clear, as topics of transformation and self-search manifest throughout the novel, while the less conspicuous allusions to other texts do not detract from the novel and supplement the text for readers that recognize the references. While students may be more familiar with pop culture references, like the Transformers slogan, with help from an

instructor they can glean meaning and clarification on other cultural texts and how those themes are pivotal to the story, as well as learn to recognize how texts influence one another. Even so, Yang's intertextuality is ideally implemented from a story aspect, as it is overt only when the symbolism necessitates explanation to contribute effectively to the novel, otherwise remaining in the background to uplift the narrative. This allows students to understand most of the novel on their own without needing background information, while instructors can fill in cultural gaps in the classroom, using intertextuality to construct analysis that contributes toward meaning-making in literature.

The most blatant example of racial intertextuality comes in the form of cousin Chin-Kee, who originally appears to just be a blend of brutal racist stereotypes meant to inspire discomfort, but his role in the novel evolves into a more nuanced narrative action than first implied. Chin-Kee is introduced as the cousin of Danny, who is later revealed to be Jin transformed into a white body. Jonathan Doughty describes how certain clues within the text point towards Chin-Kee's greater function within the overarching narrative: "In the (Mandarin) Chinese language, however, 'chin' (亲, 'qin' in modern pinyin romanization) may also mean 'blood relation' or 'relative' (. . .) Permitting a linguistic reconstruction, Chin-Kee becomes a qin-key to unlock Jin Wang's outward hostility, and inward shame, toward his heritage" (56). Though this is subtle, Yang's story is constructed around using Chinese transnationality to recontextualize Chin-Kee as an embodiment of the "inward shame" Jin fights as his white counterpart. Though these clues would pass students without a grasp of Mandarin, instructors can elevate the text to a higher plane of meaning for those students. When teaching this novel, the linguistic and historical elements of Chinese culture both supplement the text and introduce students to nuanced theming that ties into both cultural and social aspects of the story. While the narrative itself makes this conflict clear through writing and visuals alone, the added layers of cultural intertextuality allow for a deeper analysis and recognition of this text, driving home the themes central to the novel.

Chin-Kee's character is most often used in conjunction with the most blatant stereotypes, forcing students to consider the impact of these texts in a new light. Even the most seemingly exaggerated actions are directly referencing Asian representations in media. The famous line, "clispy flied cat gizzards" (Yang 114) is a direct quote from a racially charged comic by political cartoonist Pat Oliphant. The old children's rhyme, "Me Chinese, me play joke! Me go pee-pee in his Coke!" (Yang 118) even makes it in, something Rosemary V. Hathaway comments on: "Yang seems to recognize that this folkloric intertext is lurking somewhere in the recesses of many of his readers' memories and needs to be dredged up and confronted for what it is" (46). Chin-Kee's existence creates a context within which all racist references, even the seemingly innocuous children's rhymes, are suddenly forced under a microscope and presented evenly. With Chin-Kee, the goal is to not simply expose the most horrendous imagery present in pop culture, but to turn a mirror toward the audience and ask them to consider what racist narratives they have viewed and never examined, along with which ones they have actively contributed to. The objective of creating Chin-Kee is to educate with no holds barred; a character like his is not born without a continuous, unexamined history stretching for decades before him. It is therefore imperative to utilize him as

both a tool and an opportunity in the classroom—as his honest and brutal depiction creates an environment that educates and invites analysis.

Chin-Kee's depiction is deliberately intense and indisputably racially coded, which lends him ideally as a teaching tool for students. Cheryl Gomes experienced teaching *American Born Chinese* in a Special Education English class and utilizing the overt stereotypical imagery that Chin-Kee represents:

The character of Chin-Kee was the easiest symbol for students to identify because his actions and his physical appearance both contribute to the role he represents in the story. Chin-Kee's appearance, as mentioned earlier, is itself a brutal and ugly caricature—one that students must be adequately prepared for before being asked to simply identify symbols and stereotypes. (Gomes and Carter 72)

Much of Gomes's lesson involved teaching analysis through symbolism, since having a tangible element to analyze was best for students struggling with abstract concepts. Chin-Kee's existence as an undisguised stereotype—"a brutal and ugly caricature"—lends him easily to classroom discussion and learning. Not only is he a rendering of blatantly racist imagery, but his "role" at this point in the novel makes him a straightforward symbol that present-day students less familiar with historically racist depictions of the Asian community will still be able to contextualize within the narrative. Students have the rare opportunity to view the extent of stereotypes and harmful depictions, learning where they come from and how they have bled into American culture and depictions of Asian-Americans.

