

## Reading Images in *American Born Chinese* through Critical Visual Literacy

*The author of this article conveys how teaching Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel American Born Chinese from a critical visual literacy approach enables students to gain a deeper understanding of Yang's commentary on historic and modern stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans.*

They call for a recent themed issue on “Teaching English in a Democratic Society” begged the question: *What does American literature say about our nation and its people?* I also ask, what do youth responses to American literature say about our nation and its people? And, importantly, what do these responses mean for English teachers? In this article, I address these questions with a focus on Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel *American Born Chinese*—a work of American literature that has much to say about race and identity politics and contributes essential perspectives for teaching in a democracy.

Yang brought my attention to these questions in a speech he delivered to an audience of educators and librarians for winning the Michael Printz award for his graphic novel in 2007. (The Printz award is presented annually for the best work of young adult fiction.) Interweaving three storylines that include the Chinese fable of the Monkey King, a middle school boy named Jin, and the outrageous and stereotypical Cousin Chin-Kee, Yang visually confronts issues of identity, culture, and racism that confront Asians and Asian Americans in US society. In the speech, Yang described troubling online responses from youth when Myspace encouraged readers to post their thoughts about the novel. Yang realized that his purposefully constructed character, Cousin Chin-Kee (see Figure 1), whom he created to draw readers’ attention to historical and modern-day stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans, was being looked over by youth as nothing more than a good laugh. Yang notes, “It’s okay for you to find him funny, but I want you to laugh at him with a knot in your stomach. Without at least a passing

knowledge of Chin-Kee’s historical roots, a young reader might not develop that knot” (12).

Cousin Chin-Kee is a merging of stereotypes directed at Asians and Asian Americans over centuries. To the detriment of his American (and white) cousin Danny, Chin-Kee visits the family once a year, goes to Danny’s school, and embarrasses him by behaving in stereotypical ways. The Chin-Kee narrative is framed like a sitcom (which we know from the running laugh track at the bottom of the frame), as if he plays the role of the buffoon for an outside audience. Yang explains that Cousin

FIGURE 1. Cousin Chin-Kee



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Chin-Kee's character embodies imagery from multiple historic and present-day stereotypes. He notes that Chin-Kee's hair and outfit are reminiscent of "more overtly racist imagery prevalent in the late 1800s and early 1900s" (12) accompanying US exploitation of Chinese immigrant labor during the gold rush and construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. An example of such imagery is seen in Figure 2. The figure is taken from *The Wasp*—a magazine published out of San Francisco in 1881. We see a Chinese laborer depicted as a "rat"—a common metaphor used for non-union workers—with a monopoly over the workforce at the time. These images contributed to violence toward the Asian community and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned Chinese immigration for a period of ten years and caused roadblocks for Chinese laborers to leave and return to the United States. (For comprehensive nonfiction sources on the Chinese Exclusion Act, see <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/exclusion.html>.)

Yang fused these historic images and their racist undertones with examples of modern racist visual

cues, which are notably more difficult to pinpoint. For example, Cousin Chin-Kee's desire for voluptuous American girls is a nod to *Sixteen Candles*' Long Duc Dong character, whom Yang describes as offering "Oriental comic relief" (13) in the film. In Figure 1, we see Cousin Chin-Kee sing Ricky Martin's pop song "She Bang" to the shock and horror of Danny's classmates and teachers. Yang's song choice in this frame references William Hung, who in 2004 performed similar "Oriental comic relief" through his off-key rendition of the same song for the hit show *American Idol* judges and audience. Yang calls on educators to aid students in noticing and naming that: "Since the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's, America has generally acknowledged that Fu Manchu and other historical caricatures of Asians and Asian Americans are racist. But what do we make of modern-day stereotypes? Often these are treated as little more than impolite jokes. . . . Images, however, have power. And images have history . . . we must remember who their grandfathers are. And we must ensure that the next generation does the same" (13). Alexandra Bradner, in a critical piece about popular culture and reality television, makes two cases for why modern-day media sensations that circulate derogatory stereotypes (such as William Hung) are popular. For one, audiences see the "other" in these performances, thus rendering themselves sophisticated and cosmopolitan. Second, media stereotypes prevent us from confronting the real needs and consequences of exploitation including poverty, racism, and classism. Bradner notes that media stereotypes such as these, "Represent the . . . faces of exploitation, the ways in which someone without any cultural capital can respond to media bullying. When pushed into the dark reaches of a corner you had no idea you were entering in the first place, you can reflexively embrace your caricature . . . or fight against it, in the tender, vulnerable and, ultimately, false hope that the bully will take you on as a peer." If those who experience exploitation are themselves willing to promote it, then the audience can safely laugh and look the other way.