However, due to the sensitivity of racism as a teaching topic, there is often a fear that comes along with introducing Chin-Kee—the manifestation of decades of racism—to a classroom. Michael Gianfrancesco, in his introduction to his Teacher's Guide on *American Born Chinese*, writes, "Racism is a tough subject to broach and it takes a very gentle but firm touch to ensure that students don't walk away feeling offended or insulted (. . .) This novel is a teachable moment, and sometimes this type of learning can be precarious (. . .)" (3). If left unexplained or dismissed, Chin-Kee is relegated to a superficial role as a caricature; he necessitates discussion and exploration because his character is offensive with purpose. While he demonstrates that "(. . .) a stereotype needs to be dressed up in bright yellow skin and a queue in order for folks to recognize its severity" (Siegel), his appearance and actions warrant dialogue that honestly teaches and acknowledges the history of systemic racism faced by people of Asian descent. It is paramount for instructors to keep in mind that, as time moves society away from the blatantly racist depictions of characters like Mr. Yunioshi, students may not come into the classroom having seen or experienced blatantly racist Asian imagery until this novel. Thus, educating them on a history that is often buried is vital for students to perform accurate critique of historically constructed racial stereotypes. This character in a classroom is a rarity, as text is seldom this aggressive when highlighting racism and forcing conversation that, while "precarious" if done insensitively, is necessary.

Bringing race and identity politics at the forefront of his novel with the depiction of cousin Chin-Kee, Yang creates an opportunity for critical reading that serves as an introduction into the

novel's implications about racism against Asian Americans. On some people finding Chin-Kee hilarious, Yang stated that, "Cousin Chin-Kee isn't meant to be funny. He's meant to come off the page and slap you in the face. If you're laughing at him, I want you to do so with a knot in your stomach and a dry throat" (Siegel). This speech came from Yang realizing some younger readers do not have the racial context from which to understand Chin-Kee's historical roots. Thereby, analysis of this novel should not only integrate the graphic novel medium into its examination of story, but "(...) we also need to support students toward understanding the structural and economic underpinnings of racism that have carried these stereotypes into the 21st century" (Schieble 49). As the present moves away from a past that housed Yellow Peril and bred caricatures that no longer actively permeate media, the context needs to be taught to be understood. Without knowledge of the racial environment that gave birth to Chin-Kee, students only receive partial comprehension on why Cousin Chin-Kee haunts Asian Americans. Both past and modern-day stereotypes are paramount to an understanding of the novel and a society where Cousin Chin-Kee can exist at all.

While Chin-Kee is representative of Asian stereotypes depicted in media that seep into a society's collective unconscious, the novel also provides plenty of subtler microaggressions that the main characters in Jin's biography experience. Internalized oppression is produced from a societal and personal level, as portrayals of racial caricatures diffuse into day-to-day interactions that continuously perpetuate discrimination; the characters of Jin's story are repeatedly shown to feel ashamed for their race and ethnicity, leading them to reject themselves and each other in turn.

After Jin fixates on the hair of Amelia's friend (See: Figure 1), he projects his insecurity onto that singular characteristic and gets a perm (Yang 98). Figure 3 (Yang 96) shows direct discriminatory action, but the reaction of Jin and his friends highlights years of continuous intolerance. The stark change from them laughing, to going completely silent after being called racial slurs, then looking down at the ground in shame, conveys that this is a perpetual experience that has been accepted as an element of their life, despite its pain. This is made tragically clear later, when Suzy says to Jin, "Today...when Timmy called me a...a chink, I realized...deep down inside...I kind of feel like that all the time" (Yang 187). The continuous racist language and culture that surrounds these characters shows its toll to the fullest; having slurs thrown at her throughout her life, Suzy begins to connect herself to them. The result of internalized racism is that it not only pushes the characters away from their culture, but it makes them internalize bigotry as a core characteristic of who they are. Placing these burdens on high schoolers pulls the novel into a realm of familiarity for

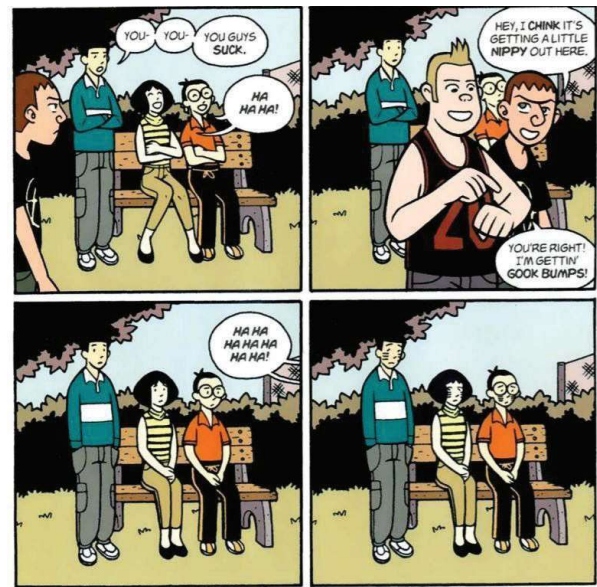


Figure 3 *From American Born Chinese ©2006 by Gene Luen Yang*

students, leading them to empathize in a manner that is far more personal than a lecture on bigotry. Grounding these stereotypical depictions and words in narrative and historical context within the classroom forces students to come to terms with the uncomfortable racial weapons that they may have seen or even used, bringing the impact of leveraging hateful speech to the forefront of the lesson. In today's cultural landscape, where the term "political correctness" receives as much support as it does ire, exposing students to stories and art that frame the effects of racism in both easily digestible and sympathetic narratives results in a more engaged class that understands the basis from which oppression comes from and desires to act against it.