Why, you might ask, does Yang's graphic novel carry so much importance to English teachers for teaching in a democracy? While approaches to teaching *American Born Chinese* from the perspective of being true to oneself and identity are important (Gomes and Carter) and address the interpersonal

FIGURE 2. Image from *The Wasp*



and psychological nature of racism, we also need to support students toward understanding the structural and economic underpinnings of racism that have carried these stereotypes into the 21st century. *English Journal* author Mary Rice, like Yang, found similar troubling responses from her students to the novel: “My colleague and I ultimately came away from this [teaching] experience feeling as if the students had made reading it an inquiry into learning the stereotypes of Chinese Americans for their own amusement . . . we needed to work harder to prepare the students to read the text critically enough to understand the author’s sophisticated implications about racism against Chinese Americans and others” (41). In the remainder of this article, I make a case that *critical visual literacy* offers a framework and set of teaching tools for teaching *American Born Chinese* that engages students in a structural understanding of racism—also known as being racially literate (a point I will develop further). Fostering students’ racial literacy simultaneously builds their critical thinking and academic skills. By applying this framework, English teachers can support students to read complex and multilayered images in *American Born Chinese* and other forms of visual media they encounter. Such critical reading practices are essential for learning and living in a 21st-century democracy.

### Talking about Race in US Schools

To foster dialogue in the classroom around issues of equity, teachers must address historic and modern-day complexities about race and racism. Literature and other forms of text offer dynamic opportunities to facilitate this dialogue. Rebecca Rogers and Melissa Mosley state, “Education in schools must address race, racism and antiracism in an educative manner to prepare children to participate in U.S. democracy” (465). *American Born Chinese* is one work of American literature that offers rich and academically rigorous opportunities for cultivating students to be racially literate, active, and dynamic participants in a democratic society. Lani Guinier, a professor at Harvard Law School, coined the term *racial literacy*. Racial literacy moves citizens to explore race as less about interpersonal injustices and more “about the distribution of power” and resources (99). Guinier defined racial literacy through three related categories: “[Racial literacy] is about learning rather than

knowing . . . and reads race in its psychological, interpersonal and structural dimensions. It acknowledges the importance of individual agency but refuses to lose sight of institutional and environmental forces . . . [and] constantly interrogates the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender and other explanatory variables” (115). Exercising racial literacy, then, becomes an essential democratic way of being to achieve structural opportunity across the many dimensions of life in the United States.

### Critical Visual Literacy

Critical visual literacy is informed by theories and practices stemming from critical theory and semiotics. Linked to Paulo Freire’s work with adult learners in Brazil in the 1960s, a critical approach frames language use (and other communicative resources) as inherently political and tied to the social performances and purposes of particular groups of people. Different language performances (e.g., academic oral language in a job interview) hold currency in the form of access to institutions, employment, and social mobility. For example, non-dominant ways of writing (e.g., writing fandom in an online community) may hold a type of social currency within a particular group of fan fiction writers (Black) but may not be accepted as a “legitimate” form of writing for a college entry application (Early and DeCosta).

To make meaning from a critical standpoint, a reader searches for hidden messages, ideologies, and power interests behind the information conveyed in texts and locates these messages as part of larger social, historical, and political contexts. Lisa Patel Stevens and Thomas W. Bean noted that “when readers take this stance, they develop a critical consciousness, fostering a search for justice and equity by reading the meanings behind the text” (6). A critical stance toward literacy thus becomes essential when guiding students to recognize, reflect on, and leverage multiple forms of reading, writing, and speaking as active and engaged citizens in a democracy.

Because students interact in a highly visual world through their Internet practices, video games,

**Fostering students’ racial literacy simultaneously builds their critical thinking and academic skills.**

film, and television, teaching students to read media and images from a critical stance is increasingly important. The “visual” aspect of this term is borrowed from semiotics and “refers to sign systems, including fonts, diagrams, symbols and other elements of discourse that may be perceived and interpreted in various ways by a reader or viewer” (Stevens and Bean xii). The potential for making meaning with visual modes of communication is fundamentally different from traditional print. Gunther Kress noted that the visual mode, or the “logic of the image” (20), is spatial/simultaneous. Information carried through the image is dependent upon a spatial arrangement, not a sequential one as is the case with writing, and this visual information is “simultaneously present” to the reader/viewer. The visual presents information as *display*, and the choice and placement of particular details affect the simultaneity of the meaning. Critical visual literacy also helps us understand how readers are “pulled into the ideal reading position” (Newfield 85) depending on the image syntax. For example, objects placed in the center, or larger within the overall image, tend to carry more importance or demonstrate power. The spatial arrangement, or image syntax, present in visual modes offer multiple cues for a reader of multimodal forms of text such as graphic novels (Hassett and Schieble). Interpreting how power relations among people, places, and events flow through the placement of details in an image provides robust opportunities for building academic skills and articulating ideas about race and justice.

Analyzing images from a critical visual literacy approach also meets Common Core State Standards for increased focus on nonfiction and informational texts in the English classroom. Richard Beach, Amanda Haertling Thein, and Allen Webb suggest that a meaningful way to integrate nonfiction into the curriculum is through connections between literary works and the social, cultural, and historical contexts situated within these works. Bringing a critical visual literacy lens to documents that contain words and images, for example, or studying propaganda and multimedia within a historic timeframe helps students understand the power interests that circulate through texts. These authors remind us that “still images, films, and podcasts are all forms of informational texts [and] in our media-saturated society, language arts students need to learn to critically

read and creatively write these genres” (98). Thus, the study of still images in *American Born Chinese* builds students’ skills for considering connections across different modes and critically analyzing and interpreting visual forms of communication.

The critical visual literacy questions in Figure 3 help students notice, analyze, and question how power is presented visually. To scaffold a criti-

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**FIGURE 3.** Critical Visual Literacy Questions

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Image syntax	What aspects of the image draw our attention first? Why? How does the layout suggest where to look? How does this affect our reading of the setting, characters, and storyline? What does this suggest about which characters have power, and which do not?
Shot distance	<b>Close up:</b> a face or object fills the frame (subjective; emotive). <b>Medium shot:</b> illustrated at a mid-range point from the subject. A “medium shot” usually refers to a shot from the waist or knees, up. <b>Long shot:</b> A panel drawn at a distance from its subject. What does the shot distance suggest about the image? Does it suggest a power relationship between people, places, and/or events? How?
Angles	Angles, movements, and positions of objects in the image can be low, high, extremely close-up, or tilted. What angles do you notice in the image? What might these perspectives suggest about power?
Color	What colors are used in the image? What mood or tone does color portray? What other connections do these colors have to the meaning of the image?
Critical questions	What or who is represented in the text? Who or what is missing from the text? What do these representations say about youth? Who benefits from the text? How are characters constructed in the text? What knowledge is presented as common sense or normal? How does the text connect to events in history? Or, to pop culture?