By bringing this aspect of consistent prejudice and racism and its effects on children as they grow up, Yang forces readers to confront the pervasiveness of daily microaggressions as an act that is not limited to a school setting. The concept, while not explicitly defined, is introduced early in the Monkey King's story when he is denied access to the party in heaven. The guard initially mocks him for not having any shoes, before finally telling him, "You may be a king—you may even be a deity—but you are still a monkey" (Yang 15). The Monkey King, before feeling angry and disrespected, feels "thoroughly embarrassed" (Yang 15) as his identity is brought up. This embarrassment is the same shame felt by Jin and his friends when they are called slurs publicly or isolated by their classmates due to their race. Min Hyoung Song describes the Monkey King's narrative as especially devastating because, "(. . .) it recalls how the image of the monkey has historically been deployed as a racial diminutive, a way to picture Asians as subhuman or beyond the realm of the human all together" (Song 85). The Monkey King is actively dehumanized and degraded in his narrative, bringing with him the history of equating racial otherness with simian imagery. This subtext lurks under the layers of humiliation the Monkey King is made to feel on account of just being himself. When he goes home and notices the smell of monkey fur, a smell he had never noticed before, "He stayed awake for the rest of the night thinking of ways to get rid of it" (Yang 20). Like Jin, the Monkey King is socially pushed to turn away from his own nature, because his nature actively excludes and defines him as other. The Monkey King's journey elevates the novel's themes to a higher plane, focusing on exclusion and the idea of never meeting an unachievable standard in conjunction with transformation. His story is, at face value, only a myth, yet it asks students to utilize the themes and motifs brought up in the other narratives to construct deeper analysis. Set in context among Chin-Kee and Jin's stories, the Monkey King's journey allows students the opportunity for intertextual and intratextual meaning-making, as they can learn about and recognize the cultural elements of the tale while making connections to the other texts within the novel.

The resolution of the novel presents a cathartic end to Cousin Chin-Kee's existence, celebrating self-acceptance as characters let go of personas adopted to distance themselves from the caricatures shaming them away from their own identities. The Monkey King lets go of his humanized form and shoes to find literal and personal freedom from being an "eternal prisoner of a mountain of rock" (Yang 149). While there is no quick fix for years of discrimination and internalized oppression, Jin makes steps to reconnect with Wei-Chen by spending weeks waiting for him to reappear. In the final panels, Wei-Chen is shown speaking Mandarin to Jin, in stark

contrast to their first meeting where Jin tells him to “speak English” (Yang 37). The true battle in the novel is shown as the fight against facades that force assimilation and stereotypes that perpetuate shame of oneself. The ending to this narrative is fundamental to the message the novel is conveying to readers, as it questions what personas they adopt and what they hide by doing so. Bringing this to a classroom, while students are still in their formative years, allows this message to resonate with its prime audience. Yang states, “(. . .) if I hadn’t invited Cousin Chin-Kee (. . .) into the pages of my comic book (. . .) I would never have been able to behead him” (qtd. in Siegel), explaining that, despite Chin-Kee fulfilling his role as a magnifying glass to years of unexamined racism, he still needs to be beheaded by the novel’s end. It is vital for students to read works that not only expose and analyze the inner workings of racism, but also violently oppose and confront them. Jin has to physically fight the manifestation of his internalized racism because Chin-Kee openly refuses to leave until Jin takes him apart and unmask him. Simultaneously, Jin can only reveal his “true form” after he reveals Chin-Kee’s—by recognizing Chin-Kee as the manifestation of his own fears and insecurities, Jin can finally begin the process of recognizing his true self. The novel educates students on issues of racism and oppression while teaching them to act against those very foundations. Otherwise, if left unchecked, Cousin Chin-Kee continues to come back and visit year after year as a reminder of the racial undercurrents that continue to allow his existence.

Novels like *American Born Chinese* belong in a classroom setting as they carry out the critical task of normalizing discussions surrounding race and identity for students. Graphic novels have an ease of access when connecting to students, due to comics having a recreational association and utilizing their dual-medium approach to narrative as a means of making text more digestible. By creating stories pertinent for students to read through a means they are more likely to enjoy, Yang explores avenues of racism in a manner that directly exposes students to these issues. Cousin Chin-Kee’s impact only works within panels on a page, where readers have to confront his image for themselves, and the novel’s intertextuality uses unambiguous imagery to concentrate decades of racism and xenophobia in the form of explicit references to everyday sayings and images. Through manifesting intense bigotry in the form of a character, and subsequently beheading him, the novel moves forward from embarrassment at one’s identity to finding freedom in self-acceptance. The novel both presents and provides the opening for anti-racist pedagogy, prompting students to act against oppressive forces that may plague them or their classmates while asking them to examine what racist narratives they have played into. The recent threat of COVID-19 has awakened a new wave of xenophobic rhetoric targeted at Asian-Americans that only heightens the necessity for novels like *American Born Chinese* in the classroom. It is paramount for education to put students in contact with approachable narratives that highlight not only the actions that lead to and stem from internalized oppression, but celebrate freedom from self-imposed prisons, leading students to recognize and reject the still-present racism simmering under the surface of our society.

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