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Note: Adapted from *Reading Lessons: Graphic Novels 101* by Hollis Rudiger; *Show Me: Principles for Assessing Students’ Visual Literacy* by Jon Callow; and *Re-positioning the Reluctant High-School Reader* by Bev Maney.

cal visual literacy approach to text, I choose one or two images from advertisements to project onto an interactive whiteboard or overhead and talk aloud about how I use these questions to help interpret and analyze how power relationships and multiple interests are presented. Then, I have students turn and talk with a new image and a graphic organizer that includes these questions as guided practice prior to reading more extended visual texts such as *American Born Chinese*. These teaching tools assist English teachers to meet Yang's call for moving students to read characters such as Cousin Chin-Kee "with a knot in our stomachs."

To demonstrate these tools, I offer an analysis using a second example from *American Born Chinese*. The images are selected from a different narrative that runs throughout the novel. This narrative focuses on a middle school boy named Jin who is second-generation Chinese American. Jin's family moves from the Chinatown section of San Francisco to a neighboring suburb, where Jin attends school with kids who are a majority European American and represent mainstream US middle-class culture. Jin struggles at this school with feelings of alienation and shame regarding his Chinese heritage; these struggles cause him to reject his own identity and instead strive to assimilate to the culture of his peers.

In Figure 4, we see a series of three panels that depict a newcomer to Jin's classroom—Wei Chen—whom eventually becomes his best friend. Since it is Wei Chen's first day at the school, his teacher introduces him to the class. Attending to questions regarding image syntax and layout, we see Wei Chen as small and at the center—powerless and on display for the class. In the top panel, it is notable that the map of the United States is drawn without the designation of state lines and in a colorless hue (as are the presumable leaders that decorate the upper border of the chalkboard). These detail and color choices suggest how school curriculum portrays US knowledge and culture as monolithic, white, and Eurocentric. Thus, these ideas are constructed in school spaces as common sense and normal, despite the linguistically and culturally diverse population that has influenced the United States. The teacher introduces Wei Chen by mispronouncing his name and telling this class that his family came "all the way from China!"; Wei Chen


FIGURE 4. Introducing Wei-Chen: Modeling Critical Interpretations



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corrects the teacher on his name and the fact that he is from Tai-Wan. These blunders comment on the teacher's and school's limited linguistic and cultural knowledge about students who do not represent the mainstream. In the final panel, we see Jin with a group of white classmates gawking at Wei Chen, as if he is an alien from another planet. Jin's reaction to his new classmate is to want to beat him up. Yang positions Jin as aligned with his classmates (both in stature and expression). Jin's desire to assimilate and fit in with the "normal" culture at his school is threatened by the presence of his new classmate. By wanting to act out in violence rather than acceptance, we see Jin's internalized oppression of the characteristics he sees in Wei Chen that remind him of his own shame about his Chinese identity. His actions say much about youth who are "othered" and resist their home identities to be accepted by teachers and students who represent the culture of power (Delpit). Standards of beauty and power are presented in similar ways through popular culture and media. By maintaining this idolatry, the culture of power remains the status quo in the United States and globally. From an economic and structural standpoint, Eurocentric knowledge, culture,

and ways of speaking guard the gates of our institutions that provide access to education, social mobility, and political representation.

The United States is an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse nation. English teachers play an important role in prompting students to engage in democratic dialogue about equity in response to visual messages that circulate historic and present-day racism and other derogatory messages about class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. These messages undermine work toward equity, often in hidden and unconscious ways, and compromise democratic ways of being for youth. Fostering a complex and structural understanding of racism and power while simultaneously building students' critical thinking and interpretive skills has great implications for action in a democracy. 

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this podcast episode from ReadWriteThink.org, the host discusses the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* as well as five other recommended titles by a diverse array of authors. Each book explores characters who struggle to know when to stay true to themselves in the face of a challenging situation—or when to compromise, change, and grow. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/teen-identity-tough-situations-30341.html>